

The Self-Writing Parchment

by beaweasley2

Hermione finds a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes that writes: *Tell me your deepest desire*. Thinking it's a trick, she says, "I wish to see my soul mate?" and she suddenly finds herself at Severus' feet.

This is my response to the Potter_Place Summer 2007 Prompt – #23

The warnings I have listed for this chapter are implied. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.

The Parchment

Chapter 1 of 43

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It was Harry's idea in the first place to visit Fred and George, although Ron was eager to go the moment Harry suggested it. "Yeah, they have defensive stuff, Hermione," both pleaded with her.

"Decoy Detonators, Shield Hats and Cloaks, Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder and stuff," Harry rattled off. "These things could be useful, especially if we run into anyone while tracking down the Horcruxes."

He was right, of course. That, and Fred had said that he had acquired the three Hands of Glory that Harry wanted in case they needed to go into caves or tunnels and didn't want to be seen. It was risky going to Diagon Alley after hours, so they all donned long, nondescript black robes and cloaks for the trip and Apparated to the recessed alcove that led to the twins' upstairs flat.

In the shop the boys all four of them roamed the shelves, collecting Shield Hats, Gloves and Cloaks, for her, Ron and Harry to wear at Harry's insistence; they also got Decoy Detonators, Peruvian Instant Darkness Powder, Liquid Condensed Fog, and their newest invention, Blinding Flash, in emergency, pocket-sized containers. Hermione added several Wildfire Whiz-Bangs sparkler balls, Repeating Exploding Snap-Caps and Loud-As-Thunder Pellets. The twins even had pocket-sized Swamp Ooze, which made a puddle of slimy swamp water three meters wide when dropped that could potentially be useful under the right circumstances.

But Hermione sternly put her foot down on buying any of the joke items at this time. "Harry, really! We don't need a trick wand you'll need your real one, and what if you pull it out by..." she stated as the wand Harry held suddenly emitted thousands of star-shaped confetti bits. "Ron, I'm not going to take any Dumbombs!" she exclaimed when he added a box of them to the growing pile on the counter as she chose the least comical Headless Hat on the shelf, a straw hat with a ridiculously large sunflower on the turquoise band.

"Really, Hermione," Fred admonished her. "Where is your sense of fun, your imagination?"

"Yes," George said. Hermione was examining her Hand of Glory, and her brow crinkled as he added a Boomerang Wheezebee on the counter. "You never know just what you'll really need. Like maybe a good chocolate or nougat?"

"Chocolate is a must if you run into a Dementor!" Fred called over from across the shop, retrieving a box from a top shelf.

Hermione slipped the Hand of Glory into her pocket. "How will developing a raging fever or a nosebleed help fight Vol-demort," she hesitated on saying his name, making it come out as a stammer, "help us?" She grimaced, realizing that she fell back into her old habit as Harry smiled at her, Ron cringed, and Fred and George looked at her, stunned.

"Very good, Hermione," Harry teased her. "You can almost say his name now!" Hermione looked at him sideways with a crooked smile.

"It only took her six years!" Ron ridiculed her.

"Yeah, Ron, and how long will it take you?" Fred said, laughing at him. Ron blushed.

"I do think these Headless Hats are a good idea, though, Ron," Hermione said, changing the subject back to the reason they were there in the first place. "You and Harry should pick one out. Personally, I think that this porkpie would fit you nicely."

"Hermione, some of these may come in handy!" Ron said, brandishing a trick knife.

"And pray tell, Ron, for what purpose would you need with a knife that won't cut anything?" she asked. "I thought we were stocking up on supplies we might need to help us out of sticky situations?"

"If you buy the knife, I'll throw in the wand, Harry," George suggested, adding three sets of Extendable Ears to the pile on the counter. "That way we can always say 'Harry Potter used it' in our advertising."

Harry set down a blue Headless Hat in a simple boater style. "I'll take it, then!"

Hermione shook her head, searching the shelves and bins for useful items. She picked up a piece of parchment off the floor. It was an expensive sheet of animal vellum, far more durable than paper, with a faint grain, thin, smooth and luxurious to the touch. She looked around, wondering which bin it had fallen out of.

She set the vellum sheet on the counter and began to separate out the pile of merchandise, dividing it in three, so that each of them would have the defensive trick items that they'd come in for, setting the items that she didn't want into Harry's pile. "I'll take these, then," she said to Fred.

Harry looked the pile over as Fred took inventory of her purchases. "No problem, but I'm paying. Fred, add it all together, then give me a note to sign so that you can draw from my Gringotts account, all right?"

"No problem," Fred said, writing up Hermione's receipt. "But you don't pay, Harry, remember? But I'll give you a receipt anyway. I'll just charge up Ron's and Hermione's merchandise."

"Are you sure, guys?" Harry asked uncertainly.

"You don't pay got it? Besides, we just keep a list of what you take so that we can have proof of what you got," George said. He was separating the items into three bags as Fred passed him the items he wrote down.

"It will be great for advertising," Fred said as he wrote out the receipt. "Buy the items that the Boy-Who-Lived-to-Defeat-You-Know-Who used to defeat You-Know-Who in the final stand. It'll be great!"

"All right, if you're sure," Harry stated.

"Harry, I'm going to go to Flourish and Blotts," she said, pocketing the items George handed to her. "I will meet you in there, okay?"

"Sure," Harry replied as Ron blurted out, "Like you'd miss an opportunity to get a new book." Hermione chose not to retort but gave Ron an angry glare.

"Ron," Harry said, trying to hold back a big grin. "You should be thankful she's willing to do all the reading. If it weren't for her, we wouldn't have been learning all those new spells. Besides, you know how many times Hermione has been able to find the information we need, either from the library or in all her books."

"Thank you, Harry," she said as she casually walked from the shop.

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Within minutes Hermione was deep in the bookshelves while scanning the list of antidotes and fascinating potions listed, trying to determine if the book was worth purchasing. She had already amassed a pile next to her on the shopping cart.

The tiny bell over the door rang out just before Harry called, "Hermione, are you still in here?"

"Of course she's still in here; the question is where," Ron said. "Oi, Hermione, where are you?"

She poked her head out of the Potions section. "I'm here!"

"Are you ready?" Harry asked.

"Sure, I, um just a moment." She climbed down the stepladder and examined the books she had piled up, considering which she could afford to buy.

Ron moaned at her indecision.

"Hermione?" Harry asked.

"Give me a minute, Harry," she said, picking up the largest tome and setting back a thick book on antidotes. "I am going to get these... and this one definitely this one..." She shifted the books, gazing at a book on Transaudient Charms, *Reaching Across Distances the Magical Way*, and *Transilient Transfiguration*, and laid them down again.

"Hermione," Harry said again, wanting to leave sooner rather than later.

"Just a minute, Harry, I'm deciding." She placed three Potions tomes aside and picked up a Transfiguration book before picking up the first four.

Harry watched, amused at his friend's dilemma. Since they had decided that they would put off their last year until Harry had either finished off Voldemort or died trying, Hermione had been in a collecting frenzy over spell books, adding plenty of new volumes to his library at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. "If you can justify needing them to me, I will buy the lot," Harry suggested.

"Really, Harry, there are..." She quickly counted. "I have eleven, well, thirteen actually, and these, but I..."

Harry turned to the store assistant. "She can have the lot." Hermione looked at Harry with both stunned disbelief and gratitude. "Hermione, I'll let you have what ever will fit in your book bag, just as long as I don't have to read all of them."

"That would be half the shop," Ron said, laughing as Harry signed the transaction receipt. "Are we ready yet?"

Back at Harry's house, they all lit their small lamps, and Hermione immediately strode into the library. "I suppose that means that either you or I cook," Ron stated, watching her disappear into the room.

"Then I'll cook," Harry said, laughing. "Besides, I'm better at it than you are, and we both knew that she'd run for the library to read as soon as we got here anyway."

"I heard that!" Hermione called from the large desk she had transfigured that morning, adding her new books to the stacks in categories. She pulled her cloak off, laying it casually on her chair, and began flipping through the book on *Transaudient Charms*.

Idly, she reached into her pocket to pull out a quill and parchment and withdrew the parchment she'd found in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes. She slipped the new book into her pocket and examined the parchment. It was old, really old, but in perfect condition. It was only when she laid it upon the desk that the words, *Make a wish, ask a question I'll show your fate, I'll tell you no lies*, appeared. Hermione was stunned.

Turning the parchment over, she looked for any trademark or the common WWW that Fred and George usually used to identify their products and found one small imprint of the trademark in the bottom left corner that looked more like a stain than their usual bright fuchsia imprint. Curious, she wrote, *What should I ask for?*

Pearly black ink appeared and scrolled into, *Tell me your deepest desire. Three times I will comply if brave you be, to face what you'll see*

Laughing, Hermione mumbled, "All right, then." Thinking it was simply a trick sheet of parchment, she wrote, *Who is my heart's desire? I wish to see my soul mate*

Suddenly, the chair melted below her, and she seemed to spin as she grabbed for the armrests, the room spinning in the opposite direction she was, and everything around her was a blur of dark colors as she seemed to be sucked into the parchment. Weightless, dizzy and confused, Hermione tried screaming for Harry or Ron, but her voice could not be heard even in her own ears.

Hermione found herself landing on her bum, sitting on the ground in a grove of thick trees, at the feet of Severus Snape. She started to rise, but he shoved her to the ground and quickly covered her with his cloak. "You stupid girl what are you doing here?" he hissed. "Of all places... and at this time? How did never mind."

"Professor?" she uttered from under the cloak, breathless, just realizing that she had been holding her breath the whole time.

"SILENCE, you stupid girl!" he hissed fiercely. "Do not utter one word, or I shall kill you myself. Simply nod or shake your head if you understand me." Hermione nodded and held her tongue.

"Okay," he said and peeled back his cloak to look at her. "At least you had the presence of mind to wear a black robe and contain that mane of hair," he observed, glaring at her robe and the loose braid holding her mass of curls away from her face.

"But, Professor, where am I?" she asked, gingerly getting to her feet.

"I told you to hold your tongue," he hissed angrily; his dark eyes flashed dangerously and he drew his wand. *Imperio*," he snarled. He transfigured a hood and pulled it over her head, and then quickly covered her face with a recruit's mask, giving it the 'mark' of one that had been approved, but untried. "You will stay by my side. You will not speak or utter any sound. You will ask no questions. You will think only obedience, loyalty, and devotion. Come."

Hermione had not even opened her mouth to resist or to call out; her mind was blank with a light, airy sensation of floating in a dream. Her wand pointed uselessly at the ground. She felt a complete, wonderful release from any sense of responsibility or worry over her actions or his, grateful that Professor Snape had everything under control. *I will do whatever he says I should... be utterly obedient to him... trust him explicitly... loyal to him, devoted to him, and love him...*

"Oh, this is bloody ridiculous," he snarled, and a light-fingered caress lifted from her mind. "Follow me and repeat insipidly that mantra whenever I say, 'my Lord'. Do you understand me?" Hermione could only nod her head, the light airy dream separating her from any sense of fear or reality.

Professor Snape led her into a clearing where Peter Pettigrew knelt, lighting a fire. She knew that she should be afraid, but she simply had nothing to worry about. Snape was in front of her.

In ones and pairs, occasionally in small clusters, the dark ring was formed as the Death Eaters arrived. There were not as many as Hermione would have expected there to be. Nearly thirty came to stand in a loosely grouped circle that stood in her line of sight. *If these are his only followers, then he hasn't been as successful as he'd been last time he rose to power. Maybe people are more aware of his true intentions, his true nature, and fear him.*

One figure swept the others aside and entered the circle; it was a tall, skeletally thin man in long, black robes with his hood folded back across his shoulders, exposing a bald, pale head. When he turned to face in her direction, Hermione could see the shrunken, drawn face the contours of his skull apparent under the translucent white skin, the livid scarlet eyes that almost glowed with black slits for pupils, and a flat nose with narrow slit-like nostrils. His mouth was his only normal feature: thin lips that curled in a sneer at the corner the way that Snape's had in class. Her eyes surveyed him, unafraid and with a calm sense of curiosity, her face serene under the mask.

"Kneel," Snape demanded, and immediately Hermione lowered down to show reverence to this man she loathed; although her eyes followed his every move, her curiosity

at seeing him outweighed her fear, only because of the hold of the curse.

Her mind repeated the mantra. *I will do whatever he says I should... be utterly obedient to him... trust him explicitly... loyal to him, devoted to him... love him...*

Voldemort moved with unnatural grace around the circle, greeting some of those gathered around him in the grove, punishing others for various reasons. His voice was strangely high-pitched, yet every bit as cold as Hermione expected it to be, making the tiny hairs on the back of her neck bristle. With several of his Death Eaters, he simply asked them who they'd recruited to join him, or if they had been successful at their appointed task with a note of menace in the cold tone of his voice. Hermione found that she could calmly and impassionately observe him, thanks to being held by Snape's Imperius Curse.

"Severus, nice of you to join us again," Voldemort hissed.

Snape bowed low, keeping his eyes reverently lowered. "My Lord, I will always return to you. I am and will be eternally yours."

Her mind immediately repeated the mantra. *I will do whatever he says I should... be utterly obedient to him... trust him explicitly... loyal to him, devoted to him, and love him...*

"Yes, although, not always obedient. Rise, Severus," Voldemort commanded coldly. He eyed Hermione curiously, walking around her, stopping just behind her back. "And what do we have here? Have you brought in a recruit? That is not the task I put to you," he continued, his voice a silky caress on each word. The silkiness of the high-pitched tone sent shivers down Hermione's spine, even under the calming effects of the Imperius Curse.

"She came to me of her own accord, just as I was summoned, my Lord," Snape replied lazily, the smooth drawl of his voice reflecting his annoyance. "I had little choice but to bring her."

Once again, Hermione repeated the mantra. *I will do whatever he says I should... be utterly obedient to him... trust him explicitly... loyal to him, devoted to him, and love him...*

"I see. Pray tell me why would I be interested in a Mudblood, Severus?" he asked quietly, his words meant for Snape only.

"This one is unique," Snape answered. Hermione could feel the tension he emitted, knowing that he was highly agitated. "She is the one you heard about from Malfoy, the Muggle-born who excelled in her every class at Hogwarts and is one of Harry Potter's friends, Hermione Granger."

Hermione's mind whirled. *Why is he telling him this? I will do whatever he says...warred in her mind with, I am going to be killed! I will trust him explicitly but I'm going to be killed!*

Voldemort stepped in front of Hermione and looked down at her still kneeling form. "Rise, girl," he said, but Hermione remained immobile. "Severus?"

"I put her under the Imperius, my Lord," Snape answered, the irritation barely concealed in his reply. "I was pressed for time, and it seemed the only logical way to control her and her incessant questions." He glared down at Hermione. "You will respond as directed by the Dark Lord." Silently, he re-strengthened the hold of his Imperius Curse on her in case her overactive mind broke his hold on her and forced his hand. *Idiot girl, keep your emotions under control. Trust me, obey me...* he thrust into her mind.

Hermione nodded and stood up, her mind repeated the mantra. *I will do whatever he says I should... be utterly obedient to him... trust him explicitly... loyal to him, devoted to him... and love him...*

"Very nice... well done, Severus," Voldemort said quietly and smiled mechanically. He stretched out a long-fingered hand and lifted her face to stare into her eyes. His touch was as unexpected as his manner. His fingertips were cold, dry and silky, but held her chin firmly. "You have done well... very well..."

Hermione thought she saw a gleam in his red eyes; a greedy expression crossed his features. "So this is the infamous Hermione Granger, Hogwarts' star pupil and Harry Potter's girlfriend... interesting," murmured Voldemort softly, examining Hermione's warm brown eyes.

"She is not his girlfriend, per se," Snape replied. "She is one of his two closest friends. They have been friends since his first year of school."

Hermione heard the voice of Lucius Malfoy speak up from somewhere in the circle to her right. "My lord, the trouble that this girl has caused, surely that must be taken into account."

"One of his closest friends... she would mean more to him than just a girlfriend, isn't that right, Severus?" a Death Eater said, also from Hermione's right, but much closer. "Then if we kill her, it will devastate him."

Hermione recognized his voice. *Lestrangle... from the fight in the Ministry of Magic...*

She was still looking into Voldemort's eyes as a shadow of annoyance crossed his face and he looked over at Lestrangle. "That is for me to decide isn't it, Rodolphus?"

"I just thought," Lestrangle started to say before he fell to his knees as Voldemort hissed the Cruciatus Curse.

Voldemort's eyes flashed scarlet, nearly glowing in anger, and Hermione clearly saw the knuckles whiten on the hand that held his wand. "I will decide what to do with her." He released Lestrangle and turned back to Hermione, his gaze traveling leisurely over her. He reached out his hand and gripped her face, his long fingers firm but gentle as he looked at her intently. The silence stretched as they stood there.

Voldemort, she had heard, was evil; however his hand, as it caressed her cheek, was oddly affectionate. "So docile, so willing, so compliant... What is she usually like, Severus? Walk with me."

"Stay where you are. Do not move do not speak," Snape told her as he stepped away, following the Dark Lord. Several Death Eaters joined them, a few sneaking glances in her direction.

Hermione stood frozen, her mind reeling. *I am going to be killed! I will trust him explicitly but I'm going to be killed! I will do whatever he says I should... Harry, forgive me... Be utterly obedient to him... devoted till death... I trust him explicitly... He's Professor Snape! Dumbledore trusted him... loyal to him. Harry, oh, I need you... devoted to him... and love him... I don't love Professor Snape!*

Hermione tried to hear what was being decided, knowing that Snape would acquiesce to whatever Voldemort told him to do. Several of the Death Eaters in the small group laughed and two swore. She felt unnaturally calm, the scene around her played before her like a television show, happening to someone else, the heroine and she was simply caught up in the story.

When the group returned, Hermione finally felt the first rise of fear. Voldemort paused to look at her and then looked over at Snape, who was standing with his arms crossed, his posture stiffer than usual. Her mind screamed for her to react, but her body stayed frozen in place, betraying her. Voldemort seemed to consider her, regarding her for a moment, then seemed to come to a conclusion. "Far be it for me to deny you, Lestrangle, Malfoy... You may do with her as you want, but just be sure to keep her alive. Severus, she will be your hostage once they're through. Unless, my friend, you want to change your mind and join them."

Snape remained immobile. "I will have my time with her," he said, his voice carrying a hard edge to it. Hermione wanted to cry out to him, but a soft, lingering caress filtered through her thoughts, and her mind focused on a lone transient thought. *You will not remember any of this. I promise you.*

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Pain infused her consciousness before anything else registered in her mind. She remembered sitting in the library. Books, new books Harry bought me to read. The unusual parchment and the sudden transportation to... I was transported to Professor Snape! But why? Was that parchment a Portkey? How could it be? There were voices, mutterings, just beyond her hearing range in the dark room. Harry... Ron! Help me... There was no answer, and she didn't hear her voice in the room. Pain, so much pain... Voldemort he's... he was... A series of contractions tore through her awareness, the pain intensifying in every fiber of her being.

She remembered him, every detail of the terrible wizard: his eyes, his face and his gentle caress of her cheek. For some reason, he elicited far more fear now than she remembered feeling standing before him. I met Voldemort? I stood before him... I was with Professor Snape and he took me to Voldemort? She remembered falling at Snape's feet, staring up at her one-time professor, seeing the black robe, the hood and the mask in his hand... His Death Eater mask. He put one on me, too, a mask like his and a hood. He took me before Voldemort!

She tried to sit up and couldn't; the effort to tighten her muscles to make them move was excruciating. Tears rolled from her eyes, trailing not down her face but into her hair. The realization hit her. She lay on a bed, covered by a sheet... that much registered in her pain-addled mind. I'm in a bedroom. Whose? Where? The cool feel of a silk sheet, which meant; I'm naked under this sheet. Her skin felt dry and abraded against the smooth silky texture. She couldn't feel her bra; the poke of the under-wires was not present. Her awareness began to reach out beyond the pain, trying to identify where she was, and her mind began to separate out the details.

She wasn't alone. She could feel a presence in the room or her level of fear had created him. The aches and pains she felt were both a general throbbing pain throughout her body and groin and sharp stabbing pains in very specific areas. One fact was apparent; she was bereft of any denial that she had been tortured and beaten... Her body ached everywhere she'd been attacked, both by flesh and magic; the realization of certain injuries and the evidence of rape hit her, and the overall effect was nauseating.

She heard shuffling, and tried to concentrate on the sounds of male voices just beyond her range of hearing. "No, I don't," came an angry retort, followed by a pause.

"No. I don't..." a second male voice snarled, then faded below her hearing.

She tried to raise her head again, and her abdomen spasmed again, making her cry out softly. Tears rolled freely down her face into her hair, and she groaned.

The sounds of heavy boots as he walked on a wood floor, announced his entrance into the room. "So, you're awake now, are you, Miss Granger?" the second male voice asked.

There was no mistaking that voice. She couldn't move her head to look, but the rich, silky voice dripping with sarcasm would have been easily recognized anywhere. Slowly, she opened her eyes, and the dark-clothed shape and black hair that could only be him loomed over her.

"Well?" he said, his arms crossed, expecting an answer. "So, you have nothing to say how enlightening."

She tried to shake her head in acknowledgment, but that caused her muscles to spasm, and she gasped out in agony. She couldn't move much, and pain shot through her body when she tried. Her arms and legs were shaking, and her stomach was cramping. She willed herself to relax, trying to ease the pain and spasms. After considerable time, she managed to reopen her eyes, only to see Snape still standing over her, watching her, staring at her intently.

"Wormtail," he called out after several long heartbeats.

A heavy shuffle announced the presence of Ron's onetime rat. "Yes, Severus?" he said from outside the doorway.

"You no longer need to be concerned; she's awake. Now go," he snarled, not even turning to look in Wormtail's direction.

She could hear Wormtail shuffle outside the door, muttering to himself. "But I want to see her," he said, practically a whine.

Snape smiled and simply turned his head slightly. "Not now," he snapped angrily over his shoulder. He picked up a vial from the bedside table and approached Hermione.

She was momentarily frightened as she looked at the hard expression on his face and tried to struggle, unsuccessfully, as Snape raised her head, and his strong fingers tightened in her hair to hold her head still. "Drink this," he said softly.

"No," she sputtered, trying to avoid swallowing anything as he poured a sweet tasting potion into her mouth.

"I'm not going to poison you, you idiot girl. Drink." The potion slid into her mouth again.

"What are you going to do to me?" she gasped between swallows.

"Heal you," he sneered. The stare of his cold, black eyes penetrated her pain-confused mind.

She rolled her eyes to look at him. "Why?" she choked as he held another vial to her lips. "Where am I? What is this place?" she asked between swallows. "Please, Professor."

"Why you are injured, and it has fallen to me to heal you. Now drink!" he said firmly. "Relax, you will only tear open again if you try to sit up."

A flare of hope swelled inside her, "You could take me to Grimmauld Place," she said, nearly a whisper. "Or the Burrow..."

"No. I cannot," he snapped angrily, then lowered his voice. "Now, will you be quiet? We have rats in the house."

She heard Wormtail snigger in the background and closed her eyes. "But when will you let me go?" she whispered.

"I cannot, Miss Granger." He switched vials again. She tried to turn her head, but he held it firmly, preventing her, and a tear ran down her cheek.

"But you have to. You are one of us. You could take me to the Order?" she asked quietly, pleading with him to help her.

"You have no idea the situation you are in," he snarled, then his hard expression showed the slightest flicker concern before he schooled his face to the usual expressionless mask, "and in no condition at the present time to hear it."

"If you won't let me go, then you're on his side." She sputtered as the potion slid down her throat. "You're only going to kill me anyway aren't you?" The potion tasted different; hypha fascia, black cohosh and colander infused with something she couldn't identify.

Wormtail coughed, reminding her that he still waited beyond the door.

Snape closed his eyes a moment, irritated and she could see the tic in his jaw as he clenched his teeth. "Oh, no, Miss Granger," he said slowly, his voice deeply infused with irritation. "The Dark Lord has reserved that honor for himself. But for now, he has decided that you should live."

She gagged. "What?" She tried to lift her head, but he held her firmly. "Why?" she tried to ask, but the effects of the potions began to hit her. Already her eyes felt heavy, she could feel herself falling asleep, even as she tried to resist, fighting to keep consciousness.

"We will discuss your situation after you are better and can think clearly. Now sleep."

Author's notes:

There is similarity between my story and 'Traitor,' by Averygoodun. I love this story of hers and I admit I've re-read it several times. I want to thank Averygoodun for allowing me to use part of the plot, some situations, and some characterizations from her story, "Traitor," which can be found at <http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=4727>

It happens to be one of the first SS/HG stories that I've read, it's a favorite, and it has influenced me greatly.

I haven't the words to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. Without her, I probably would have chucked it in the rubbish bin.

For those who don't like hostage-under-duress-falls-for-their-abductor, there is much more going on here, and I hope you have patience with me. Snape will have to come to terms with far more personal issues than Hermione will. He is now fully ensconced in the Dark Lord's circle and doesn't have Dumbledore to fall back on anymore.

Transaudient Pertaining to the passage of sound.

Transilient leaping or passing from one thing or state to another.

Actual wording of the prompt was: Hermione finds a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes that writes: Tell me your deepest desire. Thinking it's a trick, she says, "Take me to my soul mate?" and she suddenly finds herself at Severus' feet.

I changed Hermione's response to: I wish to see my soul mate, for reasons that are made clear later in the story.

Spinner's End

Chapter 2 of 43

Still recovering physically from her first Death Eater encounter after a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment dumps Hermione at Severus's feet, she finds herself in unfamiliar surroundings and in an awkward and frightening situation.

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Hermione's drug-induced sleep wore off slowly; awareness came slower. The first thing she noticed was the ease of her of pain, although it was still present. Vague memories filtered to her as she lay there trying to remember. She remembered seeing Professor Snape, falling on her bum in front of him, and seeing him bending over her to pour potions down her throat to heal her, how the look on his face right before she'd passed out was one of concern rather than the usual sneer. She also remembered that he brought before Voldemort and his Death Eaters, and the fear of that memory alone made her finally open her eyes, terrified.

Soft light filtered in around the hangings tied open on the huge four-poster bed. For one brief moment, she thought that she was in her room at Hogwarts before she noticed that the hangings were dark blue rather than red. She also noticed that the bed was much larger, more like the king-size bed in her parents' room. Not only that, but the sheets she lay in were black and silky.

Rolling rather than lifting her head, she took in what she could see of the room. A long wardrobe filled the wall next to her, flanked by a door on either side, and a bedside table held a lamp and several bottles and vials of different sizes and shapes. On either side of the bed, windows were covered in the same drapes as the ones hanging on the bedposts, blocking out almost all of the sunlight, except for a little that passed between the narrow slits down the middle. The bedside table on the other side held several books and a similar lamp. Two bookcases flanked a small Floo, and a heavy chair and ottoman sat near the window. The third wall at the foot of the bed appeared empty, except for a mirror and a painting of a landscape. In the far corner stood a dark, spotted eagle owl sleeping on a heavy branch perch.

The unfamiliar surroundings sent a shiver down her spine, confirming that nothing of what she remembered had been a dream; the strange room and the spasm of pain from the contraction of her abdomen as she moved her head tore away any hope of that. Memories came crashing down on her: the clearing in the forest, the Death Eaters, Voldemort, and waking up in severe pain, and Professor Snape... the anger and surprise when she'd landed at his feet and the gentle way he'd held her head as he gave her his potions when she wasn't resisting him. *The ones from the bottles next to me on the bedside table..*

She asked herself, *how*, and she remembered the parchment. Words had formed and she had written an answer back, twice. She had written on the parchment *What did I write? Show me my soul mate... and it transported me... to him... It took me to Professor Snape... and to Voldemort.* She felt so ashamed that she had been so gullible. *I didn't learn anything at all from Ginny's experience with Tom Riddle's diary! How could I have been so stupid? But he seemed surprised to see me, even angry. It couldn't have been a trap... a coincidence, another Horcrux perhaps but the writing wasn't Professor Snape's... It looked gothic.*

So, *now where am I?* It hurt to lift her head; a shearing pain tore at her abdomen when she tried. Her bladder hurt, and she knew that she needed to find the loo. She didn't want to call out; she vaguely remembered that Wormtail was here, somewhere, and she definitely didn't want to see him. Suddenly hit with a bout of nausea, Hermione desperately looked around for the loo and hoped the door on the other side of the wardrobe led to one. She tried to roll to her side and cried out involuntarily in pain, falling back onto the bed. *Now what?*

A door on the far side of the wardrobe opened and soft footsteps entered the room. Hermione turned her head and was stunned to see her professor dressed in black trousers and white shirt, walking into the room with a tray. "So, you decided to finally wake up?" he said sharply. Hermione simply nodded and winced at the effort. "Wormtail has insisted on preparing you breakfast. I suggest you eat it." He set the tray across her feet and picked up a bottle from the bedside table. "First, your potions."

"Professor?" she asked, her scratchy voice infused with pain.

"No questions, Miss Granger. I will not tolerate your innumerable questions and your persistent compulsion to question everything around you. You will refrain from ~~asking~~ anything. This is *my* house, so you will be expected to abide by *my* rules. You are a *hostage* here, not a guest. You are here because the Dark Lord decrees it *nothing* more." He held the potion out to her. "Drink this."

"Please, sir, I need to use the loo," she said, trying to get up and wincing in pain as she did.

He stared down at her, his gaze cold and hard. "Very well," he said, "roll to your side." He reached out to assist her, his hands firm, but extraordinarily gentle, as he helped her to rise from the bed. Hermione was surprised to see a black, silky night-slip covered her body as he helped her to stand. "The loo is the door on this side of the wardrobe," he said simply. Gritting her teeth against the pain, she tried to walk and stumbled, grasping hold of the bed hangings to keep from falling. She heard him swear under his breath.

He swept her into his arms and carried her to the loo. She was stunned to feel just how strong he was, how effortlessly he could carry her. He set her on her feet, holding her as he waited for her to pull her night-slip to expose her bottom and set her down to sit on the seat, then backed away and stood there watching her, his arms crossed, leaning against the doorframe. "Well, get on with it," he sneered at her.

I can't do this in front of him! "Will you at least look away?" she asked, straining to hold her urine, not wanting to release in front of him.

He looked down at her, his expression cross. "Ever since you landed at my feet, you have become my responsibility, Miss Granger. Are you capable of sitting there without falling off?"

"Yes, I..." Hermione started to say and felt the urine begin to trickle of its own accord, eliciting a smile from him. She closed her eyes and turned her head to cover her humiliation, and he merely laughed at her. Her head snapped up to admonish him for laughing, and she was surprised to find the loo empty, although she could hear him move about the bedroom through the open door. Hermione could no longer hold back her urine, and it poured from her, and she cringed, hoping that the sound did not carry far. Gingerly and as modestly as she could, she wiped herself. When she was done, Hermione eased her way back to the bedroom, leaning on the counter of the sink as she edged to the door. Snape stepped over to her as soon as she appeared in the doorway. Without a word, he carefully lifted her into his arms and carried her back to his bed.

After considering her phrasing, Hermione finally said, "Sir, I don't know why I am here."

"Don't you? It has become my job to keep you alive for the Dark Lord's purposes, thus you are my unfortunate responsibility," he explained as he looked down at her with disinterest. He added several pillows behind her so that she could sit up. "You cannot leave this bedroom without me, Miss Granger, and I suggest you do not try. The wards on the room will prevent you from doing so, and if you should try, you will feel pain equal to that of the Cruciatus Curse, *and* you will be thrown back into the room; the same goes for my potions lab and the doors that exit my house."

"Is this I mean, this is your room," she said, trying to make it sound like a statement.

"Yes," he sneered, "my bedroom, my loo."

Hermione looked around again, and suddenly she realized that it was the only bed in the room. "Sir, there is only one bed."

"Very good, Miss Granger, you can count," he sneered.

"Where did you, um where are you," she uttered, lowering her head to avoid his hard stare. "I mean, are you sleeping... in um."

"I sleep in my bed, Miss Granger." He turned from her as her eyes snapped to him. When he turned back, he was pouring a potion into a vial and then handed it to her. "Drink this."

"You mean... I am to sleep with you?" she gasped.

"Did I not tell you that I would not tolerate questions?" he snarled, anger flashing in his eyes. "Learn to refrain from asking them, or you will test my patience beyond its endurance." She took the offered potion and drank the contents, still staring at his eyes. His face held no expression except one that she knew well from school. He exchanged the bottle for another from the bedside table, measuring out her dose into the vial, holding it out to her. "It's a big bed, Miss Granger. You hardly take up that much room," he said dismissively.

Hermione drank the potions in silence, suddenly unnerved by his harsh reaction. *To think that parchment sent me to him my soul mate, indeed. Foul-tempered, malicious, churlish, heartless, tyrannical, insulting... and he calls me insufferable! Ha!*

The corners Snape's mouth curled up slightly almost into an expression that resembled humor, if his eyes hadn't remained so cold. "So, I finally managed to silence your insufferable questions? How enlightening."

Still, he is in the Order and Dumbledore always said he was on our side. she thought. "Sir, I need to contact my friends..."

Snape raised his finger and pointed it at her, effectively cutting her off, the hint of a smile was now gone. "That is impossible." He regarded her coolly. "Now, I have a few questions for you, and you *will* answer me. If you do not, I will probe your mind until I find the answers," he said, his voice low and silky. "I'm sure Potter has told you that I'm quite skilled at Legilimency?"

"Yes, he mentioned that," she replied. She looked down at her hands, trying to avoid his eyes *No eye contact no intrusion... according to the books I've read, you need to have eye contact..*

"How did you find me? How is it that you were suddenly present where I'd been summoned?" he asked.

"I had no idea where I was," she replied. "I'm not sure myself..." Despite her resolve, after spending six years as his student, she just couldn't avoid his eyes when he

asked a direct question. His eyes narrowed, and she made a sharp intake of breath at his intense stare, and dropped her gaze to her hands again. "I was... well... there's this piece of vellum parchment, animal vellum I think, that I purchased at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes..."

"Go on," he said, his voice eerily calm as his eyes intently scrutinized her. When she hesitated to continue, the look in his eyes became angry. "That did not answer my question."

Hermione fidgeted with her thumbs in her lap. "The parchment... words appeared. I thought it was a joke item... So I answered them." Her voice cracked *Just like Ginny did in Riddle's diary... surely Dumbledore told him about it... How could I be so stupid?* She didn't want to answer these questions, not now.

"That still does not answer my question," he snarled impatiently. "I recall quite well that you are fully capable of answering a question."

She hesitated. "It said I could ask a question or make a wish... so I did. Only, instead of more words appearing as before... I was transported to you."

"And what, pray tell, did you wish for?" he asked, his eyes narrowing, glaring suspiciously into hers.

She tried to lower her head to avoid his intense stare, and he reached out swiftly, firmly holding her chin in his grip. She tried ineffectually to block what she knew would happen next. The room around her swirled and changed; her vision focused on the shelves at Flourish and Blotts, and then among the hats and cloaks in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes, before the images of Ron and Harry fighting with trick wands came into focus. She tried to shut her mind to his, but it only elicited a cold laugh from him as she tried to push him out of her mind, and the memory of her first time riding a bicycle and nearly falling over as she tried to miss a tree flashed briefly. Then the image in her mind became the memory of Ron kissing her; which Hermione managed to change to a memory of sitting in Ron's room, talking to her friends. With a slight discomfort in her mind, the memory changed again under Snape's will. The parchment came into view as she remembered talking to George at the counter of his shop, showing him the parchment before adding it to her pile as they divided the joke and defense items into three piles. She could feel Snape directing the link as he searched for another image of the parchment, and the image swirled again, becoming the library at Grimmauld Place and the piece of parchment in her hand.

The image of the paper held firm as the lines appeared. *Make a wish, ask a question I'll show your fate, I'll tell you no lies* The image in her mind turned the parchment over, examining it, and then laid it back down, watching the pearly black ink appear and scroll into the words; *Tell me your deepest desire. Three times I will comply if brave you be, to face what you'll see.* Her memory self laughed, then wrote, *Who is my heart's desire? I wish to see my soul mate* The room swirled dizzily, and Hermione tried to fight the image of falling at his feet, and it faded, but not before she felt the pressure of his contact slide from her mind.

He rose, his body stiff and his expression hard and disconcerting. "Your heart's desire? Really? Do you intend to make me believe you desire me, Miss Granger?" He stared at her scornfully.

She knew what he saw when he looked into her mind; he had to know that she was incapable of lying about what happened. His hard stare unnerved her. She felt dizzy and wanted nothing more than to sleep.

He turned and walked away from her, stopping at the door. "Eat your breakfast," he snarled venomously.

It was hours before he returned. He simply set another tray over her knees, removed the breakfast tray and left. What little she could eat of the sandwich and soup eased her hunger, and she drank the potions set in a row by the edge of the tray. When she awoke, the room was dark. She wasn't alone.

He stood by the wardrobe, peeling off his shirt and trousers. Hermione tried to stifle the gasp that escaped her lips and saw his back stiffen, although he did not turn around. His shoulders and back showed lean muscle that rippled with his movements, lean hips and long, well-muscled legs. *Runner's legs, Mum would have called them. Although he has a slight build, he is definitely well toned,* she thought appreciatively, and as he turned slightly, she saw that his stomach rippled in what her mum called a six-pack. However, it was his penis that held her gaze, for the few brief seconds she saw it, hanging flaccid between his thighs. Even flaccid, it was large, and that frightened her. He pulled out a pair of black pajama bottoms and slipped into them.

Hermione closed her eyes as he walked over to the bed and sat down next to her. "Drink this," he demanded harshly. She opened her eyes to see a flask thrust in her face. Wordlessly she accepted the potion. She drank each one of her potions, accepting each one silently as he handed them to her. A light-headedness overcame her almost immediately after the last one. He watched her a moment, then walked to the other side of the bed and eased in. Within heartbeats, Hermione was sound asleep.

It was some time later, through the potion-induced fog that Hermione began to dream. *Long, unnaturally long, fingers stroked her face, red eyes boring into hers. "Silence, you stupid girl, or I will kill you myself," Professor Snape snarled. A head with translucent skin so thin she could practically see the skull it covered. A wide mirthless mouth stretched into a smile, red eyes with black slits, and a flat nose that leaned in to her... "You may do with her as you want, but just be sure to keep her alive," the eerie voice said. "I will have my time with her," Professor Snape sneered. A huge snake wound around her ankles... A hand lifted her cloak from her shoulders as she stood there, unmoving, and a ring of skulls looked at her, mouths smiling in lustful sneers...*

"Miss Granger," a deep, silky voice broke through the images. She felt a hand caress her forehead, pushing her hair back and lay on her forehead a moment and the images of her dream changed.

Professor Snape standing next to her... I trusted him... I will obey him, I trust him... Red eyes intently scrutinizing her... Lifted and held against a fallen tree... Long, slightly calloused fingers delicately wiped blood and mud from her body with soft caresses... Cold water... Wrapped in a cloak and lifted off her feet... White hands with long, thin fingers like spiders reached out and touched her face... Who is my heart's desire? I wish to see my soul mate, written by her hand on a parchment... Professor Snape's eyes showing concern as he looked at her, rather than his usual sneer... Pain, intense pain... The stinging of cuts, cold compresses, stinging salves... sharp pains as lacerations and bones mended... Black eyes in a white face...

"Blast it, girl," Snape snarled, waking her from her dream, and she felt him move away. The lamp on her bedside table flared to life, and he sat next to her holding a flask to her lips, his other hand supporting her head. "Drink."

Hermione opened her eyes as he tipped a potion vial to her lips, and she swallowed the potion before it choked her. Snape laid her head gently back onto the pillow and brushed a wayward strand of hair from her face, his touch almost a caress. His dark eyes showed a slight glimmer of concern before he turned to place the potion on her bedside table. He rose, and she assumed he was leaving her. A heavy headiness began to swirl in her consciousness. "I'm sorry about all this. I really should just go. I don't want to be a burden..."

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Severus stopped and turned as she spoke. "You, unfortunately, are to remain here... And yes, you are a burden." He didn't move, but stayed at the bedside looking at her, contemplating the images he'd seen in her mind, his face stern. *How was it possible that she remembered so much? I carefully Obliviated as much of the abuse and rape that I could for her, so she wouldn't have to remember any of it, and suppressed the rest of the events at the gathering. She should only remember up to when the Dark Lord pulled me aside to discuss what should be done with her.*

Hermione stirred again, emitting soft moans.

And the memories of my administrations to her wounds how had she remembered that? He watched as the sleeping and calming draughts he'd added to the healing potions took their effect. *Her mind is stronger than I'd given her credit obviously* If he was honest with himself, this girl impressed him on occasion. Nevertheless, he wouldn't allow himself to admit that she was pretty to him; *intelligent, resourceful and clever, proficient, driven by both the pursuit of knowledge and to excel in everything she did like I was at her age. But soul mates? Ridiculous.*

To entertain any notions toward the girl is preposterous! She was my student! Still would be if I had remained at Hogwarts. Doesn't matter, the Dark Lord considers her to be his hostage now... placed in my charge. He will use her against Potter, and I am to keep her alive. She's to be either forced to join the Dark Lord, to do his bidding or to be used as a sacrifice. Either way, she'll die.

He recalled his instructions when he'd put her under the Imperius Curse: *Think only obedience, loyalty, and devotion. Yet, I read clearly in her mind, "I will do whatever he says I should, be utterly obedient to him, trust him explicitly, be loyal to him, devoted to him, and love him... Where had trust and love come from? She shouldn't have added that unless, no... She felt them for me or thinks she does.* He walked slowly to his side of the huge bed.

And that parchment, it brought her to me. Magical trans-relocation is extremely difficult to do. This parchment acted like a Portkey, but it didn't travel with her it sent her. No object can do that... but this one did, he completed as he slid back into bed. He rolled over and leaned on his elbow to look at her *Who is my heart's desire? I want to see my soul mate,' she wrote not show me or tell me see.* He fumed at the implications it could mean and knew the consequences. *She has no idea what she has done damn it.*

Severus recalled his last summons to the Dark Lord as Hermione had slept under the influence of his potions. *The Dark Lord wanted to know how I captured her, and I couldn't lie he saw what he wanted to know even before I could conceive of some plausible story. He knows they know nine of them.* The fragments Severus had allowed the Dark Lord was enough, yet he could not conceal the magical plight her actions and the parchment implied. *Bellatrix had howled in hysterical laughter. Lucius was delighted, Narcissa even more so.*

His gaze fell again on the sleeping girl beside him. *But does she think she loves me? That's absurd, completely ludicrous! Still, this isn't some delusional schoolgirl infatuation written in the margins of a schoolbook. It is a magical artifact that's now connected us... one either planted for her to find or found by accident.* If the parchment was what he expected it was... and if it was in fact real, the parchment itself confused him. The situation it created infuriated him.

The Dark Lord had granted Narcissa's offer to supply Hermione with suitable clothes. Hermione's Muggle jeans and sweater had been shredded and the robe torn. The robe now hung in his wardrobe, although it was unwearable. *These ridiculous flimsy lingerie that the woman provided... What is the woman thinking? That they would entice me to use the girl? Damn, Narcissa, what in Hades is she playing at? There is no way Hermione made a Plight or a Betrothal Charm she is already engaged or plighted to the Weasley boy. It's understood.*

The parchment he saw in Hermione's mind would have required a series of spells, including both Dark Charms and Dark Enchantments *Much too complicated for merely a joke item, and she is correct, it looked like true animal vellum very expensive. Not the usual adolescent writing parchment. If she found it in the Weasleys' shop, I doubt that they would have could have produced it. Even the stationary shops only provide animal vellum upon request due to its expense.* He remembered her admission also: *trust him explicitly... and love him... Love me? Really?* he mentally snorted. *But still she had said it repeatedly.*

He rose, and taking a small sheet of parchment and quill from a box on his bookshelf, he wrote a simple statement in carefully printed letters.

She is fine. She is recovering. She must stay here for now, but I assure you, I will protect her.

Moving from Kent. T. McCulloch and H. Farag in danger. Someone in the Ministry is targeted

He placed a Vanishing Charm and a delayed Inflammariis on the parchment so that, once read, it would immediately fade and burn. Gently, he stroked the feathers of his owl before giving him the note. "You know where to take this," he said with a hint of affection in his voice, carrying the bird to the window. "Go."

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The next morning as Hermione rolled from the bed, she noticed two things. First, the pain was much less than the day before and she could roll out of bed, gingerly. And secondly, the night-slip she wore was midnight blue, not black. So were the sheets. She walked into the loo and relieved herself. She felt slightly dizzy when she moved too quickly. *Still feeling groggy from the potions, I suppose* She looked around, examining her surroundings more carefully and noticed that the loo was surprisingly Muggle compared to the loos she associated with wizard homes. The shower had three showerheads, one a handheld type, and the tub, which stood separate, was a large, deep, claw-footed kind. It had water jet spouts and a handheld showerhead that rested above the faucet, which had four, not two, handle-shaped knobs. *Well, that's definitely a wizard faucet. Two of them probably pour out bubble bath.*

Above the tub, a shelf unit held thick, burgundy terrycloth towels and several baskets, two holding various containers and jars. Matching burgundy towels hung on a rod on the wall. A large mirror hung over a vanity directly across from the mirror above the sink counter. She tentatively made her way to the tub, testing each handle, finding that two produced thick, foamy water and filled the tub.

Removing the silky night-slip, Hermione examined her face and her body in the mirrors, fingering the bruises that were healing on her flesh and noticing several thin lines of what remained of cuts and wounds she didn't remember receiving. *Pain, from both magical and physical injuries... I remember the pain... but not how I was hurt.* She shook her head, wondering why she didn't remember, but was stunned to realize that she'd been so brutalized. *I remember gentle touches... of soft fingers... The stinging when the cuts were cleaned, cool soothing compresses, salves... sharp pains when the lacerations and bones were mended... I remember dark eyes looking down at me with concern... Snape? He healed me? Or did he get a Healer for me?*

She eased herself into the hot, frothy water, realizing that the tub was engorged inside to be large enough for two. She closed her eyes as she soaked, the hot water easing away her residual aches. The thick foam of the bubble bath tickled her nose, and the rich lavender and woody scents were relaxing. Images of lying here came to her, confused images or feelings of lounging in the hot water, leaning against a firm chest, long legs and arms wrapped protectively around her, gentle hands wiping her body, stroking her skin... a warm breath caressing her ear... lips on her temple in a soft kiss...

"That, I can assure you, never happened, Miss Granger."

She sat up instantly, and the soap bubbles slowly slid down from her shoulders, unnoticed. He was standing in the doorway, leaning against the doorframe, smirking at her. She hadn't heard him come in, nor did she recognize the signs of his intrusion into her thoughts, but the unmistakable release of his intrusion was there, and it momentarily unbalanced her. *How could he know... How did he know what I was thinking without looking into my eyes?* Still, she did sense the release she now recognized as when the Legilimency contact was terminated. *But that's not possible!* "I thought I - I'd j-just take a bath," she stammered.

His lips curled even further, giving his face a mask-like appearance of wicked humor. "I can see that," he said in response to her statement.

Still he looks as if he knows actually knows what I was thinking She delved back under the thick, frothy soap to cover her nakedness from his stare. He walked in reaching into the shelves and pulled out a bottle, handing it to her. "What's that?" she asked.

Snape's lip curled up slightly into an expression that almost resembled a smile, but his black eyes remained unemotional. "That's eight questions you've asked me, Miss Granger, since you've arrived here. Are you truly incapable of refraining yourself?" When she didn't answer, he continued. "It's shampoo. Despite your friends' and school mates' impressions, I do, on occasion, wash my hair." His voice was hard, but almost humorous except for the indifference in his expression. He backed up and leaned against the sink near the door. "Anything else you would like? What items do you require? List them."

"Sir, if I could just go to Grimmauld Place, I could..." she suggested hopefully and paused as his eyes narrowed in warning.

"As I have said, that is not an option," he snarled impatiently. "You will tell me what items you need, and I shall get what you require. Now list them."

"I would like a brush vented, not bristled," she replied timidly. He nodded. "And a tooth brush, toothpaste... dental floss..." He nodded again as his lips twitched upward. "Body lotion, shampoo, conditioner, and cream rinse..." He smirked, a hint of amusement in his dark eyes, but he nodded again. "Shaving gel... a razor..." His eyebrow rose slightly, but he made no other indication of acknowledgment. "Clothes, knickers..." He shook his head. "A robe, then... shoes?"

He shook his head again. "You have nowhere to go. If and only when I am required to take you with me, you will be provided with clothes. You will wear what has been supplied for you. Wash your hair. I do not have all day." His expression was unwavering, but at least he wasn't staring at her as she began to wash her hair. The lather and scent was of spicy florals.

"I am going to need um, feminine products," she added as she worked the lather through her tresses.

He glared at her impatiently. "That is what I asked you to list out for me."

"Men is... I will need Kotex," she stammered uncomfortably.

"You will use the pad-cup and strap," he said firmly. "Anything else?"

"I don't know how to..." His eyebrow rose at her statement. "I have never... I use Kotex."

"Not this month, it would be unadvisable," he said in silky drawl. "You still need to recover." Her mind reeled. She remembered pains and aches from her groin, but little else. He smiled wickedly at her confusion. "I removed those memories for you. I didn't think you'd want to remember."

"So docile, so willing, so compliant... What is she usually like, Severus? Walk with me," the high-pitched voice said in her mind. *Voldemort! The Death Eaters, looking at her... then, "Stay where you are. Do not move do not speak," Professor Snape told her before...* She tried to focus. *What happened next... Did they?* She was raped, the pain in her body told her that. *A ring of half-skull masks looked at her, mouths smiling in lustful sneers... lifted and held against a fallen tree... long fingers delicately wiped blood and mud from her... Pain...* She vaguely remembered some administrations to her wounds. *Drinking potions and lying in bed, in pain*

"I left enough so that you would know. I knew that you would know it happened by the pain, and I thought you didn't need to remember." He drew his wand and a towel flew from the shelves into his hands.

You will not remember any of this. I promise you She remembered his voice in her head. She wasn't aware that she'd said it out loud.

"Yes." He stared at her intently. "Do you need assistance, Miss Granger?" She hesitated, and he became visibly agitated. "I do not have all day. I have things I need to do, and I will not leave you here all day to scavenge through my possessions."

"I am going to be, um, you want me... I will assist you with your potions," she stammered, trying to rephrase her words into a statement.

"That is nine," he snarled. "Are you completely incapable of refraining from asking questions?"

Apparently, "No," she mumbled. "I use cream rinse on my hair, or I won't be able to brush it out."

He rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. "You will have to forgo that for today," he said. "Now rinse or I will haul you out of there as you are."

She picked up the handheld shower wand, turned on the taps. "Rinse and dry off. If you need me, I'll be in the bedroom," he said over his shoulder as he turned back to the bedroom.

She pulled the plug in the tub, rinsed, and dried off as quickly as she could, then followed him into the bedroom. A long, black night-slip lay on the bed with a matching dressing gown. "Narcissa thought them appropriate. It's what she has provided for you. Put them on." He stood in the middle of the space between the bed and wardrobe, watching her intently, his arms crossed and scowling. He waited only a few seconds before he turned and strode back into the bathroom, reaching out and pulling the towel from her as he passed. Hermione quickly pulled on the night-slip and dressing gown, securing the tie. "The boots by the bed, put them on," he instructed when he returned, pointing at a pair of soft leather boots, almost hidden by the bed hangings. She slipped them on and stood. "Follow me."

At the doorway, he grabbed hold of her arm, pushing her forward. Thousands of tiny prickles tingled across every inch of her skin and abated. "That is nothing to what you would feel if you pass without me. Each prick would feel like a stabbing thrust, and you would have been thrown back into the room immediately. The stabbing sensations last an hour. It keeps Wormtail out of my room quite effectively, I assure you."

Hermione noticed that there were two other closed doors and a bathroom in the hall before he led her down the stairs. "Both bedrooms are occupied," he replied off-handedly. "I doubt you would prefer to sleep with either of the occupants."

"Wormtail and..." she said softly, both curious and fearful as to who else shared this house.

"Yes," he said with a wicked grin. "He, apparently, would love to have you in his bed." She preceded him down the stairs, past a door, then followed him down a short hallway, past a dining room and stopped where the hallway turned. Snape opened up a door, turning to allow her to enter, clamping a hand on her shoulder, nearly shoving her down the first two steps. The same prickly sensations assaulted her skin, and she knew he had the same wards on this entryway that he did on his bedroom. Her entire body shook for several seconds as she descended the last two steps inside a large potions lab where Draco Malfoy stood, apparently brewing two potions. "I believe you know my apprentice."

"Malfoy?" she asked in stunned disbelief.

"Yes," Snape replied, a curt edge to his voice.

"What is she doing here?" Draco asked, turning from his cauldrons.

"Mind your potions. This is not a good phase to be distracted," Snape admonished him. "She is here because the Dark Lord saw fit to dump her on me, just as he did you. However, unlike you, she is a hostage." Hermione bristled at his comment. Draco's jaw clenched, but he made no comments, staring at her with unveiled contempt. "She will have strict guidelines and restrictions. And if for any reason I leave her in your attendance, I expect you to adhere to those restrictions and do exactly as I tell you to. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," Draco said, turning back to his potions.

Hermione tried to see what he was brewing, and Snape stepped between them, blocking her view. Pulling his wand from his sleeve, he conjured a large, plush armchair, which he set against the wall behind her between a large desk and the door. "Sit and be quiet. I have work to do, and I do not want you pestering me." Placing his hand on her shoulder, he pushed her down into the chair.

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, and he placed a finger firmly against her lips. "That makes eleven, Miss Granger. Do not think I am above punishing you."

She stared at him furiously in disbelief. He leaned down, placing both hands on the armrests of her chair, his almost leveling his eyes to her own. "Rule one: no questions.

Rule two: no wand. Rule three: you will do what I tell you, without question, without comment. You will obey me. Do I make myself clear?"

Draco snickered from across the room. "Yes, sir," Hermione said, furious and embarrassed, tears welled in her eyes and her hands clenched into fists.

"Fine." He strode across the room to stand next to Draco. *Soul mate, indeed... as if I would ever... with him!* He stood, watching Draco work, making quiet comments, the rich silky tone of his voice barely audible over a constant trickle of water. She turned her head to take in the room.

Her body still ached in places, and she shifted, trying to ease the discomfort only to have other pains increase. Finally, she found a position that caused the least amount of discomfort. *How could anything consider him as my heart's desire! As my professor I respected him, even admired him, and trusted him... but love? Yeah, right. When Minerva allows Hagrid to have a dragon for a pet! He hates me. What magic in that parchment made it decide to dump me in front of him that I could be attracted to him! It had to be a trick a trap. But it was simply on the floor in Fred and George's shop... and no one but the five of us knew we were going... So if it was a trap it wasn't meant for me at all... Unless it was, and some spell made it fall at my feet... Oh get a grip, Granger! You're just speculating.* Calming herself, she examined the room.

A large L-shaped worktable was set close to the wall in front of her and a large desk stood on her right. A sink and cleaning counter was placed on the wall to her left, the shelves below full of various bowls and utensils. A spigot jutted from the wall next to the sink, providing a thin, steady stream of running water that fell into a stone basin. There were shelves behind her and above each work area, full of ingredients, specimens, books and utensils. The room was expertly laid out. *His private potions lab, I wonder what he brews here?*

She tried reading the titles of the books, many of the books were old, but there were journals and new books mixed in as well. Many of them intrigued her, and she was certain that many of the books were books on Dark Arts potions. She refrained from taking any, unsure how Snape would react. After a while, she fell asleep in her chair, listening to the sound of the water and the rich, silky voice of Professor Snape.

"Granger."

She jumped at his bark, waking with a start and almost responded with an automatic, Yes, sir? but caught herself in time. Instead she simply looked up to see his face glaring down at her. He was holding out a vial to her.

"Drink this," Snape snapped at her. "It's time for lunch, and you missed breakfast because of your bath." There were more vials in his other hand. A small table had been placed next to her chair with a tray holding a sandwich and a glass of water. "I am not going to stand here all afternoon take this. Oh, for Merlin's sake, girl, I am not going to waste any of my poisons on you," he snarled angrily. "If I had wanted to poison you, I would have been done with it and disposed of you already."

Draco sat at the desk, smirking at her, eating a thick, beef sandwich. "I could just put the Imperius on you and make you drink the potions that way." Hermione took the vial and drank the sour potion, and he handed her the next one, followed by the third. "Fine, now eat." He strode over to the desk and sat down with Draco.

A bell went off and Draco rose, added an ingredient to his potion and stirred the contents three times. "Sir, it is pink now," he said without turning.

"Fine, let it sit and finish the other half." He looked up at Hermione as she ate her sandwich. His eyes were unwavering and inscrutable, and she found her gaze flicking to meet his several times as she ate. Finally, he rose and towered over her. He leaned close to her as he reached over her head to retrieve a book from an upper shelf, his groin level with her nose. A soft, subtle, woody, earthy scent assaulted her sense of smell, and she tried to avert her eyes, her face suddenly very hot, and caught Draco's eyes as he watched her discomfort.

She looked away and saw Snape standing before her, holding a thick book. "At least I can give you something constructive to do," he said sarcastically. "This will keep you effectively occupied, I believe."

The book, written by Dilys Derwent, read like a dissertation of the old theories related to a comprehensive analysis of basic potions ingredients and their interactions to each other and their reactive properties, both innate and that which they formed when mixed together. It was advanced N.E.W.T. level reading. She knew that Dilys Derwent was a famous Healer in her day, and she was one of the most highly respected Headmistresses of Hogwarts.

The book was fascinating. Several times she'd wished that she had quill and parchment to make notes or to outline the book but had to settle for reading several passages repeatedly to commit them to memory. She was cross-referencing a use of hellebore with climbing mertensia to that of digitalis when she noticed Snape standing by her chair, leering down at her.

"It is time for dinner, Miss Granger. Put the book down."

Author's notes:

At this point in the story Hermione is still recovering from the brutality of her first encounter with the Death Eaters and is taking healing, pain and sleeping potions. Her perception of time is somewhat distorted and not reliable...

In regards to Snape's ability to read Hermione's dreams and daydreams in this chapter:

In reviewing Legilimency on the Harry Potter Lexicon site: Legilimency is easier when the spell-caster is physically near the person and has eye contact. However, I am assuming that eye contact isn't always necessary for the very accomplished Legilimens, like Snape, Voldemort or Dumbledore are. I'm using the assumption that a very accomplished Legilimens would have the ability to extract or 'read' emotions and memories when that person is off-guard, relaxed, or otherwise vulnerable. (i.e. Voldemort didn't look into a Muggle's eyes, Frank Bryce.) Eye contact has the fringe benefit that the person's emotional state may bring relevant associated memories to the surface and that one would get better 'reception' or clearer 'readings' with eye contact than without. I am taking liberty with this and using it as I see fit.

Hermione's thoughts about the necessity of eye contact for Legilimency are from what was read in a book. Snape is very accomplished Legilimens, so even without eye contact he can read Hermione's dreams and daydreams, although eye contact would be preferred in order to interpret his findings more accurately, to get the 'whole picture' or information.

There is similarity between my story and 'Traitor' by Averygoodun. I love this story of hers and I admit I've re-read it several times. I want to thank Averygoodun for allowing me to use part of the plot, some situations, and some characterizations from her story, "Traitor," which can be found at <http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=4727>.

It happens to be one of the first SS/HG stories that I've read, one of my favorites, and it has influenced me greatly.

I haven't the words to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. Without her, I probably would have chucked it in the rubbish bin.

Actual wording of the prompt was: Hermione finds a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes that writes: Tell me your deepest desire. Thinking it's a trick, she says, "Take me to my soul mate?" and she suddenly finds herself at Severus' feet.

I changed Hermione's response to: I wish to see my soul mate. For reasons that are made clear later in the story.

The Hand

Chapter 3 of 43

Still recovering physically, but feeling more herself, Hermione analyzes the dynamics between the men she is now forced to live with, after a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment dumps her at Severus's feet. She also discovers her situation is more precarious than she'd thought.



~o0o~

She set the book on the little table and rose to follow him. Entering the kitchen from an open archway off the corridor, Hermione was surprised to see a house-elf preparing the meal.

The kitchen was very much like the one at Grimmauld Place, only yellow, with old wood cupboards and white tile counters. Cooking herbs grew on the glass shelves in the bay window over the kitchen sink. The dining room area had a large wooden table and six chairs, dish cupboard and hutch that were a dark mahogany, and a wrought iron candelabrum hung from the ceiling. Several matching wrought iron wall sconces were set at even intervals along the walls. Wormtail sat in a chair at the far end of the table and quickly averted his gaze from Professor Snape as he entered the room. Neither Snape nor Draco acknowledged Wormtail as they entered, nor when they sat down at the opposite end of the table facing each other.

Wormtail slouched in his chair as he stared at Hermione, whereas Draco leaned back in his chair with his arms on the armrests, his napkin draped on one knee, looking at nothing in particular. Snape on the other hand, leaned forward, his elbows on the table and his hands steepled in front of him. Not sure where she was to sit, and not wanting to be in either chair next to Wormtail, nor wanting to sit at the head of the table and face him, Hermione stood timidly on the side of the room. Wormtail leered at her from his end of the table and indicated the chair between himself and Snape with a sloppy smile.

"Sit down, Miss Granger," Snape snapped as he kicked the chair out at the head of the table between himself and Draco. Hermione took her seat, careful to keep the dressing robe closed as she did so. As soon as Hermione placed her napkin in her lap, the house-elf began serving the meal.

Hermione had half expected to see the plates magically appear in front of her as they did at Hogwarts. However, the tiny elf balanced four plates and soup bowls easily, managing to place each plate and bowl carefully in front of each person sitting at the table. Hermione watched each man as the house-elf served them, going first to Draco, then to her, then Snape, and then Wormtail, even though Wormtail sat the closest to the kitchen area. She began to make note of the dynamics in the household while she ate, watching the three men in silence, trying to read their body language and expressions.

Draco sat casually in his chair, one arm on the table, his body rigid, his back straight, keeping his eyes either on his food or on Snape. Snape was sitting forward with his elbows on the table as he ate, his hair obscuring his face from both Hermione and, she supposed, from Wormtail. Wormtail slouched in his seat, slurping his stew messily as he ate and playing with his bread, dipping it the broth of his stew.

Once the meal had been served, the house-elf did not approach the table again. The elf busied herself in the kitchen and then disappeared into the pantry. Hermione sighed, thinking that was probably where the tiny elf had her bed.

Snape apparently tolerated Wormtail but neither liked him nor respected him. Snape only spoke to Wormtail to curtly demand the salt or pepper and to snap at him to stop slurping. Draco snickered and scowled each time at Wormtail with obvious dislike and scorn. It was apparent that Draco felt he was superior to Wormtail. Draco had been deferential to Snape all day; however, at the table, he looked over at Snape with the look of an equal. Snape glanced up at Draco frequently, and occasionally at Hermione, but seldom at Wormtail.

Since Wormtail thought that Snape wasn't looking at him at all, he glared at Snape frequently with his head lowered over his bowl. When Wormtail wasn't glaring at Snape, he was leering at Hermione lustily, rarely looking at her eyes, but rather at her chest and shoulders, trying to see what was revealed when the dressing robe shifted as she ate. Every time her dressing gown slipped open, which the silky material seemed to do whenever she reached for her glass, Wormtail licked his lips, and he always seemed to notice when she blushed under his scrutiny. His stares were making her extremely self-conscious, and she repeatedly felt the need to adjust the robe to cover her exposed skin above the low cut night-slip.

Sitting in her chair in the potions lab, she'd been able to ignore the fact that she wore nothing more than elegant lingerie and was thus scantily clad, but sitting at the table, Hermione became quite aware of the revealing and sensual nature of her attire, and she couldn't wait for the meal to end. Wormtail's stares were so overt and perverse, he made her nervous. Hermione began to wonder why Narcissa Malfoy would have provided her only lingerie to wear, unless she was using them to get back at her. She tried to focus her mind away from the lecherous Rat and switched her attention back to Snape and Draco.

Snape and Draco had had an easy camaraderie between them in the potions lab that all but dissolved at the dinner table. She expected that had everything to do with their mistrust and dislike of Wormtail. In the lab, Draco had worked side by side with Snape. Draco hadn't said much as he worked, but Snape had been giving constant instruction to him on steps and techniques throughout the afternoon. Hermione admitted to herself that she would have loved to be able to stand at the worktable with them, but the potions Snape had given her had made her drowsy.

The hearty stew and fresh bread were delicious, but the meal was eaten quickly and in relative silence since Hermione assumed that neither Draco nor Snape wanted to converse with Wormtail or to have him overhear anything they were would say to each other. She wasn't quite through eating when Snape shoved his bowl aside and stood.

"Get up, Miss Granger," he said, pulling her chair from the table. Hermione scrambled to her feet, barely given enough time to set her spoon down as he pulled her along with him from the eating area, stopping to bark a final order to Wormtail before they reached the doorway. "We are going to the sitting room. Go to your room when you are done eating, Wormtail.

Wormtail looked up at Snape. "I could come with you?"

"I don't need you," Snape growled, his face completely impassive.

"The Dark Lord has me here so that I can assist you," Wormtail sniveled, his eyes roaming across Hermione's body as if he could see her body and legs through the material. "I want to help you with..."

"Yes." Snape smirked nastily, interrupting Wormtail's plea. "The Dark Lord placed you here; however, I do not need your assistance at this time. If I do, I will let you know." He turned Hermione by her shoulders and propelled her toward a door on the adjacent wall from the one they had entered through.

"But I can help teach the boy," Wormtail called after them.

Draco turned and glared at Wormtail. "What could you possibly teach me, Rat?"

"I could teach you to transform?" he asked, almost pleading.

"I don't want to be a rat," Draco spat, turned his back on Wormtail and followed Snape and Hermione from the dining room. "And if I did transform, I am sure it would be something that would eat you."

Passing through a swinging bookshelf into a small sitting room, Hermione stood in the center of the room, watching Snape as he perused one of the bookshelves.

"Well, sit down, Granger," Draco snapped, taking one of the chairs by the lamp.

She sat gingerly on a chair, looking around, mentally assessing the room. The sitting room reminded Hermione of a section in the library, deep in the bookshelves. The walls were mostly bookshelves, except for a medium-sized Floo, two windows, covered by heavy, dark green drapes, and two doors. *So, the doorway that led to the corridor was actually a section of the bookcase that opens a concealed door... and one of the other two might lead outside... possibly. No doubt Snape will have heavily warded any door that would lead outside like he did the bedroom doorway he told me so, she contemplated. There's a heavy latch on both doors, but only one has a peephole... but still, that's not a likely escape...*

Looking over the furnishings, she noted they were old and worn, consisting of two padded dark wood chairs, a chaise and a couch all in dark upholstery and a few small rickety looking tables. A floor lamp and a candelabrum that hung from the ceiling and the fire in the Floo provided the only light. The best thing Hermione could say about the room was that it was dust free.

Snape walked over to her finally, thrusting a book at her. "Read this and take note to compare the differences from the one you had earlier," he said and then walked across the room to sit next to Draco. Both men sat quietly reading books, taking up the only seats closest to the lamp. *This chair has its back to the bookcase nearest the door and is poorly lit for reading, she noticed. The chaise would allow me to use the light of the Floo...* She chose the chaise, but the light from the Floo was barely bright enough to see the pages.

After a short while of squinting at the book, Snape rose and loomed over her. Hermione looked up at him expectantly and flinched when he drew his wand with an irritated scowl. She cringed as he swished the tip of his wand in the direction of her shoulder, but instead of being struck by a curse, the small table on the other side of the chaise beside her, instantly transformed into a lamp. "Thank you, sir," she said gratefully at his kindness.

"You could have simply stated that you required better light, Miss Granger," he snapped at her as he returned to his place on the couch.

Hermione bristled at his contemptuousness, feeling as if she were sitting in his classroom rather than his sitting room. *Still, he'd made a lamp for me... It wasn't as if I asked him to he just did it. Why bite my head off then?* her mind warred before she silently turned back to her book.

The book was newer, written by Marjorie Beaumont, which classified many rare and magical plants and their known uses in potions. The writing style was humorous with cute anecdotes occasionally written throughout the text. She quickly realized that the plants were written in alphabetical order, although in random categories. She scanned through the book, concentrating on the plants she'd read in Dilys Derwent's book, mentally noting several differences.

Every once and a while a shuffle could be heard from behind one of the bookcases. Hermione looked up each time, thinking Wormtail was entering the room. "Don't concern yourself, Granger. It's just the Rat," Draco said, mocking her. "Unless you'd like to spend time with him?"

Hermione glared at him. "No," she said simply, returning to her book.

After a while, Snape stood and walked back over to her. "Get up, Miss Granger."

Hermione looked up at him, confused. "I really..."

"I don't care what you want, Miss Granger. Get up." Snape reached down and pulled her from the chair, guiding her to the far, wall and the bookcase opened, revealing the staircase. Draco snickered as they passed. Snape propelled her inside and to walk up the stairs in front of him, turning her toward his bedroom. "You'll retire now. It's time to take your potions."

She turned, glaring at him, tired of his surly attitude. "I want to know what you are giving me, or I won't take them."

"And I already told you I don't care what you want." He opened the door and propelled her inside with a firm grip. She shuddered as they passed the warded doorway. She stopped in the middle of the room, turning to look at him, furious. "I told you, I'm not going to waste my poisons on you," Snape snapped impatiently. He looked rather offended, which only made her angrier.

"I do not want to be drugged senseless by potions," she spat. "I know you are adding sleeping draughts and calming draughts, possibly other things to make me complaisant and sleepy. I'd rather be conscious than unconscious, sir."

He narrowed his eyes, his smile a wicked smirk. "I'd prefer you to sleep soundly."

"A natural sleep is better than a drugged one," she retorted angrily.

"Didn't it occur to you that the potions I give you are for your benefit, Miss Granger?" he asked, emphasizing each word with his silky voice, his eyes flashing angrily. "I do not wish to have my sleep disturbed by your moaning and tossing. So you will take them." He pulled several bottles of her potions from his pocket.

She drew back reflexively. "I want to know what the potions are and what is in them. I feel so sluggish and weak all the time, and I'm not getting any stronger."

"For me to tell you that you would have to be told what was done to you, the extent of your injuries, and what I did to you to be able to heal you." He stood rigid and stared down at her. "Are you sure you want to be aware of what those men did to you the details?" he drawled the words slowly, emphasizing each word with a hard edge to his voice. Hermione shook her head. "I thought not."

"But, sir, wh..." She barely stopped herself before she could finish the word, hoping that he'd missed her slip. The look in his eye said clearly that he had not. After a taking in a shaky breath, she continued, "I'd like to know what I am being given, sir."

"And why should I tell you?" he asked, his rich honey-toned voice, strictly controlled and dangerous.

"I think you're giving me potions with hypha facia, kava kava, kudzu, lacknery root, whickwheat, wormwood, lobelia and valerian root. I can taste them. But wh I see no

good reason for you to do so, *sir*, other than to make me more..." She was about to say susceptible or nonresistant and changed her mind, "compliant... pliable to your..."

His face became a hard scowl, his eyes narrowed; he leaned in toward her, stopping only when their faces were a few inches apart. "Regardless of what you may believe, Miss Granger, or what you assume, being a Death Eater does not automatically equate one as a rapist." She could feel the anger radiating off him, and she nearly recoiled in fear. "I hardly have to make women who come to my bed *compliant* with potions," he continued, saying each word slowly and resonantly. Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, looking up at him as he towered over her. "They come quite willingly," Snape growled in a low, silky drawl as he leaned down to look her in the eye.

She swallowed, her breath caught, her chest restricted while her heart raced, and her eyes stared into his, entranced. Hermione fell back on her elbows, and Snape leaned over her, both fisted hands on either side of her. "And if I ever entertained any designs to have sex with you," he said, controlling the timber of his voice, rolling each word deliberately to reflect both a cool indifference with a rich honeyed drawl, making her breathing deep and her stomach flutter. "Believe me, I'd have you begging me for it." He then stood up abruptly, watching her, his dark eyes alight, his expression dangerous, yet amused.

She knew he could easily see that tone of his voice had quite an effect on her. "Now then, when I give you your potions, I expect you to be *compliant* and take them... or I can always force you to," he said, continuing with the same inflections in his voice that he'd used before, sending shivers down her spine. "Believe me, it would be my pleasure to do so."

Hermione nodded and sat up on the side of the bed. He smirked as he watched her, staring at her for a moment as she held the dressing gown closed across her chest. He measured out her doses and held the vials toward her one at a time, and she drank the contents of each, her eyes never leaving his. His eyes never wavered from hers as she swallowed each dose, but she knew that he was seeing all of her, using his peripheral vision effectively. He gently pulled her to her feet, still keeping his eyes firmly on her face, turned her around. "Be assured, I have not been forcing myself on you while you sleep," he continued in his soft silky drawl as he helped her remove her dressing gown. "In bed, Miss Granger now."

~oOo~

Severus stood, watching her climb into bed, then turned and left. He extinguished the light in the room and waited in the dark in the doorway. She settled down in the bed and lay there. He knew she was fuming, but that only amused him. *She's still the little know-it-all from school... cocky, undisciplined, spoiled... But there's a maturity to her as well.* He had been surprised and mildly impressed when she'd listed the herbs he'd added to her potions to make her docile and compliant and to help her sleep more soundly. She'd only missed three. *If it weren't for the additives I put in her potions, she'd most likely be feisty and argumentative. Some of that is beginning to show even now.* However, she wasn't healing as quickly as he thought she should. *If she doesn't improve soon, Draco will have to get his family Healer again*

When he finally stumbled to bed, the girl was sound asleep. *Thankfully*, he sighed. He pulled the blankets off her, gazing appreciatively at her. The night-slip clung to her body and the low neckline exposed much of her. Her body was lithe and well formed, her breasts pert. Idly he ran a finger down her body, caressing one breast, fingering her nipple through the silky material and trailed his touch down near the juncture of her groin, sliding down and up on her thigh. He smiled as her body reflexed and responded sensually to his gentle touch. He pulled his hand away when she moaned in pleasure. *Well, at least her dreams will be more pleasant tonight* he mused wickedly. *If she is going to wake me when she dreams again, at least it may be something worth seeing*

He wished that he could examine the parchment that had dumped her at his feet, wondering what spells and enchantments it held, curious about its validity. *Her soul mate, her heart's desire... and it chose me. Why? She's less than half my age; although, a twenty-two year difference is not uncommon among wizards. Still, she's Muggle-born and isn't fully acquiesced to our ways, regardless of being trained at Hogwarts.* He was half Muggle. *Unlike her upbringing, my mother had well prepared me for entry to our world, much to my father's indignations,* he thought as he lay in bed next to her. *She isn't likely to be accommodating to whatever the Dark Lord decides to do with her, and I'm not looking forward to dealing with her indignant and defiant behavior. Still this parchment, the fact that it transported her to me... And her timing it couldn't have been worse. The Dark Lord is intrigued by this unexpected development even pleased. That in itself isn't going to bode well. Shite...*

~oOo~

Hermione woke slowly, listening to the sounds of the shower, allowing the groggy, drug-induced sleep to fade. She would simply lie here until he dressed and left, then get up and take a long hot bath. The water turned off, and she closed her eyes, listening to him move around.

Through half closed lids, she watched him disrobe and dress, thinking about just how different his body was from Ron's or Viktor's for that matter. Not that she ever saw Viktor completely nude, but the sleeveless, thigh-length robe and leggings he wore to exercise and stretch in left him quite exposed. And she'd seen Ron nearly nude once when she'd accidentally walked in on him at the Burrow one summer.

Snape opened the third panel of the wardrobe and took out a green night-slip and dressing gown. Watching him slyly, she saw her robe, the one she had on when she had been transported to him, hanging on a hook on the inside of the wardrobe door. Hope sprang in her as she realized that inside the pockets might be something that could help her either escape, which she doubted, or to contact one of her friends. *That is if he hasn't removed everything from my pockets*

She shut her eyes before he turned, walked to the bed, laying the slip and dressing gown at her feet, and then he turned and left the room.

She listened intently with her eyes shut for any sounds before easing from the bed. She still hurt a great deal and still felt very weak, but she was able to walk around better than before. She walked up to the wardrobe and tried opening the door. Tiny prickles hurt her hands, but the door swung open easily. Inside hung five night-slips and dressing gowns, two black, one midnight blue and one in Slytherin green that matched the one on the bed. Ignoring the discomfort, she fingered her robe noticing that the contents still seemed to be in the pockets. Heavy footfalls interrupted her as she tried to reach inside for her D.A. Galleon in the inside pocket, and her fingers brushed it before the steps stopped just outside the bedroom door.

Quickly, she closed the wardrobe and scurried into the loo. She sat on the edge of the tub and turned the taps to fill her bath. She heard him move in the bedroom as she lay back soaking and closed her eyes, trying to remain calm. Giving up, she wet her hair and tried combing out the tangles with the brush he'd given her. She looked up startled to see him leaning against the doorframe, watching her try and comb out her hair with the warm soapy water.

He smirked at her efforts and then pulled a knife from his pocket, walking over to her. He seized her head, cutting a thick strand of her hair. "Hey, ouch," she protested, reflexively moving one arm from her chest to her head.

"Just be glad that I only needed this much. I could have simply given you a complete trim," he said mockingly. "Now finish up. You will be staying in the room today. I have work I need to do with Draco, and you'll only be in the way." He stopped in the doorway, staring at her. "I have warded my personal belongings. There are three books on the bed and your *clothes*. I'll have the elf bring you something to eat."

"You're going to impersonate me with Polyjuice Potion!" she accused him, rubbing her head.

"Hardly," he said and exited the loo.

After her bath and getting some leeway with her hair, Hermione re-entered the bedroom. The curtains were open; however, the leaded panes of the glass were so old and distorted she couldn't make out anything from outside, other than vague shapes and colors. The majority colors that she could see were grayish-browns, brownish-greens and pale blue skies. She tried the wardrobe again, and the tingling feeling of the wards was far more intense. It took several tries to open the wardrobe and even more to pull the Galleon from the hidden inside pocket. The pricking sensations from Snape's wards lasted for several minutes, and she opened and closed, shaking her hands repeatedly to shake the feeling between tries. Her wand was not in any of her pockets, and most of the items from Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes were missing, but everything else was still there. The hats and cloak she'd got from the shop were lying neatly on the top shelf of the wardrobe. *Well, a Shield Hat or Cloak won't help me now anyway nor my Headless Hat. Even the pink Pigmy Puff is missing. Ah, well. What did I expect anyway? Of course he chucked out all that stuff. It probably irritated him that*

I had so much of Fred and George's products in my pockets anyway.

She carried the Galleon to the bed and stared at it. With her wand she could make the writing and numbers on the coin say anything she wanted. As a little girl, Hermione had been able to make things happen by wanting them to. Now, she really wanted to make the coin read: *I'm fine. Snape... What? I'm with Snape? Oh, that would go off well. Harry would love that; he'd go ballistic. I'm in Snape's house?* She laughed at that idea. *That's not any better. It's best if I stick with I'm fine* She tried pointing her finger at the coin, thinking, *I'm fine, HG, over and over.* Suddenly the door opened and she ducked the coin under her leg.

The house-elf came in with a tray. "Oh! Hi." The elf simply nodded and set the tray on the bed. "Thank you, I appreciate you bringing this up here." The elf looked at Hermione as if she'd just turned green. "I don't know your name. I'm Hermione."

The elf looked nervous. "I is Peren, but I is not to..." the elf said and hit herself hard on the head. "I is not to talk to you." The elf banged her head into the bedpost so hard she was momentarily dizzy and made the juice on the tray spill a little.

Hermione jumped down and wrapped her arms around the elf. "Please, please don't hurt yourself." Peren looked at her, her green eyes wide. "If you nod or shake your head that's not talking, is it?" The elf shook her head. "You could always use charades, and I could guess what you are trying to say," she suggested. Peren looked at her confused. "Charades, gestures, hand movements, act out what you want to tell me. We could make up hand signals."

Peren nodded happily. "You would do this just to talk with me? Miss is liking house-elves?" she asked and then banged her head on Hermione's knee.

Aghast, Hermione rolled up her towel and gave it to the elf. "Here, use this to punish yourself; at least you won't get hurt. You can hit yourself once for each transgression."

Peren hit herself with the towel. "This is not a sufficient punishment, Miss." She hit herself again, confused.

"It is if I say it is," Hermione countered. "My best friend, Harry Potter, has a house-elf, and he's friends with one named Dobby. Dobby said that a wizard could decide on the punishment. I choose this."

Peren shook her head. "Harry Potter gave Dobby clothes, he makes Dobby a disgrace. Course, Dobby was a bad house-elf, Miss; he was always in trouble." She picked up the towel and whacked herself four times, then froze, listening, turned and ran from the room, pausing to wave a silent bye before she disappeared.

Hermione spent the day alone, reading from Dilys Derwent's and Marjorie Beaumont's books or trying to activate words on the coin. The best she got with the coin was a vibration. *Hermione, you're pathetic.*

After dinner, Snape had Draco and Hermione read with him in the sitting room again. This time he handed her a small book entitled *Herbaceous Potion Species of Northern Europe*, by Clady Lamont.

After a while, Draco stood and said he was turning in. Snape merely nodded.

Yawning, Hermione rose and walked over to stand by Snape's chair. "Please, sir, I want to contact my friends," she said, carefully choosing her words and tone.

He didn't even look up. "I don't care what you want."

"But it has been over a week," she pleaded. "They will be worried and I..."

He looked up slowly as she spoke, then cut her off, "It has been over three and a half weeks almost four."

Hermione's mind reeled, unaware that she'd visibly paled. She looked at him stunned. *Over three and a half four weeks... It can't be... No,* she stammered. "What is the date?"

He turned to face her, his face hard, and she looked at him, her eyes pleading. "It is the twenty-seventh of July."

Hermione felt the blood drain from her face as she mentally counted, then nearly swooned. *It's been almost a month! My breasts have continued to ache, as they do sometimes before my cycle, and my abdomen has continued to cramp. I have been nauseous every morning... but that's because of his potions it has to be....* However, she hadn't actually been counting the days. "Oh, Circe... No!"

"What is it, Miss Granger?" he asked, looking up at her.

He was regarding her, trying to gauge her reaction, but she was lost in her thoughts *should have... the first week of the month... possibly the second week, maybe with stress...* "Should've been the second week," she said aloud, not meaning to. *I can't cannot be... It's the potions. Three weeks late! It has to be the potions.*

Snape sneered at her reaction. "No, I assure you, it is not the second week of July... It's nearly the end of the month. You were unconscious for over three weeks, Miss Granger."

She stared at him in disbelief. Shocked by his revelation, the room began to spin, sounds became muted, and the room suddenly became unfocused, slightly fading. She stared at him, aware that he rose and stepped toward her, his expression hard. She realized that she'd asked questions, but the sudden dizziness quenched any fears of his ire. His hands grabbed her upper arms, digging into her flesh as she faltered, and her knees gave way. Effortlessly, he swept her into his arms, carried her up to his room, and tossed her unceremoniously onto his bed. "For someone who considers me to be her heart's *desire* her *soul mate*, I would think that living with me for almost a month would have been more welcomed news."

"Is that why you brought me here?" she asked, unable to breathe normally.

"*You came to me. You arrived at my feet, just as I appeared at the place where the Dark Lord summoned me. You are the one who asked that cursed parchment to show you your soul mate your heart's desire.* Not me. I brought you *here* because the Dark Lord *told* me to. I was to heal you after you had been tortured, beaten, abused *yes*, raped repeatedly, I might add. It was either *me*, Rodolphus Lestrage or Lucius Malfoy. The Dark Lord *gave* you to *me* because *he* believes that you came to me of your own accord." He turned and stormed from the room, uttering, "Ungrateful bitch," as he slammed the door.

For the next several days, Snape was uncommonly cold towards her. He rarely spoke to her except to demand something and even threatened to spank her one afternoon when she'd asked questions. The look on his face made her recoil, and she chose to keep quiet. She was never left alone in any room except the loo, and whenever she was downstairs, he never let her out of his sight. He stood in the doorway with his back to her or stayed in the bedroom when she took her bath. In his potions lab the chair had been changed into a hard stiff-backed wingback chair. A similar one had been made of the chair she was to use in the sitting room. She tried to figure out what potions Draco made each day and tried memorizing the spells Snape taught him. But from her chair, it was hard to make out the ingredients for the potions, and without a wand she couldn't try out the spells. On one afternoon, in the room down the hall from the potions lab, she had tried asking him questions about the spells he was teaching Draco. Snape was so angry that he made her stand in the corner and watch as Snape taught Draco advanced charms and spells, including many that were Dark Arts. Silently, she fumed, wishing she could at least participate in the lessons he gave Draco.

The only bearable part of the days were in the evenings spent sitting in the sitting room, when he gave her books to read or when she finally went to bed at night.

Snape left as soon as she laid down each night and was up and dressed when she awoke.

Draco was amused by Hermione's treatment, often laughing softly.

Peren avoided her.

Wormtail leered at her lustily at every opportunity and tried several times to corner her and speak to her. Snape allowed him to, only stopping him from actually touching her. Wormtail asked her questions, always with blatant sexual innuendos, that alluded to the times when he had been around her when he'd been Ron's rat, if she was dating anyone, interested in someone special, and commenting on how much she had grown and matured. Hermione brushed off his questions tartly or answered in as few words as possible. He rarely looked at her eyes when he spoke to her, but his eyes raked down her body lustfully. He made her skin crawl each time he was near her.

One afternoon as they sat in the sitting room before dinner, Snape inhaled sharply, grabbing his left forearm. "Draco, I leave her in your charge. You know the rules regarding her," he said, standing to go.

Draco looked up from his Dark Arts book. "Yes; no questions, no wand, no killing her. Got it down," he said with bored glance and went back to his book. Snape nodded and disappeared. "But by all means, please ask away, Granger. I'd love to paddle your behind." Hermione glared at him as he laughed.

She watched Draco practice the wand movement from the book, aiming at an orange on the table in front of him. "You're doing the wand movement wrong," she suggested in as nice a tone as she could muster and not sound contrite.

"How dare you speak to me, Mudblood," he snarled.

She forced her face to remain calm. "You do realize that the pictures in your book are of a left-handed wizard," she said in an off-handed manner.

"Yes, Granger, I am aware of that," Draco snapped.

"And that you will need to reverse the movement if you are using your right hand," she said politely, trying to feign indifference.

"How do you know that?" he asked, casting her an angry sideways glance.

"Professors' McGonagall and Flitwick, first day of class, first year of school," she said as nicely as she could. "If you recall, they asked if anyone was left-handed, then explained to those who raised their hands that the wand movements had to be done in reverse to the diagrams in our books."

"Fine, if you're so smart, you do it," he challenged.

"I'm not allowed a wand, remember?" she asked. "Rule two, I believe." Turning to face him, she continued. "Try switching hands use your left."

He looked up at her contemptuously. "You can't do that!"

"I can, and I have," she said nonchalantly.

"Show me," he said. Hermione, looked at him, her brow creased, then swirled her left index finger in the movement, saying the words perfectly. Surprisingly he laughed. He copied her, holding his wand in his left hand and tried the wand movement. On his third try, the spell worked, slicing the peel of the orange, but without enough force to cut the orange in half.

"If you practice, you could be ambidextrous," she remarked, trying to make it sound like a compliment.

"Are you?" he asked, curious.

"With some spells," she said with a shrug. "We practice the ones we know with both hands just in case."

"Potter is ambidextrous?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes," she answered. "So are Ron and Neville." She rose and started to walk across the room toward the bookshelf that hid the stairs to the first floor. She was feeling a bit dizzy and weak.

"Where do you think you are you going?" Draco snapped, irritated.

"I need to go to the loo," she said, swaying slightly. "I'll come right back." She had started spotting a few days ago and was relieved to finally need the pad-cups and straps. Although her cycles were usually heavier, she figured her cycle was different simply because she skipped a month or so due to Snape's potions.

Walking up the stairs, she was stopped by Wormtail as he was coming down. "You probably miss your friends, don't you?" he asked.

"Yes, I do," she replied curtly.

"Ronald must miss you. I would if you were my girl," Wormtail said, blocking her way up, his hand on her waist.

"I'm sure he does," she said, pushing his hand off her.

She tried to pass him, but he blocked her way. "He must be worried sick, wondering where you are," Wormtail said.

"He's fine. Now let me pass. I need the loo," she said briskly. He moved slightly, and as Hermione passed him, his hand slid down the curve of her bum.

"You are so beautiful," he said. She glared at him, and he looked at her with beady eyes, leering at her.

She tried to continue up the stairs, but he reached out a hand and grabbed her dressing gown, practically ripping it from her shoulders. The thigh-length night-slip left nothing to the imagination, and he eyed her lustfully. "Leave me alone," she snapped.

"Such a pretty girl you always were, prancing around in his sister's room in your knickers and dressing gowns," Wormtail said and grabbed her wrist with his sliver hand, hurting it. "You were always so nice to me, petting me when I was a rat. Your fingers always felt *soo* good. That was before you went and got that cat but I don't hold that against you. You just like animals, don't you?" he asked and pulled, trying to make her come down to him.

The force of his silver hand made Hermione slip on the step, and she heard bones crack in her wrist as she landed hard on the stairs, bouncing roughly down several steps, landing almost between Wormtail's feet. Hermione cried out in pain. "Now that's the ticket, eh?" Wormtail was now looming over her, and he tried to lean down to give her a kiss, lowering his body closer to hers, placing his sliver hand on her abdomen to hold her down. Pain seared through her under the pressure of the magical hand, and her scream of pain was muted when Wormtail had covered her mouth with his other hand. "Oh, doll, don't be like that," he said.

Hermione kicked him, aiming her foot into his groin as hard as she could, then turned, trying to scramble up the steps. "Leave me alone," she snarled as Wormtail fell and rolled, crashing down the steps to the first landing. *What is Draco doing? Why isn't he coming in here?* "Just leave me alone," she yelled at him as she pulled herself toward the top of the stairs. She felt heady, her dizziness was worse, and she felt a thick trickle of something warm flow down her legs and looked down, wiping it with her hand, realizing that she was bleeding fairly heavily. She placed her hand against the wall trying to steady herself as she took each step, leaving bloody handprints. The door closest to her was Wormtail's room; the loo was directly ahead of her, Draco's room was the next-door down, just a few steps down the hall from Snape's bedroom. She knew that she wouldn't be able to get into either Snape or Draco's rooms because of the wards. The loo was her only escape. She pushed herself off the wall, stumbling a

few times as she made her way down the hall to the loo, thinking that she was going to faint again. *Not with Wormtail trying to molest me, no please. At least get in the loo and close the door.* She could hear him coming up the stairs.

"Oh, my pretty, you shouldn't have done that," Wormtail said, coming into the hallway. The blood running down her legs had increased greatly, which made the floor slippery, and she stumbled, landing hard on her knees, then slumped to the floor at his feet. He knelt down beside her. "You are bleeding. I can help you. I will heal you," he said, sliding her night-slip to her hip, his silver hand making a painful trail from her mid-thigh on up.

Finally, Draco showed up, taking in Hermione's position on the floor, the blood and Wormtail pawing at her. "Bloody hell, Rat! What have you done?!" He had his wand out, and he Stunned Wormtail, making him fall on her. Hermione screamed in pain as his silver hand was pressed down on her hip under his weight. Draco waved his wand, throwing Wormtail off her, and she groaned, clutching her abdomen in agony. The last thing Hermione saw before she passed out was Draco kneeling beside her, his face actually concerned.

Author's Notes:

There is similarity between my story and 'Traitor,' by Averygoodun. I love this story of hers and I admit I've re-read it several times. I want to thank Averygoodun for allowing me to use part of the plot, some situations, and some characterizations from her story, "Traitor," which can be found at <http://www.thepetulantpoetess.com/viewstory.php?sid=4727>

It happens to be one of the first SS/HG stories that I've read, and it has influenced me greatly.

I haven't the words to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. Without her, I probably would have chucked it in the rubbish bin.

Actual wording of the prompt was: Hermione finds a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes that writes: Tell me your deepest desire. Thinking it's a trick, she says, "Take me to my soul mate?" and she suddenly finds herself at Severus' feet.

I changed Hermione's response to: I wish to see my soul mate. For reasons that are made clear later in the story.

The Healer

Chapter 4 of 43

Draco shows that he does have a soft side. Things are not as safe as Hermione assumed, and a major setback begins to show a side of Severus Hermione has never seen before. Hermione also discovers some truths about her situation.

This is my response to the Potter_Place Summer 2007 Prompt – #23

Hermione finds a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes that writes: *Tell me your deepest desire.* Thinking it's a trick, she says, "I wish to see my soul mate?" and she suddenly finds herself at Severus' feet.

The warnings I have listed are for this chapter and are both implied and are also expressed. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.



~o0o~

"Granger?" Someone was shaking her, his voice edged with fear.

Hermione tried to nod, but her head hurt, her hip and abdomen cramped in severe pain, and she felt nauseous and weak. The taste of bile rose in her mouth and she swallowed it back.

"Granger?" he asked again.

Hermione opened her eyes as a hand lifted her head and noticed that he was holding a cup to her lips. "Drink." The voice was soft and concerned, a rich, smooth masculine voice, her age. She sipped the tea in the cup and realized it wasn't tea at all. It tasted both bitter and sweet a potion. "Drink all of it, Granger."

He is not, Snape; he is... He's Draco. Why is Draco giving me a potion? What kind of potion would Draco be giving me? Hermione tried to turn her head, afraid of what Draco would give her. *He doesn't like me he'll poison me* Hermione shook her head, the motion making the nausea worse, and she knew that she was going to throw up. She tried to roll off the bed. Somehow she managed to cover her mouth. Thankfully, Draco got the picture and conjured a bucket just before she vomited on the floor beside her bed.

"You stupid girl, it's your potion the one Snape's been giving you," he snarled.

With a straining effort, she managed to roll onto her back again.

"Rule three, don't kill her remember? Now drink." He lifted her head again, tipped the cup to her lips again, and she took a sip. "All of it, Granger," he growled. "Peren, she needs her pad-cup changed and clean her up. See to it while I get more of her potion," he said, his voice laced with fear. "Stay with her. I need to know if she passes out again."

She heard him walk away as a small hand pulled her knees open. "Miss must let me, please, Miss," the house-elf pleaded.

Peren moved efficiently and Hermione tried to help, but she hurt. Deftly, Peren replaced her pad-cup and then helped Hermione to straighten her legs. She felt herself lifted off the bed and realized that the elf had levitated her a few inches to remove something from under her, cleaned her up, removed the night-slip, then wiped her legs and hips tenderly, and then set her down again. A thin blanket was then pulled over her. The elf wiped her face and gave her a bit of water to rinse her mouth. The elf disappeared with a pop for a moment and returned.

"Thank you," she said as the elf stood next to her head, watching her intently.

Peren looked at Hermione with deep concern in her large eyes. "I do what I is told. I clean you because Master Draco say to." She smacked herself on the head with the cup Draco had used.

"I know, but thank you." The elf simply shook her head. Hermione tried to lift her head, and her abdomen contracted with a spasm that rolled over her body with stabbing cramps, and she felt woozy. The room seemed to pitch and roll as if she were on a boat, and her head fell back to the pillow. *That's it. I'm on a boat. He's going to drown me*, she mused, knowing that was ridiculous. She was not on Snape's bed; that much she could tell. Her fingers could touch the sides of the bed without moving her arms much. The room was cooler also, but not as dark as Snape's. When she opened her eyes, all she could see was plain, pale blue walls with heavy blue and white drapes around her. She closed her eyes, trying to relax and will the pain to go away. She felt like she was floating and she felt cold.

"Miss?" Peren asked. "Miss, is you pass out or just close your eyes? Master say to tell him if you is pass out." The elf hit herself in the head with the teacup again.

"I'm still here," Hermione tried to reassure the elf. "I just need to sleep."

"No, no, no! You is to stay awake so Peren can see if you is awake or is passed out," the elf said, alarmed. "If you is asleep, I won't know if you is pass out!" She picked up the teacup, breaking it over her head, and then leaned in very close to Hermione to watch her.

Hermione wanted to reassure the elf that she wouldn't pass out again, but she didn't have the strength. She closed her eyes and did not open them when she heard Draco's footsteps approaching as he ran back up the stairs. His steady steps stopped right beside her head.

"Oh, bloody hell," he snarled. *Reparo.* Hermione heard the tinkle as the teacup reassembled. "Here, drink this," he snarled, lifting her head again.

She still didn't trust him. After six years of his calling her a Mudblood, his snide remarks and taunting, various hexes, curses, jinxes and such did little to inspire trust. "What is it?" she asked, refusing to drink.

"It's Blood-Replenishing Potion," he snarled. "You are bleeding, Granger; you've lost a lot of blood, and I can't stop the bleeding. Now drink." He tipped the cup and she took a sip. She'd never had the Blood-Replenishing Potion before, so she had no idea if he was lying. "All of it, Granger," he growled. "I didn't make this potion for an exercise. You need it."

"Why do you care anyway?" she asked. *He doesn't want Snape mad at him. That's why he's doing this. Snape left him in charge. But why then didn't he stop Wormtail when I was screaming why didn't he come and help me?*

"I don't, but you are not supposed to die yet," he said. "Remember rule three no killing her? I thought you were supposed to be bright?"

She opened her eyes and saw concern in his eyes. *Oh that's rich! Little pureblood concerned over a Muggle-born* "Where am I?"

"My room, Granger," he said with his usual disdain, that still didn't reach his light, grey eyes.

He is just as afraid of Snape's anger as I am; that's all. That's why he's doing this. "Why am I in your bed?" she asked.

"You wish," Draco snapped, exactly as he used to do in school. "I wouldn't put mud like you in my bed. I moved mine over until Snape gets back. Drink this, you need more." He lifted her head and tilted the cup to her lips again. "Peren!" he yelled.

"Yes, master," she heard the elf's delicate voice again.

"Change her. She's soaking again." The elf lifted Hermione off the bed and changed her pad and something from under her, then lowered her gently back down. "Well, don't take all day about it."

At the sound of his comment, Hermione was mortified, thinking that he was watching as his house-elf changed her. She turned her head slightly, but movements made the room turn and dip again. "Thank you, Peren," she croaked. Peren laughed nervously and left quickly.

Draco laughed at her gratitude toward his house-elf. "Trying to free my house-elf, Granger?" She heard his boots on the hardwood floor as he reentered the room and realized he had simply waited in the hall for Peren to finish.

"No," Hermione replied, barely audible. "But I will if she asks me to." Draco snorted in derision. "Talk to me," she implored.

"I don't want to." Draco moved away from the bed, but Hermione didn't want him to go.

She had no idea where Wormtail was, or if he could get into Draco's room, although she doubted the Rat could. Draco wouldn't have wanted Wormtail in his room any more than Snape allowed him in his. "Tell me what you're working on with Professor Snape?"

"No," he snarled, sounding far away. "Wouldn't you like to know," he sneered.

"Is it a secret... What potions you're making?" she asked. "I might know them." She doubted it, but it was worth a try asking.

"I doubt it, Granger." He chuckled and knelt down to give her more potion to drink. "None of them would be found in the Hogwarts library."

She swallowed and looked up at him. "The Restricted Section..."

"Seriously doubt it," he snapped. "Why are you asking anyway?"

The sound of his voice gave her something to hold onto and not sink into the pain and the coldness. "How about just telling me about any potion you've made? Something we didn't get in school." *Let him brag... He'd like that at least*

"Why?" he snapped at her.

"Draco, I'm dizzy. I feel like I'm sinking... maybe dying. I just thought I could hear your voice... concentrate on you so I don't pass out," she said, her voice shaky. *This takes too much effort; I wish he would just talk.*

He was silent, possibly considering her request. "Snape is continuing my N.E.W.T. level Potions lessons, of course. Beside that, we make what's needed. Healing drafts... mostly: pain potions, mood-altering draughts... antidotes we make antidotes."

"To what?" she asked, trying to draw him out with the least amount of effort. *Getting Harry to talk about the death of Sirius was easier than this!*

"Potions, poisons... Snape has a collection of some rather *interesting* potions and poisons... and we are matching antidotes to them," he said, beginning to brag to her. "Most are potions that are not taught at Hogwarts some are. Snape also has me helping him fulfill orders and requests. This isn't any of your business, Granger."

Hermione heard someone coming up the stairs and was relieved when Snape appeared in the doorway. "What in Hades is going on here!" he bellowed. "What happened?" Draco quickly explained. "Go get your family Healer! Hex him if you have to but bring him here," Snape ordered curtly. Draco flew from the door, and she could hear his footsteps race down the stairs.

Snape knelt beside the bed, looking at Hermione, his eyes flashing dangerously. He pulled out his wand and swept it over her. "Do you have anything to add to what Draco told me?"

Hermione tried to nod, but could barely move her head. She tried to speak but only managed to open her mouth, which was suddenly dry with fear. "He pulled my hand... I fell on... the steps... I kicked him, but I couldn't get away..." she tried telling him again, but her words were merely scratchy croaks.

"For crying out loud," he said, annoyed. He gently turned her head to look at her eyes and a soft, caressing feeling opened up her thoughts to him. The images of the assault on the stairs played out for him to see as well as the events in Draco's room. Tears rolled out from her eyes as her mind replayed the attack. He pulled down the blanket, looking at her body with angry, dispassionate eyes, frowning at the bruises caused by Wormtail's silver hand. She was in too much pain, too cold to care or feel embarrassed anymore. She either wanted him to heal her or just let her die.

"Peren," he barked and the house-elf immediately reappeared. "Stay with her, I'll be back. I want to know the instant the Healer arrives."

"Yes, Master," Peren said, bowing low. The elf stood by Hermione's bed, stroking her hand. "Oh, Miss, I is worried for you," the elf said softly, smacking herself on the head with the teacup, shattering the cup again.

I'm not going to be the cause of the elf getting hurt "Peren... does Draco... have a slipper?" Hermione asked, practically an inaudible hoarse whisper and the elf nodded. "Use one... his slippers... hit yourself... once... to punish your self." She heard Snape coming up the steps and finally felt herself relax.

"Peren," Snape said as he swept back into the room. "Box and clean up Wormtail's room and move all of Draco's things in there for now. Make sure to get that dreadful odor out of the room first. The rug, bedding and drapes will need to be washed, I'm sure." The elf bowed low and scurried from the room. Snape conjured a chair and sat next to Hermione.

He pulled the blanket down and began rubbing a salve that felt cool and then warmed her skin. His touch, while he applied the salve, was gentle, but his administration hurt tremendously and she moaned in pain. He stopped twice to make her drink potions, and the pain eased, although only slightly.

Hermione was barely conscious when the Healer came and unable to open her eyes anymore. "That's Hermione Granger! She's been missing!" the strange man's voice said, amazed.

"I know," Snape said patiently.

She felt a tingle in her abdomen that swept up her torso and down her legs and then her arms. "She's been beaten pretty badly... recent injuries... This bruise is unusual... It it looks like a hand? And this one on her hip looks like the same object made it... Strange, very strange. Some healed bones also recent. Her wrist is broken I'll take care of that. She's been badly abused... Did you find her?" the kindly voice asked.

"In a matter of speaking yes," Snape said calmly as he controlled the anger in his voice.

Hermione's awareness was fading fast. The last words she heard clearly were: "She's hemorrhaging badly... My guess would be that she's had a miscarriage...."

~oOo~

"Tell me whatever potions you need for her, and I will provide them," Severus stated, standing protectively over Hermione as the Healer examined her. "But you must heal her."

"I'll do my best, sir. The Malfoys have been under my care for years," the Healer said, nodding and trying to reassure the man. "I've never seen anything a Malfoy could do I couldn't cure, Master Snape. But she's in a bad state."

"You'll be here as long as it takes," Severus said in a tone that brooked no argument. He never shifted his gaze from the grey purplish-blue handprint on her abdomen, but his face was impassive and stern.

"But, sir?" Healer Trankner replied, alarmed. *Surely, he cannot be serious*

Severus gave the Healer a hard, unyielding stare. "You will stay in this room, *with her*, until she is well," he said, his voice low and eerily demanding. The Healer blanched and rattled off a preliminary list of potions. Severus stood with his arms crossed, nodded once and left.

Healer Trankner was used to Lucius Malfoy's aristocratic airs and his unusual demands, especially when it came to Master Draco, however, having met this man Master Snape, he was an enigma. Healer Trankner was sure that Master Snape could be every bit as dangerous or generous in his own way as Lucius Malfoy was, maybe more so. Master Draco had told him to heed this quiet but oppressive man and to tend to his friend, Miss Granger. However, Healer Trankner wasn't sure that Miss Granger was in any way as closely associated with the Malfoys as Master Draco had led him to believe. Nevertheless, she was important to Master Snape; that much was apparent.

The Healer looked down at Hermione, assessing her injuries. *The uterine hemorrhage was the most urgent, but the most painful he decided, and I need the potions before I can heal that. The wrist would be a snap.* He quickly fixed her wrist, noticing how she groaned in pain. *At least she's responsive. With this amount of blood loss, that's a good sign. The next thing would be... the old breaks.* He mended or reset them in procession. He marveled at the scars on her body; there were many that looked newly mended. *Whoever did those did a meticulous job closing them. I don't think I could've done better*

Young Malfoy was back with the pain potions and a few of his requests. "Professor Snape is brewing the others you requested," he said, handing Healer Trankner several vials. "He said he'll bring all five up in an hour."

Healer Trankner looked at Draco in amazement, deeply impressed by the statement. *Five all five at once! The man must be immensely skilled to do that!* "Thank you, Draco," he said, kneeling down to force the potions down Hermione's throat.

He waited as he let the potions take their effect and began the series of complicated spells required to mend her pelvic bone and femoral neck and stop the bleeding in her hip. Hermione moaned during the more painful spells, and the Healer cringed. He assessed the damage to her abdomen again. *Whatever caused this strange hand-*

shaped bruise had to be magical Dark Magic. I've never seen the like. The hematoma and tissue damage are clear down through the tissues to the organs beneath. He mentally listed the anti-inflammatory and tissue regenerative draughts he would need to make and the arterial and venous reparative spells to heal her. Unless... Master Snape's serious about keeping me here. No... He'd see if Master Snape could produce the required potions; if not, he'd just have to go home and try to make them. They're extremely difficult... The balance must be perfect...

He shook his head. *He cannot possibly expect me to stay here... with her... Her injuries are serious, but I should be able to administer to her injuries with two maybe three house calls.* Healer Trankner did some preliminary healing charms and then waited for the potions he'd requested. *But Master Snape looked adamant. I truly doubt few people ever argue against him... and he doesn't look the type to be persuaded easily... Bogumila's really going to be furious about this.*

~o0o~

"The room smells," Draco spat back angrily, jarring Hermione to awareness from a drug-induced fog. She tried to move, but her body wasn't responding.

"Then have the house-elf clean it again," Snape sneered.

"How much longer is she going to be in my room?" Draco asked irritably.

Hermione could hear booted steps pace on the floor in the hallway. *If one of them is pacing, I'll bet Buckbeak's life it's Draco doing the pacing*

"Until the Healer says she has recovered." Snape sounded like he was fairly close to losing his patience with Draco.

"That could be days," Draco complained loudly. "Why can't we move her into Wormtail's room?"

"You're the one who put her in here in the first place," Snape said with a hint of amusement before his tone became icy again. "She will stay where she is until the Healer says she can be moved. For now you will use the front bedroom."

"I didn't have much choice at the time," Draco stated as if clenching his teeth. "I sure as hell wasn't going to place her in his room after what he did to her."

"You were the one that allowed him to attack her?" Snape's voice was dangerously cold, and Hermione cringed for Draco's sake.

"She was just going up to use the loo," Draco said, sounding frustrated. "What was I supposed to do? Go up and watch her pee?"

"You were to watch her," Snape said, his tone threatening. "I left her in your charge. The Dark Lord's angry about this."

"Where is Wormtail anyway?" Draco snarled. "I want to thank him for the *inconvenience*." Hermione was stunned that Draco would talk to Snape in such a manner.

"He was hiding under his bed as a rat when I came home," Snape spat. "He's in a cage on the back stoop currently enjoying the weather." The hard edge to his voice indicated that he was extremely angry with Wormtail.

Good. So, Wormtail is stuck in a cage. Serves him right Hermione mused. She tried to shift, to move her arms slightly or her turn her head, but her body felt engorged and way too heavy. *From potions or from my injuries?*

"So, who's going to feed the Rat? Me?" Draco asked, incensed.

"Only if you want to," Snape said with a hint of sarcastic humor. "I planned on having Peren give him the scraps from the cooking. I told her he was to be treated as merely a filthy gutter rat. She didn't look any happier about feeding him than you do."

Peren didn't want to tend to Wormtail either? Is she angry with him because of what he did to me? She contemplated. She tried again to get Snape's attention because the pain was coming back. *Pain potion... please may I have something... for the pain..*

"What if the Dark Lord summons him?" Draco said, rather un-amused.

"I'll deliver the Rat to him in his cage. Nagini can have him as a snack," Snape said sarcastically with a slightest edge of humor.

Draco laughed. "The Dark Lord would never permit that. He'd make Nagini sick."

Hermione opened her eyes and the light hurt. She closed them quickly, moaning.

"Eavesdropping, Granger?" Draco asked.

Snape moved from outside the door and knelt down beside her. He lifted her head and held a potion to her lips, and she drank the potion gratefully. "Go to the kitchen and tell the Healer she's awake." He stood up and moved to the door, leaning on the doorframe, waiting. Within minutes Draco was back, ushering a very tall man with a slight stoop to his shoulders and a mop of curly grey hair into the room and then left. The wizard had bright blue eyes and a wide smiling mouth.

"Miss Granger, I'm Healer Aralias Trankner," he said politely. "I need to examine you, my dear."

Hermione only nodded. His hands were warm as he palpated her abdomen under Snape's scrutiny. Hermione noticed that she was once again wearing one of Narcissa's night-slips. Healer Trankner lifted and opened her legs apart slightly and waved his wand over and between them, nodding as he read the color changes from his wand tip.

Healer Trankner smiled down at her, then looked up at Snape. "She's going to be fine. I've just a few healing charms to do, and then she should sleep. The bleeding has finally stopped." Snape nodded and stepped from the room.

Warm sensations filled her lower abdomen under Healer Trankner's hand. He uttered a few healing spells and rechecked her, nodding again. Immediately Hermione felt better. He used a cleaning spell on her, then gently closed her legs, and then palpated her abdomen and hip again, making sure of his prognosis. "Your hip and abdomen will be tender yet for a few days, and you may want to have assistance when you move, such as sitting up or getting out of bed for the next day or two. I strongly suggest that you stay in bed, and I strongly suggest that you don't cast any strong spells. You'll still need bed rest for the remainder of the week, Miss Granger," he said while covering her with the blanket. "You're a most fortunate girl."

"Am I?" she said, and a tear ran from the corner of her eye into her hair.

"Everyone's been most worried about you," he said quietly. "Your sudden disappearance was reported in the *Daily Prophet*. No one has any idea of what happened to you. I'd be happy to let someone know where you are and that you'll be fine?" he asked quietly.

"Please," Hermione breathed, feeling hope for the first time. "You could send an owl to the Burrow?"

"I'll do that," he said. "Well, I'll just go and tell Master Snape that you're in good shape now and that you'll recover nicely."

Snape swept back into the room, a smirk on his face. "Thank you, Healer Trankner. If you could simply let me know if she'll require any further attendance, I'll see that it is done."

Healer Trankner jumped, startled by Snape's sudden entry. "You're quite welcome. I think that the healing potions young Draco showed me would be more than enough, and that Bruise Paste, she'll need that until the discoloration fades. She'll also need another dose of the Blood-Replenishing Potion tonight, but I believe she'll start to improve by tomorrow. She should still have bed rest for at least a week."

Snape simply nodded. "Then may I see you out," he said with a polite wave of his hand. Healer Trankner patted Hermione's hand reassuringly and collected his things. When he stood up, he smiled at Hermione with a quick wink and followed Snape from the room.

Hermione lay in the bed, worried about how much, if any, of her conversation with the Healer Snape had overheard. More so, what he would do to her if he knew she'd asked the Healer to owl the Burrow. Snape's steady footfalls on the stairs sent a tremor of dread down her abdomen, and she suddenly wished that she had been given a Sleeping Draught.

Snape entered the room standing over her, his face in an angry scowl. "What did you hope to accomplish by that cute little stunt?" he asked, each word deliberately intoned with sarcasm. "You should've known that his memories all memories of this *house call* would have to be Obliviated."

His words sunk in with a harsh reality. She was his hostage. Snape's face twisted into a sneer. "Why are you doing this?" she managed to croak out, her mouth once again dry with fear.

"Why, Miss Granger?" Snape asked, his anger making his tone sharp and his face became even darker. "Why didn't you tell me you were pregnant?"

"I I w-wasn't really s-sure, sir," she stammered, frightened by his anger.

Snape's hard glare alarmed her. "I don't believe you. I think you knew you were or at the very least suspected that you might be." He looked rather offended, which only made her angry. "You should have told me."

It took every effort she could muster to answer him. "And what would you have done about it?"

He narrowed his eyes, and his face became a hard scowl. "I could have prevented this," he said, waving his hand indicating her current state.

She could feel his anger practically radiating off him, and she swallowed back a lump of fear in her throat. "You would have aborted it for me?" she asked in disbelief.

His eyes narrowed cruelly, and his smirk was almost as nasty. "Either that, or I could have ensured that the child would live. That ~~if~~ you wanted a Death Eater's child growing inside you," he said with a sneer. "Of course, I'd have to perform a paternity charm to figure out just *who* the father was. I still could if you like?"

Her anger at him didn't diminish the embarrassment his words evoked. "No, sir, I wouldn't have I don't want to know."

"Then why, Miss Granger, didn't you confide in me?" Snape asked angrily, obviously offended. "When have I ever done *anything* that wasn't in your best interest? You, Potter or Weasley?" Snape scowled at her and moved a step back from the bed, crossing his arms.

"You have barely spoken to me since the night you told me how long I've been here. It's not as if I haven't wanted to talk with you, but you don't allow me to ask questions. Remember? Besides, I wasn't certain... I thought that the potions..." Her voice trailed off. "I thought that what they did to me, that the potions made me late..."

"None of them would have done that," he sneered. "I was trying to *heal* you. If you had wanted the baby, some of the potions would have needed to be altered, but I assure you, Miss Granger, you were only given healing potions, salves and draughts, pain potions and some for sleep." He stood rigid, his arms crossed, looking over her at the wall.

She thought about what he'd said. It irritated her, but it made sense. "I didn't know I was pregnant. I thought I was late or missed my cycle due to your potions or the trauma... I was afraid to ask you." He turned away as if too angry to look at her, and Hermione bit her lip nervously. "You're not easily approachable, sir... at least not for such *personal confidences*."

Snape looked down at her curiously, his dark eyes narrowed in thought rather than anger. "I would've thought that for something such as this you would have at least tried," he said, his tone sharp, but Hermione could detect a hint of hurt behind his words. "You could have trusted me. I would have helped you."

"When I started spotting... I thought I was... starting," she confessed. Even telling him this much felt awkward. "I really thought that, with the trauma *possibly* of what was done that maybe I simply missed my... cycle. You said I had been unconscious for three weeks I assumed that... I could have..." She just couldn't finish telling him. *I just can't discuss this with him. He's not at all as compassionate and understanding as Professor McGonagall! He's just not... It's not... comfortable talking to him about this. How do the Slytherin girls deal with him and their needs?*

He stood there silently looking down at her, watching her face intently. Once again, it seemed like he was actually reading her mind. "I see," he finally said, his voice soft and low.

I would have helped you echoed in her mind. "Sir, why have you kept me here?" she asked. The question had plagued her.

"Where else was I to take you? Malfoy Manor? The Lestranges' perhaps?" he snapped at her. "Dolohov wanted you, of course."

"But you could let me go," she said hopefully, trying to sit up. Her abdomen cramped and spasmed, and she fell back onto the cot. "You could take me home... to the Order headquarters or the Burrow. You wouldn't even have to take me inside, just inside the wards, and they'd come and get me..."

He laughed at her, an actual real laugh. "No, Miss Granger, I cannot. You made that quite impossible." Hermione looked up at him, uncomprehending. "Oh, come now, Miss Granger, surely with your heightened intelligence you can reason this out." He stared down at her, his face impassive. "No?" he asked and then waited.

Hermione tried to recall what he had said. *I landed at his feet, just as he'd been... summoned. Voldemort's Death Eaters were arriving in that grove... They abused and tortured me, raped me, and he has been healing me...*

"You arrived just as the Dark Lord's entire inner circle was arriving into that grove of trees right where we were summoned to meet him. I had no choice but to take you with me. The Dark Lord was curious about you, very curious. He knows, Miss Granger. He saw what I saw that parchment, what you wrote and the answer. He was *amused*."

Hermione shuddered involuntarily.

"Yes, since apparently you think I am your heart's desire your *soul mate*, the Dark Lord left it to me to decide what to do with you. The Dark Lord considers it appropriate that I either bring you around to *our side* to be my *consort*, to make you completely *obedient* or make you my wife. That, or *he* will kill you. I was asked for my update today in regards to how *compliant* you have become."

Hermione gasped. "Your consort or your wife! He thinks I'll that I will be your *wife*?" She grappled with the idea as his words suddenly sunk in.

Snape raised an eyebrow, his cold black eyes mocking her. "Very good, Miss Granger, you are finally grasping the situation that you have *put yourself* in. Whether I choose to hand-fast with you or bind you to me, or simply just keep you as my consort *is*, however, my choice not yours."

She stared at him, her eyes wide. "But I'm too... I can't! I... um..." she stuttered in disbelief. "Ron," she said under her breath, turning her head away. *But I'm promised... I pledged myself to Ron....* "You don't even like me."

"That is apparently irrelevant. Among pureblood families, arranged unions are common. It ensures the lines, keeps blood pure. Certain spells, Dark Magic, are often used to identify a suitable match, and the *arrangements* are made. In *our* case, it was your parchment. Besides, the Dark Lord likes the idea of Potter's close friend in *amatch* with his trusted spy. This arrangement serves *his* purpose." Snape leaned down, placing both hands on either side of her, his eyes roaming over her, before looking intently into her eyes. His voice when he spoke was smooth and silky. "So he *gave* you to *me*, Miss Granger as a *gift*."

Her eyes locked onto his, unable to evade his stare. "What do you intend to do with me?" she asked.

He pulled off the blanket that covered her, scoffing when she instinctively laid one hand on her chest and the other to hold down the night-slip on her thigh as if to cover herself ineffectively with her hands. "Whatever I wish," he said in a slow silky drawl, his eyes glinting at her attempt at modesty. "As soon as you are on your feet, I am to bring you before the Dark Lord. He wishes to see you again." He lifted her from the cot. The movement and sensation of being carried by him mixed with her weakened state, made her feel light-headed as he carried her to his room and placed her gently on his bed. "From now on, I will have Peren come to you and help you dress after your baths."

"I will be allowed to wear robes?" she asked hopefully. "I won't have to parade around you and Draco in my night-slips and dressing robe?"

He drew the sheet up to cover her. "I doubt Draco cares what you wear," he said with a cocky curl to his lips. "But will decide what I want to see you in. Narcissa was kind enough to provide clothes, I assume, because she didn't want you parading around nude in front of her son."

"Sir, why is Draco here?" she asked. "I mean, his father broke out of prison the end of May. Wouldn't he rather be back home?"

He looked at her, his dark eyes distant and thoughtful. "Draco was put under my tutelage because of a vow I made to Narcissa."

"Harry said something about an Unbreakable Vow," Hermione admitted. "I don't understand, sir; why you are still bound to Draco by that Unbreakable Vow? I thought it had to do with his being ordered to... um, kill Dumbledore..."

He glared at her, his eyes narrow and unfathomable. "I suppose Potter told you what he observed that night on the tower," he said contemptuously.

"Harry overheard you talking to Draco the night of Professor Slughorn's party. He said that he heard you and Draco arguing... and yes, he told Ron and me what happened that night. I put it together," she explained. "But after that night, on the Astronomy tower, surely you fulfilled the vow... sir."

Snape's eyes narrowed and his back became rigid. "It apparently did not," he said, sounding livid, possibly because of the indiscretion of her friend. "Not that it concerns you, but I swore to protect Draco, to help him with whatever the Dark Lord ordered him to do and to keep him from harm."

"And you accomplished that," she said remorsefully, a hint of accusation in her voice that she immediately regretted.

Snape inhaled, and his jaw clenched for a brief second. "After the events on the Astronomy tower, the Dark Lord demanded an explanation. I had to tell him about the vow. Even though Lucius Malfoy and the others escaped from Azkaban, Draco is still my responsibility. Just as you have become."

"So, he is your hostage, too, I suppose," she said.

Snape laughed, a cold low laugh. "Oh, no, Miss Granger, Draco is free to come and go. He is not a hostage; he is an equal of some degree. He is not in the Dark Lord's inner circle, but he has chosen to be a loyal follower. Your situations are quite different, I assure you."

"But what does Vol..." Snape's eyes flashed dangerously, and she remembered Harry telling her that Snape had gotten furious when he'd used Voldemort's name in front of him. "I mean, the Dark Lord," she amended and Snape's countenance softened slightly, "want with me?"

"Information on Potter, of course, and to use you as a pawn against him," he said, shaking his head. "Really, Miss Granger, you should have figured that out yourself."

"I will not betray my friends," she said stubbornly.

He laughed mercilessly. "You already have once," he said, his lips curled into a cold smile. "You do not know Occlumency sufficiently. I have noticed that while you are completely unable to block me, you have a natural tendency to redirect your thoughts quite efficiently. Nevertheless, the Dark Lord is a master of Legilimency. You will betray them I assure you."

~oOo~

Author's Notes:

To Southern_Witch_69: Thank you for everything. You have been so supportive, and the suggestions you gave me are really so very appreciated. So, again, thank you for everything.

It Begins

Chapter 5 of 43

With Hermione finally recovered from her injuries, she is propelled into the plans the Dark Lord has set for her. For her, her situation and things around her are not as simple as she'd assumed. For Severus, he must now start taking action, following the Dark Lord's designs for her.

This is my response to the Potter_Place Summer 2007 Prompt – #23

Hermione finds a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes that writes: *Tell me your deepest desire*. Thinking it's a trick, she says, "I wish to see my soul mate?" and she suddenly finds herself at Severus' feet.

The warnings I have listed are for this chapter and are both implied and are also expressed. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.



~o0o~

Severus had just left Spinner's End and Apparated to the large country home the Dark Lord had appropriated from an elderly pureblood couple, Tannis Gwynek and his wife, Elspeth. Both were now Imperiused to do the Dark Lord's bidding.

Bellatrix Lestrange, Narcissa Malfoy and Belinda Kirshner sat in the large room by the windows when Severus entered the doorway. Narcissa sat up stiffer as Severus entered, but he chose to ignore her as he waited to be acknowledged by the Dark Lord and permitted to approach. Narcissa tried to slyly attract his attention, and Severus smiled but refused to turn in her direction. Belinda was reclining gracefully, the angle of her body held so as to display her curves and yet appear serene and disinterested. He knew she was neither of those. Her eyes roamed over him subtly, even as she rolled her shoulder slightly, exposing her cleavage a bit more prominently, and Severus's smile lingered slightly longer as he easily read Belinda's obvious invitation. Bellatrix, on the other hand, was simply lounging, calmly watching, her hazel eyes flicking between Severus, her sister and friend with a feigned indifference, rolling her wand casually in her fingers. Between the three women, it was Bellatrix who Severus was always the most cautious around she was the unpredictable one.

The Dark Lord paced by the Floo in the large room as Marcus Flint and William Boyle knelt at his feet, making some kind of groveling replies. With a dismissive wave of the Dark Lord's hand, they rose and backed away before they turned, walked quickly past Severus and disappeared into the hall with only the slightest acknowledgement of their past Head of House. Severus smiled inwardly and continued to wait patiently. With a curt wave the Dark Lord called him over. "Ah, Severus, come. You are finally here." He walked over to the Dark Lord and calmly knelt in a show of respect he hadn't truly felt for years. "Rise, Severus." He stood up gracefully and carefully kept his mind blank, ready for invasion.

"I want news regarding the Muggle-born," the Dark Lord said softly, his red eyes boring into Severus's and his nostrils flaring in irritation. "I have heard nothing so far, Severus, except that she's been missing."

"She's recovering, my Lord. We had that unfortunate set-back, but she's recovering," Severus stated. Nagini hissed as she readjusted her coils around the large stand beside the Dark Lord's chair.

"Yes, that set-back. I had hoped that she'd be recovered by now?" the Dark Lord said, his head swaying slightly like a snake and his eyes narrowing in frustration. "This delays my plans, Severus."

"She was hurt pretty badly, my Lord," Severus replied. "She will recover from this soon."

"I thought it was understood that the girl wasn't to be harmed, that such was not allowed?" the Dark Lord asked, brandishing his wand lazily in his hand, a deceptive gesture that did not mean the pacified indifference it suggested.

Severus knew the movement well and suppressed the thought, *It was your 'allowance' that had put Miss Granger in the physical state from which I had to heal her in the first place*, to the back of his mind. "I do not believe Wormtail has become fully accustomed to his hand," he stated, successfully keeping the sneer from his voice.

The Dark Lord watched Severus's face with an impassive expression. "So, have you been able to make leeway with her?"

Severus nodded. "Some, my Lord. She trusts me, mostly because of her perceived past association with me through the Order and her six years at school as my student. Nevertheless, I do expect her to be resistant to joining our side. She spent all her magical years under Dumbledore's influence, and she's Potter's close friend after all."

"Regardless, you *are* making Miss Granger tractable to our plan, are you not?" the Dark Lord asked with a suggestive inflection in his voice and a glint in his red eyes.

Severus knew better than to lie. "It has been hard to do much... until she is well. I have made her my consort, my Lord, and I will have her trust and her respect, that I can assure you." Severus noticed Belinda sit up in reaction to his declaration, a scowl flickered on her face before she once again managed school her expression back into something impassive.

"I *expected* more," the Dark Lord said in an eerily quiet and thoughtful tone. "Much more, considering her *current* association with you. I was led to believe that you desired a union with this girl. Do you not?"

For a brief moment Severus was wary of what demands he would be given regarding Hermione. "I believe you gave her to me to do with as I saw fit in that regard," Severus said, then immediately regretted his temerity as the Dark Lord's red eyes narrowed dangerously. "I will do what you require of me," Severus stated languidly.

"I was under the impression that Miss Granger made a Plight-Pairing Charm or a Betrothal-Pairing Charm that has identified *you*," the Dark Lord said with the subtle hint of a question and a wicked twist of his lips. His pale head tilted slightly as he considered Severus. "Is this not what I saw in your mind?"

Severus lip curled up slightly before he schooled his features once again into their usual state of indifference. Belinda raised her eyebrow at him, and her mouth twitched as she tried not to look disconcerted by the information, while Narcissa smiled openly at Bellatrix. "That has yet to be determined, my Lord. I haven't yet been able to examine this parchment of hers, and I cannot rule out that it may, in fact, be a joke item," he replied solicitously.

The Dark Lord's red eyes narrowed and his slit-like nostrils flared slightly. He lifted his chin, looking down at Severus over his flat nose. "Is that how you read the memory, or have you changed your mind?" Bellatrix snickered quietly, but both men ignored her. "I was under the impression that this parchment held strong Dark Magic, magic that connected Miss Granger to you."

Severus retained his composure, keeping his mask of indifference firmly in place. "The parchment was purchased from the Weasley boys' shop a joke shop. Granted, they sell defensive items as well, but neither could make the powerful Betrothal-Pairing Charms necessary for the parchment to be genuine, and they do not use Dark Magic of any kind. They loathe the Dark Arts." Bellatrix leaned over to listen so something Narcissa whispered to her, and her eyebrows rose significantly.

"I see... In fact this was a joke item, I understand your caution. Nevertheless, she is of some use to me, Severus," the Dark Lord said with a silbant hiss. "If she cannot be turned to our side, there is always the possibility of perception... What one believes can be as destructive as what is real. She is, as you say living as your consort... Take her in hand, Severus. Put her under the Imperius if you need to. She must be seen... in public and *with us*, Severus," the Dark Lord stated. "Be sure she is seen."

"It will be as you wish, my Lord," he said.

"And what of your apprentice, Severus?" the Dark Lord asked, his red eyes briefly glancing toward the women in the room. Bellatrix eyed the Dark Lord with heavy lidded eyes that showed a deep desirous intent while Narcissa's attention became completely focused on Severus.

Severus paused for a brief moment and noticed Narcissa stiffen slightly in anticipation of his response. "He progresses as I anticipated he would," he said cryptically. He saw Narcissa's eyes narrow slightly and smiled inwardly.

The Dark Lord nodded and smiled. "Very good... and his other training that which he lacked at Hogwarts? Will he be ready?" the Dark Lord asked.

Severus knew that Narcissa was desperate for any news of Draco or his training; however, he chose to keep his comments cryptic. "Yes, my Lord he will. Again, he progresses as I anticipated he would."

The Dark Lord's lips stretched in a cold smile. "So, this time he will be ready. Well done, Severus."

"Thank you, my Lord," he said simply. "He should be more capable to handle whatever you request of him, even despite his exuberant youthfulness."

The Dark Lord stood silently watching Nagini as she rested on her stand. "Let us hope so... for his sake."

Severus noted, with some satisfaction, that Narcissa paled slightly and sat up straighter, her back rigid. He turned and walked purposefully from the room, stopping only briefly to give a polite nod and acknowledgement to the ladies before he exited. He had been amused to see Bellatrix reach out a hand to refrain Narcissa from rising to follow him, but he noted that Belinda did rise. As soon as she was on her feet, however, the Dark Lord called the three women to him. Severus mentally scoffed at the momentary look of disappointment on Belinda's face before she turned toward the Dark Lord.

~o0o~

Hermione woke up with a start to find Snape propped up on one arm, staring at her. She had no idea if she'd slept one night or two days, but she as felt stiff and sore as if she'd slept a week. She instinctively pulled the covers up to her chin, and he pushed them back down nearly to her groin. "Don't," he said simply. "I want to see that bruise on your abdomen." She held her breath as he pulled the night-slip up, exposing the hand-shaped bruise. His finger traced the discolored flesh with the slightest of pressure, but it still caused her to inhale in pain, and he scowled at her reaction. "Where else did he touch you, your thigh and your hip anywhere else?"

"Yes, my wrist and my bottom," she answered, unnerved by his stare.

Snape sat up. "Show me." She held up her wrist and he laughed. "No, your bottom, Miss Granger."

"There isn't anything to see there. He touched me, but not with the silver hand. It doesn't hurt," she stated. His narrowed as he looked down at her accusingly. "No really, only my abdomen, hip and thigh hurt where he pressed that hand on me." She watched him ease from the bed, walk over to her bedside table and pick up a jar.

"Now get up," he demanded, yanking the covers from her and pulling her from the bed. "Can you walk, or do I need to carry you?" he asked in his silky drawl, giving Hermione the sudden feeling that a stone-sized Snitch fluttered in her midsection.

"I think I can manage," Hermione said as she tried to rise, but her joints and muscles ached as well as her hip and abdomen, so she sagged back to the bed. "I still hurt; give me a moment."

Impatiently, he lifted her effortlessly, carried her into the loo, placed her on the edge of the tub and helped her slide inside. He sat on the edge of the tub behind her, reaching over her to turn on the faucets. As the tub filled, he helped her pull her night-slip off, tossing the wet garment unceremoniously on the floor. Hermione crossed her arms to cover herself until the frothy bubbles rose to conceal her body from him. He dumped a large amount of the crystallized substance from the jar into the bath water, and the foamy water turned a soft blue. Reaching above her, he pulled out a washcloth and dipped it in the water. "Lean forward, Miss Granger."

Hermione complied, hugging her knees and allowed him to wash her back, his strong fingers massaging her shoulders and sore muscles. She closed her eyes, letting his fingers work their magic on her aching muscles with the warm, soapy water, wishing to herself that he would continue his massage over her entire body. *Now that's not likely to happen*, she mused. She felt him shift and push her forward slightly. "Are you going to you're not going take a bath with me, are you?" she asked, alarmed, trying to turn around, but he held onto her shoulders firmly as he worked her lower back.

"Why, shouldn't I?" he asked, his voice low, but she detected a hint of humor. "Hand me the shower wand and tilt your head back," he demanded. She gave it to him, tilted her head back with her arms crossed to cover herself, and he soaked her hair and shoulders. Hermione closed her eyes as he washed her hair with his shampoo, enjoying the fresh, woody scent. His fingers on her scalp were hypnotizing. He reached for the shower wand, rinsed her hair out, and applied something else to her hair. "Head back, Miss Granger," he snapped when she tried to see what he was using, still keeping her arms crossed over her chest to cover herself. "Rinse off," he demanded. He stood and reached for a large towel. He pulled two corners apart, letting the towel unfold and held the towel open like a barrier, waiting for her with a look of impatience as she rose from the tub. She was surprised to see how large the towel was, easily large enough to wrap around her twice. Mutely Hermione stood, allowing him to wrap the towel around her, enclosing her in an embrace. When she looked up at him, his dark eyes were distant and impassive.

"Back on the bed, please," he said, steering her back to the bedroom, and he waited as Hermione sat down. He glared at her before saying, "Lie down."

"Please, may I get dressed...?" she started to say, and his eyes flashed with annoyance.

"Lie down, Miss Granger; I do not like repeating myself." She lay down, careful to keep the towel around her as much as possible. He smirked at her efforts and waved his hand to have her shift over and sat down next to her as he opened a jar of creamy, butter-yellow salve. He pulled the sheet over her legs and opened the towel to expose the handprint bruise again. "Wormtail, what did he say to you?" Snape asked as he gently applied the salve on her bruise.

The thick salve stung on contact, and she assumed that it was a different Bruise Paste than the one Madam Pomfrey used at school. Snape's fingers were tender as he massaged in the salve, but the bruise left from Wormtail's hand hurt under his ministrations. His scowl deepened as he worked, and although it might have been her imagination, she thought that she could practically feel the salve absorb deep into her skin.

"He said I was pretty," Hermione finally replied. Snape raised an eyebrow, and she knew he wanted to hear everything Wormtail had said. "He asked if I miss my friends if I miss Ron. He mentioned some of his memories of me from the Burrow... from when he was Ron's pet...."

She could see a tick in his cheek as he clenched his jaw. "Did you in any way entice him, Miss Granger?"

"NO!" she exclaimed, almost sitting up. "I would never how could you think that?" He didn't react to her words at all, and Hermione thought that he didn't believe her. "It's not like I haven't been paraded around him in seductive attire or had to put up with his constant innuendos and lecherous stares. I told him to leave me alone, *repeatedly* not that it does any good. You see how he is... but you don't tell him to stop it or anything."

Snape's lip curled in a derisive smile. "You don't think I've let his impropriety go without comment, do you? Be assured, Miss Granger, I have made it quite clear to th~~at~~ that you are to be left alone. Let me see where he touched your thigh," he instructed. Hermione angled herself carefully and crossed her right leg over her left. His fingers tenderly massaged in the salve along the discoloration, making Hermione grit her teeth in pain as he worked the salve into her skin.

"Sir, Wormtail, he's still in his cage, outside I presume," she said.

"Yes, he's currently sitting on the back stoop," Snape said with a wicked grin. "Roll on your side; I need to apply this to your hip." Hermione rolled back toward him, and he

began working the salve into her left hip, his tender touch still just as painful. "He will not bother you again without consequence." Snape set the jar on her bedside table and then leaned over her, his hand near the small of her back. "I believe that I made the rules very clear to you," he said, his rich, silky voice carried a hint of threat.

Hermione looked up at him in surprise. "Yes."

"And they are?" he asked with a hint of malice in his grin.

The rules his rules... no questions "No wand, no questions and no killing me..." she stammered.

He laughed at her. "Those are Draco's instructions," he said coolly. "I believe that I said, you are not permitted to ask questions, use a wand, and that you are *to obey* me." He leaned down, his eyes cold as he glared at her. "They are simple enough rules. Was I in anyway *unclear*?"

"No," she replied fearfully. *Oh, Circe, now what..*

He looked at her thoughtfully, and bracing himself on his arms, he leaned down toward her, his face so close she could feel his breath caress her skin. "Let me then amend your rules so that you can *fully* understand them. I expect you *to obey* me at all times. And for now, you will not be allowed a wand," he said, then lowered his voice to a soft deliberate drawl. "These two rules are for your own good for your safety. Also, you are to *hold your tongue* around anyone you know to be or may assume to be a Death Eater. However, in this room, or while we're alone, I expect you to be honest with me and to confide in me."

"Like you're being with me?" she snapped, rolling onto her side, clutching the towel to her chest.

"Yes." His expression relaxed a fraction before he schooled his features once again into his usual inexpressive mask. "As much as I can be," he continued softly. He sat up abruptly and rolled Hermione onto her stomach, pushing the towel away, exposing her bottom and thighs.

"Hey, no...!" she exclaimed as his hand landed on her bum, sliding down her leg slightly.

"I told you I wanted to see where he touched you," he said dryly. He scowled at the black and blue bruises that had been caused from her fall on the stairs. "Why did you lie to me about this?" he asked as his hand seemed to roam on her hip.

"NO! I didn't exactly... It doesn't hurt really." Hermione suddenly felt uncomfortable with the too familiar caress as his fingers traced the bruise. He pinned her down as he reached for another jar off the bedside table.

He chuckled coolly as she struggled to roll back onto her side away from him. "It's Bruise Paste, Miss Granger. Hold still." He rubbed the cool salve into her skin, his long fingers sliding possessively and rather intimately over her hips and down along the back of her thighs.

She knew he was covering the entire bruise, *But surely the bruising isn't that extensive!* When his fingers slipped down between her thighs slightly, she inhaled in shock by what she perceived as an intimate touch rather than merely necessary treatment. "Stop that!" she exclaimed, an angry chastisement forming on the edge of her tongue. His gentle stroking was giving her chills, intimate shivers that played havoc with her emotions. In her anger she missed the soft footfalls outside his bedroom door. "How dare you!" she admonished him with a shriek. She tried to roll away again, but he held her down.

"Yes, I dare." He leaned over her again, blocking her with his arm against the curve of her back. "In case you are unaware, Draco was just outside our door." Her gaze quickly turned toward the door. "I asked to see your bottom, Miss Granger, for a reason. When I ask you to do something, I expect you to comply."

"Oh, yes, rule three *to obey you*," she mumbled under her breath with withering contempt.

"Yes. Although, technically let's make that rule one," His body tensed, his shoulders and arms locked on either side of her as he lowered his head closer to hers. "Rule two: learn to control your incessant need to ask questions and your outbursts. Know *when* to speak," he continued softly. "There are Death Eaters in this house, Miss Granger, who report *directly* to the Dark Lord. Others may on occasion stop by to see either Draco, Wormtail or myself, although, not frequently. You are, for all intents and purposes, my hostage despite what plans the Dark Lord may conceive. *And* I am supposed to be treating you as such. Either you are to start obeying me or I will be *required* to punish you. Are you going to be good and refrain from *disobeying* me?" She nodded, a tear escaping from the corner of her eye, and she bit her lip. "Are you sure?" he asked, his tone apathetic and inflexible, but missing his usual sneer. "Do not doubt that I mean what I say, Miss Granger: impertinence will be punished. You are not a guest here. Now, dry and brush your hair. The elf will be up shortly to help you dress," he said.

He stood as he watched her roll onto her back and cover herself with the covers, then turned to leave. "You how could you?" she snapped at him angrily, hurt by his threat.

He paused, his back to her. "Because I have to. Now get up and get dressed; we are going shopping today. I need supplies," he stated off-handedly and left.

Hermione froze momentarily at his comment. *Shopping? We're going... He's going to take me with him?* Her mind raced with the possibilities as she climbed out of bed and made her way to the loo for her brush. A slight hope rose in her. *Diagon Alley? If we go to Diagon Alley, I might run into someone I know... But he's well known now he's Dumbledore's killer... Would he go to Diagon Alley? He'll be recognized. Where do Death Eaters go to buy stuff?*

Peren was waiting for her when she entered the room and was standing on a small stool with a light breakfast. A black robe and lightweight cloak lay on the bed, and a pair of soft boots sat on the floor. The elf held up a black night-slip and Hermione allowed the elf to help her. The robe sailed into the elf's hands, and Hermione slid her arms and head into the garment, surprised at the feel of the expensive cloth. She looked down at her gown, noticing that the long gown had been cut on the bias and clung to her curves far too seductively for her comfort.

"Peren, where did this come from?" she asked, already sure of the answer. She nibbled on the large, freshly made scone from her plate.

Peren motioned to Hermione, her tiny hand angled toward the stool. "Miss is to sit, please?" she asked in her delicate little voice. Hermione's bruises still stung, but she didn't want to be difficult for the elf, so she sat on the stool, gritting her teeth. Peren began to pat at her hair with a small hand towel. "Master Snape, he told my Mistress that you needed clothes for today. She brings this for you."

"Peren, who is your master? Whom do you serve?" Hermione asked. She had been curious about the elf *Draco said she was his, but Snape treats her as if she belongs to him. She knew Snape was a half-blood, and his father was Muggle. So it's unlikely Peren would be from the noble house of Snape, unless Peren was his mum's...*

"I is of the noble house of Malfoy, Miss, but I is given to Master Snape by my Mistress," Peren stated proudly.

"So, are you allowed to talk to me now?" Hermione asked, noticing that the elf hadn't punished herself for speaking.

"Oh, no, Miss! But I will sufficiently punish myself with Master Draco's slipper when we are finished." Hermione looked at the elf in surprise. "I will hit myself once for each speaking, as you tell me to, Miss," she promised as she gently brushed out Hermione's tresses and pulled part of her hair back on either side of her head, securing it in place with sparkling black clips.

"I don't like you hurting yourself on my account. It's not fair," Hermione said with a heavy sigh. She saw that Peren had tears in her eyes when she stepped over to the bed to retrieve the cloak.

Snape entered the bedroom just as Peren placed the cloak on her shoulders, his back robes billowing behind him. "Give me your right hand, Miss Granger," he said, looking at her with feigned indifference.

After his earlier treatment and his statements, she didn't want to anger him, so she stood up, silently holding out her right arm. He pulled a shiny, iridescent grey bracelet and necklace from his pocket, obviously made from some kind of thick shell. It reminded her of abalone shells from the beach. Snape placed the bracelet on her wrist and sealed the clasp with his wand. There was an odd, prickling vibration in her wrist under the bracelet.

"The remains of one of those infernal Blast-Ended Skrewts that Hagrid bred," Snape said with an amused smirk, moving to stand behind her, placing the necklace around the base of her neck as Hermione pulled her hair aside for him. "I thought it appropriate," he said softly in her ear. The necklace vibrated as the bracelet had. "The shell itself will repel spells, and I have added anti-Apparation wards as well. Should you even try, your head and wand-hand will splinch off."

She closed her eyes to bite back the fury she felt at his declaration, angered by his precautions. "They are lovely, thank you," she said sarcastically. His lip curled in an amused smirk as he secured the entwining snakes of her cloak clasp. He took her arm as he guided her from the room, down the stairs, past the door to the kitchen and down a longer hallway.

Narcissa Malfoy was standing in the back entry, waiting, talking with Draco with a warm, motherly smile. Hermione saw Narcissa wipe something off his shoulder before she looked up and saw them approach. She looked at Hermione with an unconcerned, appraising glance from head to toe and then turned her gaze to Snape as he fastened his cloak. Hermione faced Narcissa solemnly. "Thank you for the robes, Mrs. Malfoy. They are very nice," she said politely, actually grateful for the lovely robes.

Narcissa shot her a scathing glare. "They were necessary," she said in a dismissive tone, obviously noticing how Draco's eyes swept over Hermione's appearance. Hermione averted her gaze, catching Snape's dark scowl, and looked down at the floor.

"Narcissa if you would please... lead the way," he said politely, taking Hermione's arm in a tight grip.

Narcissa simply nodded, then looked lovingly at Draco, turned, and exited into the back garden.

"Try anything and you *will* regret it," he said, his rich voice menacing. Narcissa smiled knowingly and Apparated. As soon as she disappeared, Snape pulled Hermione close to him.

Hermione looked up at him, her brown eyes meeting his black. "If the chance presents itself..." Draco let out a contemptuous laugh at her words. "I'll take it..."

"It won't," Snape stated confidently, interrupting her. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her tightly to his chest. Breathing became hard and her pulse raced, both by his close proximity and the fear of losing her head. He chuckled mirthlessly, his lips brushing against her hair. "Don't you trust me, Miss Granger?" he asked just before the familiar sensation of Apparation tugged at her.

Hermione was shaking, holding onto Snape tightly as they Disapparated onto the dark street of Knockturn Alley. Snape thrust Hermione to stand in front of him as Draco Apparated next to them. "I will use the Imperius on you, Miss Granger, if you make even the slightest move to disobey me. Do not doubt that," he warned.

"Do you really think that you can trust her, Severus?" Narcissa asked.

"No," Snape replied, touching his wand to Hermione's necklace. The necklace vibrated, the sharp stinging sensation nearly making Hermione gag. "However, I expect our little Gryffindor to try *something*. That's why you are here," he said calmly. Snape grabbed her wrist, touching his wand to the bracelet, and the stinging vibration made her hand spasm. Snape cocked his eyebrow as her eyes filled with tears. "So, do I need to use the Imperius, Miss Granger, or will you comply?"

Hermione looked around. They were standing in front of a shop called, Slange and Drage, and from where they stood, she could see the doors of Gringotts. There were a few people on the street beyond, walking along Diagon Alley, but none turned in their direction. Two men in dark robes stood idly about a few paces away, lingering aimlessly, but they merely glanced at them and returned their gaze down the alley. However, not having a wand, and with Snape, Draco and Narcissa all holding their wands at the ready, she had little hope of escape. *Yet*. That and the necklace and bracelet had vibrated with spells she couldn't identify. *Maybe if they separate, I could simply make a run for it*, she thought, looking back at Snape, and then banished the idea as she looked again at the two men who appeared to be just loitering in the street. *Death Eaters? More of Snape's friends? I wouldn't put it past him to have arranged this... but all for me? Still, he obviously carefully planned this little trip, right down to the details*, she acknowledged to herself. She turned back to him, refusing to look him in the face and nodded. "I don't have any choice," she said meekly, her eyes flashing with anger.

Snape laughed as he firmly wrapped his fingers around her arm, making her follow him. "No, you don't."

Draco fell into step right behind her. Hermione felt as effectively trapped between Snape and the Malfoys, as if Snape had actually put chains on her. Inside Slange and Drange, Snape walked confidently up to the counter and requested to see Ian Frastoter while Narcissa stood next to Draco near the door.

The shop keep immediately disappeared behind the counter, and a portly, bald man with pale eyes stepped up to face Snape. "Master Snape, how may I have the privilege to serve you?" Mr. Frastoter inquired.

"I believe you have something for me," Snape relied.

"Yes, I do... and a request," Mr. Frastoter said. Hermione stood and gazed around the small shop. Mr. Frastoter reached below the counter and handed Snape a folded piece of parchment, a small brown bag and a long package. "I've need of your services again," he said softly. "When can we expect the delivery?"

Snape read the parchment, folded it back up and looked up at the proprietor. "Many of these will take several weeks, a few a month, the rest in four days," he said. "Handled by the usual arrangement."

Mr. Frastoter nodded, handing Snape a small pouch. "The usual arrangement then... I'll look forward to your delivery."

Snape nodded, then turned and indicated to Narcissa and Draco with a nod that he was finished. Narcissa smiled in acknowledgement, stepping aside. Snape walked up to Hermione, and taking her hand, firmly guided her from the shop, followed closely by Draco and Narcissa.

Hermione could hear Narcissa and Draco talking softly behind them as she followed Snape down the street. Although she couldn't make out the conversation, by his tone of voice, Draco seemed to be either asserting or confirming something politely, but firmly to his mother, but obviously being insistent in his statements. Narcissa's comments and replies were spoken much too softly for Hermione to make out anything, but with the few glimpses that she made, under the pretense of looking in the shop windows, she knew Narcissa wasn't very happy. They passed a shop displaying giant spiders and poisonous snakes and entered Borgin & Burkes.

In Borgin & Burkes, Draco made several purchases and an exchange obviously prearranged with Mr. Burke. Snape never let go of Hermione's arm, standing her in the center of the shop, keeping her back to the counter while Draco conducted his business. Narcissa stood by the door, appearing disinterested; however, her eyes never strayed from Hermione and Snape.

Many of the items in the shop looked familiar to Hermione, either from lectures in Professor Lupin's or Professor Moody's classes, or what she had read about dark artifacts in either the Hogwarts library or the one in Grimmauld Place. A few items made her skin crawl from seeing them in person. A shiver ran down her spine when her eyes fell upon the familiar glass case she'd seen her first time in this shop, remembering the opal necklace she'd seen here the same one that had nearly killed Katie Bell.

Hermione was relieved when they finally left the shop. Outside, Snape firmly pulled Hermione past a shop which displayed shrunken heads and withered body parts of animals, a shop whose sign read, *Nightshades Exotics*, with odd plants in the window, past another that advertised Ministry approved poisons and charmed items, and one displaying an array of candles and trinkets in the window.

Narcissa had again resumed her conversation with Draco, but each time Narcissa caught Hermione slyly trying to peek at them in the windows of the shops, she openly glared at her. Draco, however, held himself stiffly, his eyes scanning the few shoppers in the street as they passed when not looking at Snape's back or at his mum.

At the conjunction of the street, Snape guided Hermione forcibly to their right, followed closely by the Malfoys, down a short narrow alley that ended at the Knockturn Apothecary.

Once inside, Snape released her, approaching the counter. "I want to see Mr. Aster Mactabilis," he said firmly to the shop assistant.

The Apothecary slithered up to Snape, rubbing one hand in his other. "Ah, Master Snape, what a pleasure, sir. I have your order ready for you as requested," he adulated in a manner Hermione could only consider slimy.

"That remains to be seen," Snape replied coolly. "Draco," he called from over his shoulder.

Watching for several minutes, Hermione figured that both Draco and Snape appeared sufficiently distracted, carefully inspecting each ingredient in the various bottles, pouches and jars. She took a few tentative steps back, easing for the door, watching Snape's back warily. "Going somewhere?" Narcissa asked lazily, her wand digging into Hermione's side.

"No," Hermione answered, silently berating herself.

"No? But I'd rather hoped that you would," Narcissa said scornfully. "Considering everything you have done to my family and our family's honor, Mudblood, I would've an excuse." The tip of her wand warmed against Hermione's side, hurting her.

"I was curious... I just wanted to look around," she lied.

Narcissa laughed in a smooth contemptuous purr. "Oh, by all means, look. I'm sure you'll find things here that you've never seen, Mudblood."

Hermione turned her head, looking at the ingredients offered in the bins and shelves, afraid to move from where she stood. Many of the ingredients she easily recognized, many more she didn't and a few made her stomach turn.

Narcissa noted where her gaze stopped. "Shall I tell you what those are used for?" Narcissa asked haughtily, leaning in close to her.

"No, thank you," Hermione replied, averting her gaze and immediately regretting her curiosity as her eyes swept over an assortment of embryos in various glass jars and multiple jars of animal organs.

"Really, my dear," Narcissa cooed, her wand tip roaming lazily against Hermione's side, "I'd be happy to enlighten you. Or maybe you'd like to have Severus explain their uses. He knows far more of them than I do."

"Is anything wrong?" Snape asked peremptorily, regarding Hermione's reactions with an amused smirk. Her breath caught in her chest, and she wanted nothing more than to leave the shop, but she shook her head as she met his stare.

"Something piqued the curiosity of your little Gryffindor, Severus," Narcissa replied in a seductive tone. "I don't think the little Muggle-born has ever seen such goodies before."

Snape nodded, never taking his eyes from Hermione's. "Draco has taken the ingredients and breakables to the house, Narcissa. I am done with my errands, and we'll Apparate outside... Unless, there is anything you need for yourself?"

Narcissa's eyes flicked briefly around the shop, and Hermione saw a flicker of disappointment before she looked back up at Snape. "Yes," she replied smoothly, removing her wand from Hermione's side. "If you would escort me to Ater Décor, I'd be grateful. I can manage home from there."

Severus gave her a knowing smile. "My pleasure," he said and waved his hand, indicating she lead the way.

Walking back up the street, a few of the curious passersby made quick, sly glances, but no one paused to openly speak to them. The shop Ater Décor, which stood at the junction of Knockturn Alley and Diagon Alley, had false windows on either side of a recessed doorway, and inside were racks and mannequins displaying all types of exotic ladies lingerie and skimpy apparel. Snape ventured in only deep enough to allow Hermione a fair glance at the merchandise.

"If there is anything you'd like, dear, I'd be happy to oblige. I'm sure Severus would love to see you in one of these," Narcissa said, holding up a leather corset and garters that wouldn't have contained a woman's breasts, but would instead enhance and display *all* her assets quite effectively. Narcissa's eyes sparkled with mischief in Snape's direction. He cocked an eyebrow at her, but made no reply.

Hermione paled at the thought of having to wear that around the house and numbly shook her head. "No? All right then." Narcissa smiled wickedly. "Let me know if you change her mind, Severus."

"Narcissa, as always, a pleasure," Snape said with a slight nod. "Come, Hermione, we're going." He paused just inside the door. "I'm afraid that this close to Diagon Alley this is necessary." He lifted his wand, and Hermione closed her eyes, fearing the worst. "*Imperio*." A calm and light headiness clouded her mind as all her stress and all thoughts of worry and fear dissolved away. Snape guided her out the door, and Hermione preceded him, feeling immensely relaxed merely from his reassuring presence.

"Stay with me, and keep your mouth closed," he ordered intensely.

The effect of the Imperius made his demand seem a soft reasonable request, if it hadn't been for his words *Keep my mouth closed? Stay with him and... Yes, stay close to him and... Keep my mouth closed...?* Hermione fumed in anger beneath the vague happiness and serenity effects of the curse. They crossed the threshold into the recessed doorway, and Snape grabbed her arm, forcibly keeping her in front of him, swearing softly. Hermione looked up, and for a moment her mind struggled with what she was seeing. For that brief second it looked like a fantasy, a dream.

Lupin, Harry, Ron and Fred or it could have been George, stood in the street gaping at her, only a stone's throw away. Hermione tried to fight the Imperius Curse to go to her friends, but her feet would not move, and the vague floating sensation clouded her mind. All four of her friends drew their wands out, ready, but Hermione knew that they would not use them against her and that in the narrow space of the recessed doorway they did not have a clear shot at Snape.

She struggled against the dim emptiness in her mind to force herself to think clearly and felt a slight release followed quickly by a sense of tight gripping pain. She could sense Snape stiffen behind her, his fingers digging into her arm and knew instinctively that he had his wand out, ready to fight. But she could not move; she could not step out of the doorway. The thought, *Stay with me, and keep your mouth closed* echoed again.

She felt the bracelet vibrate, and Hermione counted silently, waiting for him to remove the Anti-Apparation ward off the necklace. *Deactivate it... Keep my mouth shut... and if I can break the Imperius, I can escape... But I must stay with him*, warred in her mind, making her head hurt.

Snape raised his wand to her neck, deactivating the necklace, and she knew that if she could just break the Imperius Curse, she could Apparate to freedom. Hermione tried to tell her friends to hex her, to drop her and fire at him, but she couldn't open her mouth, the demand and control of the curse still held her. She tried fighting the curse's effect, but she couldn't completely shrug off the feeling of lightheaded happiness.

"Hermione, come to me," Snape demanded softly in an even, silky drawl. His deep sensual drawl reverberated throughout her, and she felt it consume and control her as her body responded to his demand.

Her mind screamed and tried to fight the motion of her body as she turned and stepped into Snape's open arms, catching in that brief moment the look of shocked disbelief on Ron's and Fred's faces, the stunned, indignant look on Lupin's, and the rage in Harry's eyes. "Embrace me," he said with his cheek next to her ear, and she complied, laying her head on his shoulder in defeat. He chuckled softly, seductively, and Disapparated her away.

Back at the house, Snape guided Hermione through the back entry and into his potions room where Draco was putting away supplies. Draco turned and regarded his mentor and guardian speculatively as they entered. "Any problems?" he asked.

"Your mother wanted to shop at Ater Décor, and we ran into Potter and friends," Snape said, tossing his cloak on the desk. "Hermione, remove your cloak and robe." Unable to fight his demand under the curse, she complied. Draco turned to fully face her, his arms crossed and his face unreadable. Numbly, she let the cloak fall and then drew the robe over her head, handing it to Snape. "Let it fall," he demanded, leaning against the desk with his arms crossed. Numbly she opened her hand. When her robe hit the floor Snape stood up and looked at the two of them, his face expressionless.

Hermione stood immobile in her black, silky night-slip and soft boots. The calm and lightheadedness of the curse clouded her mind, yet she fumed in embarrassment beneath the feeling of vague happiness. Snape walked over to her, looked her in the eye, then slowly walked around behind her.

Standing right behind her, Snape looked over at Draco. "What happened is not to happen again, Draco," he said with a commanding tone as he moved away a step, standing very close beside Hermione, his hand sliding across the small of her back, then falling to his side. Draco leaned against the worktable, watching them, defiance and curiosity evident in his expression. "If I leave her in your charge, you are to watch her. You are not to leave her alone. Am I clear?"

Draco visibly bristled, but to his credit he managed to keep his expression neutral. "Yes, sir."

Hermione looked at Snape, her eyes following his movement as he pulled the package and bag from his pocket. "You know what this is for, Draco," he said, tossing the box to him. "Get started." Draco nodded and began to collect ingredients from the storeroom shelves. "Miss Granger, you will not ask questions today; you will *observe*," Snape said softly, leaning close to her, his voice low and silky. She felt the Imperius Curse lift from her, although she never heard him utter the countercurse.

Hermione stood frozen, waiting, and unsure of exactly what Snape intended. He moved to stand in front of her, glaring. "You did very well today, Miss Granger, although you surprised me... You nearly resisted fought it... Did you think I wouldn't know?" he asked softly, adamantly. "Don't do that again." She simply shook her head, swallowing the lump in her throat. Snape stepped away from her. "From now on you are not to wander this house unattended by either myself or Draco. Is that clear, Miss Granger?"

Her body was still rigid, more from fear and uncertainty, her mind belatedly comprehending what he'd just told her. Slowly, she nodded. "Yes, sir."

"You have a choice today," Snape stated. "You can either sit in your chair quietly or you can work at the drain board preparing Draco's ingredients. Which is it to be?"

She swept her gaze to the sink at the bowls of grubs, beetles, leeches, plubberins and water-rush pods, weighing the displeasure of the slimy work to sitting in the stiff wooden chair behind her. *Stand or sit... neither will be comfortable...* "I think I'd rather do something productive, sir," she replied. *And serve out your detention..*

"Then get to it," he said with smirk. "I will be watching you and checking your progress. I expect proficiency from you." She walked over to the drain board, and Snape handed her a pair of knives. "Don't even think about it," he purred menacingly.

She looked up at him straight in the eye. "I would hardly consider either a shucking blade or paring knife as an effective weapon against two wizards with wands, sir," she said, glaring at him. "Even if I was able to throw them with any level of accuracy, a flick of your wand and they'd miss their mark."

"No, you would not have developed that particular skill, would you?" he asked, walking away, laughing at her. She shivered, wondering if he had learned to throw knives and not surprised if he had.

Hermione had just finished shucking the water-rush pods and setting them next to the gutted grubs when Snape once again walked over to check her progress. "Pay attention, watch and learn," he said, barely audible, then raised his voice slightly. "Come over to the work table. You may assist Draco in finishing his potion." She looked up at him, catching a barely discernable nod, and followed him.

He guided her to stand between them, and Draco pointed to some globe thistle seeds. "You can grind these up, Granger. I need them next." Hermione picked up the stone mortar and pestle, her eyes catching the snakeskin pieces in the open box. "Any day, Granger," Draco said, pulling her transfixed contemplation regarding the significance of the shed skin.

Her mind raced over the ingredients she had prepared and the ones still visible in front of Draco on the worktable as she ground the seeds, trying to piece together their connection with what looked like the shed skin of a very large snake. *Possibly from Voldemort's snake perhaps? Certainly not all of the skin if that did come from his snake. Both Harry and Mr. Weasley said his snake was huge. Big enough to swallow a man.* From where she stood, she could not see the potion directions on the card lying on Draco's left.

A jar of a clear, limpid fluid of a pale, greenish-straw color sat next to Snape, and Hermione watched as he measured out a small amount, careful to avoid touching the liquid and set the jar back down. A smirk crossed his features briefly, noticing her attention of his actions, before he returned his attention to his own potion.

"Any day now, Granger," Draco snapped. Hermione handed Draco the mortar and watched him carefully introduce the ground seeds as he stirred the potion.

"Take the knife, Miss Granger, and separate the scales from the skin," Snape instructed, showing her briefly how, then handing her a piece of the skin and the small knife. "Do not damage the scales." Hermione gently scrapped the scales from the proffered skin and waited. Both Snape and Draco measured out portions and layered them in their potions. Draco's potion turned a smoky grey and Snape's a greenish-silver. Snape lowered his fire and walked to his desk, pulling a book from the drawer, and began writing notes.

"Granger, are you going to assist me or not?" Draco said, thrusting another dish with hairy lupine leaves and a pair of gloves at her.

The afternoon went quickly. Snape sat at his desk, rising occasionally to check Draco's progress, and giving him quiet nods of approval or instructions and suggestions on techniques. As Draco moved the cauldron to the cooling rack, Snape rose again to check the potion. "Well done, Draco. Wash up, Miss Granger," he demanded. "It's time to eat."

Hermione bristled, but she and Draco hurriedly washed their hands and left the potions lab for the kitchen.

Without Wormtail, dinner was a much more relaxed affair. Snape and Draco conversed easily about the interactions of potion ingredients and the subtle differences that seasonal and lunar influences made both in brewing potions and in the collection of ingredients. It was more like listening to Snape lecture Draco, although much more in-depth than his lectures had been in class. Hermione sat fascinated while listening to him, taking in his every word. It dawned on her just how vast Snape's knowledge was in the area of potions, organic and inorganic ingredients, and herbology, and just how much she could learn from him.

It dawned on her as she climbed into bed just how jealous she was of Draco, that he'd been given the privilege to be apprenticed to this man lying beside her, gaining all that skill and knowledge she knew Snape possessed.

Author's notes:

I haven't the words to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help, effort and the support she's given me on this story. Without her, I probably would have

chucked it in the rubbish bin.

Slange is snake and Drange is dragon in Norwegian

In Latin: Mactabilis means deadly or lethal; Ater is dark; and Décor is beauty or grace.

John Fothergill was a British physician, from 1712 to 1780, who identified Scarlatina anginosa, an ulcerative sore throat condition present in severe cases of scarlet fever. He is also noted for the discovery of Tri-geminal neuralgia, or Fothergill's tic, which causes severe sharp pains of the facial nerve. This nerve innovates (affects) the face, lips and tongue. However, I don't think he was a wizard... but what the heck.

The combination of herbs I chose for the Fothergill potion are completely random choices based on my limited knowledge of herbs and their uses.

I don't know about elsewhere, but here in Ca. we have five sizes of bath towels: hand towel, bath towel, body towel, bath sheet and spa size. If you can buy bath sheets I highly recommend them they're awesome!

Small Kindnesses

Chapter 6 of 43

Severus tries to get Hermione to tell him what she sees in him to figure out why she came to him. Draco and Hermione have dinner together – alone.

The warnings I have listed are for this chapter and are both implied and are also expressed. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.



~o0o~

Without the sleeping and pain potions, Hermione began to stir in her sleep. Without them when she began to dream, she started to move. She began to moan, and her head rolled on her pillow. Then she gently rolled and stretched. First, her hand reached out to touch him, then her leg. Unconsciously in his sleep, he had shifted slightly away from her once, then rolled onto his back trying to push her away. She did roll over, but shortly after, her hips and thighs were pressed against his and her face lay next to his arm. He could feel her warm breath each time she exhaled and sensed her body heat, making one side of him feel too hot. He waved his hand, using a nonverbal spell to push Hermione back onto her side of the huge bed, and fell asleep.

She moaned, her head tossed on her pillow, and she muttered something indecipherable, waking him again. He tried to ignore her and fall asleep, and the next thing Severus knew, he woke up with her lying beside him, her leg entangled with his, and an arm lying across his body with her hand nearly touching his groin and her face nestled on his shoulder. He dislodged her hand away from his erection carefully, wondering, *Why in all Hades me?*

He tried to shift her arm off him and dislodge her leg without waking her, and Hermione rolled onto her back, still managing to take up over half of the huge bed. And she's so small. *How could someone so small take up so much space?*

He maneuvered himself onto his side, propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at her. In sleep, she looked so young and innocent. *am actually old enough to be your father...* he thought. *Seventeen, she's either seventeen or will turn seventeen soon, an adult in our world but still so young* Her hair framed her face on the pillow with soft, unruly curls. His eyes roamed her face, studying her features. *She has a nice face: a pert nose, long, thick eyelashes and her eyebrows are not too thin or bushy* His eyes followed the pattern of her pale freckles from her nose across her cheeks. *Her cheekbones are evident without being bony, and she has a nice chin.* Her mouth was slightly open, and Severus stared, mentally tracing the slight fullness of her lips. He had also noticed lately that when she smiled she had perfect teeth. *Part in thanks to Draco's curse their fourth year. I don't believe she ever thanked him for that... but it is a vast improvement.* He recalled hearing two of his Slytherins and some Durmstrang students talking about her that year discussing options for Yule Ball partners. *'Cute enough, but bookish, bossy, and arrogant thinks she knows everything, always correcting you...'* and remembered Avery saying the same thing about Lily once. *But then Avery didn't particularly like Lily.*

Hermione stirred again, angling toward him in her sleep, seeking him out unconsciously. The subtle unconscious act amused as much as unsettled him. *Even in her sleep, she seeks me out. Could the parchment be right? But she shows no outward sign of being attracted to me or having any sign of infatuation.* He could almost believe the soul mate part, but the heart's desire claim still plagued him. *I've known Plight Troths and Betrothal Charms to be cast regarding blood, power, even compatibility and matches made on those grounds; but emotional attachment was generally considered to be too fleeting and unpredictable.*

He knew that in a Muggle matrimonial the words love, honor and obey were said in the vow, although not magically sealed. *Could she commit herself to me and make such a vow? Could she trust, love, honor and obey me?* He softly snorted in derision. *A Gryffindor trust and obey a Slytherin, bloody unlikely*

He looked up at the window, simply to avoid staring at her. He noticed that the curtains were parted slightly, annoyed that they weren't how he usually kept them, which was closed. *Someone no, she did it; she opened the curtains* They were open more than a full hand span and a half, showing the predawn gloom through the paned-glass window. For a moment he was angry at her audacity. *Not that she can see anything through that blasted glass, it's so old.* But the dark greyish blue of the sky through the glass was already changing with the subtle, soft silver tinge that promised a new day. He knew that slowly the color would take on a blushing of faint pink, softening into

pale shades of peach, and then the sky would slowly fade into pale blue tones and eventually turn a bright cerulean blue. There were very few that appreciated the subtle changes of night into day, few who bothered to watch it. But to him that subtle morphing of color each morning was uplifting and peaceful, calming to the soul.

Dawn was the time of the day he liked most. That brief span of time just before sunrise. Even living in the castle, the corridors were quiet at dawn. Only Dumbledore knew that Severus rose this early every morning, taking a large mug of coffee and climbing the east tower to watch the sunrise. His time. *And rumors were that I'm a vampire idiotic imbeciles.*

He looked at the girl young woman lying in bed with him and mentally traced the features of her face again *How could this snippet of a girl think that I am her heart's desire? I'm not even sure I like her...* His body belied the discontentment in his mind as his erection grew harder.

Lucius offered to relieve me of her, to have her 'stay' at Malfoy Manor, should I tire of her. He chuckled at the thought. He'd have her chained to the wall in his cellar under the drawing room. No, she's staying here, at least until I can figure out a way of getting rid of her. Shouldn't be too hard. Dolohov, Rabastan and Rodolphus Lestrage as well as Jugson and Whiltmire all want her more to extract some sense of revenge against her, I'm sure. Staging an attack and escape won't be too hard. I just have to wait for the most opportune time. Timing... but I will have to time it right. However, it must be done in time for me to begin the new term at Hogwarts. Dumbledore wanted me at the school until the end just in case. Alecko and Amycus want to take over Hogwarts, so do Greyback and Rowle. Travers wants to be a professor at Hogwarts; the four of them may just get what they want if the Dark Lord gets his way. If the plans succeed, the Carrows and Travers will get their wish just as Dumbledore feared.

~o0o~

Lying in bed, she opened her eyes to see Snape propped up on his elbow watching her *Blast-Ended Skrewt why is he looking at me like that? What does he want now?* "Is something do you want something, sir..." Cringing, she hoped it wasn't sex. *Please he cannot want that...*

"Yes, Miss Granger, I *want* something. However, I have neither the desire *nor* the intent of molesting you, despite what you and your friends probably think." The contemplative look on his face changed as his lip curled into a slight smile that gave her no reassurance at all.

She watched his eyes as his gaze seemed to dance over her face, neck and shoulders. What was reassuring was the fact that he didn't touch her, and his eyes roamed over her with a look of speculation and appreciation rather than lecherousness. "You mean you you want to with me," she uttered surprised.

His eyebrow arched, and his lips stretched into a wicked smile. "I am a man, Hermione. We always *want* to. Besides, you have finally grown up from the insufferable child and intolerable adolescent into a young woman... But no, I will not force you." She gaped at him a moment, weighing what he said. "Tell me, what do you think we have in common, Miss Granger?"

His question startled her. She regarded him speculatively. "I don't know, sir. I don't confess to know you all that well." She shifted so that she could lie on her side and look at him better.

"Pity," he said, his expression curious. "I suppose you see me as all your friends do, as the greasy bat of the dungeons, the most feared and horrible professor of Hogwarts, then?"

"No, sir," she quickly replied, her eyes opening wide.

He cocked an eyebrow at her. "Really now, Miss Granger, don't lie..."

"I *never* said that about you!" she exclaimed, unintentionally interrupting him. He emitted a soft, angry growl. "Well, I admit that I may have admitted some trepidation about you, about how me... um, how you were in your classes. And I admit you were intimidating, especially when caught... ah, passing you in the corridors but well... You were frightening at times." He laughed softly at her admission. "Nevertheless, sir, I have *never* called you 'bat,' 'git,' or 'greasy' anything!"

"You expect me to believe that? I've heard your friends say it plenty of times," he sneered slightly.

"And I always well, mostly admonished them for that. It's disrespectful!" she exclaimed, looking up at him, then lowered her eyes from his intense scrutiny, focusing instead on the black hairs that curled on the creamy skin of his chest. As usual whenever she saw him undressed of late, she admired the tone of his body, the strong chest and arms, lithe legs and rippled abdomen. *The picture of perfect masculine strength.* Without realizing it, her eyes had traveled up to his shoulder and followed his arm down across his abdomen to where his hand rested on the bed between them. *It's amazing that he's as strong as he is. He can lift and carry me as if I weigh nothing... He's lithe, but lean muscled. Besides, I've never liked thick muscled guys. I've always preferred tall, athletically-toned runner's or swimmer's bodies like his.*

He reached out and gripped her jaw, making her look at him as his eyes stared at hers intently, but he made no comment. She forced herself to breathe slowly, meeting his intense stare, forcing herself to remain calm. After several long heartbeats, he asked, "Then how *do you* see me, Miss Granger?"

Oh, I hope he didn't just read that thought She was thankful for the pale, predawn light, hoping that he couldn't see her blush *I like and respect you... if only you'd let me.* "I have always thought you were intelligent brilliant at potions, and a strong capable wizard, knowledgeable, dedicated to your craft, liked and respected..."

"Really?" he asked contemptuously, interrupting her.

Her gaze flicked across his face. "By the other professors, yes, and by Dumbledore he respected and trusted you explicitly. Even the Order members respected you may not have trusted you as much but they respected you." She noticed his eyes narrow and knew that was not what he meant. "On occasion I was intimidated by you, angry and frustrated because you hated me for no apparent reason. I hated that you were so mean and unreasonable when I had a question. I hated how you would sneak up on us me. I always wondered why, if you hate kids, and loathe teaching, why would someone like you, who could do anything *anything* would choose to be a teacher."

"Hogwarts was where I needed to be, Miss Granger. After my trial the only place I could be." His silky drawl made Hermione look up at him again, right into his dark penetrating eyes. "But you are avoiding my question. What do you suppose we have in common?" he asked softly.

His dark eyes looked like fathomless pools in the pale light, and she wished that she could read him to know what he was thinking, but his face was a cool emotionless mask. "I know you're a brilliant intellect and that you like to read. I know that you like potions, the subtle science, and the precision and exact art of potion making... of creating something magical from the ingredients with your own hands... That would be two things we have in common, sir, reading and potions," she said softly. "I'm not so sure about likes and dislikes... interests, hobbies and such..." She paused to think. "I know that you like history, mysteries, herbology, astronomy, alchemy..."

The corner of his mouth curled up, neither a smile nor a sneer. "You are simply listing the sections of my library." His grip softened, and his thumb, ever so slowly, traced her jaw. With one finger he trailed a line down her throat, then traced her collarbone, pushing her hair from her skin, exposing her shoulder to his gaze. His gentle touch sent shivers through her, and her breathing became deeper and slower.

She could feel the whisper of his breath on her face, and if he'd move slightly toward her, he could kiss her... Her lip twitched nervously at the thought, wondering if he might, and she bit her lip, releasing it slowly. "I know that you read every book you could before you went to Hogwarts." His eyebrow rose and his lips tightened into a smirk. "Well, I suppose you did, because I was told that you went to school knowing a great deal of ah spells."

"You mean that I knew quite a bit about the Dark Arts and was well versed in curses," he said, the look in his eyes far away, as if recalling a memory. "Yes, you would have been told that from Black and Lupin. What else?" His eyes roamed slowly, looking at every inch of her the night-slip exposed, and she tried to focus on anything other than his scrutinizing stare.

She watched his face apprehensively, her heart pounding nervously in her chest, and tried to focus on his question. "I'm not sure, really. You and I have never shared personal confidences, and people don't really talk about you or your past much," she confessed. "This is the first time I've spent any time with you at all... that I've been alone with you. Every other time I spent with you was in a classroom or an Order meeting..." *The Order! He is in the Order. He mentioned my friends, Professor Lupin.* Which forced her to recollect Lupin's, Harry's and Ron's expressions of shocked disbelief and rage when she turned away from them in Knockturn Alley. *Oh, Circe! Harry Ron what they must be thinking... Would they know I was Imperiused? Snape had spoken his commands so softly... I don't know that they heard... if they could hear him... What if they didn't hear him... They must think I've turned against them,* she surmised. "I really need to contact my friends anyone in the Order... If I could just..."

Snape's eyes darkened and his demeanor suddenly changed to anger, and he rolled away from her. "No you cannot!" He walked around to her side of the bed. "I suggest you shower this morning. I don't have time to stand here as you bathe."

"Why can't I contact anyone?" she asked, although she knew the answer. "Unless it's to... unless... So am so I'm being held just to torture Harry then. *I hate this! Hate that he's keeping me here when he could just let me go.*" "Sir, I could always just..."

"You knew that already. Now get up. I need to get to work," he said, snapping at her in impatience.

Hermione scooted across the bed and walked past him into the loo. "You don't have to be doing this, you know," she said, keeping her back to the door. Hermione reached into the shower and turned on the water, intimidated that he was watching her and fearful that he would join her.

"Really?" he asked in a slow deliberate drawl. Hermione turned around to look at him, but Snape was leaning against the doorframe with his back to her, staring disinterestedly at the opposing wall. She could see his smirk in his reflection in the mirror. "And how, pray tell, do I explain to the Dark Lord that I simply *let you go*? Or should I blame it on Malfoy? Would you have me killed in exchange for your freedom, Miss Granger, or perhaps you'd prefer to cause Draco's death?" he said slowly and deliberately.

"Neither!" she said, aghast at his declaration. "I don't want either of you killed! I didn't mean he wouldn't would he?" she stammered and then felt his words hit her like a lump in her chest. "Of course he would..."

"Yes, he would. Like it or not, I will comply with what the Dark Lord wants in regards to us." He paused long enough for his words to sink in.

She didn't want to shower with him glaring at her. At least in the bathtub she could conceal some of herself under the bubbles. She started to protest, then closed her mouth at his stern expression.

"Well, get on with it, or do you want me to come in and assist you, Miss Granger?" he asked her in his deliberate drawl.

She closed her eyes and turned away from him for a moment as she pulled off the night-slip, embarrassed by his suggestion, silently praying he didn't mean it, and then turned back to respond to him, only to find the doorway empty.

Hermione hurried through her shower, turned off the water, wrung her hair and reached for the towel. Snape was leaning against doorway, staring absently into the bedroom holding his jar of Bruise Salve. "I thought that you had a choice," she said shakily, resuming their earlier conversation.

"And what, pray tell, gave you that idea?" he asked curiously, turning to look at her with a smirk as she quickly wrapped the towel around her.

Hermione tucked the corner of the towel securely to enable her to move her arms freely. Facing the mirror on shaky legs, she ran her brush through her hair, trying to suppress the implicit impact of his statements. The usual battle with her hair would have been distracting enough, but this morning she noticed that the brush slid easily through her locks, obviously much more manageable than they'd ever been before. "You *told* me it would be your choice... surely you don't want to..."

His cold sneer and soft humiliating laugh cut her off as effectively as if he had yelled at her. "Apparently you might have made a Plight Troth Spell of some kind, Miss Granger." Slowly, he looked at every inch of her the towel exposed, which thankfully only included her shoulders and legs thanks to the towel's width. Nevertheless, she tried to focus on anything other than his scrutinizing stare. "That could forcefully make the choice for me. Unfortunately, for you, the Dark Lord likes the idea of Potter's best friend and his trusted spy and loyal follower bound together. Finish primping, Miss Granger," he said coolly and turned to leave the loo. "I don't like to be kept waiting."

"But I didn't do anything of the sort," she said, stunned, but he had left. She set down her brush defiantly on the counter. *Augh, he's annoying!* "I'll be dragon burned before I marry you!" *Marry Snape? Oh, my, he we us married? He doesn't want this he doesn't want this! He'll find a way out for us. I just have to trust him that's all. It'll be fine*

Hermione followed him into the bedroom, and he took her arm firmly directing her back to the bed, holding a blue night-slip out to her. She pulled it on over her towel, easing her towel to her hips at an attempt at modesty. Her actions elicited a smile from him, making her slightly annoyed at him for standing there staring at her, watching her dress. "Lie down," he said simply.

"Couldn't I do that myself?" she asked, eyeing the jar in his hands as she sat down on the edge of the bed.

"No," he replied. "You have to say a nonverbal charm with the application in order for the salve to penetrate deep enough. Now, lie down."

Hermione swallowed hard and lay back on her elbows to let him treat her bruises. He pulled her night-slip up to her waist and tugged at her towel, exposing her abdomen and the hand-shaped bruise. The discoloration hadn't changed, and the pain from his ministrations was only slightly less painful than before. She rolled slightly to give him access to her thigh and then for her hip, grateful when he was done.

"Roll over," he demanded softly but firmly.

"What?"

"Your bottom, Miss Granger," he said firmly, exchanging jars. "The bruise needs one more treatment. Roll over."

Hermione swallowed and scooted up on the bed to lie on her stomach. Snape pulled the towel from her and pushed up her night-slip, exposing her backside. The cool sensation of the Bruise Paste was in stark contrast to the warmth of his hand as he rubbed the salve into her skin, covering each buttock cheek in slow, thorough motions. He stopped briefly before his hand continued down her right thigh, his fingers sweeping slowly along the inside of her thigh to her bum-crease and then repeating on her left thigh. She held her breath, forcing herself to remain still, fighting the urge to squirm as his fingers slid teasingly between her legs. When he set the jar on her bedside table, she scrambled from the bed quickly, and he nearly collided into her when he turned around.

The surprised look on his face vanished instantly, and his expression immediately transformed into his impassive mask. "Breakfast, I'm hungry," he said simply, taking her arm and pulling her from the room without bothering to let her grab her dressing gown or boots.

Down in the dining room, Draco's brief, cold appraisal before he returned to reading the letter in his hand only increased her sense of self-consciousness. "My mum wants to know if you can make her some more of her hair care products. She also wants Skin Toning Salve and Nail Hardening Elixir."

Snape sat down, leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed. "Then you will make them for her. I have other requests to produce."

Peren quickly passed out the plates, and Hermione noticed that the food on hers looked as if it'd been arranged with a bit more care than the men's plates, and she'd been given a few extra strawberries. Her shoulders were slightly cold as she ate; however, breakfast was far more bearable with only Snape and Draco present since both men rarely looked at her while they ate.

After breakfast, Snape led them into the room across the hall. Both chairs had been moved to the wall with a heavy wooden coffee table set in front of them, and the two steamers and two traveling trunks were now stacked against the opposite wall. The rug in the middle of the floor had been magically thickened as well. Several books lay on the coffee table. Snape told Hermione to sit with a demanding bark and thrust one of the books at her, telling her to read quietly. He then stood facing Draco, both with their wands drawn. "At Hogwarts you are taught how to defend against unfriendly spells. That is not enough. You must also on occasion reverse spells or heal yourself *quickly* or you'll be easily incapacitated. So today you will undo what I do to you."

Hermione looked up from her book, and Snape gave her a cold scowl, then turned back to face Draco. "*Langlock*," Snape said. Draco gurgled, pointing his wand at his mouth, and then flexed his jaw. Snape repeated spell until Draco managed to release the effect quickly enough for Snape's satisfaction. However, the counter spell had to be a nonverbal one since Hermione didn't hear him say anything but a few mumbles when he was unable to release his tongue.

Snape nodded. "*Impedimenta*," and Draco looked as if he were a slow motion shot on a television show. Hermione stifled a laugh, watching him over the top of her book as he struggled to release himself. Snape stood with his arms crossed, waiting with an impatient scowl. Draco was immediately hit with the same curse as soon as he could move properly. Severus hit him several times with the curse before Draco could reasonably reverse its effects.

"*Densaugeo*," Snape snapped, and Draco's eyes went large as his teeth began to enlarge grotesquely. Hermione looked up, remembering when Draco had used the same hex on her. Draco struggled to reverse the effect unsuccessfully, and Snape pointed his wand at Draco's mouth and said simply, "*Abhorre*," and his teeth shrunk back to normal, then repeated the hex.

Oh, so that's the counter spell... Hermione made sure to make a mental note of the spell, repeating it silently several times so as to never forget.

Draco's eyes watered as teeth engorged again, his eyes flashing in annoyance when Snape reversed the hex and Draco's teeth were back to normal. Even after several tries, Draco wasn't able to reverse that particular hex.

"*Levicorpus*," Snape snapped quickly, and Draco was immediately suspended in mid air, dangling by one leg.

"*Liberacorpus*," Draco said, falling onto the rug.

"Well, you have that one down at least. *Sectumsempra*," and a cut appeared on Draco's shoulder. Draco said an incantation that almost sounded as if he were singing, but the cut closed. "Go put some dittany poultice on that." Draco nodded and limped from the room.

Snape turned to Hermione, walking over to loom over her chair. "If I were to insist on a comprehensive essay on what you've read in that book, how disappointed would I be?"

Hermione grimaced and bit her lip, sagging in her chair a bit. "Probably quite disappointed actually, sir."

"How disappointing that you do not find my selections for you all that interesting," he said, looking down his nose at her, the tiniest tilt in the corner of his mouth belied the flicker of annoyance in his eyes. "You'll be reading that book most of the afternoon."

Draco returned and Snape used several curses and hexes, one at a time, giving Draco time to breathe between each one, after either Draco or Snape reversed the spell's effects. Hermione knew that these were more likely the spells that the other Death Eaters liked using in fights, more so than those usually used by Aurors and Order members, which were taught at Hogwarts.

Snape used *Erigere*, which held Draco immobilized securely upright as if against a wall, one curse that Hermione knew Lupin liked to use, and *Extremus Gelidus*, which obviously made Draco extremely cold, *Articularis Morbus*, made Draco's joints swell and immobile. Hermione memorized each counter curse, wishing she could write them down somewhere. Snape then used *Ilia Ducere*, which caused Draco to become broken-winded; however, this curse had a nonverbal counter spell so she didn't learn that one. Hermione knew that these spells came from Snape's old potions book and were spells he'd invented himself because she remembered reading them over Harry's shoulder in the common room.

She tried concentrating on the book in her lap, but was too distracted, repeatedly trying to watch Snape and Draco slyly over the edge of her book instead. She repeated each counter spell Draco said silently to herself, trying to memorize each one.

After lunch in the potions lab, Snape directed Hermione to sit in her chair again. He thrust the book she had been trying to read earlier at her, then disappeared into the storeroom to collect his ingredients.

Approximately three hours later, as Snape set his potion on the cooling rack, Draco grabbed his left arm with a loud hiss, and Snape made a sharp intake of breath, grimacing. Snape turned and walked over to Hermione's chair. "Miss Granger, come with me," he demanded sharply.

"I can stay and finish..." she protested as he pulled her roughly by the arm to get up.

"No, Draco and I have things to discuss before he goes that does not concern you," Snape retorted sharply. "Set a Stasis Charm on the potion and stay here one moment. I'll be right back," he said to Draco as he propelled her out of the lab and up to the bedroom. "You're staying here until I return," he said, nearly throwing her into the bedroom and left quickly.

Hermione sat on the bed, fuming at his rough treatment. She got up and paced, sitting back on the bed with her arms crossed *Sent to my room no, HIS room, like an errant child! How dare he...* It suddenly dawned on her that she was alone in the room. *Draco was summoned, I'm sure of it... But was Snape summoned, too? If so will he be gone minutes maybe or possibly for hours?* Reaching under the corner of the bed, she pulled out the Galleon. She held the coin tightly in her hand, focusing all her concentration on the Galleon. *If I could only make this say I'm fine* The coin lay quietly in her hand. *I'm fine...* she thought again. *I'm fine*. Nothing. She wanted to scream in frustration. *I'm not even remotely fine!* The Galleon vibrated again, but didn't change.

The day wore on slowly. Hermione tried for what seemed like ages to make the coin change and give Harry or Ron a message. The best she could do was to make the coin vibrate. Finally giving up, she began to pace the room, ending up at the bookcase. Four trophies stood as bookends on the shelves: Most Extraordinary Society of Potioneers Award of Excellence in 1976 and again in 1984, Tammerforth Society of Potion Mastery, Journeyman level Distinguished Excellence Award in Potions in 1983, and the Derwent National Society Award of Exceptional Merit in potions in 1987. Hermione wondered briefly what Snape had done to win these honors and for a fleeting moment considered asking him. *As if he would tell you* she chided herself.

She perused the titles, noting that among the expected Dark Arts and potion subjects there was a fair number of books on alchemy, herbology, arithmancy, mythology and magical creatures. Even more surprising were Yates, Emerson, Keats, Hemmingway, Shakespeare, and Aristotle as well as many Muggle classics and novels. She even recognized some of her own favorite authors as well as hardcover books by Jeffery Archer, David Eddings, Stephen King, John Grisham, Jane Austen and Stephen Koontz. She tried to touch the spine of one book, and a sharp stabbing pain ran up her arm and straight into her shoulder. Gasping, she decided which book she wanted and tried again, grasping for the book quickly. The pain radiated down her arm sharply to the base of her skull, but the thick book fell into her hands.

Hermione carried the book to the bed opening the cover to read: *The Rise of Darkness*, by Myles Stanridge, *Fastosus Opinio Praejudicata Defendo*. Every dark wizard or witch that rose to power seemed to be listed in the book's table of contents. The twenty-seventh chapter detailed the years of Myrddin Gaunt in 1925 through 1931. Chapter thirty covered the rise of Grindelwald in 1945 to his defeat. Chapter thirty-two to the end of the book was about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named from 1970 until he was 'defeated' by the Boy-Who-Lived. The book had been published four years after Lily and James Potter had been killed.

Hermione sat down, reading the accounting of Gellert Grindelwald and was surprised that the account of his rise and his years of power were recorded so differently from the books that she had read at Hogwarts. Likewise, Merwyn the Malicious was in the book, although by his real name, Merwyn Mordaunt. Hermione had been halfway through the accounting of his tale before she realized, surprised, that it was the same wizard, Merwyn the Malicious, who had invented all those nasty jinxes and curses during the early medieval years of Charlemagne. The book was written in a direct, straightforward narrative with a brutal honesty that stripped away any of the romantic notions of these wizards' lives. The events, actions and situations recorded in the book both appalled and intrigued her. She turned the page and read the entry on Mordrid Cravenweld, who rose to power during the beginning of the High Middle Ages. She knew that he had tried to organize the wizards of the Northern Europe to rebel against the religious and intellectual changes in England and Europe, including the organization of the papal monarchy, which he saw as a threat to all Wizardkind. She was, however, surprised to read just how successful he had become and how widespread his theories had penetrated before he had been captured, drawn and quartered.

Intrigued by the depiction that had varied so drastically from what she knew about Mordrid Cravenweld, she decided to see how the author would write about the Dark Lord. She had started reading about He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named when she heard Snape's footsteps at the door and barely had enough time to duck the book under her pillow.

He stopped just inside the room, looking at her. "Miss Granger, come here." She jumped up and walked over to him. "You're to go down to dinner," he said, pushing her through the door into the hall. She stared at the open doorway, confused. Snape pulled off his robe, discarding it for another, then disappeared deeper in to the bedroom. She turned and walked down to the kitchen to see Draco waiting for her at the foot of the stairs.

"It's dinnertime, Granger, or aren't you hungry?" he snarled at her.

She had no idea what had gotten his wand in a knot. Mutely, so as to avoid an argument over something stupid, she followed him, sitting in the chair across the table from him. Draco looked up as Peren set down their plates. "Don't stare at me," he snapped as he started to eat.

"I'm not," she replied, cutting off a bite of her steak.

After several bites, he looked up at her. "Then why are you looking at me?"

"Draco, I'm not looking at you. You're simply sitting across the table from me." She sipped on her water and picked up her fork, scooping up some peas.

"Look somewhere else," he snapped, picking up his goblet.

Hermione dropped her fork with a clatter, making some of her peas roll off her plate. "Are you mad at me because I was watching you and Professor Snape today? Is that what has your wand in a knot?"

His eyes snapped up to hers, and the normally light grey looked cold and stormy. "That had nothing to do with you." He continued to eat, keeping his head down to avoid looking at her.

"Then tell me what it is so that I can apologize and we can finish dinner peacefully," she said, looking at him as she ate another bite of her dinner.

He looked up at her and glared angrily. "I said, 'Stop staring at me.' Really, anyone would think you had a thing for me!"

"Oh, as if I'd hold any deep longing for a *git* like you," she retorted, flinging her fork to emphasize her words, accidentally flinging some mashed potatoes that, thankfully, missed him. She dug back into her potatoes and stuffed a lump of them in her mouth.

He pointed his knife in her direction. "As if you could be so lucky, Granger." He cut off a bite of his steak, eating it, and then pointed his knife at her again. "It's not like you haven't tried shagging the other two men in this house already. I suppose it's just a matter of time."

"How dare you!" she screeched, spitting a tiny bit of peas at him accidentally. She swallowed. "I have not slept with anyone in this house!"

He snorted in derision. "Now that's not true, is it?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and set her silverware down. "For your information I have not had sex with Professor Snape, and I most certainly did not have sex with Wormtail," she hissed at him furiously.

Draco looked smugly at her. "If you say so, Granger." He took another bit of his food, looking at her from under his lashes.

Hermione ate for a while, angry with him for being so smug. *He's right, of course, but only semantically. I'm only sleeping with Snape, but not sexually..* After dinner, eaten mostly in hostile silence, Draco stood up to leave. Hermione quickly dropped her fork and followed him.

"Look, I don't want to baby sit you, all right?" he snapped at the doorway to the sitting room. "You don't have to worry the Rat is still in his cage outside."

"I'm not to wander this house unattended without either you or Professor Snape, remember?" she stated firmly. "Besides, I can't get back into his room because of his wards so I'm stuck with you."

Draco bristled visibly. "Fine," he snapped and stomped off to the sitting room. "Sit quietly and read then, Granger," he snapped, grabbing a book randomly from the nearest shelf and sitting in his favorite chair.

Hermione perused the nearest bookshelf to select a book. "It's your fault that you have to 'baby sit' me, so don't go and get all twisted in a knot over it," she said over her shoulder.

"It isn't *my* fault," he sneered.

"Yes, it is," she stated, choosing a book on animal part transformation hexes.

"It's you and that Rat's fault," he snapped angrily.

"My fault! Are you you must be delusional," she said, turning around. "The Rat, oh, yes it's Wormtail's fault. He attacked me and *ang*you didn't do anything to stop him!"

"I *did* stop him!" Draco stood up, throwing his book into the chair. "I stopped him from pawing you and possibly raping you!"

"Only after I managed to get away from him and climbed my way up the stairs!" she spit back angrily. "Why didn't you come up and help me when Wormtail attacked me on the stairs? Why did you wait then? What took you so long?"

"I didn't know he was attacking you, all right?" Draco yelled back at her.

"Oh, yeah, that's rich," she snarled.

Draco took one step in her direction. "I heard some thumps and someone fall on the stairs; I thought it was the Rat. I heard some muffled cries, but I thought it was because the Rat hurt himself. Then I heard you scream. I got up to investigate and saw him going up the stairs, holding his crotch and staggering. I saw the blood *your* blood on the stairs *and* on the wall. When I got to the top of the stairs, I stunned him and threw him off you." He crossed his arms, glaring at her. "Then I carried you *intoy* room so he couldn't get to you and placed you on a cot. Then ran back down stairs to get potions to *heal* you," he recounted furiously. "I even brewed a Pain Potion and Blood-Replenishing Potion *for* you. I took *care* of you the best I could, you filthy little Mudblood. And you never even thanked me for it!"

Hermione recoiled, stunned, as Draco turned and stormed from the room. "Thank you," she said to his retreating back.

~o0o~

When Severus returned home late that night, he found Hermione curled up in a ball just outside his bedroom door under a small blanket. He cursed silently and looked over to the room Draco used and knew that the boy was in there. He knew that neither Peren nor Draco could have assisted Hermione through the wards of his room since only the house-elf could pass unharmed. He knelt down to wake Hermione and brushed some of her hair from her face. It was damp, and her cheeks looked like she had been crying, crying hard. *She isn't prone to crying fits or self-pity crying*. Her nose was slightly red, her lashes were wet and clumped, and her usually rosy pink lips looked darker and fuller. A handkerchief was balled up in her hand. *She's outside my door... Wormtail's still on the stoop so it's not him. Draco? What did Draco do? He couldn't see any physical signs of a fight. An argument then?*

He levitated her and carried her into the room, placing her on the bed. She stirred and whimpered without waking. He pulled the boots from her feet and covered her before readying himself for bed. As soon as Severus lay down, Hermione turned toward him in her sleep and muttered, "Thank you," then promptly relaxed into a deep sleep again. Curious, he propped up on his elbow and watched her for a while before lying down and falling asleep himself.

Author's note:

Latin translations for the spells I created:

Abhorrere = to shrink back from

Articularis = of the joints

Morbus = gout

Ilia ducere = to become broken-winded

Erigere = to set up, place upright, erect, raise

Extremus Gelidus = extreme cold

I haven't the words to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. Without her, I probably would have chucked it in the rubbish bin.

This is my response to the Potter_Place Summer 2007 Prompt #23. Hermione finds a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes that writes: 'Tell me your deepest desire.' Thinking it's a trick, she says, "I wish to see my soul mate?" and she suddenly finds herself at Severus' feet. The actual wording of the prompt was: Hermione finds a mysterious piece of self-writing parchment in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes that writes: Tell me your deepest desire. Thinking it's a trick, she says, "Take me to my soul mate?" and she suddenly finds herself at Severus' feet.

I changed Hermione's response to: I wish to see my soul mate. For reasons that are made clear later in the story.

The Rat Returns

Chapter 7 of 43

Severus returns home with bad news, in a bad temper, and in need of Hermione's help. Not only that, but there may be a bit more between them than either Severus or Hermione expected.

The warnings I have listed are for this chapter and are both implied and are also expressed. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.



~o0o~

Severus woke up again with an arm lying along his, her hand on his shoulder right next to her face, and one of her legs curled around his, yet again, with his penis stiff and erect. He'd had little sleep with Hermione tossing and moaning in her sleep, and he strongly considered making her take sleeping potions before bedtime each night. At least this time he hadn't been pushed to the edge of the bed.

Sighing, he shifted her arm off him and, with a nonverbal spell and a wave his hand, dislodged her leg, rolling Hermione onto her back. He noticed that she still managed to take up over half of the huge bed. *This is why I don't have women stay overnight* he reminded himself. *Why do they always require the entire bed?*

He sat up a bit and propped himself up on his elbow to look at her. *She's Potter's friend, Weasley's girl... one of Dumbledore's golden trio... touted by my ex-colleagues to be the brightest witch of her age. I'm the greasy git, the bat of the dungeons. I'm a Death Eater, a traitor, and a killer among many other things... surely she knows this...*

So, what could Miss Granger be thinking choosing me? Or has she chosen me at all? Was the choice really from a Plight-Pairing Charm or a Dark Arts Betrothal Spell?

His mind wandered back to his school years and the only other girl he'd ever considered marrying. LilyEver since Lily refused me for Potter threw US away, I've done things... in retaliation in anger the need to belong to be someone... Her death made me realize how far I'd fallen. Only Dumbledore said it wasn't too late for me redeem myself... and I killed him, too... The only wizard to truly accept and trust me and I was forced to kill him..." His eyes refocused on Hermione's face. And she knows I killed him although, not why. Yet, here she is in my bed...

Just as she did the morning before, Hermione stirred again, rolling toward him in her sleep, seeking him out unconsciously. The subtle unconscious act made her night-slip shift, exposing one breast, and his penis twitched, stiffening even more, which surprised as much as unsettled him. *Damn if I don't want to have sex with you* he thought as he looked at her. *I can just imagine your reaction if I even tried to seduce you. Nevertheless, that is exactly what the Dark Lord wants of me... to seduce you* in addition, his thoughts on that warred between his desire to have sex with the girl and the fact that she was his student. *Still will be when I return to Hogwarts. Although technically I will not be teaching her in classes, as Headmaster she will be my responsibility. Headmaster Dumbledore had been correct. 'With my demise, Severus, if the Dark Lord takes over the school, he will appoint the Carrows on the staff. I want you here, Severus, to protect the students anyway you can...'* The old fool knew, foresaw this. He'd be furious about this situation with Miss Granger.

So, now I have to seduce you He picked up an errant curl off Hermione's cheek, wrapping the strand around his finger *But can I make you interested in me? If that is what you wrote... 'Show me my heart's desire...' Since when? She never displayed any of those silly schoolgirl infatuations toward me. I witnessed plenty of that nonsense over the years. But her heart's desire me? Preposterous. Her soul mate possibly, that is destiny... I wonder if she had written the sentences separately would I still have been identified as her heart's desire, or am I simply her soul mate? The two are not necessarily exclusively conclusive.* He exhaled and softly snorted in derision. *Still she unconsciously rolls to me in her sleep... like a lover.* He looked up across the room, and his eyes settled on the window.

The curtains were parted again, although he was certain he had closed them last night. He stared in disbelief at the window exposed by the wide gap in the curtains. He was certain that she didn't get up in the middle of the night to open the bloody curtains, so apparently he hadn't closed them as he'd thought. Peren was under strict orders not to, so that ruled out the house-elf. Through the glass, he could discern the pale blush of peach in the sky that was already giving way to soft, pale blue. The sun would be just below the horizon somewhere off beyond the mill town just about to rise. He stared down at Hermione, watching her sleep, and his thoughts wandered.

This wasn't the first time this girl had affected him like this or this much. He had been very aware of her since her first year when she'd logically solved his potions barrier to the Philosopher's Stone and her second year when she'd brewed the Polyjuice Potion, and subsequently, she held his interest ever since. *The potion was brewed well enough, nearly perfectly except for the use of the cat hair. That had been amusing, although with the potion made so well, hardly difficult to correct. Her mistake could've been permanent if the potion hadn't been brewed correctly, or even fatal. Still... the cauldron of Polyjuice Potion in the girls' loo was perfect.* He'd actually felt the first stirrings of attraction the night of the Yule Ball when she'd had the audacity to ask him for a dance. *Rolanda had asked her partner, that Quidditch player Krum, for a dance, and as I'd been conversing with Rolanda at the time, she asked me. I'd acquiesced simply to see if she actually desired to dance with me or had asked simply out of politeness and I have to admit it was enjoyable making her blush the entire time.*

She hasn't even finished school yet! What he refused to admit then, dismissing even the vaguest notion of his attraction due to his status as her professor, was apparent ever since having the girl in his bed each night. She affected him, physically and mentally. He hated admitting it. *Damn. She's just a young woman only seventeen at best, and if I were still teaching my student. I can't believe I'm being forced into a relationship with a student seducing a student!*

Hermione moaned again, a deep-throated, sultry sound, and she turned her face up to his. *If I just leaned down, I could kiss her awake* he thought with a wry grin. *Now that would give her quite a shock, wouldn't it? Miss Know-It-All professors' pet, awoken by the evil Death Eater as he took advantage of her precarious predicament with a lover's kiss.* He gently laid the curl away from her face and couldn't help it as his gaze roamed down to her chest, watching it rise and fall with each breath she took. *And the Dark Lord expects me to bind her with a hand fasting... and I will be forced to have sex with her coerce her into having sex with me...* He forced his eyes back to her nose, noticing the faint dusting of freckles across the delicate skin. *Damn it all to Hades. I'll be cursed by every Order member if I force her into this binding and killed by the Dark Lord if I don't...*

Severus rose and saw the large cup of coffee sitting on his bedside table. He picked it up and carried it to his wardrobe to dress. *My potions will need attending to before breakfast. Might as well go down and get started...*

~o0o~

Hermione had woken up alone in Snape's bed, unsure of how she managed to get into the room without him. She rose, took a warm shower, and was greeted by Peren holding her black night-slip and a cup of breakfast tea. "Miss missed breakfast, so Peren brings it to you," she said with a big smile, indicating the fresh currant scones on a plate with fresh berries and bacon that had been placed on her bedside table.

"Thank you, that's thoughtful of you," she replied as she slipped into the night-slip.

Peren smiled and made a slight 'hum' in acknowledgement. Hermione sat down on her footstool to drink her tea and ate her berries and bacon as Peren brushed her hair.

Snape appeared, looking rather angry, just as Hermione picked up her book to sit in bed and read. "Aren't you up yet? You missed breakfast," he snapped. His gaze flicked from looking at her sitting in bed, to the scone still on her plate on the bedside table, back to her. "Or are you planning on getting crumbs in my bed? Get up," he demanded, taking her arm and pulling her with him from the room. "I can't be delayed too long at this stage of my potion, Miss Granger. You'll have to forgo eating until later."

The morning in the potions lab was trying for Hermione. Standing at the sink washing cauldrons, rinsing all the herbs, and scrubbing the roots for the potions was daunting, considering that she had to try avoiding getting the silky night-slip wet. Draco glared at her when he collected the ingredients, and Snape snapped at her several times when he wanted her to bring him his ingredients, his eyes roaming quickly over her each time she brought them over to him. Even self-conscious of her half-naked state, she could hardly believe either man was looking at her in any way other than contempt.

After lunch, Snape pulled Hermione to stand between them at the work counter again. Snape thrust a bundle of lamerium stems to shred and then handed her horse chestnut seeds to grind for him, all under his watchful stare. Draco handed her a jar of mud daubers to have her remove their thorax, and then he had her press the toxin from centipedes' glands. Just as the last potion ingredient was introduced into Snape's cauldron, he suddenly made a sharp intake of breath, his right hand automatically covering his left forearm. "Miss Granger, come with me," he demanded, pulling her roughly by the arm.

"I can stay and finish this," she protested, pointing to the nearly finished potion. "There is only one st..."

"The Dark Lord has summoned me, Miss Granger... So unless you're ready to see him, I suggest you do as I say! Draco can finish it," he retorted sharply, propelling her out of the lab and up to the bedroom. "You're staying here until I return," he said, nearly throwing her into the bedroom, grabbed his Death Eater's robe and mask, and then turned and left abruptly.

Hermione bristled at his rough treatment. She sat fuming on the bed until she realized that, once again, she was alone in the room and that Snape wasn't likely to return anytime soon. Reaching under the corner of the bed, she pulled out the Galleon. Still fuming hotly at his mistreatment, she held the coin tightly between her fingers, concentrating all her pent up anger and frustration while pointing at the Galleon. *If I could only make this say I'm fine. I'm fine... I'm fine* The coin in her fingers vibrated. *I'm fine...* The coin vibrated again. *I'm fine*, and the words 'I'm fine' appeared.

She stared at the coin in disbelief. *I did it! I really did it. Imperius, he used the Imperius.* The coin didn't change. Closing her eyes, she tried to focus on the coin in her hand, repeating, *He used the Imperius...* The coin vibrated. Frustrated and angry, she repeated her tries, able to make the coin vibrate, but not change *Dragon's flame it! I did it once...* Her hands shook with frustration. *Work, blast it work. He used the Imperius on me.* The coin vibrated again. *He used the Imperius on me,* she repeated firmly, and the words 'Imperius me' appeared. She held the coin on her palm staring at the words. *Anger, if I'm angry enough, or frustrated... Frightened, angry... and frustrated... or when they're scared that's when wizard children can do accidental magic! Maybe, if I can make myself angry and frustrated enough, I can do wandless magic.* She looked at the coin on her palm, hoping that someone saw it change *it vibrated several times. Harry and Ron still carry theirs, so does Neville and Luna... Fred and George have used theirs to send messages... occasionally. So has Ginny... Colin has used his to say 'hi' to Harry at least once a week... maybe, just maybe...*

Hermione tried several more times to make the coin change and give Harry or Ron a real message. The best she could do was to make the coin vibrate, and once she managed 'am hosta' and 'help,' but the effort was giving her a terrible headache. Finally giving up, she tucked the Galleon back under the mattress and lay back with her eyes closed to dispel the dull ache just behind her eyes. She moaned in frustration and got up to get a cold cloth from the loo. Hermione rummaged through the vials in the loo, hoping to find a Headache Potion and groaned again in frustration since she couldn't find any. "Got bloody well everything else," she murmured and was startled by the sudden appearance of Peren.

The little elf fell over backward on her bum when Hermione jumped. "Is Miss all right? Is Miss need something?" Peren asked, getting up quickly and looking up at Hermione, worried.

"I have a headache, Peren. That's all," Hermione said, trying to reassure the elf. "I'm sorry I startled you."

"No, no, Peren startle nice Miss," Peren said, holding up her hand. Hermione found a cloth, wet it and held it up to her eyes. "Is Miss eyes hurt, too?" Hermione nodded. She heard the elf's feet patter on the floor as Peren ran from the room. Minutes later Peren came running back into the bedroom, gingerly tossing an eye-pack in her hands, which she held up to Hermione. "My mistress gets eyes ache often. She likes this for strain and ache."

Hermione took the offered gift and held it up to her nose, inhaling the warm aroma of lavender and herbs. "It is lavender and eyebright, some other herbs, too. It is to help ache," Peren explained.

"Peren, thank you," Hermione said, smelling the warm eye-pack again.

Peren shook her head at her. "No, Miss. Pardon me saying, but you is to lay down and put it on your eyes."

Hermione smiled at Peren. "Oh, silly me, of course it is. What was I thinking?" she teased the petite elf as she lay down, setting the eye-pack on her face. The warm pack of herbs was soothing, relaxing and really lifted her spirits as well as cleared her head. She could feel Peren watching her. "Peren, thank you, this is wonderful." Peren made a happy sound just before the patter of her feet told Hermione that the elf had run out of the room again.

After a long while, Hermione rolled over and picked up *The Rise of Darkness, Fastosus Opinio Praejudicata Defenda*, by Myles Stanridge, off her bedside table. She placed the eye-pack on her forehead and temples so she could read.

She turned to a random chapter and began reading the accounting of Thorasin Keldar, who lived in the Dark Ages. Thorasin Keldar had been a half-blood wizard born in the medieval age. His father, Theridan Keldar, had accepted a dangerous quest to save a noble lord's daughter from her abductors. He saved the Muggle girl and then accepted her hand in marriage. When his son first exhibited magical abilities, the girl declared Theridan Keldar unnatural and a heretic to the church authorities. Thorasin Keldar had escaped persecution with his father to live like hermits in the northern region in a thatch hut where he developed a hatred for Muggles. Shortly after his sixteenth year, he gained followers but was quickly defeated.

She turned to another chapter and found another name, Brentan Reldgen, which she recognized from Professor Binns' classes. Likewise, the book stated that the father of Brentan Reldgen was a wizard of the thirteenth century, who had married a Muggle girl, whose family had turned them in as heretics and servants of Satan since all their children displayed magical abilities. Brentan Reldgen's father had faced the wrath of the Spanish Inquisition, managed to escape, but his mother and four siblings had been killed. Brentan Reldgen and his father turned toward the Dark Arts in order to defend themselves in case they were discovered and captured again. However, tired of the life he and his father had been forced into, Brentan Reldgen grew up into manhood spouting the pureblood mantra to any wizard who would listen. The fall of Brentan Reldgen and his followers was a brutal battle in the highland mountains with heavy losses on both sides.

By the time the eye-pack cooled, Peren was back with Hermione's dinner. Peren asked if Hermione wanted the eye-pack heated, which Hermione politely declined. Peren promised to heat the eye-pack anytime she wanted it and ran from the room.

After Peren brought her dinner, Hermione chose to read about two other familiar wizards, Evellette and Edvaurd Mandriver. Evellette was a Seer of sorts and moderately gifted. She predicted weather, winners of skirmishes, and made love potions and pairing troths. Her son, Edvaurd Mandriver's, account was somewhat similar to Brentan Reldgen's. Edvaurd Mandriver's father, Lord Mandriver, a Muggle, married Evellette, a beautiful young girl from a small shire on his land, whom he later discovered to be a witch. Evellette fled from her husband to protect her children, taking her son, Edvaurd, and her twin daughters, Edythe and Ethyl, into hiding. The powerful lord found Evellette and Edvaurd and tried to burn them at the stake, unsuccessfully. He locked Evellette with her twin daughters away in a turret of his tower keep and chained Edvaurd, at age thirteen, in his dungeon. Evellette bribed a guard and managed to free Edvaurd. During the escape, Evellette stayed at the gates to hold off the soldiers, allowing Edvaurd and the twin girls their freedom, but it cost Evellette her life. Later, one of Edvaurd's sisters was found, killed and quartered, making her twin go insane and kill herself.

Hermione set the book down to wipe a tear from her cheek as Peren came into the room to collect her dishes.

She was about to start reading about Myrddin Gaunt when the crash of glass and an explosion echoed from somewhere in the house. She quickly placed the book on the stack of books on her bedside table and waited. There was shouting and a loud thump, two loud crashes, and silence. Hermione sat on the edge of the bed, terrified, waiting, nearly holding her breath, straining to listen. She clenched her hands and counted the thumping she felt beating in her chest.

Silence.

Her mind began to race with possibilities: *Someone broke in... obviously. Death Eaters have broken into Snape's house... Someone has come to get me or Draco... The Order has found me... No, how could they? Unless Harry or Lupin maybe they... No, not likely. They don't know where I am I'm certain of that. Snape is back and has been attacked... In his own home? But surely someone attacked the house...*

A door slammed.

Followed by silence.

Another door slammed, and footsteps could be heard as someone ran up the stairs.

The door to Draco's room slammed closed, followed by the sound of another set of footsteps in the hall.

The door flung open with a bang, nearly tearing from the hinges.

Snape looked murderous when he entered the bedroom, struggling to peel out of his Death Eater's robes as he did so, and the expression on his face looked as if doing so was causing him great pain. He tossed the robe on the floor as he walked over to the wardrobe. With slow, obviously painful motions, he dexterously undid all the buttons on his coat and shirt, dropping the torn and bloody clothing into a pile on the floor. Hermione gasped when she saw an angry gash that cut across his chest and extended around his side to his back and the amount of blood on his pale skin. "Sir!"

"Not now, Miss Granger! I'm in no mood." He walked into the loo and turned on the shower. "Granger! Get in here now!" he yelled, when the water turned off. There was a loud thumping and some muffled words from the hall. "I told you to get in here." Timidly, Hermione approached the loo as two doors slammed in the upstairs floor of the house, one a few seconds after the other. "I think you should know that the *Rat* is back. However, he won't touch you again."

Hermione inhaled sharply. "Come here, I have need of you." She stepped up to him and he held out a jar. "Apply this." She nodded and removed the lid, exposing a foul-smelling, yellow ointment. Snape gave her a stick that resembled a tongue depressor with one end wrapped in cotton.

"Don't touch this to your skin. Apply this to the inside of the cut only," he directed her. He hissed at the first contact of the ointment but neither flinched nor moved as she administered the ointment carefully along the wound. As she applied the ointment along the gash, an acidic smoke wafted slightly from the contact. The skin along the cut immediately turned a dark red, and the flesh under the ointment paled to a whitish-grey. The ointment itself turned a milky, yellowish-white instantly. "Take my wand," he said when she finally set the jar down.

"Sir...?" she started to say and was cut off as he thrust the grip of his wand into her stomach.

"Take it." She wrapped her fingers around the grip and was surprised to feel the magical 'acceptance' of his wand. "Point the wand at the ointment do not touch it or the wound, and say, *Curationis Care Corporeum*," he said through clenched teeth. "Repeat the incantation, Miss Granger, *Curationis Care Corporeum*."

"*Curationis Care Corporeum*," she said.

"Good, now do it. And do not miss," he hissed. He held his fists level with his shoulder as Hermione aimed his wand at the wound. As she said the spell, his wand vibrated slightly and felt odd unfamiliar, but the wand emitted a sickly yellow stream of mist that turned the skin under the ointment a dark pink, and a milky white substance began to ooze out.

"Again," he said, "with more determination."

She tried again, and the mist spread across the cut, wrapped around his body and the ointment glowed and smoked.

"Don't break concentration," he said, his jaw clamped tight against the pain, and she strengthened her concentration. When the smoke cleared, an angry red welt was all that was left of the gash. He wrapped his fingers around his wand and removed it from her grasp. "Now take the salve in the other jar and smear it on me."

The salve was a familiar healing paste Madam Pomfrey used frequently at Hogwarts. After applying the salve, Hermione picked up a flannel and gingerly wiped the blood from his body. Snape stood calmly, his dark eyes watching her, his expression unreadable. He handed her a large roll of gauze, and she wrapped his torso, careful when she passed it around behind him, from one hand to the other, so that she didn't put any pressure on his newly healed wound. He reached out a hand, cupping her face gently, his dark eyes unreadable and his face expressionless. "Thank you," he said, and for a moment Hermione thought that he was about to kiss her. After several heartbeats, he dropped his hand and walked back to the bedroom.

Her mind raced as she washed her hands carefully. *He... Was he about to kiss me? He was close enough... The way he held my face... No, not Snape, his expression was so... controlled. There wasn't any desire or passion in his eyes or was there? He's so impossible to read. He would never... or would he?* When she reentered the bedroom, Snape was already in bed. Hermione climbed into the bed and lay down on her half. *Maybe he was considering kissing me?* After several minutes of silence, she turned her head to look at him. "Thank you for trusting me," she said softly to his profile. He didn't answer or open his eyes, but his nostril flared slightly and his jaw clenched. Giving up, she rolled onto her side. *Get a grip. He was simply thanking me. He doesn't like me that way. You're his hostage it's nothing more than that. I have to get a message to Harry and Ron or figure out my own way out of this.* She sighed heavily.

The next morning after her bath, Snape requested that she change his dressing again and apply more healing salve. She noticed that the applicator and foul-smelling ointment was gone. He also had her help him with his shirt, trousers and robe before he escorted her down to breakfast. Wormtail sat in his usual chair, looking smug, and Draco sat scowling over his hot porridge.

After breakfast, Snape ordered Draco and Hermione to follow him into the corridor and into the room next to the potions lab. Two large chairs sat opposite each other across the heavy wood coffee table on the rug, and two steamers and two traveling trunks were now stacked in the far corner. Snape indicated for Hermione to sit on the floor next to the coffee table while Draco reluctantly sat next to her in the chair, scowling. Hermione watched as Snape lowered himself into the chair and felt a stab of concern when he grimaced briefly in pain. Peren entered and set down parchment, ink well and quills on the table and left quickly. Snape sat in the other chair, his fingers laced together, and began lecturing on the difference between using reptile and mammal fluids in potions: urine, blood, bile, sweat, saliva and other secretions. Hermione quickly began taking notations. Snape's lesson was far more in depth than any of his Potions lessons at Hogwarts, and she tried to write down his every word.

By lunch she had pages. "Thank you, Granger," Draco said, collecting the sheets with a flick of his wand. "I appreciate the assistance."

"But..." she started to protest as Peren entered, carrying in sandwiches and soup.

"Yes, Miss Granger," Snape said coldly.

Hermione was instead trying to rise and get her pages back from Draco. "Hey, my notes I'd like them back!"

"Knock it off, you two!" Snape snapped. Hermione immediately turned back to him as he rose, trying to mask his pain, even though she could see it in his eyes. "Eat, and then both of you join me in the potions lab when you are through," he ordered, leaving. When she turned back to Draco, the pages were gone.

Draco gave her a smug stare as he ate. "And where would you have put them, Granger?" he asked and snickered. Hermione glared back at him with her back straight and refused to answer him.

"You don't get it, do you, Granger?" Draco sneered. "You haven't figured it out yet."

"Don't have what figured out exactly?" she asked, looking at her food as she sipped her soup.

"You don't have *privileges* here; I do. You are a prisoner; I'm not," he scoffed at her. "I live here because I want to. I'm his apprentice."

"Draco, I don't want to fight with you," Hermione said as she ate her sandwich with small, delicate bites.

"You are only here because the Dark Lord wanted Severus to heal you, and you're still here because he has plans to use you." Draco watched her, waiting for her answer.

She listened to him, still watching him silently while she ate, giving him the impression that she chose to ignore him.

"What, no witty retort, no sarcastic comments? How pathetic... Go on. You're dying to ask me, aren't you? About the Dark Lord what he's really like? About Dumbledore why I did it? Aren't you?"

She carefully schooled her expression into something neutral, choosing not to rise to his taunts, and simply finished her soup while Draco bristled angrily. "Fine," he said, getting up to leave. "Have it your way."

She waited until she heard his footsteps in the hallway. Setting down her spoon, she rose and made her way into the hall toward the potions lab. Before she passed by the kitchen doorway, Wormtail stepped out into the hall, blocking her and looking at her with an intense animosity. "You told him that I hurt you, didn't you?" he asked accusingly.

Hermione looked at him, stunned, trying to control the anger she felt toward him. "I actually couldn't say much of anything. My blood was on the stairs, and the physical condition I was in was probably proof enough for him to know that *something* happened. Besides, I was barely conscious when Professor Snape came home that night." She tried to walk past him, but he blocked her path.

"I only tried to help you," he said angrily. "You were bleeding." Hermione turned her head, looking away from him. "I thought that you liked me."

"*LIKED YOU!*" she raised her voice to nearly a scream. "Are you mad? You betrayed Harry's parents. You hid like a coward as Ron's pet keeping your friend in Azkaban, and you brought Voldemort back!" Hermione raged. "Not to mention that you nearly killed me!"

"You fell," he said defensively. "That wasn't my fault."

"Wormtail!" Snape yelled from the steps of the potions lab. "Leave her be. Miss Granger, come here." She walked toward Snape gratefully and ran down the stairs, not realizing that the wards had been lifted for her.

She quickly took her place between Draco and Snape and began to carefully peel the delicate skin off blood-tinctoria pods, then mashed the pods into pulp, releasing their blood red juice into a vial. Draco passed her soybeans, which she shucked and mashed, and then she stripped legs and outer skins off centipedes, squeezed the juices from leeches, sliced belladonna, larkspur, lantanium and digitalis roots, placing them on the worktable for him. Between ingredients, her eyes wandered to watch Snape shyly as he moved proficiently and efficiently between his two cauldrons, and as he prepared his own ingredients. More than once, she saw him scowl when he caught her staring at him or at his hands. Draco slammed a bowl of narcissus bulbs down in front of her to grate, barking at her to pay attention. She had just finished peeling and pressing the small pile of Hungarian toxin beetles when Peren announced dinner was ready.

Following dinner, Snape led Hermione up to the room to bathe. Left alone in the room, she tried to send a message to her friends with her Galleon, but was feeling far too happy at having been included in Snape's lessons and in the potion brewing, to dredge up enough anger or frustration to even get the coin to vibrate. She finally settled for reading the tales of Dark wizards in *The Rise of Darkness* until she felt sleepy. She was reading about Olfrid McTavish when Snape entered the room.

He looked at the book in her hands and then at her with a cock of his eyebrow. "I need my dressing changed," he said simply. She set the book down and followed him into the loo.

Snape moved stiffly as Hermione helped him remove his robe and shirt. When she turned to the sink to retrieve the healing salve, she saw his reflection in the mirror as he kicked his underpants aside, and she spun around in disbelief. "What are you doing?" she asked as he reached for her, realizing he had turned on the water in the shower. So far, every time she'd seen him naked, it had been by taking sly peeks at him in the dim light of the bedroom when he changed at night. She had come to admire his lithe, muscled form and the easy grace of his movements as she watched him. Nevertheless, here he was standing before her in the bright, candle-lit loo in all his *um... glory*.

He reached out and took hold of her wrist again, and Hermione lowered her eyes to avoid his stare, her gaze falling to the patch of dark hair that dusted his chest, along the scar lines that marred his strong chest. Her eyes traveled downward until she found herself staring at his perfectly toned abdomen, her gaze automatically traveling down the line of hair to his pubic hair... and stiffening penis. *Oh, Circe it's...*

Inhaling sharply, she quickly raised her head and saw his lips twitched into a smile, but the next instant he glared at her impatiently. "Do not just stand there gaping at me, Miss Granger," Snape said, his impatience making his tone sharp.

"But you're naked," she stammered.

"Very astute of you. You're going to assist me," he said, gripping her wrist hard. "I cannot bend easily, and I don't want my wound to reopen; so either you assist me of your own accord or I'll put you under the Imperius Curse. Either way you *will* assist me." He held his wand loosely in his fingers, the look in his eyes menacing.

"*What? You cannot be serious!*" she nearly screamed.

Snape yanked on her wrist, pulling her toward him. "I said that you're going to help me," he snarled.

"All right fine," she said, relenting angrily, following him into the shower but refusing to remove her night-slip.

Snape laughed softly as the water from the two showerheads soaked them. He handed her the washcloth and soap and stood facing her. "Well, get on with it." She lathered the cloth and looked at him, unsure as to where to begin. "Oh, for Merlin's sake, girl, this isn't hard. Just wash me," he snarled. Hermione placed the cloth on the uninjured half of his chest and began to wipe him down. Snape placed both hands on the wall on either side of her as she rubbed the soapy cloth across his shoulders and down each arm.

"Your wound do I... um, should I clean it as well?" she asked, intimidated, demurely pointing down at the space between them.

"Yes," he replied, his eyes narrowed. "Oh, just wash my legs and do that later. I do not want to stand here wasting water." Gingerly, she knelt down and began to wash his legs, first one and then the other, keeping her eyes carefully on his legs and not his groin, which was inches from her face. Snape turned around silently, leaning on the opposite wall. She re-lathered the cloth and then began wiping his buttocks and his back, trying desperately to be as impersonal about it as possible. "Bunch the cloth up and roll it across the wound. Do not rub or you will break it open again," he said over his shoulder.

She tried to do as he said, carefully dabbing at the healing laceration to wash the salve from his wound. He turned around as she worked her way to the front of his torso and chest. The healing flesh was still a dark pink, nearly red, and the skin around the wound was darkly bruised. He didn't flinch once. She paused to look at him, hoping that she was finished. "Give me that," he snarled and began to wash his groin. His penis stood out hard and firm as he washed himself. "Out."

Hermione stepped out and crossed to the sink, picking up the jar of healing salve and waited while he dried himself with his wand. "Sir, did you want me to...?" she started to ask, and he looked at her with an angry glare.

"Yes, I want you to. Was I in any way unclear, Miss Granger?" He handed her his wand again. "Contrary to what you may believe, you cannot perform healing charms on yourself thus, I need you to do it. The proper charm this time is, *Percurare Integrare*. Do you think you can manage that?" he asked with an edge of indignation.

"Yes, sir," she said, feeling affronted and trying to hide it. "I will try. Please repeat the spell so that I get the words correctly."

He smirked at her. "*Percurare Integrare*," he said slowly and deliberately, enunciating each syllable exactly.

She took a deep breath to push the anger she felt aside and tried the words. "*Percurare Integrare*."

"Very good, now do it," he said firmly.

Hermione braced herself, pointed the wand at his wounds and said the incantation. The wand shimmied slightly, but the spell worked. Some of the dark pink and most of the bruising had faded, and the wound looked thinner.

"Now, the salve if you would, please," he said through clenched teeth. She gently applied the salve, slightly rubbing it in as tenderly as she could. Snape handed her a fresh roll of gauze, and once again, Hermione wrapped the dressing around his body and secured the end.

"Stand still," Snape demanded, and he quickly dried the floor and then dried her off with his wand, looking at her with an amused smirk. He then placed his hands on her

arms, holding her body barely a hand span from his, his gaze deeply intent on her face.

She couldn't read his expression, but it was similar to the way he had looked at her last night. Hermione simply looked back at him, finding herself lost in his fathomless dark eyes.

"Now *kiss* me," he said in his rich, silky drawl.

"What?" she asked in complete disbelief. "Kiss you?"

"You heard me. I want you to kiss me," he said, still rolling each word sensually, his dark eyes boring into hers intently.

"You want to kiss me?" she squeaked, fighting back her sudden squeamishness.

"No, Miss Granger, I want *you* to kiss *me*." His eyes continued to stare intently into hers, locking her gaze, and she stared openly back at him as if in a trance.

Hermione continued to stare up at him, gobsmacked, still locked in his grip. She felt intimidated by his request *This must have something to do with taking his book without asking permission*, she reasoned. *A kiss is more favorable than being cursed, and I don't want to experience the Cruciatius Curse or any of the other possible curses he might know.* Gingerly, she rose up on her toes and kissed his cheek.

"No, Miss Granger, I said for you to kiss me," he said, rolling each word smoothly and deliberately. The thick timbre of his voice confused her, and although she bristled at his statement, she leaned up to kiss his lips with a simple chaste kiss, surprised to find them soft and accepting. A rumbling laugh emanated from him. "You call that a kiss?" he asked as he leaned down and placed his mouth to hers.

His kiss was firm, and Hermione moaned in surprise and angled her head, her lips sensually following his. He gripped her shoulders hard, locking her against him, and as she opened her mouth to protest, his tongue slipped inside her mouth and sought hers. Her hands had automatically landed on his skin when he'd pulled her to him, and her arms now encircled him, her hands sliding sensually over his backside. She admired the tone and strength of his body as her hands explored. She made small flicks of her tongue, trying to match his, unintentionally drawing more from him, urging him on. His kiss became demanding and hungry, seeking satisfaction from her, and she responded to him, melding into him with a slow growing desire of her own.

She could feel his penis poking her, feeling a tiny bit of wetness just under her navel. Her hands slid over the hard, lean muscle of his back and hips as the expert assault of his kiss befuddled her senses and erased her thoughts. His hands cupped her face, and she moaned as he shifted his head to the other side, his mouth teasing her lower lip. She reached up, pressing her lips more firmly to his, her mouth opening slightly, and his tongue slid seductively between her lips, sensually teasing her mouth. She tried to mimic him with her own tongue, and he sucked her tongue into his mouth, releasing it slowly as if releasing her.

Wanting the contact back, she stretched up to kiss him again, and he kissed her back hungrily. Neither Ron nor Viktor had ever kissed her with such a passionate hunger and desire, with both a seductive tenderness mixed with a fierce demanding need. Hermione's head spun as if dizzy or floating, her body grounded only by the hard frame of his body and secure feel of his arms. His hands seemed to caress and massage her as they moved over her body, and her arms tightened around him, oblivious to his wound as she tried to pull him to her. His arms tightened in response, pressing them tightly together, and then he suddenly released her, pushing her away from his embrace.

When he set her back firmly on her feet, Hermione nearly fell against the sink, her breathing heavy and hard, her heart pounding and her head spinning as if drugged or drunk.

She completely missed the momentary look of shock on his face before he schooled his features into his indifferent mask. "Come to bed," he said softly, pulling her with him toward the bedroom. Her body shivered with a slight chill from the loss of contact with his body.

Reluctantly, she climbed into bed, her amazement turning to anger and resentment at his indifference, completely stunned by her reaction to his kiss. He pushed her to his side of the bed and lay down, pulling her to lie against his uninjured side in the middle of the bed. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tight, letting his body heat engulf her. "Believe me or not, but this will help save your life." She wanted to tell him off, but he held her until her body relaxed in his arms. The last thing she remembered as she drifted off to sleep was the feel of his lips on her temple and the firm but gentle caress of his hand on her arm.

~o0o~

What in the bloody hell just happened? His mind reeled in confusion at what was supposed to be a simple kiss to determine if they could possibly have any chemistry between them. *Where had that passion come from? She kissed me back she responded with such abandon.* Still his own reaction confused him. His wound throbbled where her hands had rubbed against it, but his mind focused on the kiss, reenacting every moment. *She's been here too long... in my bed in my space... That's all it is nothing more. A normal male reaction to a girl when she throws herself at him, nothing more. A normal male reaction...* "Come to bed," he said to break the trance of the moment. She looked stunned, her breathing was still heavy and hard, she looked like she might swoon again, and she staggered as if she were drugged or drunk. It actually made him smile inwardly.

Hermione climbed into bed, and he watched her expression change from amazement to anger, resentment, and then disbelief as each emotion flash across her face *You still got it old man.* He pushed her over to lie on his uninjured side just in case she draped herself against him in her sleep and caused him more pain than her roaming hands had just done. He pulled her into his arms in the middle of the bed. "Believe me or not, but this will help save your life," he said softly against her temple and felt her stiffen, but she didn't say any dumb remark back. *Snake got the Gryffindor's tongue?* He finally felt her relax in his arms. *Good. Maybe tonight she won't have those damn nightmares.*

He turned his head toward her, pressing his lips next to her temple. *Maybe this won't be so bad after all.* Her reaction to his kiss had startled him. *She moaned when I stopped to tease her lip, and then when I released her, she stretched up and kissed me, wanting more. At least when I have to hand fast with her, it won't be a bloody rape. The look on her face when I released her... both times! Circe! What if this parchment if she has cast a Plight-Pairing Charm what will she be like if it is real and she does fall for me? What then?*

Author's note:

Latin translations for the spells I created:

Curationis Care = attention; esp. medical attention, healing, curing

Corporeum = of the body, bodily of flesh

Percurare = to cure, heal thoroughly

Integrare = to make whole, heal, refresh; to renew, begin afresh

I haven't the words to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. Without her, I probably would have chucked it in the rubbish bin.

The Pawn

Chapter 8 of 43

Severus informs Hermione that she's to be brought before the Dark Lord and begins trying to teach her how to protect her mind. However, he also begins using her the way the Dark Lord's requested.



~o0o~

The large room was once used for formal balls and parties. Now the Dark Lord used this room as his personal throne room. He sat in a chair set strategically across the large room next to the Floo, with Nagini coiled around a large stand at his side, when Severus entered, followed closely by Narcissa, who walked stoically behind him with the practiced grace of a woman used to looking calm and serene. They both knelt, Severus rising first, and he walked over to the Dark Lord and calmly produced the samples of his newest creations on the nearest table.

"And how does your apprentice fare, Severus?" the Dark Lord asked, turning the vial of pale, lime green poison in his hand, inspecting the iridescent liquid. The new poisons and potions that contained Nagini's venom and scales pleased the Dark Lord immensely. Severus had carefully pushed and locked away his memories of the antidotes he'd concocted to all the new potions deep into his subconscious.

Narcissa's eyes followed Severus in anticipation of his response as Severus stood before the Dark Lord. "He does well. He still progresses within my anticipated expectations," Severus stated. He heard Narcissa exhale and smiled inwardly. *If you only knew how much more talent Miss Granger has than your precious son... that all through her years at Hogwarts, Miss Granger exceeded Draco's skills in every task I set her perspicaciously. Exceeding my expectations and advancing faster than Draco ever has even now that he's under my personal tutelage. I know that her talent is far greater than his,* he sneered mentally, then controlled his thoughts in case the Dark Lord invaded his mind.

The Dark Lord nodded and smiled. "And these, which ones were made by Draco?" he asked. Narcissa's gaze fell to the vials on the table.

"Half," Severus replied. "The ones he brewed are labeled in his own hand." The Dark Lord rose and walked to Severus's left and set the vial on a small table with the others. Severus had brought; twenty-three potions in all, twelve presumably created by Draco. *And actually half of those were produced the more advanced ones with Miss Granger's assistance,* he silently added to himself. If he could have admitted the truth, he would have preferred to have her as his apprentice instead of Draco. Admonishing himself, Severus pushed any thoughts of Hermione from his mind.

Narcissa looked up at the Dark Lord, her usually cool eyes, pleading. "My lord, if he..."

"Silence," the Dark Lord interrupted her harshly. "I'll speak with you later."

"As you wish," she answered, bowing her head to hide her anguish.

You're lucky he didn't curse you Severus thought ruefully, watching her.

"And what of your little Muggle-born, Hermione Granger?" the Dark Lord asked, turning his attention back to Severus.

He didn't need to answer due to the familiar sensation of the tendril-like grip that reached into his mind. Severus pulled fragments of memories forward in a pre-considered, pre-selected pattern, showing his winning Hermione over to him: carrying the girl to his bedroom and placing her on his bed, them working together in his potions lab. He fabricated an image of sitting next to her on the couch in the sitting room, reading, then allowed an image of waking her with a gentle touch on her cheek and one of watching her as she bathed. There were several flashes of Hermione bathing, so he directed his thoughts to when Hermione was tending to his last wound. The Dark Lord found the memory of Hermione washing him in the shower, and Severus redirected his thoughts again to images of sleeping with her in his arms and finally the kiss...

"Very well, Severus. It seems that your little paramour is ready to be brought to me. You may rise, my friend."

"It will be as you wish, my Lord," he said with a carefully injected subtle hint of hesitation.

The effect had the anticipated reaction he'd intended. "You don't think she's ready, Severus?" the Dark Lord asked.

"She's a Gryffindor and still willful," he said simply. "While I believe that I'm gaining her trust she still has a great fear of you. She is after all a Muggle-born and was one of Dumbledore's pets. That and she believes that you intend to kill her..." *No wonder why... she'd expect to be ravaged, cursed or tortured again* "Or you'd allow her to be thrown to your followers again. The few times she's encountered Death Eaters collectively have been rather traumatic. The three that come quickly to mind were the Quidditch World cup, the Department of Mysteries and the glade."

The Dark Lord stood silently for several heartbeats then laughed. "Touché, Severus, you have a point. Still..." He walked past Severus and stood next to Nagini, watching the snake sleep. "I expect her to be difficult, to have preconceived notions about me. That is expected. However, perceptions can be changed, loyalties can be swayed... I will have to persuade her that I accept her alter her preconceived opinions. If not, then simply make it appear that she's converted come around to reason... I want to see her by the end of the week, Severus. I have plans for her," the Dark Lord stated. "Bring her before me."

~o0o~

Hermione sat at a desk Snape had transfigured out of the heavy oak coffee table in the room across from the dining room (Draco teasingly called the classroom) and down the hall from potions lab. She had thirteen books, either stacked with multiple page-markers or lying open to various pages on the desk as she scanned through them, scrutinizing each page of potion directions and ingredient lists for the answers to the questions she and Draco were to solve. Draco sat across from her with one book on

his lap, his feet perched on the corner of the desk. "I don't see anything in any of these," he complained. Four of the books sat next to Draco, ones he'd already searched through.

Several of the books contained potions that Hermione knew were on the Ministry's restricted list, and a few that Snape had allowed her to take contained Dark Arts potions. All the books were N.E.W.T. level or simply classified as advanced. She had been excited as Snape watched amusedly while she'd pulled down all the books she'd wanted to peruse for the questions. Secretly, she wished that she could give a few of the potions a try, just to see if she *could* brew them.

"He wouldn't have given us the question if there wasn't an answer," Hermione said as she turned the page in the book on her immediate right. She exchanged two books, checking again for potions with venom and toxins looking for mention of a lizard from the venom clade. The question specified 'beneficial potions,' so anything considered dark, wouldn't apply. "Here it is! Introduce the lizard venom the Mexican Beaded Lizard venom is listed in this potion to sustain glucose levels for diabetic patients." Flipping several more pages, she exclaimed, "Oh, and here it is again in this weight loss potion..." She switched books, and she turned the page and looked up excited. "Got it! The Gila Monster is listed in this Anti-Leg-Swelling potion."

"Gila Monster? Mexican Beaded...? Never heard of them," Draco sneered.

"They're large lizards, both from the territories of Northern Mexico and the southwestern United States..." she said as she made her notations on her parchment. "I saw them in the zoo once."

"Why do I care about a lizard that lives on the other side of the world?" Draco said disdainfully.

"Because with airplanes and ships we can get these lizards here," she said, writing down the references. She closed the last book, swapping it for another. "So that's six with Helminer's High-Blood Pressure Potion, Tugwood's Pimple Cream, Unernell's Anti-Inflammatory Salve, and these three potions for treatments related to diabetes," she said, touching her finger to three different books. Draco merely huffed. "So, have you listed ten potions that combine poisonous common garden botanicals in conjunction with cobra venoms for beneficial draughts?"

"Yes, Granger, I have all ten," Draco said with a smirk, and Hermione glared back at him. "What's next?"

"List and explain the interaction properties of the common botanicals when combined with both leech juices and snake venom as used in the eight potions he gave us... and you have that, right?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, and we got all fifty-three listed." He passed her his parchment and set the book down on the desk with a thud.

Hermione ignored the smirk on his face. "Indicate the active differences of runespoor venom when extracted from each of the three heads: the planner, dreamer, and critic and denote their properties when used in Mind-Altering Potions ..." she read aloud off her parchment. "We already got that one..." Hermione glanced at his list, then sat back and crossed her arms, grinning.

Draco unlaced his fingers from behind his head and sat up. "What?"

"We're done," she said, smiling. Draco reached over and grabbed her parchment to verify her statement as Hermione carefully closed and stacked the books to return them to the sitting room shelves. She picked up half and headed for the door. Sighing, Draco lifted five of the remaining books and followed her. "Oh, don't strain yourself," she chided him.

He scowled and retrieved the remaining two books. "So, now I suppose you want to read," he said sarcastically as he led the way into the sitting room.

Wormtail looked up from the chaise as she followed him into the room. "Um... not especially... I think I might go back and..."

"Give it a rest, Granger," Draco snapped as they started returning the books to the shelves. "Pick a book."

"You could stay here if you like," Wormtail said, his eyes riveted on Hermione. "I wouldn't mind..."

"Yeah, right, Rat. I believe Severus said quite clearly that you were not to be in the same room with her unless he was home. He's not home and I don't trust you. Pick a book, Granger. We'll go to the classroom, and you can ask me some more questions." She gave him a sharp glare and selected a thick book, *The Secret Arts of Charms*, and then pulled down *Ancient Wizardry of the Dark Ages*

"The Dark Lord said I was to help train you," Wormtail sniveled.

Draco rounded on him, his wand pointed at Wormtail lazily. "And what, pray tell, could I learn from you that Severus can't teach me?"

Hermione looked slyly at Draco to see if he was paying attention to which books she selected and took down an old looking tome, *Intrinsic and Inherent Power and Potential Magic*, and a thin untitled book next to it.

"Aren't you ready, or are you going to take half the shelf again?" he asked, holding his large Dark Arts tome and opening the hidden door. "Let's go back to the classroom, Granger, shall we?" Draco sneered sarcastically.

"Yes," she replied, turning to leave the room quickly, hoping the sneer was for Wormtail and not her. She nearly collided with Snape as she sprinted to the room next to the potions lab.

"Draco, your mother would like you to visit for the rest of the week," Snape said, easily side-stepping Hermione. Draco looked up suspiciously. "We're caught up on the potions requested by the Dark Lord, and I'm nearly done with my current requirements. However, if you don't wish to go, you can always select seventeen of the potions off the questions I gave you to fill in the time."

"Ah, no, sir, I just thought that... I'll go pack," Draco stammered and hurried up to his room.

"Peren," Snape called out, and the elf came running from the kitchen. "Take Miss Granger's books to our room." He turned to Hermione and looked at her thoughtfully, his gaze stern. "Follow me."

Hermione handed her books to Peren, whispering, "Thank you," and apprehensively followed Snape into the potions lab.

Once inside Snape loomed over her, staring down at her appraisingly. "For the next five days you will be brewing several potions with me. I expect your work to be of exemplary quality, or I will be displeased." He looked down at her curiously and crossed his arms as she smiled, then smirked when she tried to school her face back into something impassive.

"Yes, sir," she said, pursing her lips to keep the corners of her mouth from stretching into a smile.

His lip curled into a smirk as he watched her struggle to keep from showing her pleasure. "Go retrieve the potion cards Draco left on the desk yesterday. I'm sure he asked you to file them for him. Then set up six cauldrons. I will tell you which four we are doing this afternoon, and you will collect all the ingredients needed," he said gruffly. "I will allow you to ask relevant questions regarding steps, timing, ingredients, or the brewing process of these potions only. No questions about why or anything irrelevant. There will be no idyll chatter of any nature. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," she said eagerly and hurried to collect the potion directions to get started.

That afternoon, Severus sat at the desk and momentarily watched Hermione as she stirred the potion in front of her twenty times, then added a counter-clockwise stir. He silently counted fifteen seconds and watched as she lifted her arm at the precise moment that he ended his count. *Twenty turns one per second... counter-clockwise..* He counted off the seconds as he watched her. Her movements nearly coincided with his count. She made one clockwise stir before setting the long-handled spoon on the spoon rest. He bent back to the note he was writing.

She is well. She will face the Dark Lord at the end of the week. She will be unharmed. Northumberland occupied. Look within the Ministry heads. The law is not on your side.

He rose just after she made the third counter-clockwise turn with the long potions spoon, and he walked over to check the color, making no comment or indication to her at all. He turned, amused at her expectant expression, knowing that she anticipated some acknowledgement of her achievement. He smiled inwardly, made the slightest of nods and turned to leave, missing the slightly crestfallen look on her face when he simply left the room. *Acceptable actually more than acceptable... She exceeds Draco with each one. All my years of teaching has demonstrated one unequivocal, undeniable fact that just cannot be dismissed. Blood doesn't matter. Strength, intelligence, knowledge, skill that's what really matters. Some of the most inane, imbecilic, incompetent, and inept dunderheads came from pureblood families. Most recently Longbottom, Flint, Crabbe and Goyle, who are all prime examples, while Muggles produce witches like her and like Lily.... If they only knew if they only pulled their heads out of their collective arses...*

His dark-spotted eagle owl hooted softly as he entered his room. "I have a delivery for you. You know who. Don't be seen," he said softly to the owl. He pulled a chicken heart from his pocket and offered it, pleased with how delicately his owl ate the small gift. He tied the note to the offered foot and gently stroked the soft feathers. The owl hopped onto his arm and hooted in thanks as Severus carried him to the window. The window flew open with a flick of his hand, and his owl lifted from his arm and flew off. He stared out of the window, deep in thought. *She works tirelessly simply because I tell her to. I have only five days to recreate all the potions Draco and I have created in two weeks. Still, since she helped Draco with the first round, it will be easier advantageous the repetitive steps familiar...* He closed the window with a curl of his hand, absentmindedly turning, and his gaze fell on her side of his bed. *No, without having the distractions of Draco's other lessons, we should be able to accomplish this. Too bad Draco wasn't allowed to visit longer. The extra time would have been preferable...*

That night Severus escorted Hermione to his room as usual, but guided her across the room to the chair by the window. A fire danced in the grate and two glasses of amber liquid sat on a small table. "Sit," he said, indicating the chair, "and hold your tongue. I have something to tell you, and you are to listen." Hermione looked up at him, her warm, brown eyes full of trust. *Damn, just tell her she will have to come to terms about this quickly.* "I have been instructed to present you before the Dark Lord by the end of the week."

"But why?" Hermione asked at once, jumping from the chair, frightened. "He'll..."

"He will not. He will not let any harm befall you," Severus stated, taking hold of her shoulder and easily pushing her back into the chair. "The Dark Lord has plans to use you." His lips twitched as she stared up at him bewildered. "Come now, Miss Granger, *think*," he sneered at her lack of comprehension. "He feels that you are useful to him and wants to exploit that."

Her brows crinkled in confusion. Snape stood directly in front of her, looking down at her with his arms crossed. "Use me how? Besides information on Harry or on the Order which I don't really have what does he think I can tell him? Unless... he's using me to break Harry's concentration and focus, if he's worried for me... If he thinks I've switched sides on him he'd be really hurt."

"Very good, Miss Granger, the Dark Lord will probe your mind for information regarding Potter, yes, although I seriously doubt he'll question you about the Order," he said, staring fixedly at her. "I'm to persuade you to join us *him* alter your preconceived opinions." She squirmed in discomfort and shook her head, looking up at him imploringly, and he regretted the position he'd been thrust into with her. "If not, then I'm simply to make it appear that you've converted accepted me and came around to reason... implied perception..."

"No!" she exclaimed and stood abruptly again, and his hands automatically clasped her shoulders to keep from being knocked backwards as her body collided with his. "I'll never..."

He held her firmly. "Yes, Miss Granger, you most certainly will." He leaned down and kissed her, claiming her mouth possessively, silencing all her protests. She tried to push away from him, but he held her firmly, his tongue teasing her lips as he kissed her. *Come on, Hermione, give into me like before* She tried to pull away again, and he cupped the back of her head with one hand while the other wrapped around her back, pressing her into him. *No.* She struggled briefly in his grasp, her hands pressed against his chest, but she was definitely kissing him back. He smiled. *Yes.* Severus relaxed a fraction, allowing his kiss to be more passionate, moving his lips sensually across hers, sucking on her lower lip and releasing it slowly.

She stiffened, but her hands wandered slightly on his chest. Her mouth opened slightly, and he flicked his tongue on the edge of her front teeth and along her upper lip and then kissed her, sliding his lower lip against her upper lip before claiming her mouth again. She shivered, and the hand that crushed her to him relaxed, sliding down to her lower back as he cupped her head gently with the other. He now held her lower body pressed against his, his groin slightly higher than hers, but the effect was the same. She gasped as she felt his stiff penis pressing to her. He lightened his grip on her head, his fingers slowly sliding through her hair, although he didn't remove his hand altogether, and he felt her relax against him. He liked the feel of her hair between his fingers as he stroked the silky curls while he sensually teased her lips. Hermione moaned softly. *So, I'm not abhorrent to her after all...* He allowed himself to take pleasure in kissing her, teasing her with his tongue and lips. Slowly, he slid both of his hands to her arms and then stopped abruptly, dropping her back into the chair.

She fell back, her expression changing with her thoughts: first dazed, confusion warring with uncertainty, then becoming flustered, to angry, which quickly changed to indignant fury, and then her cheeks flushed with embarrassment, all under his watchful stare. His lips twitched in a slight smile as he watched her reactions and waited. *Just as I expected, blatantly expressive...*

"Your face is an open book, Miss Granger. You can barely control your expressions, so I seriously doubt that you'll be able control your mind against him. As to your second question, yes, Miss Granger, the Dark Lord still wants me to either hand fast with you or magically bind you to me. Do not forget your situation the one you put yourself into. You are now under *his* discretion. This means that the next time I'm summoned to him, as my consort, you *will* accompany me. Your mind will be probed by the second best Legilimens I know the first having been Dumbledore. Therefore, you will need to learn how to protect your mind," he said as he watched the emotions war across her face. "Do keep this in mind; how you act how you behave even what you say will determine *if* he lets you live."

Hermione visibly paled. "I can't I don't know how to do Occlumency," she stated, staring at him in disbelief. "Harry wasn't able to do it, and Professor Lupin and Mr. Moody didn't have the time...."

Severus exhaled in annoyance. "Hardly surprising. Potter was incompetent; Lupin has adequate skills with Legilimency, but hardly sufficiently skilled at Occlumency. Moody would have been your better bet." Hermione glared at him, then looked surprised, and then cringed slightly in reaction to how he'd assessed the talents of her friends. She's too open and trusting completely expressive... hardly promising. The Dark Lord won't need Legilimency he could simply read her expressions and body language.

"So, you are going to teach me Occlumency?" she asked, and her eyes widened in anticipation. "I mean I would like to learn how to..."

"Obviously," he said, his expression soft. "I just read your every thought just by watching your face." He looked at her thoughtfully and then amended his statement. "I seriously doubt your mind will be difficult to plunder."

She bristled visibly. "There are some memories that are private..."

"They won't be to me," he stated smugly. Her eyes narrowed contemplatively. "I'm going to use Legilimency on you. You are to try to mentally push me out of your mind or to push me away from what you don't want me to see. You do this the same way you tried to fight the Imperius Curse in Knockturn Alley. It's similar. However, you will be unable to do so." He watched her bristly visibly at his insult.

This will be interesting... He stared intently at her, catching her gaze. "*Legilimens*," he said softly and immediately had access to her thoughts. A jumble of memories flashed until he grasped onto one and saw himself standing over her in the bedroom and felt her fear of him, and then the memory changed to that of seeing him standing in the doorway of the loo, leaning against the doorframe as she bathed. Surprisingly, he felt not only her embarrassment and shame but also a sense of... anticipation. Obviously embarrassed, Hermione pulled a childhood memory of playing with a kitten in a front garden.

He let the memory drop, and he followed her memories, searching for ones about him and saw several of himself at the worktable in his potions lab as she stared at him with feelings of awe, curiosity, respect and wonder. He searched and found a memory of her waking up, curled next to him in bed, and the embarrassment she felt before she rolled away. She tried to push forward a remembrance of handing in her potion after class, but Severus pulled another memory of her waking up to see himself propped up on his arm watching her. He smiled inwardly as he found the memory of when he'd washed her hair and was amused at her dreamy desire to have his hands massage her entire body. *My, my... that's interesting*. Hermione tried several times to push that memory away and finally managed to shift the image to his ministrations of her bruises. Severus watched her version of his treatment and smirked, then chose another morning when he was watching her as she awoke and sensed her feeling of anticipation that he might lean down and kiss her. *Again promising...*

Hermione changed the image, and her memory from three nights previous when she sat next to him on the sofa in the sitting room came into focus. *She had felt safe and content almost happy. Interesting...* He found the image she'd created in her mind of the two of them in the bathtub, her body leaning against his, the romantic delusion of his hands caressing her skin, and Hermione again tried to control her thoughts, and another image of watching him at the worktable brewing potions came into focus. Her attention was again on him as she stirred her potion. *Infatuation, curiosity, respect...* he mused, reading the emotions associated with this memory. He broke contact. *So I intrigue her...*

"How dare you... How could you!" she began to protest loudly, obviously feeling violated when the contact broke.

"I suggest you try concentrating on something benign," he said, ignoring her protests altogether. "Maybe something about Potter? *Legilimens*," he said, quickly forcing the connection. He saw Hermione helping Harry learn the Summoning Charm, then Ginny Weasley brushing her hair as they talked about Ron and Harry. He could feel her bristle, even squirm. Severus focused on finding another memory of Potter and saw the trio sitting in the library at Grimmauld Place practicing hexes and jinxes against each other, which faded as Hermione switched it to being bitten by a doxy in the sitting room. Severus pushed again for memories of Potter and saw Potter sitting on a rock, crying and shouting, *'He was their friend and he betrayed them*. The scene fogged, and she changed it to a memory of the trio sitting in the Three Broomsticks drinking butterbeers. With an inward chuckle, he pushed and found an image of Potter giving directions on how to do the Stunning Hex to a bunch of students, which she changed to the trio in their common room, Harry losing at wizard chess to Ron Weasley while Hermione sat next to them reading. Severus smiled inwardly, pulled at the memory of Potter teaching again, and saw Potter once again teaching hexes in a large classroom, surrounded by other students. Severus felt Hermione push him back. She was ineffectual but managed to divert the image to one of shopping with her friends in Honeydukes Sweet shop.

Severus broke contact and crossed his arms, contemplating his assault on her memories. "Well, Miss Granger, it seems that you at least have a talent for directing your thoughts," he said, amused. "We will begin there."

She looked at him hopefully. "Will that be enough, if I just..."

Severus's lip curled up slightly. "No. Hardly. Nevertheless, it will amuse the Dark Lord make you a bit of a challenge. For the next five nights, we will strengthen your ability to refocus and redirect your thoughts, to trade one thought for another. For now that's all we can hope for unless you surprise me and prove to be a competent Occlumens. In time you may be able to put fragments of memories together to create false memories, but we shall focus on that at another time. You need to grasp the basics first." He watched as she considered his words. "Shall we try again? *Legilimens*," he said before she could resist.

~oOo~

Hermione sat crossed-legged on the floor carefully copying the symbols and runes on groups of vials and bottles in the box before her. She was just finishing the last label of bottles and vials that still sat on the floor by her foot. It had been a grueling five days, and Snape had kept them busy in his potions lab nearly every minute of it with the only exception of the last hour before bed when he instructed her in Occlumency and her evening bathing, although he'd used her bath time on three occasions for Occlumency lessons as well.

Done, Hermione carefully added the dark brown glass bottle to the box next to her, adjusting the packing material and picked up a red vial by her left foot. Another box, already full of various potions, antidotes, salves, draughts and elixirs sat ready to be padded and sealed for delivery. Two more boxes sat on the desk already packed and sealed, ready to go.

Oddly, those boxes held the same potions as the ones Hermione was labeling; only Snape had carefully written out those labels instead of using coded runes. Snape had snapped at her for asking about the use of the runes on the labels instead of clearly writing out the contents, curtly refusing to elaborate.

Still she knew which of the potions she was labeling were questionably legal at best, and she easily identified the potions that were illegal and which were definitely on the Ministry's Restricted-and-Controlled list. Several of the potions they'd made she knew were on the Ministry's contraband list and had not been in any book at Hogwarts that she knew of, and a few of the potions she knew could only found in the Restricted Section at school. However, there were also ones from Snape's personal library, and she doubted that the Ministry knew about them.

Snape stood at the sink ladling the final potion into small ceramic jars. "Miss Granger, are you finished yet?" he asked.

"I have twenty to do yet, Professor," she replied. She bit her lip as she checked his list to determine which symbols and runes to write on the label of the red vial.

He turned slowly, crossed his arms as he leaned against the sink, and watched her a moment. His posture was a little stiffer than usual, appearing to be contemplating something, and then seemed to come to a conclusion. "You shall address me as either master or sir while here in my home, considering our current arrangements," he said abruptly.

"Sir?" she asked, caught off guard by his statement. She looked up at him, not comprehending. "Pardon... I..."

"I am no longer your professor," Snape cut her off as he looked down at her with a bored expression, then turned and collected his potions. "It's inappropriate to continue with the appellation while you are here." He turned away from her before she could comment to put half of the jars in his own stock shelves and carried the remaining jars over to the boxes Hermione was filling. He checked several of her labels and then rose, giving her an incomprehensible stare. "You are going to accompany me today," he said nonchalantly. "I have an appointment at precisely eleven minutes after three today, and I cannot be one minute late."

"You want me to accompany you?" she asked, stunned. *I'm getting out! He's taking me of the house?*

"Yes, Miss Granger, you are accompanying me. I cannot leave you alone in the house," he stated, annoyed. He levitated the full box up onto the desk, adjusted the packing material, and sealed the box. "Stay here and finish. Do not touch or move anything if you do, I will know. I shall return in a moment."

Hermione kept her eyes focused on her task, her mind reeling over his sudden announcement. *Diagon Alley? More likely Knockturn Alley but still I might see friends or*

someone who knows me... If I could just make my Galleon work, I could send Harry and Ron notice.

Snape returned as she finished the last vial. "Stand up, Miss Granger. Put on your robe and cloak." He handed her the garments and thrust her boots at her. She dressed, slipped her feet out of Snape's work boots and into her soft leather ones, and then stood up expectantly. "Give me your arm," he demanded as he held the Blast-Ended Skrewt bracelet and necklace out to her. Hermione opened her mouth to protest, and he smirked at her, his face one of devilish humor. "Surely you didn't think I'd forget the jewelry I made especially for you?"

"But..." she said as he grabbed her wrist, and clamped on the bracelet.

"Yes?" he asked in a slow drawl next to her ear as he placed the necklace around her neck. He smirked as she stiffened at the silky tone of his voice and released her. "You will wear them whenever I take you from this house."

"But, sir... If I promise... If I give you my word," she said to his retreating back.

"No." Silently, he Levitated her second box to the desk, sealed it closed, and bound the two boxes with twine. He turned and held out a small blue vial. "Drink this," he demanded, and she looked at the vial speculatively. "Do not make me ask twice," he warned her softly.

She took the vial and sipped the potion apprehensively. Snape crossed his arms, waiting impatiently. Her mind seemed to instantly fog slightly. "W-what is did you, in this..." she tried to ask, but her thoughts seemed to mix incoherently.

He looked down at her and his eyebrow quirked up a notch. "Short term Befuddlement Draught, Miss Granger. Just enough to confuse you from what you will see and what you may think you are seeing. We are doing *his* business today," he stated, his lips curled slightly with a wicked sense of humor. "Take these," he demanded firmly, handing her two boxes. "Shall we go," he said, taking the boxes tied together. He guided her out into the back garden and grasped her arm.

They Apparated into a deserted alley between two very tall buildings, and Hermione hazarded a guess that they were possibly in London. A brown door suddenly materialized in the wall above of a short cement stairway, opening slowly, and an old wizard in lime green robes and brown cloak approached them quickly and stood next to Snape, looking at him appraisingly. He was nearly as tall as Snape with grey hair and a ruddy complexion. "Right on time. Knew you would be usually are. Bright out here isn't it? Got your owl of course. Couldn't believe you would write me but none the less here you are," he rambled quickly, looking at Snape undaunted.

"Here are the potions I wrote you about, Master Ogden. Directions are inside. No one is to know." Snape said respectfully, handing the two large boxes tied together to the Healer.

"Humphred. I've known you too long, son. Don't stand on formalities now," he corrected Snape. "Oh, hello," he said to Hermione absentmindedly and then turned back to Snape. "Does he know?" he asked with a quick flicker of apprehension on his face that immediately faded. "Course not. Wouldn't be here if he did. Pretty girl. Do I know her? No, I don't think so familiar though, but no. Too bad. Been really needing these how'd you know?" He looked at Hermione again and his brow wrinkled. "Is she your apprentice? No, too young. Pity. Some odd poisons being used lately should've known to ask you. You should you know, son take one on... but you've never wanted one, have you? Got some new fangled scales they want me to use, son... Hate them. Should give them to you but you like the old type, too, don't you, same as me... Maybe your girl would like them," he said as an afterthought, pointing to Hermione, then looked back up at Snape. "You were always so like me like brewing the hard ones, huh? And if I need more?" he asked, turning and walking away, the two large boxes floating before him. "I'll owl you. That's right Jingly knows how to find you. Thank you, son."

Snape watched the old Healer walk back to the brown door with a look of respect and admiration and smiled. His smile faded as he took Hermione's arm and looked intently into her soft brown eyes. The Befuddlement Potion still made her dazed and confused. She looked back at him in disbelief and incomprehension. "The boxes... We made he's a Healer? Those potions... he called you, son? You? The ones we made for are we in London? This isn't St Mungo's," she stammered incoherently. Her brain just didn't seem able to function. "You supplied... poisons, he said poisons? You gave poisons to St Mungo's?"

"An old friend... I gave him some potions, yes... and nothing more. Do you recognize him?" he asked, taking one of the boxes she carried from her.

Hermione looked at Snape, confusion mixed with utter respect. "No, sir. At least I don't think so should I have?"

"Good. He is, by the way, one of *us*," he said. He modified her memory, purposefully planting the vision of a handsome wizard with curly brown hair and intense brown eyes in her mind, standing in the alley near them, holding his Death Eater mask lazily in his hand. When her eyes widened in recognition of the Death Eater's image, he quickly took her arm and Disapparated the both of them away. They Apparated into Knockturn Alley in the same location he had taken her before.

Two wizards in black robes, who had been leaning against the wall of Slange and Drange, straightened, wands ready as Snape and Hermione appeared. The second Apparation seemed to help clear Hermione's mind, but only slightly, and she looked around and noted two other wizards in black robes that stood casually in the street only a few paces away. Both men looked familiar to her, although their faces were turned away, looking down the street.

"Abou' time, we've been waitin'," a wiry man with straight black hair and a lazy eye said gruffly. The other looked just like the Death Eater she vaguely remembered from the other alley a moment ago.

So, he was there and now here he followed us... but we Disapparated before he did, or I'd have heard his Apparation crack... But if he left after we did how did he get here before us... Her mind raced as she looked at the brown-haired man.

"Avery, Cillian," Snape addressed the men as they approached with a cordial nod. The other two wizards in the street merely glanced in Snape's direction with curt nods and then turned their heads. "We agreed to meet at a quarter after three. I believe I am punctual," Snape said amicably with an amused smile.

Cillian wolfed in laughter, and Snape cocked his eyebrow as a slight smile curled his lip. "Always the same, you ole' bat," Cillian said between laughs. "Well, let's get inside and get this job done."

Snape activated the Anti-Apparation Wards on Hermione's necklace. "Do behave yourself, my dear," he said coolly in his silky drawl. Avery stepped next to Hermione, and she nervously looked away, staring again at the wizards in the street. They both stayed where they were, making unobtrusive glances at the shoppers in the street with an intent alertness, belying their relaxed pose. One looked like Lestrage, but he kept his face averted from her as he watched the people pass.

Snape turned Hermione abruptly to proceed before him and walked confidently into Slange and Drange. Once inside, he immediately requested to see Ian Frastoter as Snape set his box on the counter and then turned to take the second box from Hermione. "He's not here," the shop assistant stated gruffly.

Snape just chuckled, condescendingly. "Try looking in the back," he said, his tone sharp. "I believe I have an appointment."

The man turned and disappeared behind a curtain. Moments later, Ian Frastoter walked up to the counter. "Master Snape, you have something for me?" he said, looking at the boxes expectantly.

"Everything you requested," Snape replied coolly.

The shopkeeper opened the boxes and began examining the contents carefully. "This isn't your writing.... Who'd you get these from?"

Severus watched the shopkeeper's inspection with a wicked twist of his lips and a strange glint in his eye. "After nearly twenty years and you still don't trust me?"

"This is your work?" Mr. Frastoter asked. Snape simply raised one eyebrow, his face a hard mask. "Of course it is same quality as usual." Snape silently nodded and glared at the shopkeeper, un-amused. "Okay, then.... Here you go," Mr. Frastoter said, undaunted, and set a pouch on the counter down which clinked heavy of coins. "Oh, and I got something to give you. Got a message yesterday saying I was to see you get this." He pulled out a long thick package and passed it to Snape.

Snape extracted several Galleons and handed them to Cillian, and then he put the package and pouch in his robes. "Thank you. If you require anything else, owl me," he said, taking Hermione's arm and turning to leave.

Back on the street, the three men stood waiting, talking amicably regarding the state of the Ministry and various occurrences in the country, many of them Muggle attacks. Severus held Hermione's hand firmly in the crook of his arm, giving her knuckles a painful roll whenever she tried to shift away from him. The two wizards Hermione had seen before they'd entered the shop turned to look in their direction briefly, but hadn't moved from their post. She stood quietly, listening to the three men talk, taking in every word. It was the first news of the Wizarding world she'd heard, and although she knew that their views were slanted, she hoped to hear some news of her friends, but little was said about anyone she knew well, and nothing was said about the Weasleys or Harry. Several people passed them, making furtive glances, but no one stopped or stared for too long, or they stepped aside to avoid the three men and witch in black hooded robes. Finally, Snape bid his comrades good-bye and pulled Hermione aside. "Time to go," he stated and Apparated them back to the house.

~o0o~

The Dark Lord wanted the girl seen, and Cillian had been eager to help him corral Hermione on his errand to Slange and Drange. But then Cillian was usually up for a possibly combative assignment. Truthfully, Cillian was one of the few that Severus called his friend, and he also knew Cillian regretted taking the mark just as he did; but as far as Severus knew, he was the only one who knew his friend's secret. He also knew that Cillian wasn't ready to turn either. *Pity, he would be an asset to the Order... Still, he's nearly open to the suggestion...*

Severus had checked Hermione's memories as soon as they'd arrived back to the house to see if and what Hermione had retained of his little side trip. He had been impressed. She had remembered quite a lot of the outing, but her memories from stop in the back alley next to St. Mungo's were sufficiently modified. *Even befuddled, the girl could still reason things out. This definitely poses a problem....* However, the image of Cillian standing in the alley was firmly planted in her memory. *If the Dark Lord does find this memory, I'll be able to claim she was confused, mistaken, or that it was merely a delivery to another Death Eater... Jaron Whitherspoon perhaps... blundering idiot can never remember anything correctly.*

~o0o~

Snape was restless at breakfast, nearly hexing Wormtail for his shameless glaring and blatant innuendos regarding Hermione's impending summons before the Dark Lord. Hermione's nauseated stomach and general nervousness became so acute she tried to dismiss herself from the table. Snape flatly refused, which made the Rat snicker. The two men stared each other down until Wormtail cowered. Draco was amused by the tension in the room and smiled smugly as he ate. Hermione wanted to wipe the smirk off his face as much as she wanted to hide in Snape's bedroom until the summons. Snape snapped at her each time she made the suggestion. Afterward, Snape sent Draco to the sitting room and took Hermione to the room across from the kitchen to continue the lessons to protect her mind. His attacks on her mind were strong and brutal in her opinion, but she was able to shift the memories more often under his attacks and probing, although she could not block him. When her head began to hurt, he simply gave her a Headache Potion, waited, and then tried again. By lunch her headache felt like a pounding migraine for which Snape gave her a stronger Headache Potion.

Following lunch, Snape insisted that Peren fix Hermione's hair into 'something suitable' and dress her in black robes. Peren had little to do. Hermione's usually bushy curls had been tamed lately into soft, silky curls that now fell past her shoulders. Peren typically used a clip or combs to pull her hair from her face, although today she merely brushed her hair and let it fall. Hermione now sat in the sitting room waiting nervously, trying to concentrate on the book in her lap. Snape was the vision of controlled calm as he sat writing at a small desk he'd transfigured from one of the tables. Draco looked up at her and smiled. "So, Granger, got any questions before you go?" he sneered.

Snape looked up, gave both of them a bored glance. "Draco, I warn you, knock it off," he snarled and went back to the parchments he was writing on.

Draco smiled seductively. "I just thought, this being her first summons and all, she might like to know what to expect."

"She shall find out soon enough," Snape said, impatience making his tone sharp. Hermione reread the paragraph again, still unable to concentrate on the words. Her mind raced with possible ways of avoiding the summons and inwardly moaned when she had to discount each one.

Draco just chuckled condescendingly. "Anxious, Granger? Apprehensive about meeting the greatest wizard of all? Someone who hates your very kind?"

"I told you to cease, Draco." Suddenly, Snape stood, his jaw clenched, his hands in fists, and he crossed the room. Hermione lowered her gaze back to her book, holding her breath, until she realized Snape was looming over her. She swallowed hard and looked up. He looked down at her curiously, almost sympathetically, and then schooled his face back into something impassive. "It's time, Miss Granger," he said in a soft drawl, but he was already smirking.

Hermione swallowed again to quell her fear and rose, setting the book down, and followed him from the room to the back door. Unconsciously, she fingered the Blast-Ended Skrewt necklace and tried to mentally brace herself.

"Drink this," Snape said in an almost kind tone, holding a plain vial out to her.

"I thought that I couldn't be under any spell or potion that would alter my mind..." she said, taking the vial with reservations.

Snape raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched. "A simple Calming Draught. I presume you are nervous and this will help you. I do expect you to do what I tell you to do without resistance, question or complaint. Your life depends on it," he said, his tone strict. She accepted the potion gratefully. "Ready to enter the snake's lair?"

Author's Notes:

I know that there doesn't seem like a lot going on here in this chapter, and I hope it's not boring. But this chapter transitions to a great deal of what will happen later and was necessary. Next chapter will clarify the consequences from Hermione's innocent use of the parchment.

I haven't the words to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. Without her, I probably would have chucked it in the rubbish bin.

The warnings I have listed are for this chapter and are both implied and are also expressed. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.

Realizations

Chapter 9 of 43

Severus brings Hermione to face the Dark Lord again and unwillingly becomes his tool. More disturbing, she discovers

what he plans for her and realizes that Snape has acquiesced. However, it's always those we fear that are the largest threat.



~o0o~

They Apparated on the front veranda of a large, stone country home. Immediately, Snape activated her necklace and bracelet. Walking up to the front door, magical wards sent sharp prickling and stabbing pains on Hermione's skin, and she felt a sense of dread. Snape grasped Hermione's hand as he held up his left arm and pain ceased. She curled her fingers tighter in his and looked up at him, wanting some sign of reassurance, and Snape gave her hand a slight squeeze.

A tall, thin man opened the door, coolly greeted Snape, his eyes quickly scanning over Hermione speculatively, and then returned to Snape as if to dismiss her as unimportant. Once in the foyer, he held up his hand, indicating a hallway to the right and ushering them down a long corridor that simply opened onto a series of rooms.

Hermione's eyes darted around as she tried to take in everything around her, feeling apprehensive and uncertain of what was about to happen. Snape silently disengaged Hermione's hand from his, taking her arm, to force her to continue walking. The man led them just past a large sitting room, in which several people were sitting around in small groups, and walked away. As they entered, several people looked up briefly, then resumed their conversations.

"Severus, how nice of you to join us," a saccharine female voice purred from behind them. "Too bad you didn't come alone." Hermione turned to see a long-limbed, curvy woman, nearly as tall as Snape, saunter up to him, completely ignoring her. Her dark brown hair offset striking turquoise-blue eyes that roamed over Snape hungrily.

Snape smiled with an expression that almost resembled humor, if his eyes hadn't narrowed slightly. "Belinda, as always a pleasure to see you. How's Horraine these days?" He placed Hermione's hand in the crook of his arm, still effectively tethering her to him, but giving the outward appearance of gentlemanly possession.

Belinda's eyes followed his move with a disapproving glare. "He is well. I suppose that this is your Mud Muggle-born, then? She's lovely." She looked at Hermione from head to toe disapprovingly, then turned back to Snape with unabashed sexual desire. "Not your usual taste, is she, love?"

"She's entertaining enough and not unpleasant to have. However, it's the desire of the Dark Lord and his decision in the matter that I acquiesce to," he answered with a measured drawl. Hermione resisted the urge to react, not wanting to give him the satisfaction that his remarks hurt. "I'm sorry to hear about your recent illness. Horraine must have been greatly disappointed that you lost another." Belinda's eyes narrowed and she stiffened.

Belinda was cut off from making retort as a house-elf walked up to them and attempted to attract Snape's attention the same time that Nagini slithered up to them. The elf quickly jumped out of the way as the huge snake rose to look at Snape and Hermione, motioning with her head with a hiss, and then turned to leave. The elf quickly scampered away to avoid being noticed by the huge snake. "Excuse us," he said smoothly. "We've been sent for." He turned and guided Hermione to follow the snake into the next room.

The Dark Lord stood waiting. Snape walked over to him and knelt down in supplication. Hermione stood frozen on the spot momentarily until Snape pulled her to her knees beside him. She felt the twinges of panic as the Dark Lord loomed over her. "Ah, Severus. You have brought your... paramour. Hermione Granger, how nice to see you again," he said with insouciance. "I do hope you don't mind if I call you Hermione?"

Even with the effects of the mild Calming Draught, she could only manage a simple nod. The Dark Lord's robes brushed her knees, and she felt his hand slide down her head and cup her face, gripping her chin to make her look at him.

"Please do not be afraid to speak to me, Hermione. I am most delighted to have you here." His red eyes gazed down at her in amusement. "I assume you have come on your own accord this time, Hermione? Willingly, not by coercion or magic?"

She was afraid, both of the power he exuded and what she knew of his reputation. Desperately, she wished that Snape had Imperiused her. "Yes," she said softly, and the Dark Lord's grip relaxed a fraction, and he lightened his touch, his thumb caressing her cheek.

"Calming Draught, I see. No matter, that's fine," he said with a note of disapproval. "Rise." Snape rose easily. The Dark Lord held his hand for Hermione, and cautiously, she accepted it, allowing him to assist her to her feet. "Seems you have nullified some of her fight, Severus. Or are you afraid of me, my dear?"

Hermione nodded, shivering slightly. "I, um, yes, a little," she managed, opting to tell him the truth.

He laughed softly at her admission. "You have every right to fear me, Hermione. All Muggle-born do. However, for now, you are safe I assure you." He cupped her face with his hand, almost like a lover, as he gazed down at her. She felt naked and vulnerable under his stare, too frightened to move or pull away. "Do you believe me, Hermione?"

Hermione swallowed, her eyes darted to the Dark Lord's face, then lowered to avoid staring at him. "I want to, yes... I think for now you mean that."

The Dark Lord laughed, a high-pitched, mirthless laugh that Hermione assumed was to set her at ease. "Then accept my word, Hermione, you will not be harmed. I wish to get to know you. I have heard so many things about you."

Hermione looked at him. "I'm sure you have, although I doubt they have been favorable."

Snape stiffened next to her, and for a moment she was certain that she'd said the wrong thing.

"Severus has said some remarkable things, as have some of your old classmates and a few of my followers," the Dark Lord said, and Hermione's eyes widened in surprise as she briefly glanced in Snape's direction, hoping that he'd acknowledge the claim. Snape looked at her, his face impassive. "Oh, yes, Hermione," he continued, "I've heard some remarkable, and, yes, favorable things about you, my dear. To truly meet you, *again*, is quite a pleasure. Although these are under more pleasant circumstances for you, I'm sure? To say that you have piqued my interest is an understatement."

Hermione knew that he was trying to sound reassuringly friendly; nevertheless his reference to their first encounter did nothing to reassure her. *He set his Death Eaters on me last time allowed them to... for their fun.* She tried to erase the memory from her mind.

His red eyes swept over Hermione's face. "I heard that you had an unfortunate incident? I trust that you are well?" he asked.

She mumbled a throaty, "Yes, sir. I am much better now, thank you."

He looked pleased. "I am very glad to hear that. I want to assure you that I have spoken to Peter in regards to the incident. He said it was simply an accident."

He's talking about Wormtail's attack! Not the one he allowed! Nagini slithered past Hermione's feet, causing her to inhale in alarm as she watched the huge snake pass and climb into the chair by the fire.

The Dark Lord's hand once again cupped her face, forcing her to look at him. "Now, my dear, tell me what I need to know." His thumb caressed her jaw as he tilted her face to look him fully in the eye. She tried to keep her eyes down, away from looking into his red ones, and the Dark Lord chuckled. "Still willful, no matter. *Legilimens*," he said.

The Dark Lord immediately pulled memories of Harry from her mind: Harry's potion exploding in the potion room at Grimmauld Place, Harry and Ron practicing spells in a bedroom, playing chess in the library while Hermione sat reading, or flying in a game of pick up Quidditch as Hermione sat under an oak reading. Several images from school passed in succession, all of when she'd helped Harry practice both Charms and Transfiguration Spells. When the image of Harry reading a map came into focus, she switched the memory to when they'd been shopping in Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes.

The Dark Lord laughed, a cold maniacal laugh. "Don't bother, girl. I'll see what I want to find." The image of Harry's potion in Snape's classroom turning a mucky grey instead of a warm brown flashed in her mind, and Hermione changed the memory to a Care of Magical Creatures class when he'd impressed Buckbeak. Several memories of the D.A. meetings flashed in succession, but she tried to focus on Harry flying for the Gryffindor Quidditch team instead. He chuckled again and redirected her memory to watch Harry try unsuccessfully to Transfigure a teacup, fail to change his match into a needle, Switching a tortoise into a handbag, a piece of wood into a vase, or a potato into a shoe.

Hermione tried to focus on the last Halloween dinner in the Great Hall, but the Dark Lord directed her thoughts back to the Potions classroom and Harry's potion sputtering when it was supposed to froth. She tried to redirect the image, but Harry's failed attempt at making an antidote came into view. Hermione groaned when the Dark Lord pulled the memories of Harry struggling to learn Repelling, Summoning, Freezing, Banishing and Substantive Charms in class. Hermione quickly changed the memory again, recalling how Harry outflew the Hungarian Horntail. He snorted in derision, slipping out of her mind. When the contact broke, he was smiling.

She looked at the Dark Lord in confusion as she steadied herself, wondering why he'd wanted to see those images instead of the ones where Harry had fought his Death Eaters, how he'd handled the challenges in the Triwizard Tournament, or had stood up to him. *He wasn't even interested in Harry's instruction of the D.A.*

"Now, my dear, you will answer another question I have. *Legilimens*." Instantly, the image of the parchment appeared in her mind. Hermione tried to direct her memory to something else in the shop, and for a while the Dark Lord allowed her to recall the day in the shop until the bin under which she had found the parchment came into focus. She could feel the Dark Lord's curiosity mix with her own feelings as she reached down to pick up the parchment. Hermione tried to refocus her thoughts, but the Dark Lord replayed the moment Hermione's fingers touched the vellum sheet. A fleeting, faint glow emanated from the parchment, then vanished so quickly that Hermione had missed seeing that the day she'd found it. Unnerved, Hermione tried to pull her mind away, to push the Dark Lord from her thoughts.

She felt a slight slip and for a second thought that she'd managed to break the contact; however, the Dark Lord merely pulled the image back to the animal vellum, probing her mind to find another memory of the parchment. The image of the parchment in her hands while she examined it came into view. Hermione again tried to avert her memory, choosing the day with nifflers in class, but the image changed quickly back to her examination the parchment in the library in Grimmauld Place. She tried to direct her memory again, and the Dark Lord laughed. The image of the transferred watermark and then the pearly black lettering came into focus, *Make a wish, ask a question I'll show your fate, I'll tell you no lies.* He held her memory fast as she wrote, *What should I ask for?* The pearly black ink disappeared, then reappeared and scrolled into, *Tell me your deepest desire. Three times I will comply if brave you be, to face what you'll see.* Once again Hermione tried to redirect her memory, and a sharp pain made her recoil slightly, and she recalled laughing and saying, "All right, then." As if in a Pensieve, she remembered thinking it was simply a trick sheet of parchment and wrote, *Who is my heart's desire? I wish to see my soul mate.* The ink glowed for a fraction of a second, then blended into the parchment. Her memories blurred and spun and darkened. Suddenly, she was at Snape's feet, and he was looming over her threateningly, his cold eyes glaring at her with surprise, then anger.

Slowly, Hermione felt her mind being released, and the face of the Dark Lord was in front of her at arms' length, still gripping her chin and scrutinizing her thoughtfully. He narrowed his eyes slightly, and slowly, he straightened, moving away from her. She could feel the curiosity radiating off of him, and fear sliced through her again. "Well, that does explain a bit. I assume you have delved into her mind, Severus, and seen her memories of the parchment?"

"Yes, my Lord, I have," Snape replied. Hermione bristled slightly at his admission.

"Do you recognize this artifact or have you tried to procure it?" The Dark Lord beckoned someone into the room, and Hermione stiffened, but refused to turn around to see whom it was.

"Neither, my Lord," Snape answered. "I believe it to be in the possession of Harry Potter or the youngest Weasley boy." The subtle clack of heels echoed off the floor as he spoke.

The Dark Lord turned to face her. "Hermione, where is this parchment now?" he asked, and Hermione wanted to cower from his intense stare. "Answer me, Hermione," he demanded firmly yet softly.

She knew from what Harry had told her about him that she shouldn't refuse to answer him or anger him, but she couldn't tell him what he wanted to know. "I don't know, sir. It could still be at, ah the, um... the library, or I could have dropped it. When I awoke at Professor Snape's, I didn't have it any longer. I don't think it came with me when I landed in the grove, and I don't remember dropping it either."

"I see," he said, staring at Hermione intently. "No matter." His red eyes watched her face and then turned to the woman standing behind them. "Belinda, take Hermione to the sitting room to wait for Severus. She is here as my guest. See to it that she is not accosted by anyone," the Dark Lord commanded as he stroked Nagini's head with a long finger.

"As you wish, my Lord," Belinda answered, while making a deep curtsy, and then she rose gracefully. "Come, Hermione, let's let get acquainted, shall we?"

Hermione looked imploringly at Snape, fearful to leave his side. Snape made no move or no indication toward her at all. Memories of what she could remember of the encounter in the glade flashed in her mind. The Dark Lord smiled. "You do not need your protector here, Hermione," he said, clearly amused by her unease. "Not while you are in this house." Numbly, her head aching, she nodded and turned to leave the room, both glad to be able to leave the Dark Lord's presence and intimidated to be escorted around a house full of Death Eaters without Snape.

Belinda took Hermione's hand, and she instantly withdrew it. "Come, let the men talk. We'll have a nice cup of tea, shall we?" Hermione left with her reluctantly, trying to assess the house, to find any way of escape, while pretending to check out at each painting, window and room they passed. "Adorable house, is it not?" Belinda asked. "Old style, been in the family for ages. Mum wasn't too keen at first to give it over for the Dark Lord to use, but we've convinced them to come around. Oh, Narcissa, how lovely to see you here," she said as they entered a pink and tan sitting room. Narcissa looked up at Belinda and smiled, the smile fading slightly when her eyes fell on Hermione. "So... you know Severus's intended?"

"We are acquainted," Narcissa replied coolly. "She is, after all, a schoolmate of my son's." A house-elf appeared carrying a large tray with a silver tea service and three delicate china cups. The elf set the tray down and poured the tea, fixing first Narcissa's cup, then Belinda's.

The elf stood waiting for Hermione to say how she liked hers served. "One sugar please," she said. The elf handed her the cup and ran from the room quickly.

"So, how did you land Severus?" Belinda asked, eager for the gossip.

"Pardon me?" Hermione asked, scalding her tongue on the hot tea.

"Severus. You're to be married I'm told. How did you manage to snag him?" she persisted.

"I'm to what?" she asked, thinking that Belinda was misinformed. *The Dark Lord had called me his paramour; Snape said I was his consort... He mentioned a hand fasting... but that doesn't mean marriage!*

"Yes, you're to be married in a magically bonded hand fasting with Severus, my dear, surely you know?" Belinda asked, confused. "Narcissa was just telling me of the arrangements. Sounds lovely. So, how did you ensnare him? Others have tried, unsuccessfully, you know. The confirmed bachelor."

"It was the Dark Lord's desire, I assure you," Narcissa said coolly. "Why else would Severus lower himself so?"

"Really? That's not what I've heard," Belinda stated, looking at Narcissa, amused, and then turned back to Hermione, her eyes alight with curiosity. "I heard that you made a Pairing-Plight Troth or a Betrothing Charm to identify a suitable match, and the charm identified Severus." Her wide smile was apparently meant to appear warm and friendly, although it didn't quite reach her eyes. "Apparently, the Dark Lord consented and he accepted the match."

"I did no such thing," Hermione protested. "That's not how it happened at all!"

Belinda sat up straighter in her chair, looking from Hermione to Narcissa. "Horrance said that Severus brought her with him when they were all summoned before the July attacks to introduce her to the Dark Lord. He said that she wore a recruiter's mask and robes and that Severus... that he requested her and confirmed the plight," she said to Narcissa.

"That is how Lucius told me it happened," Narcissa said, her eyes narrowed over the rim of her cup, watching both women with an indifferent expression. "You used a magical object, didn't you, Miss Granger, to arrange a matrimonial contract, and the object declared Severus to be your match your soul mate so to speak? At the very least, they were declared magically suited. So, now my dear you are *engaged* to be *married* to Severus Snape."

"No, he we can't be... He doesn't we're not in love!" Hermione stared at the women. *They are absolutely convinced that Snape will go through with this!* "We're not engaged he hasn't even proposed to me."

Narcissa let out a cold, haughty laugh. "Yes, you are," she stated in cold amusement. "Among pureblood families, arranged unions are common, my dear. Besides, the Dark Lord likes the idea of Potter's closest friend *married in a magically bonded union* with his trusted and loyal follower." Her eyes shifted to Belinda. "She was given to Severus, Belinda, as a gift." She watched Hermione blanch, then looked back at Belinda. "Draco's told me she's become quite trusting and docile to Severus's desires."

Hermione was incensed at Narcissa's innuendo. "I have not he has not..."

"You haven't? Why ever not?" Belinda replied, clearly not believing her. "He's quite... masterful in bed, very attentive and considerate, I assure you," she practically purred. "You are quite lucky. He's a talented one, Severus."

"He didn't ask for me he doesn't want me," Hermione tried to persuade the witch.

"That is apparently irrelevant," Narcissa said haughtily. "Your Charm apparently constitutes a magical promise or bind that created your solemn pledge, specifically to betroth. This arrangement serves the Dark Lord's purpose. He gave you to Severus as a gift. Not that he wants you obviously, but he has accepted you. All the arrangements have already been made. We are just waiting for Severus to select a date. I believe that is what is being decided right now, this evening."

"But don't I have to agree," Hermione stammered. "You cannot be bonded in a hand fasting without... consent?"

"Yes, my dear, you can," Narcissa said with a haughty laugh. "Let me explain this to you, Mudblood. As a Muggle-born, I'm not surprised that you don't know this. With certain arrangements, the use of certain *spells*, the pairing is magically selected, sealed within your magical core, and the betrothal is made even without consent." She sipped her tea, watching Hermione over the rim of her cup. "Contracts are then drafted, dowries exchanged and arrangements made. Although with you, there was little concern over these matters, so the contract is quite simple. Only death, dishonor or you being barren can break the betrothal, and that is only after a full year of marriage. I'm certain Severus can effectively *seal* the bond. He's helped a few of us before."

"But you still have to say, 'I do,' during the ceremony to consent," Hermione argued. "I was at a hand fasting..."

"You already *have* consented, my dear," Narcissa said as if explaining to a child. "The consent is *in* the spell itself. And since you were the one to cast the Pairing-Plight Charm, you've already, by your own actions *given consent*. So the only one who needs to acquiesce their consent would be Severus and he's already done that in front of witnesses."

"And I assure you my dear, Severus *did* ask for you. My brother, Cillian, and my husband, Horrance, were both present when he accepted the arrangement." Hermione stared at Belinda, her cup tittering in her hand. "Oh, don't be silly, girl. Haven't you been living with the man? Surely, you know that he is the most skilled of lovers? I almost envy you."

Narcissa snorted. "Lucius said you were quite amenable and pliant in his hands the night you cast the Soul-Matching and Pairing-Plight Spells to claim your match. He said you were rather acquiescent to his wishes then." Hermione bristled under Narcissa's stare, knowing somehow she meant Lucius's hands not Severus's. "Why else would Severus have taken you into his home and into his bed? Surely, you are submitting to this arrangement, are you not? Just as all of us of purebloods in magically prearranged matches do."

"And you get Severus," Belinda piped in. "Those enchantments can go so incredibly awry. You are lucky that your soul mate, your blood-match is someone like Severus. You could've been matched far worse."

~oOo~

"Married in a hand fasting to you! They were saying that we are to be married not just hand fasted with a Bonding Spell! How could you?" Hermione was fuming when they arrived back at Snape's house. Actually, she was scared; the entrapment she was in was spiraling around her, and she had been left mostly in the dark as its web engulfed her. As soon as they had Disapparated into the back garden, she'd tried to release his grip on her arm by yanking it away. "How could you let them? When were *YOU* going to tell me? They simply cannot be serious I won't consent I cannot you cannot... I don't believe this... You cannot possibly agree with her..."

"Control your tongue," Snape snarled in a low dangerous tone. He was furious as evident by the angry tic in his jaw as he clenched his teeth and the scathing retort in his voice. He waved his wand, either to set Silencing Charms on his back garden or to release some ward. Hermione was certain it was the first. "You will control yourself and stop this outburst this instant." He deftly flicked his wand at her necklace, making the shell vibrate.

Hermione's hand automatically went to her throat, and she floundered in shock; her balance wavered slightly, and his grip tightened on her arm. She tried to pull away from him, and tendrils from the fanged ivy reached out for her feet.

"But she said we are going to be *married by a hand fasting you and me!* She felt like a jaberknoll that just realized it was to be dressed out, cooked and served up as dinner to a familiar. "I thought that you said *consort... He called me your paramour! Not your fiancée! You can't possibly even want to to with me! You...*"

"Silence!" he yelled. Hermione stood her ground, ignoring the ivy that was trying to ensnare her. Snape grabbed her arm, and she tried to pull it from his grip. His fingers clamped down so tightly she knew that he would leave bruises.

"Unhand me!" she yelled angrily. "There is no way I will consent, and no possible reason that you could expect me to." She pushed away from him, trying to step back in retreat, her mouth open agape, and the brambles of the fanged ivy began to curl around her ankles. Severus halted her retreat, pulling her back to him and away from the

ivy's reach.

"No." His eyes narrowed threateningly, and he stepped closer to her. Hermione tried to back away, but the vise-like grip prevented her from succeeding. "Now I suggest you calm yourself, Miss Granger."

She stared up at him in defiance. "You said that the options were, a hand fasting, a bonding or to be you *consort your choice!* She tried jerking her arm free again, and he merely smirked at her efforts. "And those women told me they are planning a wedding *our wedding with a bonding!* They think assume that you have chosen to marry me!"

"Yes," Snape said, impatience making his tone sharp. "That is what was said. Things have changed."

"You cannot be serious! You said that it would be your choice! Is that what *YOU* choose? To be *married* to me by a hand fasting *magically bonded no less!* she snarled as she stared up at him defiantly.

"And what if it is?" Snape's expression was one of cold amusement, but his eyes flashed dangerously.

"But you don't like me! You can barely stand me, and and... I I'm promised to Ron!" She stamped her foot, and his lips curled into nasty smile.

"Not anymore," he purred sinisterly. "You belong to me now."

"I don't belong to anyone! Least of all you!" she screeched. His crooked smile gave her no reassurance at all. "No! You cannot but you don't want me you don't! You don't want to be... *married!*"

"I don't what?" he asked as he pulled Hermione close to his body again. "Desire you? Want to make love to you? Want you sleeping in my bed? Want to bathe you or run my hands on your skin?" Severus purred each question in a slow deliberate drawl as he held her body tightly against his. "What do you think has been going on then, Miss Granger? You asked for this. You were the one who made the magical 'arrangements' Narcissa spoke about. You were given to me and yes I accepted you. What part are you not able to comprehend?"

His words fully sank in, and she would've tumbled into the flowerbed if Snape hadn't been standing so close to her and grabbed her. "I'm to be your wife *Your wife?* she asked, stunned. He lifted his wand to push a curl from her cheek, and she recoiled slightly.

"Oh, yes. For one year and a day," he said smoothly.

Hermione tried to pull away from him, her eyes narrowed. "I'm to be you *temporary wife?* And then what? You release me? Discard me as *used?* she snarled venomously.

"Come, we are going inside," he demanded, turning her to walk ahead of him into the house, nearly making her trip, and forced her to precede him. A shadow moved from the kitchen bay window, and Snape swore. "Damn it," he swore, softly slamming the backdoor.

"*Sorry!*" she snapped, still trying to pull her wrist free.

"Wormtail, the *Rat*, was standing at the window he was watching." Snape swore softly under his breath. "Disobedience, Miss Granger, and witnessed. It will be *expected* for me to *punish* you," his eyes narrowed as he stared at her intently, "for your disobedience your little outburst. It will be expected and my actions reported." He paused, the tick in his jaw returning. "Do you have a favorite curse or do I choose?"

Snape pulled Hermione along with him through the house. Draco was standing in the doorway to the potions lab as they passed, and Wormtail watched them from the dining room as Snape dragged Hermione down the hallway and up the stairs to his room. Once inside, he released her and reinforced the wards on his room, adding a muffling spell and two that Hermione didn't recognize. He turned to her, crossed his arms and stared at her, his expression hard.

He released her arm, rolling his wand in his fingers as he watched her speculatively. "I suspect you have no familiarity with how the Dark Lord operates? Do you? I follow his wishes or I am either severely punished," he said moving one finger along the newest scar on his chest. "Or he would simply kill me. As for you... either I accept you make this hand fasting with you or you die." His lips twitched, but the next instant he was sneering once more. "It is not /who am opposed to this arrangement /I have consented. But it seems that you are. Do you choose death over being hand fasted to me?"

He truly consented to this? His dark eyes were riveted to her face, watching her, reading the reactions to his words war across her face. "But this was thrust upon you, too; surely you can find another solution..."

His lip curled into a mirthless smile, and for the first time, his eyes raked over her knowingly.

"But you haven't have you?" He raised his eyebrows at her stammering. "You've not asked me... At least Ron had the decency to propose..."

His mouth twitched in a sardonic grin. "My dear, in arranged unions magically aligned engagements there is no proposal. Therefore, since the parchment you used claimed me to be your soul mate, *your heart's desire*, it was hardly necessary for me to do so. Nevertheless, if you desire a proper proposal, consider yourself as having been *propositioned*. If you still feel this is all in error, tell me how to locate your parchment, and maybe, just maybe, another option can be open to you."

"I don't have it," she said, his words still echoing in her mind. "I don't know where it is. Last time I had it was in the library in Grimmauld Place. Why don't you just go get it?"

His face fell into a hard, blank mask. "I can hardly take you there, and I doubt that I'd be welcomed in the door," he stated flatly.

"But you are a member of the Order Dumbledore trusted you I trusted you!" she said, backing away from him, frightened, although her words come out as a scathing sneer.

"Stupid, foolish girl! You still don't get it, do you?" he asked, taking a step toward her. "You have no understanding of exactly what role I play do you? When I followed Dumbledore's wishes, I served *two* masters. Whenever I did what Dumbledore asked of me, I had to twist the evidence and truth to fit what the Dark Lord would accept. Dumbledore is dead. I have only *one* master now." She stepped back in shock, disbelief and horror. He followed her retreat, and Hermione found herself pressed against the bedpost, Snape looming over her with a smirk on his face.

His dark eyes seemed to look deep into her soul, his energy almost tangible. She looked up at him imploringly. "But you don't even like me! You don't respect me or trust me and you can't possibly love me! You don't care about me at all not that way. And you want me to simply comply with this wedding... To be married to you temporarily might I add and not given any say as to whether or not I consent! How can I? You've called me insufferable know-it-all or silly girl more times than I can count... You've insulted my teeth, my hair, my intelligence and my desire to learn. You berate or insult me at every possible opportunity... We've never talked, discussed or shared anything personal... I know absolutely nothing about you... I have no idea who your friends are or *if* you have any *true* friends... I don't know what you do for fun, if you've ever traveled or... anything! All I know is that you like to read and brew potions and know more Dark Arts than anyone else I know. And you don't know me. You don't know anything about me! Need I go on?"

"I know you, Miss Granger," he said calmly, moving even closer to her, his gaze never wavering from her face, and their eyes locked on each other's. "I've watched over you for years. More so than *any* student that was in *my own house* yes, even more than Draco," he stated firmly and with fierce conviction. Hermione made a

condescending grunt, and Severus cocked his eyebrow. "You have no idea, do you? You don't think I've watched over you and your two friends, protected the three of you? You don't think the three of you were under my constant observation? You were. Every adventure, every rule you broke. I knew it was *you* who solved my logics barrier your first year. I know it was *you* who brewed the Polyjuice Potion and solved the mystery of the basilisk your second year. *knew* you figured out that Lupin was a werewolf, even though he retracted my essay assignment. I know that *you* wrote Hagrid's defense for that hippogriff, even though Hagrid was too nervous to have used it. I know it was only because of *your* help that Potter made it through the challenges of the Triwizard Tournament. I know it was *you* who organized Dumbledore's Army, and I was well aware of *your* actions during the battle in the Department of Mysteries. *And* I was aware of *your* involvement the night the Death Eaters broke into Hogwarts even though I *tried* to keep *you* out of that fight and safe. Yes, Miss Granger, *I was watching you*"

She stared at him in complete disbelief, obviously fighting to grasp what he said.

Snape turned his head, glaring at the wall, obviously frustrated and trying to compose himself.

"That is not respect that is doing your duty. It's not the same thing. How can there be anything between us without respect, trust and love if not love, at least friendship, something to build on?"

Snape raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched as he looked at her with a disapproving glare. "I couldn't show you any favoritism as my student, Miss Granger. Surely you can understand why."

"But if you liked or respected me at all, why were you so awful?" she asked stubbornly.

His face relaxed and his lips curled into a cold smile. "Because I was Head of Slytherin House, a Death Eater and a spy *foboth* sides, Miss Granger."

Hermione shook her head, not comprehending his rationale. "That would account for your treatment for my fourth year through my last but hardly gives you the excuse for your treatment my first, second and third year. You were not a Death Eater then."

"Oh, wasn't I, Miss Granger? Or did you believe like every witch and wizard out there that Potter had *vanquished* the Dark Lord?" He laughed at her stunned expression. "I knew he would come back. I knew, as did Dumbledore, that the Dark Lord was simply diminished, weakened but very much alive." Hermione continued to stare at him in disbelief. "I was the one who heard the Prophecy *me*. I know Potter is to defeat the Dark Lord." Snape pulled the sleeve up on his left arm, turning his fist so that the Dark Mark was clearly visible, held directly between them.

Hermione couldn't help but to look down as he exposed his arm and stare at the image of a skull and snake, the dark image more than just a series of lines and shading on his arm. It wasn't a flat picture tattooed into his flesh, it looked alive, like a parasite in his skin. She was repulsed as well as fascinated by it. Tentatively and without thinking, she raised a finger to touch the mark. Snape smirked at her tenacity, but made no move to stop her. The mark was slightly raised, the skull as hard as bone, and the snake undulated slightly, but perceptively under her fingertips, as if the snake were alive but trapped within his very skin. She jerked her hand away and stared at him, finally comprehending.

"I *am* a Death Eater, Miss Granger. Draco *is* a Death Eater so is Wormtail. Even after the Dark Lord was *diminished* I *knew* he was not defeated. I knew he was not dead. My mark was still present, although not as dark as it is now. It was... placid, inactive. Nevertheless, I could on occasion still *feel* it. He was not dead."

"You knew? You knew, and yet you did nothing to save Harry's parents?" she stared at him, her tone and expression accusing.

"No?" he asked his eyes narrowed angrily at her accusation. "I tried. I told Dumbledore. I risked my life to tell the one wizard I thought could save Lily Evans and Potter. And for a price one I was willing to pay to try and help them all of them, Miss Granger. The prophecy stated that 'the one with the power to *defeat* the Dark Lord would be born at the end of July, from parents that had thrice defied him.' I knew that the Longbottoms had defied the Dark Lord the required three times, so had Potter. I wasn't sure about Lily. I was banking on the Longbottoms' boy. I was instructed to try and secure my place at Hogwarts. The Dark Lord wanted *me at Hogwarts*. The Dark Lord went after the Potters himself. He rarely does *anything* so overt *himself*."

Hermione's head swam, and she staggered backwards, bumping into the other bedpost. Snape walked towards her, and she moved away from him, backing towards the bookshelves. He easily stalked after her; however, before she reached his bookshelf, he walked past her and walked over to his bedside table. She watched, stunned, as he pulled out a crystal decanter, poured some of the amber liquid into a glass, and held it out to her. "It's scotch, Miss Granger, not poison."

Hermione hesitated.

"Take it," he said softly.

Hermione accepted the glass and watched as he poured himself a glass and sipped the liquid as he leaned against the window.

"I thought that you were going to *curse* me?" she asked, swirling the liquid and inhaling the aroma *It is scotch... He drinks scotch?*

"There is a spell on the door that will make your outburst just now sound like screaming," he said, sipping on his own drink. "To the perception of the two down stairs, I was quite harsh with you. Unless you'd like to experience one of my many curses? I'd hate to disappoint you." He downed his drink with a knowing smirk and set down his glass before heading for the door.

Hermione shook her head, surprised yet again by his actions. He consistently did things that were unexpected. "Why?"

"Why?" he asked, raising one eyebrow as his mouth twitched, almost into a smile. "We are to be married by the end of the month, Miss Granger. Using the Cruciatus Curse on you would not be a very auspicious beginning of our union. Surely that is reason enough?"

"The end of the month?" she asked, choking on her drink. *That means that we will... have to consummate... Oh, my gods! No! He is we are going to.*

He crossed to her in three quick steps, making her recoil back into the bookcase. "Yes, Miss Granger, the end of the month." He sneered at the reaction on her face, then turned and strode from the room, saying, "Just before I have to return to Hogwarts."

Hermione stood alone in the room, watching as the door closed behind him and feeling trapped *By the end of the month! Before he reports to Hogwarts? He's returning to teach? Her head swam, and she grabbed onto the bedpost for support. He killed Dumbledore how can he return? Oh, gods, what else is going on I don't know about?*

Her world just seemed to flip upside down again. *I'm to be married to Snape. He's returning to Hogwarts. By the end of the month... How many days is that?* She tried calculating the days she'd been in his house and couldn't be sure. She didn't have anything to go by. No classes; no calendar. *It could be a few days or a week or three for all I know!*

Hermione began to fume about the loss of control of her life. *I trusted that Snape, a member of the Order, would could help me escape. I was certain that he would help me find a way out and so far all he's done is present me before the Dark Lord and allow those women to plan our wedding! He chose... She threw her tumbler into the wall, grabbed his and threw it as well, and then stood there, her hands clenched tightly in fists as she fought back a scream. Snape's owl, Aetos, snapped his beak irritably each time she passed his perch as she began to pace angrily. "How can he think I will marry him? This is preposterous!" she stopped by the chair and stared at the glass in the window. "Insufferable know-it-all, insipid child, little girl... he has never said one kind thing ever! I cannot please him. He's condescending, cantankerous, infuriatingly smug... and sneering at me all the time, demeaning... And that that Belinda has the gall to call me *lucky!* He can't even stand me but oh, yes, he's willing to hand fast with*

me for a year of frolicking fun! Sure, yes, he's amiable to *that!*"

Hermione threw herself down on the bed and cried.

~o0o~

Severus sat in the sitting room with a large tome in his hands, although his mind would not focus on the text. He'd been livid to hear Narcissa telling Hermione about the hand fasting. He hadn't truly desired a hand fasting, although in retrospect the Dark Lord had alluded to the idea several times. The conversation with the Dark Lord played out in his mind.

"This is what I want, Severus. Had you paid any attention to the parchment in her memories, you would have seen the effects of the spells on it. I'm disappointed in you. Nevertheless, Narcissa is correct, having you married to the girl will demoralize the Weasley boy and unnerve and unsettle Harry Potter. She was the brains behind his success at school, and without her, he will flounder I saw that in her mind."

Severus wanted to disagree, but the impression that Potter couldn't succeed without Miss Granger's help would play nicely in their plans... He would just have to use her. *That's preposterous. She won't be able to do it... No, Cillian he's the better choice*

Draco looked up at Severus, and he casually turned the page again, not really having read a word *I have less than two weeks to subdue her or seduce her to make her comply...* He snorted in derision. *She may respect me or admire me academically, and her body reacts to me, but I've probably lost her trust, and getting her to agree, let alone comply, to this hand fasting will be a challenge.*

Hermione is promised to Weasley of course she's told me as much. The Dark Lord had accepted my suggestion of hand fasting with her, instead of marrying her, apparently amused, assuming that I only wanted Miss Granger as a temporary plaything. Nevertheless, he insisted that we be magically bonded. The hand fasting alone is preferable, as it would only be temporary but bonded would become permanent if Hermione became pregnant. He could be darn sure that she never became pregnant. This solution is at least acceptable to the Dark Lord. I've bought her a year and a day if I can stand her that long! He'd leave her alone tonight, going into bed late, and would rise early. He just didn't need any more of her tantrums.

Narcissa and Lucius had performed the bonding during their hand fasting, a common practice between purebloods. Narcissa had come to me to help her conceive because after ten months of trying, she'd been unable to affirm and seal the bonding with a pregnancy, and thus he had obliged her. Lucius had made Severus an honorary uncle to Draco for his services. However, Hermione is a Muggle-born. She sees this magically bonded hand fasting as a temporary marriage followed by a magical divorce. Moreover, apparently Hermione doesn't want me. She has given no indication what so ever that she desires to wed me in any fashion. I will be forced to consummate this union with an unwilling partner. He seethed at the thought of forcing her. She still expects me to open my door and simply let her walk out and go. Stupid girl. The situation is too precarious for me to do that. She would become a target equal to only Potter if she just left, and the Dark Lord would kill me. She knows too much even if she doesn't realize it or remember yet.

No, I'm going to have to do a hand fasting with the required bonding and keep the girl from conceiving so that I we can later release the 'ties' and separate. Wizardkind frowns on divorce, and Hermione will be recorded as barren, although the Weasley boy won't care about that. He'll simply suspect that I provided her potions. Unless Potter fails... No, the boy must prevail. She will be released by the end of the year, and I'll finally be free of all these obligations.

Author's Notes:

I haven't the words to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help, encouragement and the effort and support she gave me on this story. I appreciate it more than she could possibly know.

The warnings I have listed are for this chapter and are both implied and are also expressed. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.

Perspectives

Chapter 10 of 43

Hermione realizes the entrapment she is in and feels the hopelessness of escaping from the impending destiny chosen for her. Because of this, her trust in Snape is seriously undermined.

Severus, meanwhile, has a talk with his friend, in hopes of securing Hermione's safety and trust.

However, thanks to Wormtail and his desire for Hermione, she is forced to take drastic action that puts her in grave danger.

Sorry, image is currently unavailable.



Protect more of your memories for less

~o0o~

The sunlight was pouring in from the gap in the curtains on both sides of the bed when Hermione awoke, finding herself alone in the bed, and for some reason, grasping Snape's pillow in her arms. She looked up, scanning the room for Snape, although there was no sign of him or any sound coming from the loo. She was alone. She had only a vague notion of whether or not he'd even been to bed at all since she'd obviously been holding his pillow while she slept. The memories of the arguments from the night before and his smug declaration regarding their living situation came flooding to her, and she sat up abruptly. *What do I think has been going on here? I'm being held here against my will, forced to do his every whim and made to suffer all kinds of indignity just to save his bloody arse that's what!* She threw his pillow to the foot of the bed, saying, "I am *not* living with the man!"

Aetos snapped his beak and turned around on his perch in mocking disapproval.

She recalled his words the night before with full clarity. *Sure he wants me, sexually! He madethat perfectly clear. He desires to have me in his bed, to bathe with him and to be under his control HIS control! His magically bound concubine wife! I get to be his sexual slave and at his disposal for a year. In a year, then what? I'm free? Thank you very much, good-bye! What if Voldemort wins, then what? I remain his wife, or he dumps me and hands me over to Voldemort to be killed? Or worse, to be another Death Eater's sex slave? 'Lucius Malfoy and Lestrangle wanted you...' he'd said... and Dolohov apparently.* She kicked the bedcovers off in frustration, feeling like a kid throwing a tantrum. *He said I made this happen...*

'What do you think has been going on then...' His words echoed again in her mind.

Bloody Merlin! No! She scrambled from the bed, backing away from it as if it were her entrapment *His bed! Is this why he's had me sleeping with him... to come to terms with the fact that we're to be married? To get used to the idea of being his wife?* She spun around, taking in the room. The nightstand by her bed still held two of her potions, her books, and a vase with a flower whose petals were just starting to wilt. She'd suddenly realized this was the fourth flower in that vase. *Does he did he put that flower there for me?* She'd assumed it had been Peren who'd left her flowers. She turned and her gaze swept over to the wardrobe *The wardrobe his wardrobe. Except it's now mine, too, isn't it? One section of the wardrobe is full of my things, those things Snape let me keep! Only it's warded so it hurts my hands when I open it. Does that make that part mine or simply the things in it are for me but not really mine at all?*

For me... She ran into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

On the shelves above the tub rested the basket with her bath salts, bubble bath, shampoo and conditioner. *The conditioner he made for me... The bath salts and bubble bath that I enjoy so much because of their fragrances.* She suddenly realized that they were a mix of ylang ylang, sandalwood, rosewood, ginger, jasmynes, and blended with the subtle scents of ferns and woods. *For their calming effects! He's given me aromatic aphrodisiac scents to induce a calm, soothing amorous mood? Oh, oooh!* Turning, she yanked open a drawer and saw her brush, toothbrush, toothpaste, dental floss and a razor, lying neatly in a row. The drawer also contained a fresh bar of soap, jar of hand cream, a jar of herbal salts, one of oiled raw sugar, another containing a peppermint-scented salve for her feet, a fingernail file, nail clippers, and a small container of cotton swabs. She quickly shoved the drawer closed. On the counter next to a box of facial tissue were two bottles of body lotion in the same scents as her bath products. A bar soap that had a fresh lavender and fern scent sat in a small dish.

'Tell me what items you need, and I shall get what you require, his words echoed again.

Everything I asked him for... Things he made for me to use... Things that just appeared for me to.. She pulled opened the cupboard under the sink and saw her pad-cups and straps, clean and folded up neatly in another basket next to extra bath tissue rolls and a box of facial tissue. Hermione's hands began to shake.

Once again, she heard his voice. *What did you think was going on then...*

Oh, my, gods... It's true! She slammed the cupboard closed, her hands shaking. She stood up and looked in the mirror at her reflection. Her eyes were slightly dilated, but her skin looked smooth and unblemished, as perfect as porcelain. Her normally bushy hair had the luxurious look of those hair models that advertised perms, and fell past her shoulders in a cascade of soft, rippling curls.

She stormed back into the bedroom, pacing around; furious, angry, her breathing ragged and her heart pounding. She wanted to throw something, anything, to vent her frustration and her burgeoning panic. She caught sight of the two tumblers from the night before, sitting on his bedside table, obviously magically repaired. She picked up one, then the other, throwing them against the wall, just missing the large painting. She'd been in denial, clinging to hope, not really listening to him, not wanting to face the facts, but now she had to.

Aetos screeched in annoyance as the glass shattered both times and snapped his beak at her.

This is entirely his fault! He could have he should have let me go... staged something! But no, we're to be married! Hermione screamed in frustration.

~o0o~

Severus and Cillian sat in the dining room. Cillian had owled earlier, asking if he could stop by to ask Severus his advice. Severus had a vague idea what his friend needed to talk to him about and had sent the horned owl back with his consent. Of all his friends and acquaintances, Cillian had remained a true and trustworthy friend. He was one wizard that Severus could always confide in when they were younger, and the friendship between the men still stood on those grounds. Cillian had confessed after the Dark Lord's fall that he'd been relieved. But with the Dark Lord's return, Cillian had returned, just as Severus had, and resumed his pledge of loyalty. Severus would have approached him about spying for the Order, but Cillian's family had been hosting the Dark Lord for months, and his sister was as enamored and amorous of the Dark Lord akin to Bellatrix. Not only that, but Cillian wasn't as accomplished with the skills of Occlumency and was still honing his skills. But Severus knew it would only be a matter of time before his friend would want another option, and he waited.

The knock on the door came only seconds after the owl had flown out of the window. *Cillian must've been waiting outside on the street somewhere,* Severus thought as he'd opened the door. Peren had served them some freshly baked blueberry scones and breakfast tea as soon as the men sat down at the dining room table, and then disappeared into the kitchen.

"Where is Draco, your apprentice?" Cillian asked as he stirred half a spoonful of sugar in his tea.

Severus smirked at his friend. "Still asleep, why?"

"And the other the *Rat*?" Cillian asked, looking at the doorway.

"The same. Draco was up late because of a potion, and the *Rat's* never up this early. We have the house to ourselves for the time being." Severus leaned back in his chair, the relaxed pose designed to put his friend at ease.

"And the elf?" Cillian asked, stirring his tea.

Severus smiled. "She's not a problem; don't be concerned. So what did you need to talk to me about?"

"My bloody sister, what else? You've heard the latest decrees from our Lord, haven't you?" he asked, brandishing his spoon at Severus. He scooped up some more sugar for his tea, never taking his eyes off Severus' dark ones. "First, all eligible males are to find suitable mates *wives* as in *married*. Secondly, all families must begin *trimming* the *undesirable* branches from our family trees. Belinda and Horrance have already turned *isix* from the family. It's madd-en my favorite cousin, Madeline. I barely had enough time..."

"Yes, I've heard about it," Severus stated calmly, a subtle hint of his true feelings reflected in his tone.

"Severus, you know don't you? I don't know how you manage to keep off the I mean... Oh, shite, man! If you weren't a favorite you would could I'd be warning you!"

"Don't worry about me, I watch my back and few know," Severus stated, watching his friend's distress. "I hadn't realized your family tree needed so much trimming?" Severus exhaled slowly. *Not all of Cillian's family is as loyal as his sister or as devoted zealots either. Of his extended family, only a few are known supporters, and only two of his brothers.*

"My parents have been lenient with my two older brothers, let them marry whomever they wanted. So have my aunt and uncle with my cousins," Cillian stated, adding in another scoop of sugar to his tea. "Byron and Stephanie fled, and the kids are safe for now. He didn't want to listen, doesn't want to believe it'll happen, but at least he took precautions. Madeline and Lewis moved, put their new home under the Fidelius. Nevertheless, they trust the protection of the Ministry. Marc's lucky, his wife's acceptable. But Marc he's ever loyal... and Justin, just don't hurt his kid brother me! Merlin!"

"You warned them, what more can you do except Imperius them to hide," Severus said, sipping his tea. "From what I've heard, the Ministry will fall under the Dark Lord's control soon. It's just a matter of time. We already control two major departments covertly. Yaxley, Runcorn and MacCavish are going to try and push Muggle-born registration through the Ministry." Cillian sipped his tea, scowling at the taste, and Severus smiled as he watched his friend set the cup aside. "So is that all Belinda has been up too lately?" he asked.

Cillian's eyes became guarded, and he shook his head warily as Peren inconspicuously exchanged his cup of tea for a fresh one. "Belinda wants me to marry someone else. She's being *insistent* actually." Severus cocked an eyebrow and Cillian continued. "She's selected my future wife, a Roquewood."

"Roquewood? One of Eugene Roquewood's daughters? The older one or the younger? Oh, either one would turn my stomach, let alone yours. Clairenne now there's a barmy witch. That's a delightful match," he said sarcastically.

Cillian expression turned sour. "Larissa," he said with distaste.

The younger one... Larissa? "And you don't care for the girl?" Severus knew the answer, smirking at his friend.

Cillian snorted as he sipped his tea, grimaced and added a scoop of sugar. "Larissa's okay, I suppose..." he said with a sneer. "But her nose is pointy, and her voice sounds like a house-elf's, and she's... dumb."

"Ah, yes, I remember you saying something about that before, at least once," Severus said, remembering the girl in question *An idiotic and clueless twit...* "As I recall you said she's as witty as a troll and compared her favorably to a pissed off Veela." He sipped his tea, watching Cillian stir another scoop of sugar into his cup.

"Don't jest; didn't you have her as a student?" Cillian asked. He took a sip and grimaced, pushing the cup aside. Peren discreetly exchanged his cup for a fresh one again.

"Yes, Slytherin, thin, long blonde hair that always fell into her face or into her ingredients, blue eyes with one that wandered inward occasionally, not too tall, fairly chesty," Severus replied with a hint of sarcasm and a subtle sneer. "Always coming to me about some drama over some boy or another. Melted a cauldron a week, if I remember correctly. Delightful girl."

"Yeah, that's her," Cillian said. He sipped his tea, frowning at the taste, quickly set the cup down and added in a half spoonful of sugar. They could hear Hermione in the silence as she walked around upstairs. "Your witch seems to have finally woken up," Cillian said jovially as he set his spoon back down.

"Apparently," Severus said, calmly sipping on his tea. A door slammed upstairs. *That would be the loo.*

Cillian looked up as if to see Hermione through the ceiling. "I suppose she's not in a very good mood this morning."

"We had a bit of a discussion last night," Severus replied, exhaling slowly. "Your sister and Narcissa Malfoy had a little talk with her. Well, Narcissa isn't very fond of Hermione, and you know how Belinda is." He could detect the faint sounds of the cupboards slamming upstairs. Severus let out a long, slow breath.

Cillian lowered his gaze, smiling at Severus. "Yes, I heard something about that. Sis does like to meddle, doesn't she? Still, the two of you are compatible, no?"

"I don't think she's come around yet." The bathroom door slammed again. "So, is your sister still forcing you to accept the match?" Severus asked, redirecting the conversation.

"What do you think?" Cillian asked gruffly. "Comes from a very old bloodline, properly connected, wealthy, both parents and her brothers are in the circle... She's ecstatic that Roquewood still approves of the match, considering that Mum and Dad are still Imperiused."

"But?" Severus asked. Hermione was pacing, he could hear her footfalls through the ceiling *Larissa would of course be thrilled to land such a catch. There's no way she could do better.*

"I can't stand the witch. Besides, I'm involved with someone else..." Cillian looked up at Severus, his expression guarded again. "Can I trust you, Severus?" he asked, his eyes darting from Severus to his cup and back.

So, you are still serious about Dianne "As much as anyone," Severus said with a soft chuckle. *Cillian's always been a bit of a lad, a guy's guy but good with the ladies and a rather charming rake. Dianne wanted nothing to do with him. Still, he'd fallen for her the day he met her.*

"You told me you remember Dianne from Hogwarts, right? Bright, pretty, great sense of humor... Nevertheless, Belinda expects me to break it off," he said, breaking off a piece of his scone and eating it. "Wrong family. Dianne's parents were childhood sweethearts... But her mother and her father are Muggle-born, undesirable all the way." He sat back, staring at the mismatched dishes in the hutch behind Severus. "Having your wife chosen for you simply because of her bloodline I feel like a bloody

Thoroughbred..."

Yep, he's still with Dianne. No wonder Belinda's trying to push the match with Miss Roquewood. She'd have quite an aversion to Dianne." "What do you want to do?" Severus noticed that the candelabra shimmered slightly as Hermione stomped across the floor upstairs, making the shadows in the room shift minutely.

Cillian looked up to see what Severus was staring at. "I suppose I won't be seeing her today."

"Probably not," Severus said, and he leaned back with one elbow propped up on the back of his chair.

"What am I going to do about Larissa? What if the Dark Lord approves? I can't stand the witch." Cillian looked back at Severus, one finger tracing the rim of his cup. "I don't want to break it off with Dianne. What am I going to do about my sister?"

Suddenly the loud crash of glass, followed by a second crash made Severus look up again. "You're asking me what to do with a witch?" he asked, looking at Cillian, trying to maintain his composure. He was answered by the dulcet sound of Hermione's scream. "It's usually the other way around, isn't it?"

Cillian scoffed as he shook his head. "Merlin, that's what I like about you, you ole' bat. Straight shot from the wand." He became quiet a moment, then looked up at Severus, his expression contemplative. "I may need your help, Severus."

"What is it you want?" Severus asked. A door upstairs slammed, then another, and Cillian looked questioningly at Severus. "Draco's in the upstairs loo," Severus clarified for him. "So are you going to finally confide in me?" *Are you ready to know? Are you ready to take a stand?*

Cillian nodded. "I'm certain Belinda's going to try and do something to Dianne and her folks," he said softly.

"I wouldn't be surprised," Severus said, his face becoming serious. "How far are you willing to go in order to protect her?"

"Keep this between you and me," Cillian said as he leaned forward, putting both elbows on the table as he cradled his cup in his hands.

Severus nodded solemnly. "Haven't I always? We go way back, you and I. We know each other's secrets. You can trust me."

"I Imperiused her parents and hid Dianne and her folks in a cottage under the Fidelius Charm," he said, watching Severus's reaction.

Severus nodded, fairly sure that the cottage was the same cottage that had been the private hideaway of Cillian's grandfather. *It's been protected under the Fidelius from the Gwynek women for years. I don't think Cillian's dad even remembers about it.* "We've both sneaked away to your cottage a time or two as I recall. I'm glad you still have the place, if we're speaking of the same place."

Cillian nodded and relaxed a little. "I also took her sister and brother to stay with relatives in Germany... and they are delighted to take the kids. Dianne had her mum write a letter to her great aunt, telling her it would be best if the kids attend school there for a year. But if anything happens to me... Severus, I'm not ready to be married yet. And certainly not with Larissa Roquewood!"

Severus looked at Cillian thoughtfully. "Cillian, I don't know what I will be able to do or how much I can promise. If the matter is pushed on you you could always insist on a hand fasting. I can certainly assist you with the pregnancy problem." He sat up, his dark eyes becoming serious. "You know that I'm to go back to Hogwarts as Headmaster this year. I have you down on the list of men I want with me."

Cillian nodded with a look of relief. "Of course, I'll be glad to help out at Hogwarts. You'll have your witch with you?"

"Yes, that's the plan." The room upstairs became awfully quiet and Severus hoped that she had finally calmed down. "The fact is, I'm to have the Carrows, Rowle and Travers under me as well. Hermione will be attending classes, and she'll have enemies within the castle. Draco will be under orders to watch her, but so far they're not getting along yet. The Dark Lord wants it to seem that Hermione has come over to our side as *my wife*. The way things are going, I may need your help with her. More than half the staff is unhappy with my assignment Minerva McGonagall for one who's refusing to be demoted under Alecto Carrow. Alecto expects to be assigned as Deputy Headmistress and for me to simply make Minerva step aside gracefully. And your sister's been sending owls again."

Cillian wolfed softly with laughter. "And I thought I had witch problems. Sure, this should be fun and solve one of my problems as well. Oh, I should warn you, Belinda's fuming over your pending marriage. Watch your back."

"Already aware of that problem, but thank you," Severus said, smirking.

~oOo~

Hermione stopped and turned her head, her gaze falling on the bookshelves. "So/F he won't help me out of this I will have to find a way," she said aloud.

Aetos hooted in response.

"The answer has to be here somewhere." She scanned the titles of the spell books. "Snape can do wandless magic I've seen him do it several times. Somewhere he learned how..." Her eyes swept the bindings, trying to discern what the books would be about by the titles. The titles for several of the spell books were in Latin; many were vague, which didn't help. The stinging sensation when she reached for a thick volume nearly made her cry out, and it took several tries to pull the book from the shelf. It was an old, outdated Charms book. She scanned the list of contents, noting that many of the spells were now considered Dark Arts. She placed the book on the chair and tried another. After only three books, she had a knot in her neck and shoulder she couldn't stretch out. *Great! If I only had my wand, I could just Levitate the ones I wanted* She doubted that, but the thought was appealing. *Accio, wandless spell book...* she thought pointing her finger at the bookshelves.

Her finger pointed to a short, light brown book. Taking one more deep breath, Hermione grabbed for the book, knocking down two others as she did so. The sharp pain from the wards shot down her arm, shoulder and neck, making her cry out softly. She collected the three books. Sitting down on Snape's side of the bed, she opened the light brown book. It was a journal of sorts. The writing was small, slanted and tight, almost like Snape's. *This must have belonged to Snape's mother... Eileen Prince!* There were comments about Gobstones, mixed in with comments about other students and professors. Several entries were about spells and variations on them. Many of the variations were crossed out. On one page it looked like information had been copied down from a page from another book. The old style of writing was difficult to read, and Hermione carried the book to the window for better light.

'Sill not able to do this' was written next to a square that may have been the letter R. "Asmeagan baet... no be on ymbe gewaldan..." she read aloud softly. *Great, it's old English!* The tiny script under the line read, 'think of, to do, have the power over... Think of what you want to do, which you have power over... *Yes, this is it!* She concentrated on reading the tiny script. 'Concentrate your thought on the intent... focus your will on the intent. Find your focus on the power within and direct that power through you at the intended target or action... Focus your intent on that which you want to do.' *This doesn't make any sense. Think of concentrate thoughts and focus, direct my power at the intent ...*

Focus my intent on that which I want to do. You think? How? The notations in the page didn't provide any further clues. Hermione turned the page. *More Gobstone techniques and her personal entry. Eileen wasn't very popular with the boys.* The next page was full of Transfiguration notes and comments about school, classes and the weather. Several pages later there were more notes on wandless magic. *She was trying to learn how to do it!* The notes were clearer and more precise, however, still confusing. Finally, Hermione turned the page, looking for more notes on wandless magic. Sixteen pages later was a page copied from another book, this time talking about directing your thoughts. Hermione read the passage and set the book down.

She got up and went around the bed to get her Galleon out. *I did this once. Concentrate* Hermione focused her mind on the frustration and anger she felt towards Snape. She focused on her intent as she built up her anger and held the coin in her fist. It vibrated. She opened her eyes. Trying again, she concentrated on the Galleon and her desired action as she tried to make the coin read, *Harry, I need you*. After several tries, still nothing. *Direct the power within at the intent...* She tried again. *Bugger. Maybe if I try changing the coin when I exhale...*? She inhaled deeply, then concentrated on the coin as she exhaled. *Harry I need y* appeared.

Yes, okay. She waited, hoping.

Finally the words *Mione is U* appeared.

Yes! she wanted to scream, pointing at the Galleon and the coin vibrated. After several tries, she managed to make the coin read *yes*. She stared at it, stunned. Looking at the flower on her bedside table, she decided on her next message.

The coin vibrated. *You okay?* appeared.

She concentrated on saying *for now* several times, growing frustrated with herself. Finally, *4 now* appeared on the Galleon. *Yes! I have to tell him* she thought...

Where are you appeared, followed by *come get you*, then *tell me*.

No use hiding it from him, he knows. She concentrated again, this time on *SS safe 4 now* and after three failed attempts, the Galleon finally showed her message.

The Galleon vibrated again, reading *come home*.

Hermione seethed at the subtle request, knowing that as much as she wanted to she could not. The letters on the Galleon changed to *cannot* in one try. *Okay, Voldemort saw you in my mind no, too long. Got it*. She could hear footsteps in the hallway. *Keep it simple single letters...* She closed her eyes, focused her anger at the men in the house, opened her eyes and pointed at the coin. *V C U in me* appeared far easier than any of her other tries.

The bedroom door opened up, and Hermione looked up to see Snape leaning in the doorway, watching her. She quickly ducked the Galleon under her leg as he entered the room. "I will not steal from you, Miss Granger," he said, amused. "Have you finished your tantrum from this morning? Draco could use your assistance in the potions lab."

Her eyes narrowed at his accusation. "I was not throwing a tantrum."

His lips curled into arrogant smile. "Pardon my mistake. The sounds of slamming doors, shattering glass, your pacing and your resounding scream led me to assume otherwise. It was quite entertaining from downstairs." He crossed to the bed, looking down at her. "As I have said, Draco will require your assistance today. So, you are coming down to the potions lab to assist him."

"Fine," she said. She tucked her Galleon under her pillow and slipped on her dressing robe and boots. "I don't really..."

"I don't care what you want. You're needed," he said firmly, taking her arm and pulling her with him as they passed through the wards.

"Don't you think it's time to let me pass through the doorway on my own?" she asked.

"And let you wander the house unprotected? I don't think so, Miss Granger," he said as he guided her downstairs. Once in the potions lab, he turned to Draco. "I have staff meetings today. You and Hermione are to brew those potions I've given you to do, *together amicably*. I expect my lab to be in the condition it is now when I return with all three potions on the cooling rack. I want them to be of exceptional quality."

Draco had crossed his arms when Snape had entered and listened to him, his face impassive, although his eyebrow quirked when he'd said her name. "Yes, sir. And if I get summoned?"

"Wormtail is on an errand. He may be gone all day or just a few hours. Lock her in here or in your room again if you have to leave." Snape turned to Hermione as Draco walked into the storeroom to collect supplies. "Miss Granger, this is not a punishment, even though you've removed my books again without permission." He spoke softly, looking at her, amused by the change of anger to fear in her eyes as he spoke. "This is for your own good, not as confinement. I don't trust the *Rat*. Please, obey me on this and don't give Draco a hard time. Try and get along."

"I will if he does," she replied, her eyes darting to the storeroom door. She looked back and saw that he meant what he'd said. "I'll try."

"Fair enough," he said, releasing her. "We'll discuss the books when I get back."

Hermione walked over to peer in the storeroom. "Draco, is there something I can do?" she asked, biting her lip.

Draco turned, looking as if he was about to snap at her, then seemed to change his mind. He held out a stiff piece of parchment. "Yes. This is one of the potions we're doing. Collect please, collect the ingredients that I need."

Hermione took the parchment gratefully, relieved that he was at least going to try and get along with her, and scanned down the list. The potion was a Ministry Restricted and Controlled listed Mind-Altering Elixir. She looked up, catching Draco's stare. He was looking at her as if he dared her to comment. Hermione simply nodded and quickly collected the ingredients, hoping that no one she knew, met, heard about or ever cared about would fall victim of the potion she was about to brew. A thick knot grew in her stomach as she pulled out the copper cauldron and began to arrange the ingredients on the worktable.

Draco followed her from the workroom and placed a silver cauldron on the worktable next to her cauldron. He set his ingredients on the worktable next to the silver cauldron as well as several ingredients that made up the Wolfsbane Potion. "Draco?" Hermione asked, her brow furrowed in concern. "That those are the Wolfsbane Potion ingredients. Why are you going to brew the Wolfsbane Potion in a silver cauldron?"

"Mind yourself, Grang Hermione," he snapped, then quickly amended his tone. "Snape said the Dark Lord wanted this potion, and Snape was quite specific on how it's to be brewed." He set the silver cauldron on the flame. "Pour in the artesian spring water and castor bean oil in your cauldron."

"But... are you able to brew Wolfsbane?" she asked, then bit her lip as Draco's eyes flashed angrily.

"It's not Wolfsbane Potion, Gran Hermione, it's..." His eyes darted away from hers and then down to the worktable as he started pulling the legs and wings off the grasshoppers. "It's not really your business."

Hermione noticed that he was bruising the thoraxes. "Draco, I'm sorry. It's just that if made wrong..."

He thrust the bloodmire berries at her. "It's not Wolfsbane per se. Look, we're to make it and I'm to deliver it to him..." He dropped the grasshoppers into the cauldron and began shredding the Aconite. "There are things you shouldn't ask about for your own good."

Hermione fell silent, carefully preparing the ingredients Draco wordlessly handed to her, following the instructions on the parchment. As the potion brewing continued, she grew increasingly worried and unsure as to what they were making and why.

When the potion was halfway through, Draco lowered the flame to let it simmer for a few hours and indicated that she move over to the copper cauldron. "This one is tricky, and we have to move fast. Therefore, we'll take turns. But keep up."

"No problem. I can keep up with you," she replied, sounding a bit cockier than she meant to.

He ignored the jibe as he started chopping up the duck tongues while Hermione pressed the white sap from the fresh Oleander stems, careful not to get any on her fingers. "Okay, add a spoon full of the sap on each third stir. Ready?" he asked, picking up the long-handled spoon. She nodded, easily adding in the sap as his hand moved away from her on each third turn. "Hemlock's next," he stated briskly.

Hermione quickly shredded the water hemlock leaves, laying them in the cauldron, checking to see which ingredient was next while Draco diced the jacana gizzards into tiny pieces and adding them immediately after.

She grabbed the echidna quills, carefully cracking and grinding them, while Draco ground the alfa leaves as finely as he could. "They have to be mixed together with fennel oil before I we put them in," he directed.

She handed him the small bottle of oil. "Okay, Draco, you can have the honors," she replied, handing him her quills since she finished first.

"Then you stir," he said sharply.

Hermione let the tone slide. "Next is the moonshood roots, followed by the angelica root. Since these roots need to be thinly sliced, how about you do those, and I'll do the angelica when I'm done stirring?"

He nodded, picking up the knife. "What color is it?"

"Burnt orange, but still a bit murky." She pulled out the rod and watched the timer. *Twenty seconds, then stir again twenty times*. At exactly twenty seconds, she started stirring, adding the single reverse stroke to every five turns with the potions spoon. The potion turned a clear broth-like brown. "Okay, ready," she said, picking up the angelica roots and beginning to slice them thinly.

"Faster, Granger, the potion's turning," he snapped, measuring out the dwerγκlauwotter fur.

She'd just finished the roots when he pushed the dandelion leaves at her. "This is next and add the steiffel goat horn powder," he said, dumping in her roots and adding his hairs.

Hermione stirred sixteen times clockwise, adding the dandelions, stirring them in, and added the steiffel goat horn. Draco grabbed her by the waist, pulling her back just as the potion spluttered violently. "Thanks," she said, surprised by his concern.

"It always does that. I should have warned you," he said, picking up the dusky shrew tails. "Do the fenugreek leaves next and add the ground ginger."

"I thought that the meadowsweet salicylates were next," she asked, confused.

"I'm nearly done with the tails. You cut the fenugreek in thirds and drop them in," he said, stirring the potion. "By the time you finish with the fenugreek, my tails go in, then the ginger. After that, it'll be time to add the peppermint, and the potion will be done."

As soon as Hermione added the peppermint, Draco turned her to face him, looking at her chest and shoulders, his eyes sweeping over her exposed skin intently.

"What?" she asked, unsure why he was staring at her so.

"Did you get any of it on you? I couldn't stop to check," he said concerned. "You won't feel any burning; it's like tingling, a cold tingling feeling?"

"No, I don't think so," she replied as he took her hand to examine her arm carefully. "Really, Draco, you pulled me away before it splashed on me. I'm fine."

"Okay, just checking," he said, turning away from her and walking to the storeroom. "You check on the other potion while I get the stuff for our next. When that potion," he said, pointing to the potion they'd just made, "starts to get a white foam, lower the heat. I'll be back."

Making the third potion went a lot more smoothly between them. Brewing with Draco wasn't as comfortable as brewing with Snape, and he definitely wasn't as skilled, but she did notice that he was more accomplished now than when he'd been at school. Draco still on occasion called her Granger, but he would amend his statements and questions by adding her given name. For the most part, this was the most amiable he'd ever been with her. He was even looking at her differently, more appraisingly, and often had a curious look in his eyes. *Well, he is under orders to get along with me and be friends*

There were only three more steps to do on the first potion when Draco suddenly hissed. "I'm being summoned. Stay in the potions lab until I get back. Follow the next steps exactly, and let the potion simmer. Peren will give you whatever you need," he barked at her as he ran from the room.

As fate would have it, it was only an hour later that Hermione felt the urge to relieve herself. She looked around the room, contemplating what to do. The constant trickle of the water from the spout on the wall into the catch basin wasn't helping matters any. In fact, it was making things far more uncomfortable. Draco had been adamant, as had Snape, that she wasn't to wander the house unattended, but she really had to go. *Apparently, neither trust Wormtail, but he's not home... I think?* She bit her lip and squeezed her legs together. The constant trickle of water seemed louder than usual, and she simply couldn't disregard the sound. *I've got to go... can't turn it off... I've really got to go... He couldn't have meant that I can't go to the loo... augh....* Gingerly, she walked to the door, opened it, and listened.

She could hear the trickling sound of the water behind her, but nothing else.

Hermione slipped through the door and closed it slightly behind her to cut off the sound of the water, feeling a shiver down her spine. She listened intently for any of the noises Wormtail usually made.

Silence.

Hermione quickly ran down the hall and up the stairs, the urge to pee becoming unbearable. On her way back downstairs, Hermione heard a door slam. Feeling much lighter, she assumed that either Snape or Draco had just come home. She hoped that the wards to the potions lab still recognized her.

Wormtail suddenly rounded the corner in the hallway as she passed the dining room doorway, and Hermione came to an abrupt halt.

His eyes opened wide as soon as he saw her, and then he smiled lasciviously. "Hermione, sweetness, how delightful to see you," he said, his eyes traveling down her body disarmingly, taking in the green silky night slip and robe, eyeing her with a lustful appreciation.

"Where's Snape?" she asked, then immediately regretted it. The way he was looking at her made her terribly uncomfortable.

The Rat smiled as he slid his hands on his baggy jeans as if they were sweaty, and took a step toward her. "He's not here?"

"Potions lab," she squeaked, taking a step backwards.

"No, I don't think so," he said, moving closer, licking his lips, his eyes fixated on her chest, and she instinctively moved backwards again. "Snape went to Hogwarts this morning. He's not here, is he? He'd be out here by now if he were. No, it's just you and me all alone isn't it?" he asked, stalking after her. "And I finally get to talk to you to

explain." He tried to reach out for her and grab her arm, and she flinched, stepping backward. "Hermione, sweetheart, don't be afraid of me. Please, don't be like this. I just want to talk to you."

"No, I think you've said enough," she said, slipping into the dining room.

Wormtail followed her. "Hermione, wait, love..."

Bugger. The lab... "Please, leave me alone," Hermione pleaded. "If Snape stepped out it's only for a minute he's due back..."

"Hermione, I just want to talk to you, so you can get to know me better," he said as she slipped out the other door.

Hermione tried to get into the potions lab. The sharp, stinging sensations made her recoil as she reached for the doorknob *Trapped! The loo, I can lock myself in the loo!* She turned to run down the hall for the stairs but Wormtail stepped in her way.

"Hermione, sweet Hermione, don't run. I'm not going to hurt you I promise. Not like last time." His eyes raked over her, his expression libidinous.

He smells of booze! "Oh, I bet. What about your hand? Huh? Please, just leave me alone," she pleaded, turning around in hallway *Nowhere to go there's nowhere I can go!* She ran for the classroom door and found that it was locked. Wormtail had followed her, reached out and grasped her hand, pulling her to him. Hermione stumbled, and he pinned her against the wall, his silver hand pressed on the wall by her head as the other slid up the side of her body.

"I so remember how you used to touch me, Hermione. The way your fingers stroked my fur," he cooed, leaning into her.

Hermione ducked, her body brushing his as she maneuvered away from him. "You were *arat* Ron's *pet*. I didn't know! I wouldn't have if I'd known you were you." She ran into the dining room.

Wormtail followed. "Are you sure about that?" He nearly grabbed hold of her robe when she tried to reach the other door. "You used to hold me against your breasts... and said I was nice." He lunged for her, and Hermione slipped around the table.

She darted right and he matched her. She darted left, then right again, each time matched by Wormtail.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked.

"Oh, Hermione, I like you. I want you. You would let me sit on your lap... Oh, do you have any idea how *good* you smelled?" he asked, his eyes going momentarily glossy as if remembering.

My lap? He means... Oh, gods! Down there! Hermione darted to the other side of the table. "Do you honestly think I'd have held you like that, held you on my lap, if I'd known you were a man?" she asked. She tried to go around the table to the other door but he matched her movements on the opposite side of the table.

"You said you liked me said I was sweet," he said, his smile licentious, as they sparred around the table.

"I thought you were simply a *rat*, a *pet!*" she exclaimed. "I didn't know you were *apervert!*"

"I'm not, Hermione. Just give me a chance to prove it to you," he said as she darted right again, then faked a left and ran around dining table, escaping into the hall.

She tried to turn and go to the stairs, but the Rat jumped out of the other door and chased her *I cannot open potions lab or the classroom...* He chased her down the hall to the back door. Wormtail finally got ahold of her robes and tried pulling her. She flung off the garment and turned around, trapped.

He smelled the fabric as he moved forward. "Oh, my sweet, Hermione, don't be afraid..."

She backed against the door and tried the doorknob. *Locked! Oh gods! Severus come home please come home...* Wormtail lunged for her again, his hand latching onto her arm, causing the doorknob to turn. Hermione nearly tripped as they stumbled down the stoop and landed with a hard thud on the grass, Wormtail lying practically on top of her. Hermione kicked and scratched at him to break free as he tried to position himself better and fend off her attacks while still holding onto her. They rolled slightly, and she managed to push away from him and gain her feet. *Grimmauld Place*, she thought as she hastily Disapparated. She felt a searing pain ripping through her consciousness and a sudden wave of excruciating cold and fear, before everything in her mind simply went blank.

Author's Notes:

Poor Hermione. I know that she is really being immature lately, but I've a reason for this. She is still only a teenager and possibly not ready for the adult world. I'm afraid to say I'm that there is more bad news ahead for her... but she is about to make a new friend.

It seems I now have two women to thank for their assistance. I want to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. And to Cocoachristy for her added support and kind words of encouragement. Thank you both very much. I appreciate it more than they could possibly know.

The Splinching

Chapter 11 of 43

Severus has had a day from Hades. Beginning with staff meetings, dealing with Minerva, Poppy and Alecto squabbling about everything, followed by being confronted by Belinda, the one woman he'd least like to see, and an angry Narcissa... This just wasn't his day. Not only that, but he'd arrived home just in time to see Hermione trying to escape from Wormtail. Merlin, is the Dark Lord going to be mad about this!



~*~

His day couldn't get any worse. Severus had slipped from bed earlier than normal when Hermione's feet kicked him awake, and he'd just managed to roll away before her arm went flying toward his pillow with a thump. He'd stumbled down the hall, heading for the kitchen, just as a great horned owl screeched from the sitting room announcing his presence and carrying a cryptic note from Cillian. Moreover, although breakfast with his friend had been enjoyable, considering they could hear Hermione's tantrum through the dining room ceiling, Cillian's warnings had bothered him. He knew his friend was growing dissatisfied, wavering in his loyalties, but Severus still felt the timing wasn't right to introduce Cillian into the Order. Well, his one and only contact, the one wizard who still trusted him.

Draco had been in a foul mood after having been woken by the crash of Severus' favorite glasses and Hermione's resonating scream, protesting loudly after he'd been told that he was to spend the day working with her. Only being under the threat of the Cruciatus Curse and reminded, yet again, that the Dark Lord *wanted* Draco to befriend Hermione, possibly being probed by the Dark Lord under Legilimency to prove he was, had brought the boy around. At least Draco had finally consented to *try* and convince Hermione that he wanted to be on friendlier terms. What amused Severus was that Draco was jealous of Hermione on so many levels.

Then there was the concern that followed him all day that Draco was likely to be summoned, and Severus didn't want Hermione left unattended in the house, especially when Wormtail had such overt desires for her. Needless to say, he was at least pleased that Hermione had chosen to cooperate and work amicably with Draco rather than sulk and continue destroying his property in their bedroom all day. Besides, she was starting to get past the wards on his bookshelves, which he just couldn't allow. Severus kept his questionable books in his room, the ones Draco and the Rat couldn't know about. Nevertheless, he'd hoped that Hermione was following Draco's instructions amicably and that if Draco was summoned, she'd sit quietly in Draco's room until either he or Draco could get home.

The staff meetings at Hogwarts had been a fiasco. Thankfully, Cillian had chosen to situate himself between Minerva, Poppy, and Alec to Carrow. Never before had he been more appreciative of his best friend's way with the ladies and his skill at deflection, both verbal and magical. As Severus had expected, Minerva refused to step down as Deputy Headmistress, saying that the Ministry could sidestep her and place him above her, but she'd be smothered by a Lethifold before she'd relinquish her position to Alec. Secretly, Severus was pleased by her insistence and determination. He'd rather have Minerva as his Deputy than Alec anyway. At least Minerva would *do* the job, keep up on the paper work, and not just wear the title like a badge. That and he was counting on Minerva to stand up against the Carrows to help protect the kids. Severus knew he'd be battling both sides all year: the four Death Eaters versus the *real* staff of Hogwarts. If only he could trust in Minerva, Pomona and Filius enough to confide in them, but he couldn't take the risk. They were good, honest people, capable, but not very good liars.

On the up side, the Hogwarts charter also supported Horace's position as Head of Slytherin, since neither Alec to nor Amycus could displace him unless Horace himself decided to step down, which thankfully Horace had declined resigning. At least the four Heads of House would act as staunch advocates and defenders for the students, but he was secretly concerned for the Hufflepuffs, Ravenclaws and Gryffindors. He'd seen Filch smiling with glee as he'd been listening raptly to both Alec to and Amycus prior to the meeting, and that alone had sent shivers down his spine.

Severus was glad to seek the quiet of his office, if nearly twenty-four portraits angrily accosting him with boos and hisses could be considered quiet. No, he'd have given his left nut to be able to keep his office in the dungeons. Nevertheless, the pleasant garden painting in his new private chambers had a lovely bench or so the painted memory and essence used to create the portrait of his mentor and friend, Dumbledore, had told him. He knew Dumbledore had left more than just a faint imprint of himself behind as was usually ensnared into the paint; it was nearly a full imprint in order to give counsel to Severus, knowing he'd really need it, which gave him some comfort. He'd hated confiding in Dumbledore about the events since his departure from Hogwarts last term and especially that which had happened over the summer, including his impeding hand fasting to Hermione Granger. Nevertheless, after careful, if not occasionally heated, explanations to the portrait, Dumbledore was at least sympathetic and understanding. Dumbledore pleaded with Severus to be more forthright with Hermione, something Severus just couldn't do. Hermione was too open, too trusting, and he couldn't risk giving her information that could jeopardize his precarious position. Especially now, as things seemed to be escalating in the Dark Lord's favor, he had no way of assuring that Potter would be ready when the time came.

No sooner than he'd had a long conversation with Dumbledore's portrait than his Dark Mark burned, and Severus had to bid his true master adieu.

~o0o~

"But he didn't support me at all!" the dulcet sounds of Alec to's voice echoed down the manor all the way to the foyer. "He let that old cow that Gryffindor Head of House and *rule-the-castle-wench* stand there and challenge my qualifications! My right to be Deputy Headmistress!"

Severus hadn't waited to be ushered to the room, he just stood waiting patiently in the doorway of the large room for the Dark Lord to acknowledge him. Nagini was the first to see him and hissed to her master. "Severus, come in and *explain*," the Dark Lord demanded, irritated.

Severus entered and bowed, closing his mind, quickly formulating which images he'd allow the Dark Lord to see before rising. "It is as she's said," he began, ignoring Alec to's outraged expression. "I did not prevent Minerva McGonagall from reassuming her role as Deputy Headmistress. I felt her continued service in that capacity would be... beneficial."

The Dark Lord languidly brandished his wand in his fingers in his deceptive gesture of pacified indifference. "Severus, I placed her there to reform the school in the manner befitting the original intent of Salazar Slytherin. I had thought my intentions were quite clear."

"Yes, my Lord, they are. However, there are twenty-seven staff members returning to Hogwarts this year, even with your appointment of the Carrows, Rowle and Travers. I fully expected, and was not surprised, that the staff and school governors weren't very receptive of the new changes. However, keeping Minerva in her post showed stability at least in appearances and they are coming around," Severus explained, keeping his tone respectful and his expression neutral. "Moreover, Minerva is familiar with the duties, forms and meetings, which fall to the Deputy Head office as well as a familiarity with the running of the school. In addition, many families are familiar with Minerva and will be more confident with the other changes I've needed to implement and will be more accepting of *your* school policies if I can gain her backing or at least the perception of her accord."

The Dark Lord's expression remained displeased, but Severus could tell his interest was piqued. "What other changes to my directions have you made, Severus?" he asked, his red eyes scrutinizing Severus's face.

"Two, my Lord," he answered confidently. "First, I had a talk with the Heads of Houses concerning the arrangements in regards to Hermione Granger. As I will want her at Hogwarts with me, she will be attending school. I made it quite clear that she'll be attending her classes with a guard to assure her safety without naming whom I've selected to watch her, although the true purpose of this guard is really to control her extracurricular activities. I also informed Minerva that Hermione will be staying in the Headmaster's quarters with me, *not* the Gryffindor dormitory."

"The old wench really disliked that arrangement, I can assure you, my Lord," Alec to interrupted.

Severus ignored her outburst, smiling inwardly. *Yes, Minerva had certainly pitched a fit over that one as did Pomona, Filius, Septima, Bathsheba, Horace and Hagrid. They had not been pleased at all...* "My only concessions were to allow Hermione to eat meals with her house since I'll be sitting in the Headmaster's chair in the Great Hall, and

she will be allowed to retain her prefect status." Severus smiled as the Dark Lord nodded, his fingers curling around his wand, holding it more firmly, indicating a more composed bearing. "The other change is that Cillian will be escorting Hermione to and from classes, and anywhere she goes on or off the school grounds. He has happily agreed to this."

The Dark Lord's eyes flashed dangerously and narrowed, but Severus remained poised. "I thought that Draco would be escorting her to classes and around the school grounds. Is he not enacting the role as her friend as he'd reported?"

"There have been too many years of distrust, animosity and aggression between them to make such a transition so quickly, although there has been remarkable improvement in Draco's efforts. So far, they are just beginning to get along. Also, Hermione shall be carrying on in classes that Draco won't be taking. Hermione will be taking nine subjects, and he's only carrying seven, six of which they have in common, leaving three of her subjects that he will not be attending. Since I am no longer Head of Slytherin and Horace Slughorn is, I'm not sure that I can exact the same control over the students as I'd done in the past or not as directly. Discipline falls under the teaching staff and Head of Houses. It's due to these reasons I have elected to have Cillian follow her."

"Very well, Severus. And the Headmaster's office recognizes you?" the Dark Lord asked, and Severus nodded. "The portraits acknowledge you? The denizens of the castle obey you?" Again, Severus nodded, and the Dark Lord visibly relaxed. "All right, I am willing to accept your decisions..."

"But, my Lord, I was..." Alecto interrupted, incensed.

"And shall deal with you later!" the Dark Lord snapped, pointing his wand at her, his red eyes angry. "Severus, you may go. I shall see you soon enough. Update me if there are any changes or complications. You're dismissed," he said, his eyes never leaving Alecto.

Severus left the room, smugly knowing that his decision to keep Minerva as Deputy Head would not only be supported by the Dark Lord, but was about to be reinforced forcibly and Alecto would be brought around to comply from now on. He walked to the other side of the house seeking out Cillian.

Unfortunately, he ran into Narcissa Malfoy in the drawing room. "There you are. I've been looking for you," she said amicably enough, although lately she'd been rather cool toward him.

"Yes, Narcissa," he said dully, hoping that this wasn't the usual plea to have Draco released from his apprenticeship.

She ignored his tone and smiled coolly. "When would you like to be fitted for your robes? My tailor has informed me that you've declined his request for an appointment."

"My usual robes shall suffice, Narcissa," he said dryly.

"For your wedding? Seriously, Severus, you cannot be what will your bride think? That reminds me, I will need to have the Mudb Hermione fitted for her robes as well. Which color would you prefer? Red, white or black? Or should I ask your bride which she prefers?"

"Any color will suffice. It's a hand fasting, Narcissa, not a wedding. Such ceremony will follow if and when she proves fertile." He looked down the hall, hoping to escape the rest of her meddling.

"No, my friend," she said smugly, standing before him haughtily. "You'll be properly married. I assure you."

He eyes narrowed dangerously as he turned back to her. "Pardon me?"

"Did you forget that *all* eligible wizards are to be married and produce future loyal followers? The Dark Lord was most insistent on this, and you, Severus, are no exception," she replied with an elegant but wicked grin. "You're getting *married*, Severus. The Dark Lord has already approved the arrangements. You will be marrying your fiancée on the thirtieth."

"The Dark Lord has strongly suggested that his followers make pureblood matches to strengthen their family lines," Severus pointed out. "Miss Granger is Muggle-born and therefore not part of the Dark Lord's plans. When I first accepted Miss Granger, he'd been content with my keeping her as my paramour. I'm not sure why he changed his mind."

"Yes, that was the arrangement, wasn't it? However, foreseeing the need to strengthen our numbers, our Lord has decided that his *loyal* followers, who are half-blood or less, are to marry eligible purebloods and improve their lines," Narcissa said with a purr. "But he gave you Miss Granger as a gift for your steadfast loyalty and service as a reward, did he not? Therefore, you are being granted special leave to marry your Mudblood because of her exalted brilliance and power. Isn't that why you wanted her in the first place, Severus?" Her usually cool demeanor faltered, and her expression suddenly looked disdainful and vindictive.

Severus suddenly wanted to strangle her. "Narcissa, just why are you so Hades-bent on forcing me to marry Hermione Granger?" It was all starting to click into place. *She's the one pushing this marriage through. She's the one who convinced the Dark Lord that I should marry Miss Granger rather than simply keeping her as my consort* "The Dark Lord was content, so why are you pushing this?"

"Because you told the Dark Lord about the vow, and you took Draco from me! I wanted him home this summer *with me!*" she said venomously. "You have usurped my family and turned my son against me! I asked you to protect and help him, not ruin his place in the circle by telling the Dark Lord he is a coward. Instead, he is in disfavor and living with you."

She was told not to talk about the Dark Lord's plans, but came to me anyway and was then accused of 'great treachery,' just as I'd predicted. That's why she wants revenge. He sighed heavily. "Narcissa, I did not tell him about the vow. The Dark Lord saw it in *our* minds, yours and mine, when we came before him after Dumbledore was killed. I never said nor implied to our master that Draco was a coward, quite the contrary. However, Amycus and Rowle had already given their accounts, and Draco's mind was probed with Legilimency. The Dark Lord demanded an explanation as to why you came to me asking me to watch over and protect your son. He was furious at you, *at your treachery*, I believe he called it, and ordered me to continue with the promises of the vow and *he* placed Draco in my home *his* orders."

"He's my son, Severus. My only child," she hissed angrily. "Can't you..."

"No, Narcissa, I can't. Not until the Dark Lord decides it's time. He put him under my tutelage. He was sent to me by our Lord as my apprentice, and he is receiving the best instruction I can give him. I'm to teach him things not taught at Hogwarts, specifically curses and the Dark Arts. You know this." Severus knew she'd been growing increasingly bitter about something lately, but *this* argument was getting old. "He will finish his last year at Hogwarts and then join the inner circle just like his father did."

"He'd given Draco an impossible task Severus, please." She lowered her voice. "The demands he's making, the things the new recruits are asked to do..." She straightened, the pleading mother pose gone, and her posture became rigid again. "I want my son back. I want to have him at home. He can Apparate to your house for his tutelage daily if need be, but I want my son at home."

"You are welcome in my home anytime you are free to visit, and Draco is free to visit you," he said, bristling at her tone with him. "But the conditions were that Draco move into my house and any extended visits or trips have to be approved. Other than that, Draco is free to come and go as he's needed. If he's not visiting as frequently as you'd like, maybe, just maybe, he likes having the strings cut and is enjoying the sense of freedom. Do not think that I am keeping him from you."

She clenched her hands into fists. "I'm not allowed to visit your home as frequently..."

"That is not my doing, Narcissa. I have never refused your visits. Ever," he said as smoothly as his temper would allow. "Nor have I ever declined any request he's made to spend time with you. I suspect that the Dark Lord doesn't want Draco's lessons interrupted. However, if you'd like to come by for dinner, I'll inform him."

"I want Draco home where he belongs or at least home for the weekends. If I can't have that, I want him home for dinners!" she said angrily.

"I have no control over what you want, Narcissa. Draco has never been denied permission to dine with you. He is a man now accept that," he said a bit more harshly than he'd intended, but she was infuriating lately. "All kids grow up and leave home. He is an adult."

"You'll regret taking my son away from me," she stated vehemently.

Severus stood straighter and glared her down. "Narcissa, don't make an enemy of me. I have *notaken* Draco *from* you. Having Draco as my responsibility and my apprentice is the Dark Lord's decision, not mine." Her head dropped and she turned her face away from him. "I thought so. It's easier to blame me, isn't it, instead of facing the fact that it might be Draco who doesn't choose to come over every night to see you?" Her grey eyes met his with a scathing glare. "That's the real reason, isn't, Narcissa? You don't want to admit that it might be Draco's choice. Good day. I'll extend your request to Draco again, but do not fault me if he declines." *Damn witch*, he thought angrily as he walked away, his robes billowing behind him. *Foolish, foolish woman...*

He hadn't gone too far before the other witch he'd been trying to avoid accosted him in the hall.

"Severus, dear," Belinda's voice purred from the hallway he'd just entered. "Come to find me at last?"

Shite! Severus carefully controlled his expression to something far more polite than he felt at seeing her. "Hello, Belinda. I'm sorry, but no, I was looking for Cillian actually. Have you seen him?"

"He's upstairs, presently occupied with Mum." She stepped closer to him, leaning in to whisper in his ear, and he nearly gagged on her perfume. "I've so missed you and our... interludes. Surely he can wait. Couldn't you find time for a friend?"

"Not now, Belinda, I've things to do. I'm preparing for my new year at Hogwarts, and as you're aware, I'm getting married," he said the last a bit too bitterly.

She caught his tone, giving him one of her most seductive smiles. "Surely that won't come between us? You've never minded such trivialities before. Are you sure you wouldn't like a diversion from all of your planning?" she asked, trying her best to act demure, looping her arm around his. "We could always slip upstairs for a private *chat?*"

"Belinda, please. I do not have the time, and I, presently, do not have the inclination," he stated, disengaging her arm. "Please, forgive me, but I'm looking for your brother regarding a business matter."

"He's in Mum's room, consoling her," she said, undeterred. "Why don't I show you the way?"

I'm not going upstairs with Belinda. "How about you simply call one of your house-elves and have it fetch him for me?" he asked, still looking down the hall hoping to see Cillian. "Come to think about it, where are your house-elves? They are never this remiss..."

"Granddad somehow broke in, snapped Dad out of the Imperius and sent all the house-elves off somewhere," Belinda bemoaned. "I've yet to find them."

"That's because you left Mum and Dad drooling on the parlor sofa," Cillian said, suddenly rounding the corner with a sly smile, giving Severus a subtle wink. He turned to Belinda. "Leave him alone, Bell, and attend to your own husband. Or doesn't old Horrance meet your needs well enough?"

"Watch it little brother, or you'll regret it," she warned.

"I'm the only brother who'll speak to you anymore, or haven't you noticed?" He turned to Severus, ignoring his sister's retort. "Sorry I didn't return your owl, but we seem to be relocating. Mum's upstairs, using her smelling salts, and Dad's left, so the house won't be secure for too much longer. Bell's been edgy about it, and Horrance threatening to do her nut."

"You cannot speak to me like that," Belinda snarled, drawing her wand.

"And Bellatrix has been cooing over our Lord all morning, and he hasn't allowed Bell here an audience all day," he said, ignoring his sister. "So, Severus, you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, I need to talk to you about your duties at Hogwarts," Severus stated, eagerly wishing he could leave, not really wanting to get between brother and sister.

"So, baby brother, you're still going to go back to school?" she teased. "How quaint. Used up all the witches at the club?"

"Beats getting married, Bell." He held up his hand to cut her off again. "I'm not going to marry anyone not at this time. The Dark Lord has other plans for me, and I'm not going to be available to conjugate with your broodmare. Leave off; your intrusive match-making impositions are unappreciated and unwelcome."

"It's a good match! You should be so lucky," she said angrily. "Just be thankful Larissa will still have you! If only Bryon had listened to me, he wouldn't have made such a poor match..."

"Leave it alone, Belinda. Marc and Justin agree. Lay off, please," Cillian warned, walking away, motioning for Severus to follow him as he quickly sprinted down the hall, outside and quickly led Severus into the rose garden. Cillian turned to face him and swore. "Merlin that woman! I'm not going to marry the twit!"

"I take it you've had as fine a day as mine?" Severus asked with a grin. "So, what's in the garden you needed to show me?"

"The nerve of that woman! And Horrance is upstairs recovering from being Crucioed! Do you know Justin won't even talk to her anymore after what she did to Madeline and Lewis or to Bryon and Stephanie not to mention our nieces and nephews! They are all now on the hit list! And she's worried about her sex life and my breeding eligibility!"

"You might want to keep your voice down," Severus suggested. "The walls here have ears..."

"Not so much anymore," Cillian said with a grin, but lowered his voice anyway. "Between you 'n' me, you missed the fun, ol' bat. Granddad showed up, got past all the wards, and entered through the side door near the servants' porch. No one saw him at all nor knows how he did it, although no one else could've pulled this off. Managed to Unimperius Mum and Dad and then skirted of with ol' Ben, the vault key and the house-elves. Sorry, but I agree with Granddad that house-elves shouldn't be snake food. Anyway, the Dark Lord was in such a fit, he started Crucioing everyone in sight. He's still in there with Bellatrix, being pacified. Everyone that could, fled. The house is nearly empty. Frankly, I couldn't get away."

"Well, if you're in the mind of getting away, how about coming with me back to Spinner's End?" Severus offered. "You could join us for dinner. You need to get to know Hermione, and I need to discuss your role at Hogwarts."

"Love to," Cillian said with a rakish grin. "So, I finally get to see your witch again, eh, ol' bat?"

"Sure, you ol' dog, just follow me. You know the Apparation site." Severus didn't wait for Cillian to answer before he Disapparated. A second crack sounded just after Cillian's loud pop, and both men drew their wands, aiming at a startled Draco.

"Whoa, what?" Draco said, holding up his hands.

"Nothing, just startled," Cillian said lowering his wand. "Hi."

"It's your timing," Severus replied, stowing his wand. "I'm supposed to inform you your mother would like you for dinner again." Draco scowled and rolled his eyes. "You

know she's furious that you don't see her enough. You could go..."

"I could. Look, I don't want to. All she did last time was moan about me moving into your house and complain that I could simply Apparate here every day. She's smothering... Fine, I'll see her tonight," Draco said as they walked toward the house. "Besides, last time I stayed with her, all she wanted to do was take me shopping, chat about all her charitable events... Oh, and we had a nice time in her garden plucking flowers and changing the color of her roses. But really, I've more important things to do."

Cillian looked at Draco with a knowing smile. "Apron stings are so hard to sever, aren't they? At least you don't have meddling sisters."

"No, being an only child does have its advantages and its disadvantages, believe me," Severus stated. "Did you finish the potions the Dark Lord requested before you were summoned?"

"Yes, two of them. The one we were to brew in the silver cauldron still had two or three steps to go, and Granger could manage those without me. I left her in the potions lab so that she could do so," Draco said casually, and Severus cocked an eyebrow at him.

"You left Hermione alone in my lab?" he asked, suspicious. "And how long ago was that?"

"Little over an hour or so, I think," Draco responded warily. "The Dark Lord sent me on an errand."

Cillian smiled as he took in the exchange. "This should be good. You left her locked up alone in the lab with all those ingredients and potions for her to peruse?"

"And my potion books. She'll be curled in a chair with some or several of my books, reading contently," he stated, hoping that was the case.

"Your potions books? Even the *prohibited* ones? Man, you are brave," Cillian said, amused as the men entered the house and walked across the sitting room. "I'm still amused that you keep your potions books in another room. Couldn't you fit them in here among all your novels?" Cillian commented humorously, waving his hand toward the bookshelves.

"I have books on the usual subjects, not just novels, and I keep the novels in my bedroom," Severus replied casually, although distractedly. He was eager to check on Hermione and the potions. "Besides, I like having my potions books handy when I need them."

"You have more books in your bedroom?" Cillian asked, amused. "You always did like reading, made buying you birthday gifts easy."

Severus smirked at his friend as he opened the hidden doorway in the bookshelves. As soon as they entered the hallway, he could hear people struggling, and Wormtail cry out to Hermione. "*Shite!*" Severus swore, running to stop the Rat, and just before he turned the corner in the hall, he heard the back door slam closed. *I'm going to kill that Rat!* Severus snarled as he raced through the house for the back door, followed closely by both Cillian and Draco.

Severus bolted through the door and jumped over the stoop, wand drawn, just as the loud ripping crack sounded as Hermione splinched. Wormtail stood there, holding Hermione's hand, most of her body still attached, although severed cleanly from her right shoulder to her left hip, as though cut by a sword, and the ground was quickly turning red.

Draco and Cillian entered the back garden behind him, obviously having seen what he'd just witnessed. "Shite, man," Cillian swore as he landed on the ground next to Severus.

Severus wasted no time, hoping for the best. *Retineo Sanguinis! Captus Arteriae, Coerceo Continere!* he immediately cast in succession as Cillian quickly responded to the scene before him, crying out, "*Cohibeo Sanguen! Contentum Intus Venas, Amplector Coercere!*" The part of body Wormtail still had now looked as if it had been cauterized, like a cartoon cross-section of her body that wasn't the least bit comical except in cartoons.

"Severus, this won't do any good without her other half," Cillian practically shouted. *Amplector Coercere.*

"I'll get Tranker," Draco said, Disapparating away as Wormtail tried to make a dash for the house.

"*You, Rat, open the door!*" Severus shouted as Wormtail reached for the doorknob.

Wormtail stopped and stood aside, holding the door wide open, trembling.

"*Patefacio lab door, Accio Essence of Dittany!*" Severus cast forcefully, and two green bottles flew to him. The whole side of Hermione's body looked as if it was drenched in her blood.

"I've got this! Go!" Cillian nearly shouted, taking a bottle from Severus's hand. "If you have any idea where she'll have gone go. I've got things here." He turned to the Rat. "Wormtail, have you a wand, man? Get over here!" Reluctantly Wormtail returned. *Amplector Coercere.* Repeat this every ten seconds. Keep her lungs open."

"Draco went to get his Healer, but get yours too, and hurry! Two will be better than one," Severus ordered Cillian, and then looked at Wormtail with a dangerously dark glare. "Stay with her until either Draco or Cillian return. Do not transform into a rat and cower away," he demanded. "Or you *will* regret it."

Wormtail was nodding, looking at Severus with a terrified expression.

"All right, I'm going for our Healer, Pushpa." Cillian cast Wormtail a malicious glare. "You leave, and he's not the only one you'll have to fear."

Wormtail turned to look at Cillian, and the sniveling Rat almost looked ready to cry.

"*Retineo Coercitum Contineo,*" Severus added for good measure and then Apparated to the Burrow.

The house was quiet and dark.

Severus immediately Apparated to Grimmauld Place.

Lupin sat on the steps holding Hermione's head and left arm while he and Nymphadora cast spells to retain her blood. Both looked up at him, startled, as Severus quickly ran up and poured the rest of contents of the essence of Dittany on the wound, watching as the greenish smoke instantly billowed upward, then cleared. With trepidation, Snape waited two more seconds to be assured the bleeding had stopped. "Lupin, Tonks, I have to take her," he snapped and immediately regretted it, amending his tone. "Her other half is with Death Eaters as we speak, and I must take her back."

"No, you bring her other half here," Lupin argued.

"Remus, Snape, please, not now," Tonks said, straining with the spell she was using. *Concipere Anima Capere.* She needs a Healer; this is bad! I can't hold the blood much longer."

"There are two Healers with her other half," Severus lied, although he prayed that it was the truth. "I have to bring her back now."

Tonks nodded, and Lupin opened his mouth to protest, but she cut him off. "I don't like this Snape, if she dies..."

"She won't. I give you my word my wand pledge to you as an Auror. She'll I'll do everything I can, but we are wasting time she doesn't have!"

"You cannot be thinking about letting him take her?" Lupin argued with a snarl. "The Accidental Magic Reversal Squad..."

"May not get here in time, and we don't know where she splinched from. Remus, I can't fight Death Eaters and retain her blood... Snape, you said you have Healers?" Tonks asked.

Severus nodded. "Two with her other half as we speak, already starting the Repairing Charms," he said with more confidence than he felt, mentally crossing his fingers and growing restless with the delay. Tonks nodded, regret and distrust in her eyes, but Severus didn't care. *At least she isn't fighting me on this* "Tonks, I have to take her now! I will do everything I can for her."

Lupin looked outraged. "Dora, no, we have to..."

"On three. You know as soon as you Disapparate my spells holding in her blood will fail," she said.

"Yes, I'm aware of that." Severus grasped Hermione's forearm tightly, wishing he could take the time to explain, but knew there wasn't. "The Healers will be ready."

Lupin tried to disengage Severus's hand. "No."

"All right, on three," Tonks conceded.

"I'm ready. One, two, three," he said and Apparated back to his back garden in Spinner's End. Cillian and a Healer were standing on the back stoop when he appeared. Immediately, he and Cillian repeated the spells to enclose and retain what blood Hermione's half had and to contain what they could of the blood leaking out.

"Wormtail took her other half into the dining room with Draco's Healer and a Healer Dunlap," Cillian stated. "You remember Pushpa Bastula?" Severus recognized the petite Indian woman with the long, black braid who had immediately began casting spells on Hermione's head and wound as soon as they'd appeared.

Severus nodded once, but wasted no time on courtesy. He simply picked up Hermione's upper half, dropped the wards and Apparated into his house. The back door closed the second he set her head and shoulder where it should be in relation to the lower half of her body on the enlarged table. Cillian and Healer Bastula entered just as he was standing up. Healer Tranker and a short, stocky wizard with wiry hair were already beginning the Repairing Charms.

"Tell me what you need, and I'll get it," Severus stated. He'd rather do something productive than stand around watching anyway.

"Obviously you know your retaining spells," Healer Bastula said, joining the others at the table. "Keep up on those, will you? We could use the wand help for the moment. She'll need Blood Replenishing-Potion, and various regenerative potions but let's get her back together first."

"I'll get the ones we used when Goyle splinched," Draco said, looking pale.

Healer Bastula frowned as she answered a short, stocky wizard. "Dunlap, I'll reattach circulatory damage while you mend her spine. Cillian, help Pettigrew keep her lungs open."

"Nerves are cut clean, I can get those," Healer Dunlap replied.

The Healers began the complicated spells that would put Hermione completely right while Severus cast the spells to contain what little blood Hermione still had within her, and Cillian and Wormtail made her breathe. Hermione was pale and waxy-looking wherever the sickening color of drying blood didn't cover her. The Healers worked well together, and quickly, severed bones, arteries, veins, nerves and muscle tissues were reconnected and magically mended with the various Healing Charms. To Severus the process was excruciating slow. Comments that passed between the Healers kept his nerves on edge, and he fought a sense of dread that Hermione wouldn't recover.

"But that could cause more damage..." Healer Bastula complained.

"She's lost so much blood already, Dunlap," Healer Tranker said as he bent over Hermione's chest.

Healer Dunlap looked up quickly, then back to Hermione's body. "They acted fast, she just might..."

Tranker sighed. "Practically bled to death, especially with such a massive cut..."

"Tranker, stimulate her heart, and let's see if we've matched everything well enough before we continue," Healer Dunlap suggested, and Severus held his breath. Nothing happened, and once again the Healers began their spells.

Hermione's skin looked so pale, so moist and clammy. Her eyes were slightly sunken, her usually rosy cheeks shallow and her lips nearly white. Her chest rose suddenly, then compressed, and Severus realized that Cillian was making Hermione breathe, repeating his Resuscitation Charm on a five-stroke count.

"Son, do you feel up to making the Deep Tissue Regenerative Potion?" Healer Dunlap asked. For a moment, Severus thought the Healer had spoken to him.

Draco spoke up from behind Severus's shoulder. "We have the Deep Tissue Regenerative and the Blood-Replenishing Potion already. I also have the Muscle Reparative you asked for, and I brought more essence of Dittany." Healer Bastula accepted the bottles with a grateful smile.

Healer Tranker smiled. "She'll need the Blood-Replenishing Potion right way as soon as we know that she'll wake up. But there are potions that will be needed if Miss Granger wakes," he said and rattled off a list of six potions, five Severus knew he already had on hand. Severus nodded and tapped Draco's shoulder as he turned to go to the potions lab. Draco returned his nod and quickly followed. Severus quickly checked his copy of Drowit's *Moste Potente Healing Potions*. He flicked his wand at the wall to make the directions appear so he'd be ready to brew the desired potions if and when Hermione woke up, then asked Draco to collect the ingredients. Severus collected the five potions he had on hand, asking Draco to begin brewing the Pain Potion, and returned to the dining room.

The Healers were still attentively ministering to Hermione. New skin began appearing as he watched, stretching to cover what had just been open flesh, closing what looked like a deep gash. It looked several days old instead of fresh, although the skin didn't have her normal peach tone. Severus stood by her head, one hand unconsciously smoothed her hair away from her face as he looked down at her, deeply concerned. Cillian looked up at him, giving his friend an anxious smile from the kitchen. Peren exchanged a bowl of red water for a bowl of fresh water and a clean flannel for Healer Tranker.

After several agonizing moments, Hermione moaned and tried to struggle. "What? No! Get off me... Leave me alone..."

"Hold her down!" Healer Tranker cried. Severus placed his hands on her shoulders. She looked paler if that was even possible. She felt cold and clammy under his hands, but her struggles were feeble and weak.

"Miss Hermione," Severus said, leaning close to her, making his voice as silky smooth as he could. "I have you; you are safe."

"He did... He tried..." she stammered incoherently.

"I know. You are safe now. I am here, and he will not hurt you," Severus continued silkily, caressing her cheek. "Trust me, Hermione, and lay down. Relax. I will not let anything harm you." He watched as she nodded slightly and relaxed, closing her eyes again.

Healer Tranker gave Hermione a Sleeping Draught and nodded to Severus with a smile. Several minutes later, he stood up and turned to Severus. "I think it's safe to move

her now but carefully. She should rest for a day or two to give the magic residue a chance to continue its healing."

Severus stood back as Healer Dunlap transfigured the table into a stretcher, and Cillian grasped the other end. Together they followed Severus upstairs, and after he lowered his wards, they proceeded him into his bedroom. "She'll need potions for a few days," Healer Bastula said, standing by Severus' side.

"She should be up and around in a day or two. She was splinched pretty badly, but someone had good forethought and acted quickly," Healer Tranker said as Hermione was levitated into the bed.

"But she'll be all right?" Draco asked from the doorway, his face still ashen.

"Someone splinched even this bad won't really stay down long, not with the right spells and potions. The problem is timing and to get help right away before they bleed out," Healer Dunlap said, looking down at Hermione with a smile. "You were smart to bring us both, Draco."

Healer Tranker examined Hermione once more, then gently laid the sheet over her body.

Healer Pushpa Bastula leaned toward Severus. "If it's all right with you, I'd like to stay and watch her?" the kindly woman asked.

Severus nodded. "Draco," he called softly. Draco walked up to him and Severus leaned over to whisper in his ear. "Set up Healer Bastula in Wormtail's room. She's going to stay with us. The other two their memories will have to be Obliviated. Ask Cillian to do it if you don't feel comfortable."

Draco looked at him comprehendingly, but obviously unhappy with the idea. "Healer Tranker, Healer Dunlap, may I see you out?"

~~oOo~~

Author's Notes:

I know that I took a huge literary license with the Hermione's splinching and I hope you forgive me. And believe me, my beta, Southern_Witch_69, and I talked about this scene extensively. I intended for it to be this drastic, and she, thankfully, played Devil's advocate to each of my suggestions, reminding me how bloody splinching was in DH, before I began this chapter, which I appreciate beyond words. I know that there was mention of someone splinching a leg off in canon and that it was really messy; and there was Ron's splinching is described on page 269 in DH. Ron's losing of a piece of his shoulder is the only canon description we 'see' happen, and to me it's a bit more drastic than Mr. Weasley's description in GoF.

Mr. Weasley tells Harry in GoF, (UK version, page 63), This pair I'm talking about went and splinched themselves. They left half of themselves behind... So of course, they were stuck. Couldn't move either way. Had to wait for the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad to sort them out." Then complained about the paperwork saying, "a fair bit of paperwork, I can tell you, what with the Muggles who spotted the body parts they'd left behind... But they got a heavy fine..."

So I used the descriptions I had in canon from GoF and blended it with what happened to Ron in DH and supposed the rest. The spells Severus and Cillian use to contain Hermione's blood were purely made up for this story, and the Latin I used is listed below. I hope that the event wasn't too squicky for anyone, and if so, I apologize profusely.

In regards to Hermione's nine classes mentioned, I know she received eleven O.W.L.s, which, according to HP Lexicon, included: Transfiguration, Potions, Charms, Herbology, Astronomy, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Care of Magical Creatures, History of Magic, (one unnamed class), and Defense Against the Dark Arts, which will be Dark Arts her seventh year. As far as I can remember, she dropped Muggle Studies her third year, which she will have to carry under the new policies. I also believe that she dropped Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures and History of Magic her sixth year so the rest are the classes I am referring to.

To credit the women who did my beta work: I want to send a huge thank you to Southern_Witch_69 for all her help, support, encouragement and cleanup work, and for sticking with me with this story. And to Cocomachristy for her added support in catching my many typos and comma errors. Without you both, this story would never get validated, and thank you just seems so inadequate. I appreciate it more than you could possibly know.

The Latin words used are:

Patefacio means: expose, open, make open

Retineo means: to hold back, restrain, detain, keep, maintain

Sanguinis and Sanguen means: blood

Captus means: to take in, hold, contain, keep in

Arteriae, Venas, Venae means: a blood vessel, vein, artery

Coerceo means: surround, enclose, restrain, confine

Contineo, Continere, Contentum means: to hold together, keep together; to connect, join; to keep in, surround, contain, confine

Cohibeo means: confine, restrain, hold back, repress

Intus means: within, inside; to or from the inside; inwardly

Amplector means: to embrace, twine round, enclose, surround

Coercere, Coercitum means: to enclose, shut in, confine, restrain

Concipere, conceptum means: to take completely in, absorb; of fluids to suck in; of air to draw in

Concipere Animae means: breathe, of air to draw in, wind, air

Any mistakes in the use of the Latin words are purely my own.

Repercussions and Consequences

Chapter 12 of 43

Hermione wakes up only to find that she's to be held accountable to the Dark Lord for her actions and is forced to choose Wormtail's punishment. However, she manages to surprise the Dark Lord and receives a curiously suggested offer from him for her courage.

Not only that, but Draco and Cillian save Hermione from what could have been a disastrous mistake. And the wedding looms ever closer...



~*~

Hermione woke up in a darkened room softly lit with candles. At first, the soft light was soothing, but she quickly realized that she couldn't move. She tried to move her eyes down far enough to see if she was bound, but she couldn't feel any bindings. She tried to move her head, arms or legs, but they were completely unresponsive to her. She tried rolling her head, and managed a tiny tilt, but only enough to see Snape's head resting against the back of his chair beside her. Hermione began to panic, worried that she'd damaged her spinal cord and was now paralyzed. She whimpered softly, fighting back her fears. She heard Snape shift in his chair beside her, saw his arm as he stretched, and she could feel the bed move when he lifted his feet. *He'd obviously been sleeping with his feet propped up on the corner of the bed.* She hoped he wasn't going to be mad at her for what she'd done.

He rose and stood by her, bending down to stare into her eyes. "Are you in pain?" he asked softly.

She felt a brief sense of relief at his tone, although it didn't ease her fear about her paralysis. "No. I'm... I'm paralyzed!" she managed to say with a choked sob.

He smiled and moved the chair closer. "No, you are not paralyzed. I've given you a potion that will prevent you from being able to move," he explained. "Are you in any pain?"

"No, well, somewhat... yes. But mostly, I feel heavy," she said, fighting back tears, although very relieved by his statement. "I just feel really thick and heavy."

"Not surprising," he said, sitting down next to her, tipping a potion to her lips. "You splinched yourself in half. What were you thinking?"

Hermione sipped the potion, recognizing the flavor as the Blood-Replenishing Potion. "I was thinking about escaping Wormtail," she replied between swallows. "Where is he? Did he run away?"

Snape's grin was malicious. "He's in his cage on the back stoop again," he said, and his expression softened to one of concern. He leaned toward her, brushing her hair from her forehead, and he held another potion for her to drink and then another. She was sure the second one was a Regenerative Potion because it tasted familiar to her. "Hermione, there's something I have to tell you," he said softly, and she immediately knew it would be bad news. "As soon as you are up, I've been instructed to bring you before the Dark Lord. He wishes to see you, but I've delayed, telling him you've not woken up yet."

"He's going to kill me, isn't he?" A jolt of fear shot through her. "I wasn't. I was trying to escape," she tried to explain. "Wormtail..."

"He won't kill you, but he's angry. He's not happy about your trying to run away. He'll want answers, but I don't believe it will be you who's punished." Snape turned and then lifted another vial to her lips. "The Dark Lord has seen my memories, and he listened to Draco and Cillian. Still, all I saw was your splinching. Wormtail tried hiding, but we've caught him. I'll bring him with us when you're able to see him."

Regardless of his assurances, Hermione was scared. A tear ran down her cheek, and Snape wiped it away with his thumb. "How soon?" she asked, unable to mask her fears.

"I want to keep you still for at least another two days. I'd prefer longer, but Cillian's Healer left today, and she told him you'd be up and around before long. That's what has been relayed to the Dark Lord," he said softly. "Cillian is with the Dark Lord now, and he'll be back here shortly. I'll know more then."

"Is he another Death Eater?" she asked, concerned.

Snape smiled and nodded. "He's going to be around a lot, so you'll have a chance to get to know him."

"No. Why?" she asked, not really wanting to meet anyone at this time, let alone another Death Eater.

"Because I want the two of you to get acquainted," Snape said reassuringly as he leaned over her. "Weren't you the one that said you didn't know if I had any friends?" he asked with a smirk, and Hermione nodded, remembering her accusation. "Cillian is a friend."

"Sir, what happened?" she asked, wanting to change the subject. "I don't remember anything except... I just wanted to get away from him, and Grimmauld Place was the only place I could think of. I remember Apparating or trying to. I think..."

Severus explained briefly the events after he'd heard the door slam. "I'd just come out the back door as you attempted to Apparate," he stated.

Hermione was stunned by his description of her splinching. "But if I'd splinched so badly, how is it that I survived? How did you know what to do?"

His lips curled into a smirk. "Hermione, I do know how to heal. I know many of the healing potions by memory, and I know how to reverse some spell damage. I'm surprised that Nymphadora and Lupin knew what to do, but she obviously used a spell to hold your blood within you and keep you in a sort of stasis. I'm not sure which ones; I was too concerned with saving you. I simply wanted to retrieve your upper half and heal you."

"So you healed me?" she asked, amazed.

"I was able to hold your life in stasis and hold your blood inside you. I made the potions you needed, but no. Draco and Cillian went to get Healers while I found your other half." She looked up at him with a mixture of awe and amazement, and he shook his head with a bemused expression. "Look, I can heal some things. I healed Draco right

after Potter cut him with my Sectumsempra Curse. I helped heal Potter when he fell off his broom and helped Mr. Weasley when Nagini bit him. I fixed Ron Weasley's leg his third year, if you recall, and it was my potions that helped him recover from the damage caused by those brains his fifth. Katie Bell was sent to me after she'd been affected by that cursed necklace, not Poppy Pomfrey... and Albus used to turn to me when he was hurt, cursed or poisoned, even up to the end."

He pulled down the sheet that covered her and looked at her body, his eyes deeply concerned. "I have to treat your scar again. Peren, get me the jar please," he said, and Hermione heard the elf run from the room. Hermione wanted to raise her head and see how bad the wound was, but she couldn't move a muscle nor lift her head. Judging by Snape's expression, it was bad, and she watched his face as his eyes swept from her shoulder to her hip. Peren returned, coming around the bed, crawled up on the mattress from Snape's side, and then squatted down by her head. Her huge eyes were brimming with tears.

"Peren, don't cry. I'm sure it will be all right," she tried to reassure the elf. Peren held a large jar open for Snape as he scooped the gel out with his fingers, which had the distinct smell of Dittany.

"It is looking much better, miss," Peren whispered in her ear, encouragingly. "It is healing and will be all gone soon."

Hermione could feel Snape's fingers as he dabbed the gel on her skin in a line that started from her shoulder and angled down between her breasts. "Sir, what?" Hermione asked, alarmed as his fingers continued down her body.

"I'm using a mixture of Anti-Scar Paste with essence of Dittany so you will not have a scar as a reminder," Snape stated as his fingers dabbed the gel in a line that proceeded down toward her hip. "Hermione, Peren is going to support your head when I turn you over. All I want you to do is to relax." Snape levitated Hermione, turning her over, and his fingers traced the same route down her back. Hermione couldn't help but whimper softly as he treated her scar and cast an Absorption Charm.

When he'd lowered her back onto the bed, Hermione swallowed a lump she felt in her throat. "Thank you," was all she could think to say.

"You're welcome," he said, still eyeing her scar. "Peren, you can go." Snape waited until they were alone and leaned over her. "I wish I could gain your trust, Hermione, and get you to obey me. I know the situation isn't to your liking, and you are stuck in this, just as I am. I really am looking out for your best interest in all this, but you've got to start trusting me."

"But you cannot let me go?" she asked, knowing the answer.

He shook his head and gave her another potion. "I cannot." She opened her mouth to ask why, and his eyes narrowed, effectively cutting her off. "You are not able to close your mind or conceal what you know. You are not able to occlude probing by a Legilimens, so I cannot confide everything to you. Surely, you can understand that. But you must start to obey me if you are to survive. I can protect you only so far. Push too far, and yes, the Dark Lord will kill you. You are a pawn in his plans, and for now, you are useful. I must keep him thinking you're valuable if I'm to keep you alive. So think about that." He stood and turned to go.

"I'm afraid," she said. "I don't like being in the dark or not having a say in what happens to me."

"Nor do I," he replied. "But you'll have to learn how to let go of that need to control everything around you."

~o0o~

Hermione stood by the door in her black robes and Blast-Ended Skrewt jewelry, wishing she could simply sit in the dining room until they were ready to leave. She still felt weak, and her knees were shaking, although that could just as easily have been due to the fearful anticipation of her impending meeting. Snape had been true to his word, keeping her in bed for two days, although this morning he'd called Peren as soon as Hermione woke, instructing the elf to serve her breakfast and dress her.

Draco entered the hallway, adjusting his sleeve, and Snape nodded to him before turning to her. "Ready?" he asked with indifference that matched the cool expression on his face.

Hermione sighed, remembering what he'd told her that morning about what he thought might happen. She knew it was only speculation, but she appreciated his openness. She lowered her head and nodded as he grasped her arm and guided her from the house. As she exited the house, she tried not to notice Wormtail in his cage on the stoop as she preceded Snape down the stairs into the garden. She was unfortunately unable to avoid looking at the walkway, staring at the stepping-stones, which were still splotchy with her bloodstains. She was taken aback at how wide the pattern seemed to be, indicating just how much she must have bled. She secretly wondered why no one had cleaned it up, but had the eerie feeling that Snape had left it for her benefit as a reminder.

Thankfully, Draco spoke up, drawing her attention from the macabre scene. "Dad said that he changed the wards on the back terrace for our Apparation just as you requested," Draco said smoothly, holding Wormtail's cage by the handle. "I'll see you there."

"After you then," Snape said, pulling Hermione to him, carefully placing his arms around her body, trying to avoid grasping her where she'd splinched. Draco's sharp crack sounded as Snape looked down at her and smiled. "Remember what I told you and the role that I play. Trust me."

"I remember," she replied, unable to suppress the nervousness she felt from her voice.

He smirked down at her. "I will not splinch you. Trust me, please."

"It's not that; it's him," she said, lowering her head. "I'm afraid of him."

"You'll be fine," Snape replied.

The foyer they arrived in was massive. Directly in front of her was a large arched entry between twin curving staircases. Marble columns flanked the entrance of hallways on either side of the room. It wasn't the size of the room that took Hermione's breath away upon arriving nor the obvious wealth, but the cold feeling the room gave off, similar to the feeling she'd remembered when entering a museum.

However, Draco took her expression and sharp intake of breath to mean that she was impressed. "Like it, do you, Granger? Bet you never thought you'd be invited here, did you?"

"Enough, Draco," Snape warned softly as he placed his hand on Hermione's elbow. "I believe he'll be in the drawing room. Shall we?" He guided her down a hallway that looked like pale cream sandstone, polished into such a high gloss finish that it reflected the minimal light from the dimly lit wall sconces, giving the room a subtle glow. Expensive carpets covered the floor, and the walls were lined with the portraits of Malfoy ancestors that glared at Hermione as they walked by. Snape hesitated for a few heartbeats before he turned the handle of a heavy wooden door and ushered her inside. The room was elegantly decorated, although the usual furniture had been pushed carelessly against the walls and windows, leaving a wide-open space on the marble floor. An odd tree-like stand and an armchair stood next to the large marble mantelpiece. A large, heavily gilded mirror reflected the room from above the Floo.

The Dark Lord stood waiting, backlit by the roaring fire in the grate. Hermione tried to linger in the threshold, but Snape forcefully guided her forward to kneel before him. "Hermione, you disappoint me," he said, his tone sending shivers down her spine.

"I... I'm sorry," she stammered, her mouth suddenly dry.

The Dark Lord was pacing irritably, looking down at her, but she couldn't move or look up at him, and she was so frightened, she felt like she could barely breathe. "You tried to leave me. No one leaves me. Not without punishment."

She sucked in her breath. Snape rose from her side and stepped away to stand behind her.

The Dark Lord towered over her, pacing like a Graphorn, stalking its prey as she knelt. She was trying to keep from showing her fear of him, but she knew he could sense it anyway. "I thought I could trust you. Was I wrong? I do not like being wrong."

She could only shake her head. Words completely escaped her. She was going to die and she knew it.

The Dark Lord stopped in front of her, and she could feel him staring at her. "You will not even try begging me? No pleading for your life? No groveling? No crying?"

Her bottom lip quivered, and her eyes filled with tears that she refused to let fall. She wouldn't beg him, couldn't suppress her fear down enough to, even if she wanted to. She was too afraid to trust her voice to speak. Only she didn't want either Snape or Draco to suffer because of her mistake. *Snape said she had to follow the Dark Lord's wishes or he'd be severely punished or worse killed!* "Please," she managed to say, her mouth as dry as parchment.

"Oh, so you do wish to beg," the Dark Lord sneered. "Well, get on with it."

"It wasn't Severus's fault," she said breathlessly, her voice cracking in fear. "Nor Draco's. Please, don't hurt them on my account."

The Dark Lord stood still. The air in the room around her seemed to become heavy and oppressive. "You would plead for their lives? Interesting. And why shouldn't I punish my servants for allowing your escape. Your well being was entrusted to them, and they obviously failed *again*."

Hermione took a deep breath and forced herself to try and look up at him, but her eyes stopped at his chest. "It wasn't their fault, it was mine. *If he's displeased with me, fine, but Snape hasn't done anything wrong.* Hermione forced herself to look up at his face, cringing at the anger in his red eyes. The slit-like pupils contracted and his nares flared, and he stared at her for what felt like minutes without comment. "Do what you would to me, but please, don't hurt Severus or Draco," she pleaded, her voice barely a coarse whisper that broke the silence in the room.

The Dark Lord's fingers slipped into her hair, and he gripped her head painfully. "And why shouldn't I?" He held his wand pointed over her shoulder, and she suspected that his aim was for Snape's chest.

She had no real reason, except that she couldn't stomach the thought of watching either of them tortured on her account, especially when they hadn't been home. *After all Severus' done to heal me, and now that he's finally opening up to me...* "I disobeyed him."

"Then I should simply punish you, is that it?" The Dark Lord threatened, his wand tip now aimed at her.

Hermione swallowed, her eyes locked on the Dark Lord's, completely unable to turn away. "I..." She couldn't say it.

"Yet you did try to leave," The Dark Lord snarled venomously. "Tell me why. I will fit your punishment to your explanation."

"I wanted to get away from I didn't want to be raped again. I thought I didn't have any other choice..." She tried to say more, but couldn't get the words out. She tried to lower her head, but the Dark Lord held her head firmly by her hair.

"We shall see. *Legilimency.*" The invasion was fiercely intense; the room swam in front of her as if she were extremely drunk. The images flickered though her mind like a film, replaying Wormtail's attack so vividly, it was like repeating the events she was seeing. All the emotions flooded over her: repulsion, fear, anxiety, and the feeling of being trapped. There was an aching pain in her mind, worse than any migraine. The images shifted, and the panic was gone. She was seeing the potions lab, working with Draco, helping him with the tricky, quick-paced potion, and then the memory jumped to the last potion they made together. Seeing the memory replayed in her mind this way, she was amazed at how flawlessly they had worked together. The searing pain lightened up somewhat, until she remembered the last words Draco had barked at her before he'd turned to run from the room: *Stay here, don't leave. Peren will get anything you need.* Suddenly, the memory of the consent trickle of water from the faucet in the potions lab which had made the urge to pee so great she felt forced to leave the security of the lab came to mind. She could almost hear her own thoughts: *I've got to go! I can't turn it off. I've really got to go... He couldn't have meant that I can't go to the loo? Augh!* As suddenly as it came, the urge to pee left as the probing sensation jerked from her mind. The Dark Lord thrust her away from him as if in disgust, leaving only the pounding migraine behind.

"Women and their inability to hold their urine," the Dark Lord sneered. "Where is Wormtail? You were told to bring him with you."

"Here he is, my Lord," Draco said, walking forward. Nagini came forward from over by the windows, slithering across the floor to the Dark Lord's feet. The Rat in his cage began to squeal and thrash, terrified.

"Open it," the Dark Lord demanded, brandishing his wand lazily in his hand. Draco turned the cage over, and Wormtail fell to the marble floor with a thud. The Dark Lord pointed his wand at Wormtail, and the Rat transformed into Peter Pettigrew, who lay groveling on the floor at The Dark Lord's feet.

"M-my Lord, I didn't m-mean too," he began to snivel. "I was only..."

"Silence!" the Dark Lord barked at him with a sibilant hiss, his fingers tightening his grip on his wand. "I know what you did; I saw it for myself. You're aware that Miss Granger is under my protection and is to be married to Severus, and yet," the Dark lord paused as Wormtail tried again to plead with him again. "Silence! And yet, you have attacked her now twice," he hissed angrily. "From what I've seen in her mind, as well as in Draco's and Severus', she has never indicated any attraction to you or enticed you in any way. Yet you have attempted to push your affections on her, unsolicited, and attempted to rape her."

"No, I didn't!" the Rat cried, reaching out for the Dark Lord's robes, only pulling back when Nagini raised her head. "I just wanted..."

"You were trying to grope her and kiss her in the hallway." The cold menacing tone made Wormtail cower on the floor again. "I saw it, Wormtail in her mind!"

"Arise, Hermione," the Dark Lord's sibilant voice echoed in Hermione's head. Hermione felt a light airy feeling overtake her mind as she felt herself rise and walk over to stand next to the Dark Lord. "Severus, your wand please." She stood transfixed as Snape walked up and presented the Dark Lord with his wand. "Take it, Hermione," he hissed, his red eyes glaring at Wormtail.

Snape held his wand out to Hermione. She swallowed, afraid to touch it, her hands clenched into fists. His lips twitched, but his dark eyes showed approval as he flicked the grip to indicate she should take it.

"Take it," the Dark Lord demanded. "As his soul mate, Severus's wand will do what you bid it to. Take it."

Snape nodded as he flicked the grip at her again, indicating that she should accept his wand. As if in a trance, she curled her fingers around the grip, at once again feeling its magical acceptance. Snape's lip curled up slightly, smirking at her. Draco stood staring at her with cold amusement in his eyes.

"Now punish him, Hermione," the Dark Lord ordered, his nostrils flaring in irritation.

"S-sir?" she asked, Snape's wand shaking in her grasp.

Snape looked down at her curiously, then turned his head away. She tried to beseech him with her eyes, but Snape was already smirking nastily at Wormtail. "Do as you are told, Hermione."

Punish him, a sibilant voice sounded in her head. *Use the Cruciatius on him.*

No, her mind screamed. *I can't.*

Do it. Curse him, the sibilant voice repeated. *Crucio* him.

No, she argued desperately as her hand raised Snape's wand and pointed it at Wormtail. *Cru-cruc...* "I can't! Please, she thought, struggling to fight the instruction to use the Cruciatus Curse. "C-crucio," she said feebly. No. "I can't." The voice in her head warred with her conscious. No, I can't do this. The light headiness broke, and she knew she'd shrugged off the effects of the Imperius Curse. "I can't," she pleaded, her shoulders slumped, and her hand fell limply to her side.

"Interesting... Severus, I see what you mean," the Dark Lord sneered. "I do not like being disobeyed, Hermione. You will obey me. Punish him! He tried to rape you you will punish him for it! Now!"

She pointed Snape's wand at Wormtail again and contemplated on which curse she knew that she could use on him. She racked her brain and remembered Snape's lessons with Draco. "*Extremus Gelidus*," she said, and Wormtail began to shiver and appeared to cramp as if he'd been plunged into freezing water.

The Dark lord started laughing, the sound cold, condescending and cruel. "No, girl, I said to punish him, not freeze him," he demanded, his cold eyes glaring at her and then down at the Wormtail with obvious malice.

"Draco," Snape said with a wicked twist of his lips and a strange glint in his eye as he watched Wormtail curl into a ball, arms and legs twitching with spasms from the effect of her curse.

"Finite," Draco said, pointing at Wormtail.

"Hardly an appropriate punishment, Hermione," Snape said to her, crossing his arms with a smirk.

"No, Hermione, you will use the Cruciatus Curse," the Dark Lord said, impatience making his tone sharp.

Draco tried to conceal a snicker at her expense. "She can't do it; she's too nice," he said, sneering at her. Snape raised his eyebrow, and he sneered at Draco, frostily.

The Dark Lord glowered at the younger wizard, his red eyes narrowing dangerously, and then turned back to Hermione. He crossed his arms as if expecting her to try and narrowed his eyes into a scowl.

"I can't," she stammered, afraid. "It's an Unforgivable..."

"Do not defy me, Hermione," the Dark Lord warned, his tone menacing, his expression becoming dark, and his wand now pointed at her. "Either you do it or you will experience it."

Hermione pointed Snape's wand at Wormtail. "*Crucio*," she said, her hand shaking. Her curse didn't have very much strength because Wormtail only yelped and then lay half curled on the floor, snarling at her.

"I told you she'd be unable to do it," Draco said, looking smug.

"Again. And mean it," the Dark Lord snarled.

Hermione tried, but she hadn't the heart to actually use the curse, and Wormtail only yelped at her attempt, making her face flush with embarrassment and anger at being made to torment him. Tears began streaming down her cheeks. Her third try had no force behind it at all. "I can't," she whimpered as she raised the wand for a fourth try.

Draco was smirking at her as if she were incompetent. Snape's lips curled into an amused smile. The Dark Lord loomed over her threateningly, expecting her to do something that she knew she just couldn't do. Finally, she lowered Snape's wand, never uttering the fourth attempt, admitting defeat. "I can't. I'm sorry, but I just can't."

"Hear that, Wormtail, she can't. You attack her like a lecherous scum, cause her to splinch herself in half, and she still hasn't the heart to punish you," the Dark Lord said, sneering down at Wormtail. The Dark Lord indicated something to Snape. He walked over behind her and wrapped her in his arms, holding her protectively against his chest. For a moment she was grateful for the support and the feeling of comfort he gave her, until the Dark Lord said, "But I have no such compunction. *Crucio*."

Hermione stiffened in Snape's arms and his embrace tightened, holding her pinned, leaning against his chest. She tried to look away, and Snape hissed in her ear, "He wants you to watch. It'll be over soon."

Her breath hitched at his words, and she forced herself to watch as Wormtail clenched and writhed on the floor, screaming in pain, severely punished for attacking her. The Dark Lord released the curse only to inflict it again after a brief pause, and Wormtail's screams echoed off the walls. Hermione cringed inwardly, watching him, thankful that Snape supported her, sickened that the Dark Lord wanted her to watch. When the Dark Lord released the Unforgivable Curse for a third time, Snape allowed Hermione to turn and cry on his shoulder, his hands caressing her back comfortingly.

"I will give you the choice, Hermione," she heard the Dark Lord say behind her. "Since you refuse to curse him, and I know you can't kill him, I will give you a choice. Will you allow Wormtail to come back to your house; or should I dispense of him for you?"

Hermione stiffened and looked up at Snape. He only he raised his eyebrow, and his mouth curled into a knowing smile that gave her no answer at all, except to assume that he already knew what she would do. Taking a deep breath, she turned her head to look at the Dark Lord, who stood looming over the Rat, menacingly. "I don't want to be the cause of anyone's death even his," she said, wiping the tears off her cheeks. Snape released her, and she turned back to him, hoping he wasn't angry with her.

Snape's smile became smug. "You're being too kind," he said, his smile fading, and he had strange glint in his dark eyes.

"Yes, too kind." The Dark Lord turned his attention to Snape. "I will honor her decision and spare his life since she is your fiancée, Severus. But since Wormtail's actions were against your intended bride, I'd like to know your decision as well."

Snape's expression turned cold. "If I have to have him in my home, it will be in the cage. I will not have him lurking around the house, trying to rape my fiancée. Because of him, I cannot leave her alone in the house, which has proven to be an inconvenience." He turned to Hermione as Wormtail started sniveling again. "Will that be acceptable, my dear?"

Hermione nodded and looked down at the Wormtail, knowing that even as much as she disliked him, she didn't want him killed, but she didn't want him at the house either. "Whatever you decide," she said, a tear rolling down her cheek again.

"Well, Wormtail, either you change into your rat form or I'll do it for you," the Dark Lord said menacingly.

Hermione watched, fascinated, as Wormtail nodded, tears on his face as his body began to shimmer and shrink. In seconds a mangy looking rat sat on the polished marble floor. Snape took his wand from Hermione's fingers and levitated the Rat into his cage.

Draco picked up the cage and peered at the Rat disdainfully. "You're one lucky bastard, Rat," he said.

"Draco, Severus, leave us a moment," the Dark Lord said, dismissing them both with a casual wave of his hand. "I want a word with Hermione."

Both men bowed and left with out comment. Snape only glanced at her once before he turned for the door. She heard one of the settees slide across the room, and it stopped right beside her. The Dark Lord swept his hand toward the backless lounge. "Sit down, my dear," he insisted, his tone firm, yet kind, as he watched her, his red

eyes sweeping her tear-stained face.

Hermione sat, and she smoothed the robes over her lap, her palms sweaty. She felt like she had a heavy lump in her throat and had large rocks in her gut.

"You were too soft hearted toward him. He doesn't deserve it, you know." The Dark Lord's hand cupped her face, and his thumb caressed her cheek, almost intimately, as he wiped away her tears. His action startled her, but no more than when he slid one long finger down her neck to her collarbone and then placed his hand on her shoulder as he stared at her intently. "You think I was too harsh with Wormtail, don't you?"

She nodded.

He wiped another tear from her cheek with his other hand. "I cannot allow those under my protection to be treated so by my loyal followers. I'd lose control. He was warned, Hermione, and yet he accosted you in your own home. He knows you're to be Severus' wife."

His cold hand stroked her shoulder while the other gripped her chin to tilt her face up, and she felt uncomfortable under his stare, unsure why he was being so familiar with her.

"I told you once, you have nothing to fear from me; I have not chosen to rescind that promise. No one is to hurt you. Wormtail will be an example. Even though you didn't do as I told you to, I will allow it to slide this time, since you are still unfamiliar with me." He released her face, and Nagini curled up at her feet, flicking her tongue at her. The Dark Lord watched his familiar and then sat down next to her as he leaned casually against one padded armrest, his eyes focused on her. "I hear that you and Severus had an argument the day before your attack. Was it concerning anything I should know about? Is there anything you wish to tell me?" he asked, his eyes looking at her akin to ownership, and Hermione shook her head. "Are you finally accepting your pending marriage to Severus? I understand you've had reservations. I'd like to hear them."

He was confusing her. His actions seemed almost kind, especially after his harsh display earlier. "I was under the impression he only wanted me as his consort. Now I understand we're to be married, but I know he doesn't want to. It's being thrust upon him."

"That's not exactly true," the Dark Lord replied. "Severus has consented to this marriage."

"He hasn't said... He makes it seem as if he's forced to." She looked down at her hands to try and avoid his red eyes. "I suppose I wanted to know if he loves if he could love me," she stammered. "I it wasn't..."

"You want flattering declarations of love? Gifts, flowers and endearments...? Surely you know Severus isn't the type." The Dark Lord waited until she glanced up at him before continuing. "This isn't how you thought your marriage would be." She stared at him, surprised, and he smiled at her. "Please, I know how women are. The perfect dress, the perfect place, flowers, fairies and candles everywhere, music, food, champagne, the groom and blushing bride, the proud parents... Narcissa has been reciting all the plans to me for days. Isn't that what you expect?"

At bit more than I expected, but that fits what Narcissa would plan."Something like that, yes," she admitted, knowing it's what he wanted to hear.

"We've been unable to get your parents for you, but be assured, everything else is all arranged," he said casually.

They were unable to get my parents? Hermione's breath caught. *They went to my parents' house?*

The Dark Lord tilted his head, his eyes narrowing. "What else would make you happy, convince you I am pleased that you have joined us? Knowledge? Access to some of the largest private libraries in our world? To learn magic spells you could only dream about?" he asked, looking smug when she gasped at his offer. "To be shown how to do that which Hogwarts wouldn't teach you?"

Again Hermione gasped at what he'd just promised her.

"Yes, Severus told me so. I was like you, wanting to read every spell book I could get my hands on. But what is to prevent you from disappointing me again, eh? What would keep you in line and make you realize your place is with me? Oh, yes, Hermione, your place is with me. Just as Severus has agreed to marry you, this marriage will bind you to me. A Death Eater's wife is held by her husband's oath. You will be a Death Eater's wife and married to my most trusted advisor and most loyal follower. I will not allow you to cause him grief, create problems for him or turn his concentration from the tasks I have given him. You are either to be an asset to him or you will be disposed with. I am good to those who please me and harsh to those who do not you'd best to remember that."

Hermione nodded, unsettled by his threat as much as by his demeanor. "But I thought that to be your follower you had to... I'm sorry."

"Had to what? Take my mark?" He lifted her left hand from her lap and stroked the back of it lovingly. "Only if you choose to. I will not force it on you, any more than I did any of the others. Does this surprise you? That accepting my mark would be a choice?" Hermione shook her head as he turned her hand over exposing her palm. "Have you seen Severus' Dark Mark, Hermione?" she nodded and he laughed. "I thought I saw that in your mind. Did you think it hurts him?"

"He hisses, or inhales sharply, each time you summon him," she admitted. "I assumed..."

"It's not pain they feel, Hermione," he said, his fingers sliding up her arm, uncovering her wrist pushing her sleeve up her arm, his fingers caressing her. "It's an awareness. A sensation very much like my fingers on your skin right now," he said, his eyes darting to hers. "Only much more intense."

Hermione wanted to pull her arm away, but resisted the urge, lest she irritate him. "It looked alive."

"As I am alive, so is my mark," he said. He rolled his wand languidly in his other hand, bringing its tip to her arm. She cringed as he pushed it into her flesh. He smirked and released her. "But you are not going to accept it, are you?" She shook her head, and he laughed, a high-pitched cackle, his red eyes gleaming. He looked at her with a smile that struck her as both maniacal and cruel. "No matter, there are other ways of showing loyalty. You may go now, Hermione. Severus will be waiting for you in the foyer. I will be seeing you soon; on your wedding day actually. Good-bye for now."

She rose, made a small bow and hurried from the room. Snape was waiting for her just outside the door, leaning against the wall when Hermione left the drawing room. She stood, her body trembling, staring at him, her mind reeling with the events of her private audience with the Dark Lord, still uncertain as to his intent. Snape watched her, his face inscrutable, then he stood up, opened his arms, and she rushed forward, hugging him. She clung to him, drinking in his scent and feeling his strength. "You are all right. Let's go home," he said silkily after a few heartbeats. She simply nodded, but didn't want to release him. He laughed softly, and he turned her to leave, his arm still across her shoulders as they walked away. The portraits scowled and sneered as they passed, but Hermione didn't care. Nor did she notice the women standing in the archway as Snape pulled her into his arms again to Apparate them home.

Once at the house, he guided her straight up to his room. "So, what did he want?" Snape asked softly as he closed the door.

"Questioned me about my feelings about things," she said and shivered. "He offered to let me have access to libraries and..." She looked at her left arm, and her fingers caressed the spot where the Dark Lord had pressed his wand into her forearm. "I think he asked me if I wanted the Dark Mark, but I'm not sure."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked smoothly.

"No, I don't really want to talk about it right now," she replied, shaking her head. "I want to take a bath, if that's all right?"

He nodded and stepped aside. "Come down when you are done. I'll lift the wards tonight," he said as she walked out of the bedroom.

~o0o~

Later that afternoon, Hermione received a large package. She was curled up in one of the chairs in the sitting room, enjoying a cup of tea while reading a large book. The owl, which carried the package, nearly collapsed on the rug as he set the large package down. "Oh my goodness!" she exclaimed, setting both the teacup and book down, before kneeling next to the exhausted bird. Hermione scooped up both the box and the owl and carried them both to the kitchen.

"What's that?" Draco asked, curious.

"I don't know; it just arrived," Hermione replied as she dropped the box on the table and helped the owl perch on a chair. She went to get water and owl treats.

Draco was trying to see if there was any return address on the box when another owl started pecking on the kitchen window. "I'll go get it," he said.

He returned as Hermione was holding a cup up for the owl to drink. "He's got to pick up a few things before his meeting at Hogwarts," Draco was saying as he entered the doorway. "I expect him back anytime, actually."

"Another meeting. The Carrows are causing a fuss again then," a male voice said. A handsome wizard in casual robes entered the kitchen behind Draco. "Hello, Hermione, so we meet again."

"Pardon?" Hermione asked, glad that she'd finally been allowed to wear a house robe when downstairs. He looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. He was taller than Draco with curly, dark hair and warm, brown eyes that matched Snape's in their intensity, but he was obviously someone who smiled more often than Snape did. She had the nagging feeling that she should know him and couldn't stop staring.

He laughed and extended his hand to her. "Cillian Gwynek, but call me Cillian. May I call you Hermione?" he asked.

"Yes. Do I know you?" she asked and felt her cheeks heat even more as he smiled. "Sorry, you look so familiar. It's as if I know you, but I can't place where we met?"

"Knockturn Alley, but you weren't quite feeling yourself; I'm surprised you even remember me. You were kind of befuddled that day." He sat down as Peren set a cup of tea and the sugar bowl on the table next to him. "Hey, thanks. So, when is the ol' bat coming home?"

"In an hour," Draco said, staring at Hermione's box. He waved his wand over it and his brow furrowed. "Magic."

"Pardon?" both Hermione and Cillian asked.

"Hermione, if you open the box, be careful. There is either some strong spells on the box, or something magical inside."

Hermione nodded, and Cillian drew his wand. The twine released easily, and the paper fell open to reveal a pale yellow box. Draco nodded, and she lifted the lid. Whatever was in the box was lace, gorgeous pale, creamy white lace adorned with crystals. A small velvet pouch lay on top, and when she opened it, an exquisite string of pearls lay exposed. She held up the string of pearls, examining their iridescence and knew somehow that these were extremely expensive pearls. She laid them carefully aside and lifted up the lace. The white mass of lace unfurled in her hands, and she found herself holding the most exquisite antique-lace wedding robes she'd ever seen, watching as the thousands of tiny crystals caught the light. It wasn't her style at all, but the dress had an allure to it, a breathtaking quality.

"I know that dress... Why would I know that dress?" Cillian asked no one in particular, his eyes distant.

"It's gorgeous!" Hermione exclaimed as she held the robes up to her, checking the width of the bodice against her body and then extending the sleeve out with her fingertips. She knew that it would fit her perfectly.

"You like this? It's ancient!" Draco said, confused.

Hermione looked at him baffled by his reaction. "It's beautiful. I love it!"

"Who sent it?" Draco asked suspiciously. "Is there a card?"

"Does it matter? It's mine!" Hermione exclaimed, turning to go.

"Hermione, wait," Cillian said, grabbing her wrist, his tone sharp. "Where are you going?"

She turned to look at him, confused. "To try it on, of course."

"It's not from Mum," Draco stated. "No one knows the location of Snape's house except a few followers, and only a handful knows that we're keeping you here." Draco snatched the necklace and tested it for spells, throwing them back into the box as if they'd bitten him.

Hermione shrugged and turned to go.

"No, wait, you can't! I do recognize this gown," Cillian stated, and Hermione scowled at him as he jumped to his feet, snatching the gown from her. Hermione reached for the robes as Cillian tried to check the robes for curses. "It looks like the Widower's Robes, but how on earth did *you* get it?"

Draco turned and tested the gown for spells as well. "If not *the Widower's Robes*, one charmed and cursed to act like it. Hermione, the robes and pearls, they will shrink as you wear them, and once you have them on they cannot be removed." He took the robes, shoving them back into the box, forcing the lid down and sealing it closed.

Once out of sight, Hermione shook her head as if she'd been released from a curse. "It isn't even my style at all. Who would have thought I'd want that old dress? What do you mean by the Widower's Robes?"

"Cursed robes," Cillian stated. "As soon as you say your vows, the gown begins to shrink. The robes will literally strangle you to death, leaving Severus a grieving widower by the next morning, if not sooner."

"My guess is that you would have been dead in hours. These would have slowly strangled you to death as well," Draco said angrily, indicating the pearls. "I'll be right back."

Cillian was scowling. "Hermione, there wasn't a card, was there?" he asked as Draco ran from the room.

"No, none that I saw," she said, feeling foolish. "This owl brought it this afternoon..."

"Damn bitch," Cillian swore. "Sorry. I thought she was sending... never mind. I know this owl." He rose, scooped up the owl and carried it away.

Hermione stood in the kitchen, a swirl of questions forming in her mind.

"If that owl *ever* delivers anything to you again," Cillian said as soon as he returned, "do not touch it until I, Severus or Draco check the envelope or package for curses. Promise me."

"Only if you tell me why," she said, crossing her arms.

"Promise me!" he snarled.

"Fine! But tell me why?"

"My sister's owl," he said, his expression serious. "She had a fling with Severus for a while, and your impending wedding is interfering with her *play* time. I'm afraid she wants him back. Don't worry; I'll handle my sister. But that owl, or one that looks like its twin, *never* accept anything either one brings *ever*. Got that?"

Draco returned with Narcissa. She stood in the doorway and stared at Hermione. "The Widower's Robes? How cliché. I thought that you had your robes. I hate last minute well, never mind. You'll need wedding robes. I'd thought that Severus would've taken you when he went to be fitted. Well, no matter." She stared at Hermione, sizing her up. "If we take you shopping for robes, you will have to promise that you will not attempt anything foolish."

"And if I give you my word I won't try anything?" she asked, but Narcissa and Draco looked unconvinced. "Where will we be going?"

"I'll be happy to come with you, if you like," Cillian offered Narcissa.

Draco nodded. "Peren, go get Hermione's shell necklace." He turned to his mum. "She can't Apparate with it on, so that's one problem solved."

"And I've no qualm using the Cruciatus, my dear," Narcissa said smugly to Hermione. "So you best remember that."

"But I gave you my word I won't try anything!" she pleaded.

"It's a start," Draco said, taking the necklace from Peren. "Although, you've been fairly difficult so far." He indicated for her to turn around and fastened the necklace around her neck. "Please, cooperate."

Hermione nodded as Peren handed her her boots.

"Gentlemen, we will go to Twilfitt and Tattling's for wedding robes. Draco you know the way; you first. Hermione, you'll come with me and Mr. Gwynek."

"I know T and T's," Cillian said with a cocky smile. "My sister's preferred shop."

They left the house and Apparated to a quaint little street lined with magical shops, which obviously catered to a wealthier clientele. Hermione followed Narcissa into Twilfitt and Tattling's and stood quietly as Narcissa looked through the robes on a nearby rack under a sign that read: *One of a kind, tailored to fit*

"Mrs. Malfoy, how delightful to see you," a petite, dark-skinned woman said as she approached. Her robes were stylish, and her hair was done up in a fashionable twist. "What shall it be today? I've several new robes, all in the most current fashion, and in the most divine fabrics..."

"Thank you, Mrs. Farag," Narcissa said amicably. "We are here to find suitable wedding robes for the young lady here."

"So, my dear, which shall it be? Red or white?" Mrs. Farag asked, turning to Hermione.

"Surely, a Muggle born will want white," Narcissa said haughtily in Hermione's direction. "Don't all your kind wear white? What does it stand for in your world, Hermione? Purity, cleanliness, and virginal innocence?"

"White also symbolizes unity, sincerity, loyalty, and a love stronger than death," Mrs. Farag added with a smile. "Red signifies love, desire and passion..."

"It also signifies violence and warfare," Hermione said.

"And denotes passionate love, happiness and prosperity," Cillian offered, shrugging. "Girls love red roses."

"It also means anger and danger," Hermione added, not sure why the discussion was going this way.

"Only to Muggles dear," Narcissa said softly in Hermione's ear as Mrs. Farag continued undaunted, "In the old customs brides chose red as a sign of fertility, love and devotion as well as wealth and prestige."

"I'll wear red," Hermione stated determinedly.

"So, we are passing up on the whole virginal bride motif?" Narcissa said with a smug smile.

At least two hours later, robes and gowns in every shade of red hung on a rack next to Draco, who was lounging on the steps of the viewing dais, completely bored. Cillian had wandered deeper into the shop and was flirting with another sales witch. Hermione stepped from the dressing room in another red robe that fit her too tight across her chest, making her breasts already hurt, with sleeves that were cut so tight that she couldn't move her arms, and the waist was so loose it made her look fat.

Cillian came over with a Scarlet robe draped over his arm. "Ah, no. Here, try this one. It was in the back. The fabric and the neckline are nice."

Sighing, Hermione carried the robe into the dressing room. When she emerged, Cillian's eyebrows rose and Draco sat up straighter, his mouth slightly agape. "Well, if you don't take that one, you're daft. It's gorgeous," Cillian exclaimed.

Hermione checked out her profile in the gown. It fit her curves like a glove. The simple lace sleeves and bodice were tastefully adorned with tiny crystals. The scoop of the neckline was a bit low, but not too low, being almost deceptive in its curve, alluding to, but not actually showing, too much cleavage. When she turned, she saw that the gown bared most of her back. The material was a scarlet crimson that seemed to drink in the light and changed hue as she moved. It was the nicest dress she'd tried on so far.

"Yeah," Draco said, finally gaining his composure of indifference. "It's great on you."

"Really, I don't think," Narcissa started to say and was cut off by the stares from both men.

"It's only two hundred seventeen Galleons, sixteen Sickles and twenty-eight Knuts. I've had to... The woman it was made for, well, her wedding was cancelled," Mrs. Farag was saying, but neither of the guys was paying her any mind.

"She'll take that one," Cillian stated. "You don't even need to fit it to her, it's perfect."

"She'll need foundation and under garments," Narcissa stated, still scowling at Cillian. "I suggest we go to Ater Décor."

Mrs. Farag ushered Hermione into the dressing room to help her remove the gown.

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When the four of them finally returned to Spinner's End, Snape was livid. "Where have you been?" he snarled. "Did you try to leave again?"

"Relax, you ol' bat, we took the girl to get her wedding robes," Cillian said, handing Peren the garment bag from Twilfitt and Tattling's and the shopping bag from Ater Décor.

Snape eyed the bag from Ater Décor and glared at his friend. "I wasn't aware that Ater Décor is now carrying wedding robes."

"They don't," Hermione said, blushing as Narcissa started laughing.

"Don't be silly, Severus. She needed a few things, and we simply took the girl shopping," Narcissa replied, clearly amused. "Besides, the groom isn't supposed to see the

wedding dress before the wedding, and don't think you can peek. I've set spells on the garment bag and the bag from Ater Décor, so you'll be cursed if you try to look. Now be good, elf, and take these upstairs."

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Author's Notes:

It seems I now have two women to thank for their assistance. I want to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. And to Cocoachristy and Amsev for her added support and helping to catch all my mistakes. Thank you all very much. I appreciate it more than you could possibly know.

I'd hoped to have the hand fasting in the next chapter, chapter thirteen. We'll see if I can pull it off...

The Hand-Fasted Bonding

Chapter 13 of 43

Wedding bells and the wedding night. Need I say more? Hermione has the wedding of Narcissa's dreams.

Third place winner of the Potter_Place Summer '07 Prompt Cahllenge.

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The Hand-Fasted Bonding

Hermione stood in the room, clutching the bedpost as Snape removed his robes. She wanted to ask him questions, many questions, but didn't know where to begin and didn't want to annoy him. Snape wasn't pleasant when he was annoyed. Cillian and Narcissa had stayed for dinner, and although Cillian was friendly enough toward her, Narcissa could barely contain her contempt. Hermione had feigned exhaustion to be able to slip away to the room and had tried quelling her fears and concerns in a long hot bath. While in the tub, she'd been thinking about Snape's actions over the last few days, contemplating his shifts in mood, his behavior toward her and the way he'd acted during her summons before the Dark Lord.

Sure, Snape had been fairly harsh with me at first, but he's been treating me in a caring manner lately, but hardly desirous, really. And there is no doubt that the bath products he made for me are luxurious, which as she thought about it, he hadn't really needed to do. He didn't have to make them such good quality; any basic shampoo, conditioner and soap would've sufficed. He could have given me lye soap and been done with it. The thought of having to use lye soap on her hair made her cringe.

Narcissa had asked Snape at dinner to make her some of his shampoo, and he had lightly suggested Draco would do it, to which Draco had said he would only if Snape would tell him his secrets regarding how he brewed his bath products. Snape had simply glowered and said that he wasn't about to become known as a purveyor of beauty products. Cillian had chuckled, saying that only an oily git such as Snape could create the most luxurious shampoo ever known and never use it, which made Draco and Narcissa laugh, Hermione blush and Snape to scowl slightly. But Snape did smile, falsely, and lift his wine glass at Cillian, then looked at Hermione with a smirk. Nevertheless, the fact that he had made his bath products for her wasn't lost on Hermione. She was stunned that he'd taken the time to make the bath products for her but wouldn't make them for Narcissa, and this wasn't the first time Narcissa had asked for them. That really struck her as thoughtful now that she thought about it. *In fact, there are a number of things he's done lately that were thoughtful, even tender at times.*

She still felt trapped by this impending hand-fasting, but he was being forced into it as well. It was possible that he couldn't see any way around it, although why, she had no idea. She knew what his role had been, but since Dumbledore's death all that had changed, and truthfully, she didn't like it. And now she was wrapped up in his life, his new role, which she didn't understand, and was completely reliant on him for everything, including her life. It was frightening.

Still, when Snape had finally entered the bedroom, her nerves were strung so tightly she honestly thought they would snap. She wasn't actually staring at him, her mind racing over things she wanted to know, but she couldn't help watching the way he flicked his buttons open, his fingers moving deftly as he released each one, nor did she miss the casual way he tossed his robes and frock coat on the floor next to the wardrobe. Every now and again, a tic showed in his jaw, and she knew that he was already annoyed about something, although, she hoped it wasn't because of her shopping trip or that she'd excused herself so early.

Severus sighed as he removed his shirt. "Do you like what you see?" he asked, smirking, breaking into her thoughts as his trousers fell to the floor.

"Huh?" She'd become so accustomed to seeing him undress now and to his casual demeanor when standing before her nude that she hadn't even realized she'd been watching him.

"Hermione, you're staring," he said with a strange glint in his eye.

"What will happen to me when you return to Hogwarts? Will I be returning to Hogwarts as well?" she blurted out.

"Yes," he said simply.

"Even though I'll be your wife?" she asked, toying with a crease in the bed hangings.

"Yes, Hermione, as my wife," he replied, watching her casually.

"But how? The school governors and the Ministry don't allow married women in the school, do they?" She absent-mindedly pulled off a hair that had somehow gotten caught on the fabric. "I want to go to school, but I thought... I know you're going to return to Hogwarts to teach and all, and you keep saying that you're not letting me leave you... But, will I be in Gryffindor tower with my friends?"

"You won't be, you'll be with me," he said with a twist of his lips. He leaned against the wardrobe, unconcerned about his nudity.

She tried to avoid looking at him below his chin, and down his lean torso, to the line of dark hair that trailed down his body from his chest to his groin, which was literally pointing to his erection.

"I am to be Headmaster, Hermione, not a professor." He smiled as he watched her with an amused smirk. "I suppose you should know. Okay. Yes, you're returning to school. You'll be finishing your seventh year, taking classes and eating in the Great Hall at your house table. However, for your protection and as a precaution you will have a bodyguard."

She bristled at his comment. Even so casually stated, she knew he meant that this bodyguard was intended to keep a leash on her.

"Hermione, the Dark Lord has gained control of the Ministry and the school. Even Hogsmeade is now under his thumb. I will not be able to I want to assure your safety. There will be many Death Eaters on the school grounds and in Hogsmeade, many of whom do not exactly approve of you or accept you, regardless of the Dark Lord's claims. You understand my concern don't you?"

She looked up at him, his declaration regarding the wizarding world alarming. *He's winning? Harry Ron... the Weasleys... Are things really that bad?* She nodded, considering what he'd said. *And I'll have to have a bodyguard for my protection?* "Who is it? Draco? Is that why he's being nice to me?"

"The Dark Lord told him to befriend you, but no, he is not your bodyguard. There are classes you'll be taking that Draco won't. You'll only have six classes together. I've asked my friend Cillian to watch over you." Snape held up his hand to cut her off. "He's actually happy to do this favor for me. He's told me that he finds you charming, and he's a capable wizard. I trust him." He crossed his arms as if expecting her to continue with the questions.

Cillian? "You said we're to be married just before you have to report to school. How long? How many...? When is that?" she rattled off. She had no concept of time lately, and the date of the hand-fasting seemed like it was getting close.

Snape smiled, his dark eyes sweeping over her. "Our wedding will be tomorrow, Hermione. The following day, you will come with me to Hogwarts. The teachers must be in the castle before school starts."

Tomorrow? "That means it's the twenty-ninth of August already. I'll be his.. She looked at the wardrobe, knowing that her wedding robes and the undergarments from Ater Décor were inside. "It just seems so fast. I don't even have my school things or my books..."

"I already have all of your books and school supplies for you," Snape stated. "Draco bought them for you when he went to collect his school things."

Hermione nodded and fingered the fabric of the bed hangings. "What about my school robes? I don't have..."

"I told you I would provide everything you needed. Your things will be packed in one of my mother's trunks and will be delivered to Hogwarts along with my own trunks," he explained. "If you like, tell me where your school trunk is and I can try to get it for you, or I'll have everything replaced that you need. You'll be my wife, Hermione; I can and will provide for you."

"Your temporary wife," she said, her heart sinking. *The Dark Lord is winning, the Ministry has fallen and the Death Eaters have taken over Hogwarts and Hogsmeade*

Snape walked over and tilted her head up to look in her eyes. "The Bonding won't be consummated by a pregnancy, I can assure you of that. Nevertheless, the Dark Lord considers you to be mine for a year and a day. After that I don't know what will happen. The war over the wizarding world is happening. There still is a strong resistance against the Dark Lord, and it's gaining supporters every day, but it's still ineffective. I have a role to play in this war, but even I'm not sure what the outcome will be."

She looked at him, needing reassurance. "And I'm now part of that role?"

"No, you are an unexpected kink in the plans," he replied with a smirk. "You are quite a predicament, actually, one that had to be adapted for."

"Predicament? You mean I was dumped in your lap, and now you are being forced to marry me." Hermione wanted to look away, but he held her chin firmly. "I know you don't really want this; you're just going along because you have to."

"You're wrong. Yes, I do... Let me in, Hermione, let me be with you." Snape grabbed her roughly by the shoulders and kissed her. "I've been waiting for you to want me, but Merlin, girl, I do want you."

"You only want... to shag me... because I'm here," she stammered between kisses.

"Hardly," he growled in frustration. "It has nothing to do with convenience and everything to do with you."

"Really?" she asked breathlessly against his lips.

"Yes. I want to make love to you. Every night *I want* to make love to you." He moaned, a deep growl in his throat, as he grabbed her hand roughly and placed it against his stiff penis. "Doesn't this answer your question? How many times have you *ever* seen me flaccid when I'm alone with you? Don't you realize how you affect me? I just don't want to be another Death Eater that has forced himself on you you've been through that too often." He stepped back, running his hand through his hair, looking flustered and uncertain, and she'd never seen him so unguarded, so unsure before. "I wanted you to... Circe, Hermione, I don't want to force you. I don't want to rape you tomorrow, but it will be expected... I will have to consummate our union, and I don't want you to hate me for it."

She watched him gobsmacked as she listened to his declaration. He turned, as if to walk away from her, and she reached out and grabbed his arm *He didn't want to force himself on me? He's been restraining himself for me because of what the others did...* She moved closer, and his eyes locked on hers, dark and questioning. *He really does care!* She didn't know what to say. Wordlessly, she leaned up and tried to kiss him, her lips barely touching his face, just below his lower lip, tentatively. He didn't respond, his eyes staring at her, his expression guarded and dark. She lowered her head, wondering if her brazenness had put him off. She didn't have to wonder about it for very long. He grabbed her again, pulling her roughly to him as his lips landed on hers.

His kiss was ardent and hungry as his arms wound around her, crushing her. She couldn't breathe, his tight embrace and his bruising kiss making her head spin and her knees weak. "Merlin, girl, I need you," he mumbled against her lips.

He needed and wanted her; it was what she wanted and needed to know. She closed her eyes and let her body respond to him. He awoke desires in her she'd tried to deny but couldn't any longer. She murmured an affirmative against his mouth, knowing he would make love to her and wanting him to.

"Hermione, are you sure?"

"Yes."

His response was a growl that sounded practically feral as he pulled her night slip off of her body, then swept her up in his arms and nearly threw her on the bed, climbing up on top of her. He braced himself over her, his fingers gliding on her skin as he kissed her mouth, her neck and her breasts, making her skin tingle, giving her shivers in their wake. He tenderly caressed and kneaded every inch of her, his fingers a stark contrast to the demanding hunger and driven intensity of his mouth on her skin. He shifted his weight, his knees trying to press between her legs, and she moved to accommodate him, receiving a lustful grin before he kissed her sensually, encouraging her to use her tongue on his. His hand slid down between them, and he fondled her, stimulating her, creating shocking jolts of sensation to course through her, eventually rippling outward in waves that suddenly tensed and came crashing down through her core, leaving her gasping and breathless.

Snape smiled as he watched her face, shifting his weight above her and repositioned his body between her thighs as his deft fingers parted her moist lips and his penis pressed against her opening. He rubbed its tip around a few times, teasing her, spreading her wetness in its path before he slowly inserted himself into her.

She expected it to hurt, to feel some discomfort, but his penis as it slid into her felt incredible, filling and slightly stretching her, and she moaned in pleasure. His answering smile warmed her heart. He began to move, his strokes long and slow, watching her face with a possessive gleam in his eyes. She reached out to touch him, gliding her fingertips on his skin, every now and again closing her eyes, enjoying the sensations of his penis inside her. He caressed her breasts while he moved, his pace quickening. Hermione gasped as his thrusts became harder, moaned as his movements became faster, and her breathing became ragged as her heart began to pulse faster, from the sensation she'd felt before building within her again. She stiffened as it seemed to peak, spreading from her groin to her head, and she tried holding onto the pleasurable feeling, letting it fill her.

"Breathe, Hermione," he said silkily. "Let it go, don't fight it."

He lifted up slightly; his movements in and out of her seemed to become longer as his fingers slid between them to touch her sensitive nub again with small flicks and sweeps, and she thought she would burst.

"That's it; let go." His silky voice was nearly a growl, and he flicked her again in rhythm to his strokes, sending shock waves to course through her. "Let it happen; don't hold back," he said, his voice deep and seductive.

She tried to pull his hand away, to stop his finger on the sensitive nub, but he only smiled and pulled her hand down to feel himself within her. She was stunned to feel his penis slide, wet and hard though her as he moved within her body, and the pressure within her began to ripple. "That's it, feel; let it come."

She felt like she'd burst, the feeling inside growing, then suddenly breaking, surging down and out, as if her body had become liquid. She cried out his name between gasps as he pounded himself into her and then stiffened, hissing harshly, his body trembling above her. She closed her eyes, concentrating on the feelings of bliss and contentment before looking up at him in amazement. He had a smug look of accomplishment on his face as he watched her, waiting before pulling out and lying down beside her on the bed, pulling her into his arms.

"Thank you," he said, kissing her temple.

"You're welcome," she said uncertainly, thinking she should be the one to thank him since he did everything.

He pushed himself up to look at her, concerned. "Are you all right?"

"Can we do that again?" she asked, still feeling the tingling and throbbing between her legs.

He laughed, a warm, sensual laugh, rolling her onto her back. "Gladly."

~o0o~

Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy came to take Hermione to Malfoy manor very early the following morning. Hermione was nervous as she listened intently to the argument between the Malfoys and Snape. Actually, he was arguing with Narcissa, regarding Narcissa's insistence that Snape couldn't see Hermione before the wedding and that she needed a day at the manor to be prepared properly. Hermione could just imagine what that would entail and was desperately hoping Snape would win the argument. Peren had been ordered by Narcissa to retrieve the wedding robes and undergarments from Snape's room, only to be ordered to return the garments back upstairs by Snape, thrice, by both, before Draco finally yelled at them to stop. Lucius simply leaned against the doorframe, amusedly watching Snape try to argue with his wife, a knowing smirk plastered on his face.

Draco swore to Hermione that she wouldn't be killed, maimed, cursed, tortured, poisoned, abused or otherwise harmed, and that all his mum had planned for her was simply to have her groomed properly in preparation for her wedding. Narcissa laughed coldly, amused at Hermione's insistence that she would do anything untoward and incur the wrath of her Lord. Lucius stifled his laughter and asked Peren to fetch him a drink while Narcissa tried to persuade Hermione that she did not intend to harm her.

In the end, Hermione reluctantly agreed to go to the manor on two conditions: first, that Narcissa swear a wand oath to her promises which Narcissa refused to do, and secondly, that Peren could come along with her.

"Fine, Hermione, anything to expedite this and get you to comply," Draco said, holding his wand pointed to his chest as he swore that she'd not be harmed.

Narcissa's temper flared, her grey eyes flashed in annoyance and anger as Draco gave Hermione his wand oath. "Draco, how could you!" she screamed, then calmed, although she was still seething. "I told you I'd not do anything to incur the Dark Lord's wrath! You insipid girl! How dare you insinuate insist on..."

"And I want Peren with me," Hermione chimed in, still refusing to go without someone who would be on her side and make sure nothing untoward would happen. She knew Peren would protect her, even getting Snape if the need arose.

"We have plenty of house-elves, Miss Granger, surely..." Lucius said, but was cut off by Narcissa.

"I don't really care! She can *have* the bloody elf if that's what it will take to get her to comply! Just get her belongings together, and let's go!" Narcissa snapped furiously. "I have a lot to do to make her *presentable*, and I don't need this trouble and aggravation!"

Peren started to cry as she stood next to Hermione, huge tears streaming down her exuberant face.

"Fine," Snape barked. "Peren, go pack Hermione's things for the wedding."

Peren ran upstairs to retrieve the wedding robes and small overnight trunk again, and Draco ran upstairs to pack as well.

From the time Hermione Apparated to the manor until Peren insisted that she eat something for lunch, Hermione had been massaged, oiled, bathed, lotioned, creamed and perfumed by multiple house-elves. Her hair was brushed, washed, straightened, rolled, twisted and re-rolled. As her hair set, Narcissa introduced several women to Hermione: Constance Mulciber, Estrith Rosier, and Ling and Sherrilyn Gwynek, who all gabbed and gossiped together while manicurists gave them Nail-Perfect Potion and Nail-Grow cuticle oil treatments, then filed and re-shaped her nails into ten perfect claws. Hermione's nails were painted in a dark crimson, which she knew would match the color of her gown perfectly, while the five other women had their nails done in an iridescent dark pink.

Of all the women, only Ling and Sherrilyn Gwynek were truly cordial toward her, while Estrith Rosier was coolly indifferent, although not as patronizing as Constance Mulciber and Narcissa. Both Ling and Sherrilyn sat on either side of Hermione throughout the day, engaging her in idle chatter. After the manicures and pedicures, Peren and two other house-elves began teasing, twirling, combing and pinning Hermione's hair into an upsweep with cascading tendrils falling down her back adorned by tiny sparkling rhinestones. No sooner than everyone's hair had been coiffed than three more witches arrived to assist the women with their makeup. Finally, the elves started tying Hermione into her backless wizard corset, helping her with her garters and stockings, her robes and lastly, her shoes. Ling and Sherrilyn Gwynek, Estrith Rosier and Narcissa were dressed in their matching deep sapphire dress robes while Constance was wore dark, midnight blue, all five chatting excitedly over the jewelry two elderly

house-elves had brought in for everyone to wear. Narcissa walked over, placed a diamond wreath-style necklace around Hermione's neck and clipped a pair of ridiculous dangle diamond earrings to her ears while Constance and Estrith snickered. However, when Hermione looked at herself in the mirror, surrounded by the other Death Eater's wives, she was amazed. She looked and felt beautiful.

She was as ready as she was going to be. Hermione sat quietly while waiting to be escorted down to the gardens where the wedding was to take place, feeling every bit like Narcissa's dress-up doll. The women still milled around, chattering at her or amongst themselves, and Hermione began to feel nervous.

"Mistress," Peren said, handing her a cup of tea as she waited. "Master Snape asked Peren to slip you this. He told me it is Calming Draught," she added in a whisper. Hermione smiled and took the cup, drinking the brew, thankful for Snape's thoughtfulness.

As the Calming Draught took effect, a loud knock made all the women turn, and the conversations halted.

Narcissa stood and opened the door, allowing Cillian, Draco and Lucius to enter; all three dressed in fine, dark blue dress robes. Cillian smiled at Hermione, Draco's mouth opened slightly, then snapped closed when he looked at her, and Lucius stood apprising her as if she was a sculpture he was considering purchasing, then complimented his wife on her superb abilities. Cillian immediately walked over to talk to Ling and Sherrilyn, complimenting them both and kissing each on the cheek. Constance made her leave, saying something about going down to sing as the Dark Lord entered the room in resplendent midnight blue dress robes, which only accentuated his grotesque features.

"Well, my dear, I can see what Severus sees in you," he said, gazing approvingly at Hermione's appearance. He held his arm up for her. "Hermione, shall we?"

Passively, Hermione accepted his arm and followed the wedding party from the house out toward the Malfoy gardens. A strong, second-soprano voice was singing from somewhere inside the formal hedges, accompanied by a harp as Lucius and Narcissa, followed by Cillian and Ling Gwyneck, passed through the garden gate. A heartbeat later Draco and Sherrilyn Gwynek entered.

Hermione took a deep breath, trying to find her Gryffindor bravery, holding onto her cascade of orchids, roses, peonies, gardenias and lilies of the valley, as she stood waiting with the Dark Lord. *I can hardly believe that he is the man who is going to escort me down the aisle at my wedding and not my dad. The one man in the world who I fear most, who would've killed me on sight under any other circumstances, is giving me away at my wedding to the one man I'd never, ever considered as a potential husband. Could life become any more ironic? Never in my most disturbing nightmares would my mind have created this. But so far, the only decision I've actually made regarding my wedding is the color of my gown and which shoes I was allowed to wear.*

"Don't be nervous, Hermione, you are stunning but then all brides are stunning on their wedding day, aren't they?" the Dark Lord asked.

"Thank you," she said softly, just as he added, "Are you ready?"

Hermione nodded, swallowing the lump in her throat. *This is it.*

Her first view of the garden nearly made Hermione pause from pure shock. It looked surreal. The formal garden was alive with fairies, and every bush, tree, shrub and even the grass was in bloom. Thousands of butterflies, candles and bouquets of flowers decorated every inch of the garden. White male peacocks stood on stone pedestals in a circle around the garden with their tails spread out in magnificent fans. A large fountain, overflowing with water lily blooms, stood in the middle of about a hundred guests, all standing and waiting for her to enter. She had no idea if these people here to witness her wedding were all Death Eaters and their wives or not, but she did recognize several members of wizard society and several familiar faces of schoolmates, mostly Slytherins, in the crowd. She assumed that some of them, a certain amount, were probably Death Eater sympathizers as well. On the far side of the garden, a priest in flowing blue and white robes stood in front of a large gazebo, which was covered with fairies, candles and flowers. Slightly to the right of the aisle in front of the gazebo, stood Snape, wearing elegant black dress robes, his expression unreadable, flanked by their wedding party all in dark blue dress robes, the women holding silver flowers in their hands.

The Dark Lord tightened his grip on her hand as he led her down the aisle toward Snape.

When she came to a halt in front of Snape, the priest began to speak. "May the place of this rite be consecrated by the goddess and by the creator. For we gather here in a ritual of love with these two who would be united. Marriage is a bond to be entered into only after considerable thought and reflection; as with any aspect of life, it has its cycles, its ups and its downs, its trials and its triumphs. With full understanding of this, Severus Tobias Talfryn Snape and Hermione Jane Granger have come here today to be joined as one in marriage."

The priest looked up at the assembled guests. "We are gathered together here in the sight of goddess and the creator to witness this man and this woman to be united together in holy matrimony. By their free will and devotion, these two persons come now to be joined together in the honorable and holy estate, instituted of the goddess and the creator, hand to hand, body to body, soul to soul. Therefore, if any man can show any just cause why they may not lawfully be joined together by the rites of the goddess, the commandments of the creator, or the laws of the realm, let him now speak, or else hereafter forever hold his peace."

Without a pause the priest then looked at Hermione, and then at Snape, as he continued. "I require and charge you both, Severus and Hermione, that you will answer truthfully if either of you know of any impediment why you may not be lawfully joined together in matrimony. If so, speak that you confess it now."

Again without waiting for an answer the priest continued. "I now shall ask simply if the bride comes of her own will to this ceremony. Who confirms her assent for this union and gives consent for this bride to be bound in marriage to this man? Please state his blessings upon her."

The Dark Lord smiled at Hermione, and then looked up at the priest. "I give this witch to this wizard, to be his wife."

The priest nodded. "Severus and Hermione, please come forward and stand here before us, and before the goddess and the creator, place your right hands upon this wand."

Hermione stepped forward to stand next to Snape, placing her hand on the rod held by the priest as Snape did the same. The priest smiled briefly, then continued. "Above you are the stars, below you are the stones, that as time does pass for you, you shall always be reminded of your devotion. Like a star, should your love guide and direct you, like a stone, should your love be firm and support you. Be close, but not too close. Possess one another, but be understanding. Have patience with each other, for storms will come, but they will go quickly. Be free in the giving of affection and warmth. Make love often, and be sensuous with one another. Have no fear, and let not the ways or words of the unenlightened give you unease, for the goddess and the creator are with you, now and always."

The priest turned to Snape. "Do you, Severus, take Hermione to be your hand-fastened wife, to be her constant friend, her partner, and her love? To love her without reservation, honor and respect her, protect her from harm, comfort her in times of distress, and to be with her in mind and spirit?"

"I so pledge by my wand," Severus stated and the wand glowed.

The priest then turned to Hermione. "Do you, Hermione, take Severus to be your hand-fastened husband, to be his constant friend, his partner, and his love? To love him without reservation, honor and respect him, protect him from harm, comfort him in times of distress, and to be with him in mind and spirit?"

Hermione looked up at Severus, her gaze unwavering. "Yes, I do. I pledge by my wand." And again the wand glowed.

The priest handed a chalice to Severus, saying, "May you drink your fill from the cup of love and fertility."

Severus took the chalice and drank, then handed the chalice to Hermione, watching her with a sly smile as she took chalice and sipped the wine. He took the chalice back and handed it to the priest, who set it on the table.

Next, the priest took the plate of bread, giving one piece to Severus, who broke it, handing half to Hermione. "May you serve each other now as in life and eat your fill from

the bread of life and prosperity," the priest said as Severus held the piece of bread out for Hermione to eat and then accepted hers as she made the same gesture for him.

The priest hardly waited for them to swallow before announcing, "And now for the exchange of the rings." Cillian handed Severus Hermione's ring, winking at her as he did so. "Severus, if it be your wish for Hermione to be bound to you, place the ring on her finger, and repeat after me," the priest continued as Severus slipped a pair of rings onto Hermione's finger.

"I, Severus Tobias Talfryn Snape, if it be your wish, take you and you alone, Hermione Jane Granger to be my wedded wife, my bonded mate, to have and to hold from this day forward until the fulfillment of my troth. I promise to love thee wholly and completely without restraint, for better or for worse, in plenty and in poverty, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; and thereunto I plight to you my troth," Severus repeated after the priest as he stated his vows.

The priest turned to Hermione. "Hermione, if it be your wish for Severus to be bound to you, place the ring on his finger, and repeat after me," the priest directed her. Narcissa touched Hermione on her shoulder and pressed a ring onto her palm.

Hermione turned and faced Severus, sliding the band onto his finger and repeated after the priest, saying; "I, Hermione Jane Granger, if it be your wish, take you and you alone, Severus Tobias Talfryn Snape, to be my wedded husband, my bonded mate, to have and to hold from this day forward until the fulfillment of my troth. I promise to love thee wholly and completely without restraint, for better or for worse, in plenty and in poverty, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish; and thereunto I plight to you my troth."

"Kneel, and take hands," the priest commanded. Both Snape and Hermione knelt facing each other, and Severus reached out, grasping Hermione's hands in his. "Do not cause pain nor live in the heat of anger, but share each other's pain and anger, and seek to ease it," the priest charged them pointing his wand at their combined hands.

Snape made a subtle squeeze of Hermione's hand. "I so vow," he urged her to say with him in unison. One cord materialized from the priest's wand and tied their hands.

"You will share each other's laughter; look for the brightness in life and the positive in each other," the priest charged them.

"I so vow," Hermione and Snape said in unison, and another cord from the priest's wand wrapped around their wrists.

"You will share the burdens, dreams and hopes of each other so that your spirits may grow in this union," the priest charged them.

"I so vow," Hermione and Snape said, and a third cord wrapped around their wrists.

"Honor each other and never seek to give cause to break that honor," the priest charged them.

"I so vow," Hermione and Snape said, and a fourth cord appeared binding their hands tightly together.

The priest smiled at the couple. "The knots of this binding formed by these cords bind you to your vows. Severus, I commend you to commit yourself to the bond and unique relationship that exists between you, and pledge Hermione as yours. I bind you, Severus." The part of the cords binding Snape tightened around Severus's wrists and glowed. "Hermione, I commend you to commit yourself to the bond and unique relationship that exists between you, and pledge to keep Severus as yours. I bind you, Hermione," the priest said and the cords around Hermione's wrists tightened and glowed.

"You are man and wife for a year and a day; that space gone by, thy choice must be made or to be sealed by recommitting your declaration of holy matrimony or by the consummation of life. For as man and woman bring life, so may life come from you," the priest stated. "You may now kiss to seal your pledge."

Snape pushed their hands down, making Hermione lean forward, and he placed simple kiss on her lips. The cords binding their hands glowed and then vanished, as if absorbed into their skin. "Rise and be acknowledged." Severus stood and offered his hand to assist Hermione to her feet. "I present to you, my Lord, and to our honored guests, Mr. and Mrs. Severus Snape," the priest declared. Everyone rose, and Snape nodding respectfully to the Dark Lord before walking through the collected guests, leading Hermione down the aisle. The Dark Lord turned and followed the newlyweds, followed by the wedding party.

As Snape and Hermione exited the garden, they emerged beneath a huge gossamer canopy. The glow from thousands of candles made Hermione realize that the sun had set during her wedding, and the evening sky could be seen though the sheer, gossamer canopy. The hedges that had surrounded the garden vanished. The pillars with the peacocks shifted backwards, enlarging the space and tables appeared on the grass around them. At least fifty house-elves began moving chairs as guests began to rise and mingle. Severus stood stiffly as the guests passed them, offering their congratulations, some sincere, most with condescending or smug expressions. As the guests began to settle at the tables, Narcissa indicated to Severus that they too should take their seats. The long table for the wedding party was elegantly set. Hermione and Severus sat down, the Dark Lord on her other side, as Narcissa and Lucius placed themselves next to the Dark Lord, with Cillian and Draco on the other side of Snape. The dinner of glazed pheasant was superb, and the champagne excellent, although Hermione was too nervous to appreciate it as she tried to avoid the stares and glares aimed her way.

When a quartet began to play, Snape stood and asked Hermione to dance with him. She followed him, self-conscious of the people watching as he began to lead her in their dance. She was amazed at how fluid he was and relaxed as she allowed him to guide her. He was a strong lead, his steps measured and sure. Soon the center of the canopy filled with couples. Hermione found herself passed onto one wizard after another and rescued several times from a scowling or sneering partner by either Draco, Cillian or Snape. The cake was served; more champagne, and several hors d'oeuvre and tiny deserts were carried around on huge silver platters by the house-elves as people continued to dance and mingle.

Snape pulled Hermione aside, his arm around her, as the evening grew dark. "Hermione, it's time. We will be escorted up to the bridal chamber soon. Here, drink this." He poured a pale liquid into her empty flute and urged her to drink the potion quickly.

No sooner then she emptied her glass than the bridal party, escorted by the Dark Lord and Bellatrix, approached. "Severus, I think it is time you took your bride upstairs," the Dark Lord announced. Hermione saw Belinda standing next to Ling and Sherrilyn Gwynek and their husbands among the crowd, her expression cool.

Snape bowed respectfully to the Dark Lord and guided Hermione, along with the throng, up and back into the manor. She tried desperately to ignore the clatter of conversations as they made their way up to the second floor, stopping at the large double doors to a large bedchamber. The room had only one elegant dresser set under a huge gilded mirror, which faced a huge bed. A small bench sat at the foot of the bed, and a petite chair stood near a window. The bed hangings were tied back, the covers folded down, exposing the silky sheets, dappled with rose petals. Peren and a male house-elf stood waiting to assist the couple. The overall feeling was expectant and opposing, hardly what Hermione would have considered romantic at all.

Wordlessly, Snape guided Hermione to stand by the bed as he gazed down at her. "I don't believe I've told you how lovely you look," he said softly when they were alone.

"No, but your eyes have," she said demurely, nearly in a whisper, as he cupped her face and kissed her.

He removed his robes, casually discarding his coat and shirt, and then kicked off his boots. "Relax, Hermione," he said as he cupped her face again. "I'm not going to hurt you." With a flick of his wand, he released her hair, the wealth of hairpins falling to the floor, and he swept them aside with another flick of his wand. His hands glided down her bare back until his fingers found the zipper, slowly removing her robes, letting them fall to the floor at her feet. His dark eyes grew darker as he gazed down at the restricting backless corset, garters and stockings. "And Narcissa thought you needed this," he smirked softly as he deftly began untying her.

"You don't like it?" she asked as the corset gave, landing on the floor.

"Oh, I like them. What man doesn't? I just meant that you don't need one to entice me," he said as he urged her to step closer to the bed. "Sit down." Hermione complied, and he slipped off her knickers, the garters and stockings with gentle, teasing caresses down her legs, dropping them on the floor with both of her shoes.

Hermione swallowed in anticipation as he removed his trousers before leaning down to gently kiss her. His kiss was so different from the hungry, demanding kisses she was used to from him. He teased and caressed her lips sensually as he pressed her down onto the soft bed. His hand swept down her body, fingering her folds until he

found her clitoris. He stimulated her, rubbing and flicking the sensitive spot until she was gasping, reflexively arching her body in response. He trailed his kisses down her neck and bent down between her legs, sucking and licking her. His finger slid inside her, adding to the manipulation, until she was thrashing on the bed, pleading and crying out his name. Snape looked up at her, a smug gleam in his eyes, bringing himself back up to kiss her, her salty taste still on his lips as he claimed her mouth, his tongue deepening his kiss.

He left no part of her untouched, unknissed or ignored, and she squirmed as the desire for him grew. She reached out to touch him, her fingers tracing his chest hair, his nipples and his abdomen, loving the feelings of his touch and the feel of his skin. "Move up," he whispered, following her as she scooted toward the center of the bed, never losing contact with her mouth. He held himself above her as his fingers explored her body, leaning down to kiss, nibble and taste her skin, suckling her nipples while his fingers delved lower.

He kneed her legs, encouraging her to open up for him, and settled himself between her thighs, his penis probing at her entrance. With one stroke, he slid into her, watching her face. He moved within her, long, slow strokes, as he gazed into her eyes and then bent down to place his mouth to her breast. Hermione closed her eyes, losing herself in the feeling of him inside her, the sensual sensation of his lips on her skin. He moved up, capturing her mouth, grinding his groin against hers with each forward plunge. She tried to meet him and match his rhythm, her hands exploring his back and shoulders. He grasped her hips as he increased the pace of his thrusts. Her breathing became ragged as the escalating sensation in her groin grew, spreading deep inside her, threatening to consume her. "That's it, Hermione," he purred against her neck. She arched her back as the pressure grew, and her nails dug into the satin sheets as he spurred her toward her climax. She grasped him, trying to pull him deeper, and groaned and tightened down on him, her body clenching around his penis, and he moved with more force against her, his breathing becoming as ragged as hers. Suddenly the pressure surged and rolled, rushing through her as if her body was melting, and she screamed his name, crying and gasping.

Snape thrust into her, pushing her into the bed, growling deep in his throat as his own release came. He held his body up, his arms stiff, his body shaking, pushing his penis down into her, perspiring, his hair falling down over his face as his breathing slowed down to normal. She waited, wondering, until he lifted off her and climbed from the bed.

He swept his wand over himself and then her, cleaning them both and smiled contently. "Come here, Hermione," he finally said, holding up his hand. She scooted off the bed toward him, uncertain of his intentions. He pulled her to her feet, his hands sliding down her arms. "Get dressed. I'm taking you home," he said softly before kissing her.

"We're leaving?" she asked, gobsmacked. She thought she'd have to spend the night in this sterile room.

"Yes," he said, gazing up at the mirror. "I have no intention of staying here. *We've* provided enough entertainment, done what's been expected, and I want to take you home. Peren."

"Yes, master," she squeaked, peeking around the bed as Snape grabbed his clothes off the small chair, pulling on his trousers.

"Get her back into her clothes. Hermione, I'll be back; I need to have a word with our host." He dressed quickly as Peren and another hose-elf started to assist Hermione back into her wedding attire.

"Won't they be upset with our leaving?" she asked as the elves tied her back into her corset.

He snorted softly and smirked as his eyes darted to the mirror again. "Possibly, but we are going. I'll be outside in the hall." Hermione gaped at him, suddenly comprehending as her eyes flew to the mirror. "Yes," was all he said as he walked out of the room, and Hermione turned her back to the mirror, quickly pulling on her robes. Peren pulled Hermione's hair up into a coil that almost resembled the elaborate upsweep she'd worn before and was just putting on her shoes when the Dark Lord walked into the room.

He closed the doors and leaned against them with his arms crossed. "So, Hermione, I understand you and Severus are leaving?"

"Yes," Hermione said with a slow nod. "Severus wishes to go."

The Dark Lord casually walked over to her, his red eyes watching her intently. "You will be returning to Hogwarts, tomorrow. Are you excited?"

"I'm looking forward to going, yes," she admitted.

"I have granted permission for you to have your wand returned to you." He started to step around her, his eyes roaming over her as if weighing her reaction to his statement, and Hermione remained frozen where she stood. "My concern is *obviously*, are you going to disappoint me again?"

Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat when he stopped directly behind her. "No," she replied, breathlessly. Something cool slid down her back, and she wasn't sure if it was his fingertip or his wand tip.

"Somehow, I do not believe you. You have not come around as much as I had hoped." She could feel the Dark Lord's breath on the back of her neck as he leaned closer to her, his cold hand now pressed against her bare back. "You are *mine*, Hermione, remember that. *I* choose to allow you this privilege that no other Muggle-born will be allowed to have, protected now because you are now one of mine. You are now a Death Eater's wife, and as such, you are now *bound to me* by *his* oath."

Hermione could barely breathe, his nearness sending chills down her spine and making her hands tremble uncontrollably by her side. She could see flashes of the tip of his wand as he stepped even closer behind her. "Remember this, Hermione, I am generous to those who please me. Severus has pleased me, and I granted him his request to have you." His cold, sibilant voice became more controlled and cruel as he spoke. "But those who displease me are punished and not always by death, although you might prefer death if you do. Did you know that I have been able to improve the effectiveness of the Cruciatius Curse and the Extreme-Cold Curse that you used on Wormtail?"

"No, I wasn't aware of that." Hermione didn't want to think of what variations he was referring to.

"Your pathetic little attempt was *nothing* compared to what the curses feel like by *my* wand. I have perfected them; I know how to truly harness their effectiveness." He stepped away from her slightly, coming around to stand in her peripheral vision, his wand held loosely in his hand where she could just see it if she turned her head. "Since Dumbledore's pathetic little Order has been disbanded, what with him dead and all, my spy has been given a new task, one which you are not to interfere with. You are to assist him to do whatever he asks of you, or you will *feel* what the Extreme-Cold Curse *and* Cruciatius Curse *really* feel like as performed by a *master*. *Your* master, Hermione." He reached out and grasped her left wrist, pulling her arm toward him, making her look at him. "Do I make myself plain? You're to be an asset, a loyal Death Eater's wife, or you will be eliminated."

Hermione stared up into his hard, cold red eyes, very much aware of the power he radiated. "Yes, sir," she stammered nervously.

"My Lord, Hermione," he said, his eyes narrowing, his wand tip pressing into her forearm. "Say it."

"Yes, My Lord," she said, paralyzed by fear.

"Very good," he said, stepping closer, his wand tip still aimed into her flesh. "Because you are *mine*, Hermione, *do not* forget that."

"Yes, My Lord," she said, her voice shaky.

"Welcome to the Death Eaters, Hermione," he said, releasing her. "I look forward to our next meeting. I'll inform Severus you are ready."

She stood, shaking uncontrollably, barely able to stand as he swept from the room. She tried to compose herself, too emotionally distraught to summon up the exalted

Gryffindor courage she didn't feel presently, and exited the room expecting to see a group of people standing in the hallway, as if they'd been looking through a one-way mirror into the bedroom. What she saw surprised her; the hallway was empty, except for Snape coming to get her. "Are you ready to go?" he asked, looking at her speculatively, scrutinizing her face.

Hermione took a deep breath and pulled herself up straighter. "Yes."

He held his arm to her and she accepted it gratefully, leaning into him as they walked from the house. Hermione's mind was in pure turmoil. There seemed to be so many people to say good-bye to, and more than a few that looked at her with knowing smirks. By the time they arrived back at Spinner's End, Hermione's legs were trembling and her whole body was shaking. Snape removed his robes and placed them on her shoulders, but they felt pressingly oppressive and gave her no comfort at all.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Severus asked.

"I'm fine," she said softly, her voice wavering. The Dark Lord's voice still echoed in her mind.

"No, you're not. What's wrong?" he asked.

Hermione shook her head. "Nothing, I'm fine," she said, trying to keep control of herself. *You are mine, you are now bound to me by his oath your master...*

"No, something's wrong. Tell me." he tipped her face up and she couldn't meet his eyes, simply shaking her head, then shrugging. "If you won't tell me, I can't fix it."

He tried lifting her face to his, but she couldn't look him in the eyes. *You can't fix this*, she thought sadly. "It's nothing, I'm just tired, cold... exhausted, I think."

His hand fell to his side, and she turned her head away from him to hide the tears swelling up in her eyes. *My Lord, Hermione say it...* She could still feel the spot where he'd pressed his wand to her arm.

"Do you need something? A potion?" he asked.

She shook her head. He left her in the bedroom saying, "I'll get you a Sedative Potion."

As soon as the door closed, Hermione collapsed on the bed. She was completely numb, trembling uncontrollably as Peren helped her change into a sheer, peach-colored nightgown. When Peren left, her emotions came crashing down on her, and she crumbled, curling up on the bed, and began to cry in deep racking sobs, burying her face into her pillow.

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Severus returned from his potions lab, carrying a Calming Draught and a mild Warming Elixir in case Hermione had been cold from wearing those backless robes all evening.

He'd been stunned when he'd seen her, truly amazed at how lovely she looked. The crimson truly complimented her coloring, and the way the robes clung to her body nearly set his blood to boil. Only when he'd seen the back of the gown had he felt odd stirrings of anger and possessiveness as she danced with the other wizards. It was cut too low for his sense of decorum, and he shot scowls at every wizard that made comments regarding her attempt at making herself desirable or about showing off her better assets. He had no idea *what* Narcissa had in mind choosing those robes for her. As he'd watched Hermione sway in the seductive robes, he grew more and more restless to have her all to himself again.

Her performance was perfect all evening, and he'd felt a sense of pride as he watched her, thinking about how her Gryffindor pride must have been what kept her looking so sure and confident, although she'd had a nervous smile the entire time. Still, she glowed radiantly when he was near her. Nevertheless, he'd had to fight his own urges to whisk her away from the lecherous eyes of his fellow Death Eaters all evening. He'd even had to fight down the urge to curse Lucius for his blatant innuendos regarding his new wife.

She had been shivering uncontrollably since she met him in the hallway after their coupling, though, and had obviously been shaken by something, possibly by the Viewing-Mirror Narcissa had placed in their Bridal room. He was certain all she needed was another dose of Calming Draught. He returned to the bedroom and paused at the door. Hermione was crying, deep racking sobs. *Nothing wrong, eh? Damn it, that girl! When will she grow up?* He waited, listening to her cry and turned to go back down stairs. *Cry it off then, but it won't change anything. We are married. You are now my wife. If being married to me is so horrible... Augh, shite* He needed a drink.

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Author's Notes:

Whoopsie! Seems that Severus misinterpreted that a bit again! Poor Hermione, she really needed him to comfort her, but she wouldn't tell him what bothered her, and Severus didn't have the patience to try and pry it out of her. They still have a way to go in the relationship department. At this point Hermione still feels like a prisoner, forced into a union, and Severus isn't pushing her into being physical, wanting that decision to be hers. The exception being the consummation of the hand-fasting of course.

It seems I now have three women to thank for their assistance. I want to express my gratitude to Amsev, Southern_Witch_69 and Cocomachristy for helping to catch all my mistakes and the support they have given me on this story. Thank you so very much. I appreciate it more than you could possibly know.

The diamond wreath-style necklace Narcissa gave to Hermione to wear was an idea taken from the Harry Winston wreath worn by Jennifer Lopez in the movie: Maid in Manhattan. I rather liked the earring she wore with it as well.

The Morning After

Chapter 14 of 43

The day after the wedding and Hermione is preparing for her return to Hogwarts. However, there are a few surprises for her, some pleasant and some not so.



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The Morning After

The dark apparition moved around her, blocking everything else from her by his billowing black robes and sleeves. She stood frozen, her left wrist grasped tightly in his fist. *"My Lord, Hermione. I'm your master now."* She couldn't breathe; she couldn't move. The very air about her was cold, dank, heavy and oppressive, nearly smothering her. *"You are a Death Eater's wife and thus you now belong to me."* She could feel his malevolence radiating, his hatred of her radiate from him in palatable waves, feel his gaze as he stared at her and feel his breath on her skin and hair. *"Say it, 'My Lord,' I want to hear you to say it to me."* Her fear enveloped her like a Lethifold. His lips curled and stretched into a sneer that showed a set of fangs, which gave his white, snake-like face and glowing red eyes a ghastly appearance. *"You are mine. 'Yes, master' say it!"* He was looming over her threateningly, his slit-like pupils retracting and his nares flaring. *"Show me your loyalty; succumb to me say it."* His cold red eyes were glaring at her with obvious malice. *"Say it take it!"* he demanded, his wand pressed into her arm, making her bleed, and her fear sliced through her like a thousand stabbing knives. *"You are going to accept it, aren't you? Because you are mine, Hermione, do not forget that."*

Hermione sat up, gasping for air, sweaty and shaking uncontrollably, her every nerve afire with a freezing intensity. It was dark, almost like a tomb, the air stale and oppressive, and she began to panic, her heart racing wildly in her chest, her lungs unable to take in enough air. She groped around until she realized she was on a bed. She quickly fumbled to the edge and encountered bed hangings, and started batting and swinging her hands wildly against the fabric until she found a way out.

Hermione tumbled from the bed and into Snape's bedroom, recognition of the familiar crashing over her as the dream faded. *I'm still here. His bedroom his house. I'm still with him.* She looked at her arm, expecting to see the Dark Mark marring her flesh, scarring her as his for life. There was a bruise on her forearm where the Dark Lord's wand had pressed into her, but the rest of her skin was unmarred and undamaged. She looked around the room. Even without Snape's presence, his things gave her a sense of reassurance. *Trust and obey him, and he will help me survive this I know he will.* Her hands were still shaky, and her legs felt weak, but she scrambled off the floor and into the loo, dropping the nightgown to the floor as she entered the shower.

The icy blast of the water before it heated up refreshed her mind and gave her strength, but her nerves, stretched to their limits, seemed to break as her emotions washed over her. Tears slid unchecked down her face as she used Snape's soap to wash, the woody scent so masculine, so familiar and almost reassuring. She inhaled the scent, hoping it could relieve the growing ache inside her, but the tears flowed harder, and she began to cry again. Her mind raced over the events of her summer, images and memories crashing down on her. *Raped, tortured, attacked, imprisoned, assaulted, intimidated, splinched, married, seduced, threatened and still his prisoner...* She slid down the tile and wrapped her arms around her knees, giving into the despair she felt.

She heard the door close, and she turned her head, still curled up sobbing on the shower floor. She hadn't realized he had been in the room. *He's here. At least he's here. If it weren't for Snape, I'd have gone insane.* She recalled each time she'd been hurt, assaulted and could have been maimed. *He's been there for me, healing me, doing everything he could, everything he can. But can he really protect me from the Dark Lord? From the other Death Eaters? Well, them maybe but from the Dark Lord? She recalled how he'd behaved at her summons. He stood near her, but at a distance, unemotional, and stiff, allowing the Dark Lord to do whatever he wanted. He even held me and forced me to watch the Dark Lord as he tortured Wormtail.* The memory brought fresh tears and choked sobs. Snape's words in her ear had been spoken in his low, silky drawl, *'He wants you to watch; it will be over soon.'* Was he trying to be supportive or reassuring? The Dark Lord had been punishing her as much as Wormtail that day, and she knew it.

A sharp knock interrupted her thoughts, and she looked up to see Snape leaning against the open door frame, taking in her position in the shower with a slight sneer. "Do you mind not wasting water?"

"Sorry," she said, awkwardly scrambling to her feet.

"I have a personal errand I need to do. I expect you to be dressed and packed when I return. My mother's trunk is next to the bed, and Draco will give you your school robes and supplies. I have an assortment of books you may use until we can acquire your old school trunk," he said smoothly. "Do not remove any of my personal books from this room. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," she answered, intimidated by his cool demeanor.

Severus's gaze swept over her, making Hermione flush slightly. "Cillian will be arriving shortly, so pull yourself together. He shall be going with us," he said, turning to leave.

Hermione quickly rinsed herself off, reaching for the shampoo.

She showered quickly, only stalling long enough to let the conditioner soak in her hair before rinsing. She mulled over what she might expect at school. *Snape is going to be Headmaster, how will that affect me? How will my housemates react when they find out I'm married to Snape?* Actually, she was looking forward to being in her dormitory again, having some sense of normalcy. She finished her shower and returned to the bedroom, finding the trunks from downstairs sitting on the floor. Peren was already busily packing her things, what few she had, into an open trunk.

Hermione looked at the trunk sitting by the bed. The trunk had a sizable bookshelf in the lid of the compartment and a lingerie tray that Peren had already filled for her. The house-elf had carefully folded Hermione's wedding robes and had placed them in the trunk as well. Dropping the lid, Peren turned another key, opening up another lock. Hermione's eyes opened wide as she noticed that the trunk had four locks before Peren threw open the second compartment. The lid had niches and nooks already filled with parchments, quills, inkwells and other stationary supplies. Peren levitated a removable secretary, exposing a large compartment with cubbyholes for her shoes. Her two house robes, one dark blue, the other Slytherin green, lay inside along with her black cloak. Hermione quickly dressed in her black robes and her soft boots as Peren pulled the hooded black robes from the wardrobe, which she'd worn the day she'd been captured. "Peren, I won't need those. Please get rid of them."

Peren looked up at her, startled. "But I fix them, mistress. I did a good job with the tears; you can hardly see them anymore."

Hermione picked up the garment, noticing that it had been meticulously mended with a sense of awe. Still the garment held horrible memories for her. Segmented memories of scowling faces, sneering and lewd comments from behind skull masks with glowing hateful and lustful eyes shining through the eye sockets hit her. She dropped the garment on the floor with shaking hands and shook her head to rid herself of the unwanted images. "No, this I can't ever wear it again. Please, Peren, get rid of it."

Peren nodded as if actually understanding, and the robe vanished from sight. "Is mistress wanting her hats?"

"Yes, Peren, everything that is mine," she replied.

Peren looked up at her, her eyes enlarging as if she'd said something wrong. "Everything, mistress?"

"Yes, Peren, everything," she answered, going to the loo to collect her belongings from the cupboards. She returned, her arms full, depositing them on the floor next to the trunk.

"I is to do this," Peren said nervously, trying to stop Hermione from placing them in her trunk. "Please, mistress, lets me."

"Peren, I can pack my own trunk," Hermione said with a grin.

"But I is to do this," she insisted, tears forming in her large green eyes, her lips and ears quivering.

"Okay," she relented, and Peren's pout turned into a huge grin.

Peren ran into the loo, coming out with the rest of Hermione's potions and lotions, carefully placing each item in the trunk. She stood up and looked at Hermione with a worried expression. "Mistress, is I going to school with you and Master Snape?"

Hermione didn't know what to say. "I dunno. I don't think anyone brings a house-elf to school. Hogwarts has a hundred house-elves already."

"But I wants to go with you," Peren said, her green eyes filling with tears again, like a child being left off at school for first time.

"Peren, don't cry!" she exclaimed, pulling the elf into a hug. Instantly Peren stopped crying.

"Oh, how very touching," Draco sneered from the doorway, a thick garment bag draped over his shoulder. "Elf, go get the rest of Hermione's things from my room. They are on the chair next to my bed." He dumped the bag on the bed, looking down at Hermione. "Here are your school robes. Merlin, you're costing Snape a bundle."

Hermione blushed. "I do have money, Draco; I can pay him back."

Draco snorted. "You're going to pay your husband back for things he should be providing you? Snape? Really Gra Hermione, you are so naïve. He won't accept it, and if you did offer to, he'd be insulted."

Peren came back, struggling under a large pile of packages. "Oh, my gods, Peren, here let me help you!"

"Blimey, you're unbelievable! You're actually helping the help!" Draco said, laughing.

Hermione ignored him as she unwrapped all the packages while Peren deftly put away her school robes and clothes. Hermione looked over the school supplies Severus had bought for her and handed them to Peren, who added her books to the shelves in the first compartment. If Draco thought the trunk unusual, he didn't show it. When Hermione saw her new Potions book, Peren closed the lid and opened another lock. Another sizable bookshelf was revealed in the lid, and the large compartment already had cauldrons, potions supplies and utensils inside, all in excellent condition. Hermione picked up a set of new brass measuring spoons and a set of scales with extra calibrating and balance indicators, wondering where they came from. They were definitely more complicated than the ones used at school.

"Nice, Hermione, are you going to use them in Potions then?" he asked with a chuckle. "The standard scales and measuring spoons too average for you?"

"I have no idea where these came from, Draco, and no, *like* the standard issued ones. These look ridiculously complicated and unnecessary," she replied, setting them back into her trunk. "Maybe they are Snape's?"

"No, he uses standard scales. He wouldn't use those," Draco stated. "Peren, I need you to pack my trunks."

Peren was retrieving the potions, books and flower vase from Hermione's bedside table. "If my mistress wants Peren to do it, I is happy to when I is done, sir."

"When you are done?" Draco asked, taken aback. "Did you call me sir? Since when do you call me sir?"

"Ah, er, yes, sir. When I is done with my mistress's packing, Peren is happy to pack yours too, sir," Peren said, placing the new quills in the second compartment.

"Elf, come here," Draco demanded, and Peren looked at Hermione as if struggling with the idea. "Now."

"Peren, just hand me the books and do what he says," Hermione suggested, not wanting to cause Peren trouble.

Peren's ears drooped as she handed the books to Hermione. "Yes, mistress, I will..."

"Wait. Did you call her mistress? Since when do you call her mistress?" Draco asked, perplexed. "Peren jump up and down."

"She will not! How dare you!" Hermione exclaimed. "Peren, you can go now, thank you." Peren bowed and ran from the room.

"Wait, come back here," Draco called after her. Peren didn't return. "Peren!" After a few seconds, Draco turned on Hermione. "Call her back."

"What?" Hermione asked, incensed. "I will do no such thing!"

"Call her," Draco said adamantly.

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "I will not..."

He looked at her as if she were testing his patience. "Humor me, will you? Call her only like it's an order."

Hermione looked at him as if he'd lost his Gobstones. "Peren, please come back here."

Peren appeared with a pop. "Yes, mistress," she said, bowing low.

Draco began to laugh so hard he bent over.

"Okay, what is so funny?" Hermione asked him.

"You don't get it, do you?" Draco choked out between laughs. "Oh, Mum is going to have a fit."

"About what?" she asked, perplexed.

"Peren, who is your master?" Draco asked the elf, ignoring Hermione's question.

"I serve the noble house of Granger-Snape, sir," Peren said proudly with a deep bow, nearly touching her little plump nose to the floor.

Hermione couldn't believe her ears. "*You what?*"

Draco stopped laughing. "Don't you realize? My mum actually gave Peren to you, Hermione. The morning before your wedding, remember? In the sitting room, when you refused to come to the manor without taking her with you? Apparently, Mum gave you a house-elf as a wedding gift! Priceless!"

Hermione was stunned, staring at Draco with her mouth agape. "No!"

"Apparently, yes," Draco said the same time Peren replied, enthusiastically, "Oh, yes, mistress, I serves you now!"

Peren looked from Draco back to Hermione twisting her fingers together. "So, does this mean Peren can come with her mistress to school with her?" Peren asked with a hopeful expression.

Hermione took in her with big green eyes looking up at her imploringly. "Alright, yes, you can come." Peren made a happy bounce, all smiles, and ran from the room.

Draco shook his head, grinning at her. "Another first. What, Hogwarts house-elves aren't good enough for you either?"

"Harry had his house-elf at school. Don't other students bring theirs?" she asked, not seeing what was funny.

"No, they don't," Draco stated and then looked at her, bemused. "Look, the school lists say you can bring a cat, an owl, or a toad no house-elves. So, no, students don't bring their own house-elf with them. I don't know why Potter thought he was above the rules, but then, we are talking about Potter, aren't we?" Hermione started to take offence, but Draco cut her off. "I don't want to fight about it, but it seems I need to ask you a favor. Hermione, I'm having some friends over in a bit. Could you please inform *your* house-elf to fix snacks and tea for six?"

If he hadn't been smirking amusedly, she would have thrown a book at him. "Yeah, I'll just go down and let her know."

Draco looked like he was ready to burst out laughing at her again. "She will hear you, you know. You just have to say it out loud."

She glared at him, not finding any of this amusing. "I want breakfast anyway," she said, getting up. "Are you coming?"

Breakfast was sitting on the table as soon as Hermione and Draco entered the kitchen. "See, she heard you," he said mockingly as he sat down.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked, and Draco shook his head. "Then why are you sitting with me?"

"Some habits die hard," he said, sipping on his tea.

The silence stretched as Draco watched her eat. Being observed reminded Hermione that there would be Death Eaters constantly watching her in the school. *Snape is having his friend watch over me as protection. Would any of them really harm me? The Dark Lord said I was his.* She tried to shake off the lingering concerns from her dream and the talk she'd had with the Dark Lord on her wedding night. Her hand shook slightly as she sipped her tea, and Hermione hoped Draco wasn't watching her close enough to notice. The memory of his wand pressing into her skin gave her uncontrollable chills. *What if he really does insist I take his Dark Mark?* She kept looking at Draco speculatively, her eyes falling to his left arm each time he set down his teacup. "Draco, may I, um..."

"You are staring at me, Hermione. What, is it?" his asked, his tone impatient.

He's a Death Eater; that means he took the Dark Mark, doesn't it? She looked up at him, wondering if he'd be forthright with her. "I was wondering...*Oh, just ask him!* May I see your Mark?"

"What?" he asked, not quite comprehending her request.

Tentatively, she pointed to his left arm. "Your Mark may I see it?"

"Why? Are you thinking of taking it?" he asked, confused.

She could feel her cheeks warm, and for the first time ever, she wished they were on better terms. "No, I was just..."

He pulled up his sleeve and held his arm out in front of her. "There, happy?" Her hand rose to it involuntarily and Draco laughed. "Go on, touch it if you want."

The snake undulated in his pale skin as he tightened the muscles on his forearm, making the Dark Mark seem to swell slightly. "Does it hurt?" she asked.

"Yes, sometimes, depending on his moods." Draco relaxed his hand, the muscles of his forearm going lax, and the snake seemed to relax as well. "It's my connection to him; it's like I can... feel him."

Like Harry's scar, she surmised. "So it hurts when he activates it, I mean when he summons you?"

He pulled down his sleeve, sneering. "Okay, it's like this. I can feel it in my skin, like it's alive. When the Dark Lord summons me, I know immediately if he is happy or angry, somewhat, well, most of the time, and I know where he is. I can go to him. It's an awareness, but yes, sometimes it hurts." He looked at her intently. "Just why are you asking?"

"Curious," she answered, not really comfortable confiding in him about her nightmare.

"Curiosity killed the Kneazle," he teased her. "He won't offer it to the likes of you, so don't concern yourself. Or are you curious as to why I took it?"

"Yes and no," she said, curious if he'd tell her.

"It's simple. My dad is a Death Eater, and so is my mum. It was expected that I'd join eventually," he stated so matter of factly. "When Dad was imprisoned, I was given the offer to accept the Dark Mark and restore my family's honor and to secure my mum's life, or forfeit everything. I took the Mark and accepted the task he gave me to save my mum's life."

"He didn't! He threatened your mum?" she asked, stunned, and he nodded. "Draco, if he'd threaten your mum just to make you take his Dark Mark, how do you know he wouldn't make me take it for some equally twisted reason?"

"Don't worry about it, Hermione," Draco said as he stood to leave the table. "He won't even ask you to take his Mark; it would go against everything he stands for. You cannot spout purity of blood, demand your followers to wipe out Muggle-borns, then give you, a Muggle-born, his seal, and induct you into his inner circle. He'd be a hypocrite."

She touched the bruise on her forearm. "What if he did mark me as a sign or something to Harry? Proof that I'd turned against him and joined the dark side?"

"Fat chance," he said. "Look, my friends will be here soon. If you want, you can join us, but I don't think you'd be all that comfortable with us Slytherins yet, even if Snape and the Dark Lord have told us to befriend you." He turned as a knocking sound echoed into the hallway. "They're here. It's what I'm supposed to talk to them about; that you really are Snape's wife, and we are not allowed to harm or harass you. Strange isn't it? Us not hexing each other?"

"Hilarious. I think I'd rather go out in the back garden and pull weeds," she said sarcastically.

He laughed as he left the room. "Yeah, right, you're hilarious."

She rose to take her dish to the kitchen, hoping that Draco would keep his friends in the sitting room. No such luck. She heard Draco's laugh as the hidden door opened. Peren looked up at her expectantly as Hermione set down her dish. "Does my mistress want anything else?"

"No, I'm fine," she replied with a smile, turning to leave.

"So things are going to be different this year at Hogwarts," a gruff, scratchy voice was saying loudly. "No more Mudbloods and undesirables."

She quickly walked to the doorway in hopes of not crossing paths with Draco's friends.

"That's not all, we're gonna be learnin' the Dark Arts really learnin' them," a softly spoken deep voice said with enthusiasm.

"Who's teaching that class?" Hermione recognized Goyle's low raspy voice before she saw him enter the kitchen. She quickly ducked into the hallway and tried the latch for the classroom door. It was unfortunately locked.

"Carrow, who else?" Draco answered.

Hermione recognized Blaise Zabini, Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe as they milled around in the dining room, but didn't recognize the other two guys, who were obviously a year or two younger than Draco.

Hermione sighed, not really wanting to pass by the guys, but knew that she couldn't get into potions lab, classroom or out the back door, which left her very few options. There was one other door in the hall. She tried the latch, and to her surprise, the door opened, revealing a sunroom. She let herself in, walking along the gardening table and bay windows, looking at the collection of plants and herbs. Many of the plants were slightly overgrown for their pots, and most looked as if they'd recently been harvested for potion ingredients or cooking. There was a few alihotsy with very few leaves, a screechsnap that looked fairly wilted and six gurdyroots, which been recently harvested, probably for last night's stew. An aquarium stood along a wall holding the remains of some water avens, muddaubers, and a few parisipiny pods. Mostly the room looked as if it had been abandoned. Hermione picked up the alihotsy, turning it in her hands. There was evidence of new growth on the stems, and she wondered if the fragile-looking plant would survive until Snape returned home next summer.

She turned around, and her gaze fell on what looked like a plastic doghouse tucked under one of the tables in the far corner. Curious, Hermione walked over to it and squatted down. To her surprise, it had a blanket and a tiny pillow inside, folded neatly into a tiny bed and a small pile of belongings in a box covered with a tea towel. *Peren must use this as her room*, she thought, appalled, even though the plastic doghouse was meticulously clean. Hermione lifted out the box and the tiny bedding, wondering if she should ask Peren to pack them in her trunk. Curious as to what personal items Peren would keep, Hermione lifted the tea towel and was shocked to see several of her things tucked neatly inside, the things Severus had taken from her pockets the day she'd been captured and brought here. "What are these doing in here?" she asked softly, setting the box down. Several Wildfire Whiz-Bangs sparkler balls and two small canisters of Swamp Ooze rolled around in the box on top of her study guide. "I wonder where the Hand of Glory went to?"

"I is sorry, mistress, but Peren was told to get rids of them," Peren said, standing in the doorway holding a tray, her ears drooping. "But you is nice to Peren, so I is getting them for you and keeping them safe from Master Snape."

"You kept them? All my things?" she asked incredulously.

Peren nodded, her big ears flapping with each nod, although she looked really worried. She approached cautiously, looking around for somewhere to place the tray before gently setting it on the floor next to Hermione. "Is you looking for anything else?"

Hermione bit her lip, wondering if Snape would have kept her Hand of Glory. "Do you remember a black shriveled hand holding a candle as well?" Peren nodded, crinkling her nose in a distasteful expression and popped out, returning with the shriveled hand, holding it like it was disgusting to her. "I'm grateful. Thank you. Could you hide these in my trunk? And if you'd like to take your blanket and pillow, pack that as well."

"Mistress, what about your pet?" Peren asked nervously.

Hermione looked at the tiny pillow in her hand, suddenly feeling sad. Crookshanks was still at the Burrow, for all she knew. "Peren, can you go to the Burrow and get him?"

Peren looked at her confused. "Yes, Mistress... I could... but your pet is here," she said, pulling out the little pink Pigmy Puff in a wicker cage Fred had teasingly given her, looking at the tiny creature with a look of longing.

Hermione was stunned. "Peren, you've kept him!" she said with a chuckle, watching Peren's look of longing, knowing she didn't really want to give it back to her. "You can keep the Pigmy Puff if you like. I was referring to my cat, Crookshanks. He's at the Burrow. If you'd get him and his carrier, I'd be very grateful."

Peren smiled broadly, bowing low, promising to get her cat right after placing her things in her trunk. She quickly grabbed the box, balancing the pigmy puff on top, and popped out. Hermione sat back on her heels and laughed softly. *Wait till Snape comes home and sees my cat. I wonder if he even likes cats? But since there isn't any evidence that he currently has a pet, I seriously doubt it.* She looked at the doghouse wondering. *Maybe he had a dog as a kid?*

Hermione stayed in the room until she became bored, walking down the hall as quietly as she could, hoping to go to Snape's room unnoticed. No such luck. Draco intercepted her in the hall, insisting on introducing her to the Slytherin prefects Dwayne Hardgrave and Walter Nott. Zabini and Crabbe had some lovely things to say, which Hermione pointedly ignored, and after a round of veiled insults, she finally managed to excuse herself for the sanctuary of Snape's bedroom.

She was sitting on the chair by the window, reading when Snape came into get her. "Are you all packed?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, setting the book down on his bed and rising to face him.

He levitated her trunk and motioned her to follow him. "Cillian is downstairs. We're just waiting for the car, and then we leave."

"Will Draco be coming with us?" she asked, following him down the stairs.

"Yes, as will his friends," he replied, opening the door for her to the sitting room. "You've met the new Slytherin house prefect, I'm told?"

"Yes," she said, not wanting to elaborate any.

Snape smirked at her knowingly. "I'm glad to see you're making friends."

"If they're to be my friends, I won't need any enemies," she replied softly. She entered the sitting room surprised to find it empty. Hermione took the opportunity to talk to Snape. "Sir, if I'm going to be taking classes... won't I need a wand?" she asked.

Snape smiled, reached into his robes and pulled out her wand. "Of course you will. But you will have restrictions until I am assured that I can trust you. You will be allowed to have it in class," he said smoothly and stowed it away again. She was stunned to see it, assuming it had been lost in the glade back in June. "Hermione, there are a few things you should know." He pulled three books from his shelves and handed them to her.

She quickly read the titles: *The Truth About Muggles*, *Of Pride and Prejudice* and *The Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction of the Condemned Heretic*

"You'll need to read these before school starts," he said smoothly as he sat down. The first two will anger and insult you, and the third you'll find enlightening, but they contain information that is necessary for you to know. This is how purebloods see Muggles and Muggle-borns. It's the basis of the pureblood prejudices. You'll be facing a

lot of these sentiments this year, I am afraid; more so than you have before. Secondly, you will wear your jewelry at all times. I cannot have you trying to escape. And you are going to need to learn Occlumency. Once you can master closing your mind, I can be more open with you. But if you will behave and be good, you will get your education and more, I assure you. Please, trust me. There will be things I will be needing you to do for me from time to time, and I need to know I can count on you."

"So, you're still helping the Order, aren't you?" she asked in shock.

Snape leaned back and crossed his arms. "Who do you think I want to win this war? Don't answer, but hear me out. There is more going on than you realize. Cillian is a good guy whose family was enthralled by and joined up with a powerful and charismatic wizard, and they pledged their loyalty to him, just like Draco's parents did. And like their parents, it was expected for them to take the oath and the Dark Mark. Have you not noticed a change, however subtle, in Draco? The death of Dumbledore hit Draco hard, and the weeks that followed, well, Draco has shown weaknesses. Narcissa blames me, and I blame it on the fact that his eyes are opening. Cillian is likewise becoming disenchanted and may be influential. Just be yourself, Hermione, and you will find yourself an ally, possibly two."

Hermione listened, hardly hoping what he was saying could be true. "If you think that they will switch sides, aren't you taking a considerable risk telling me this?"

"Yes," he said just before the door opened and Cillian entered.

She looked up as soon as he entered the room. "Hi, how are you?"

"Hello, Hermione, fine. Are you looking forward to your last year at school?" Cillian asked amiably.

"Yes, thank you." She walked over and sat in the chair by the Floo to wait.

"Sorry, did I interrupt anything?" He picked up two of Hermione's books and let out a long whistle. *Of Pride and Prejudice* and *The Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction of the Condemned Heretic*. A little light reading before school? You won't like these much."

Hermione picked up *The Truth About Muggles* and opened up the book to the first page. "So I have been told."

"You won't like that book at all," he said, laughing, pointing at the book in her hand. "Aren't you Muggle-born? Where did you get these?"

"From me," Snape stated, picking up his own book and opening it up to the marker. "She needs to know what she's facing."

"Idiotic posturing and biased stupidity," Cillian murmured under his breath, turning for the window. "Don't suppose you have a spare book I can read, do you?" Severus gave him an incredulous quirk of his eyebrow and lifted up another Potions book from beside his seat. "So, how about it, Hermione, happy to be going back to Hogwarts?" Cillian asked, ignoring the gesture.

"Yes," she replied, scanning the introduction of her book. The truth was it was horrible, and the suggestions in the book were insulting to her. "Is this really what some wizards believe? That all Muggles are stupid, mindless and naïve?"

"Yes," Cillian responded. "That book was written after several hundred years of segregation and avoidance. Wizardkind had been so out of touch with Muggles that we haven't kept up with their society. It's like your other book *Of Pride and Prejudice*. You have to consider when it was written and what was happening in the two worlds. *Of Pride and Prejudice* was written after the so called witch hunts. Both men and women accused of being witches were persecuted in order to extinguish knowledge about magic. Although, many of those women who were accused, were accused of destroying entire fields of crops, causing pestilences and diseases, controlling the weather and performing birth control. All the allegations were from either ignorant superstitions, fear, or false accusations for revenge, and many of the people accused were subsequently pronounced as witches simply to be rid of them. Very few were actually witches or wizards in the first place. But those who were had to go into hiding, concealment or move to uninhabited places."

"It is a prevalent human tendency to blame unexplainable occurrences on someone or something familiar," Snape stated casually.

"It was religious leaders who killed any alleged practitioners of witchcraft outright," Cillian stated. "Our kind developed a hatred based out of the prejudices and suspicions that Muggles accused us of. And we were blamed for the burnings of many innocent men and women. Real wizards and witches became desperate for their lives and those of loved ones, wizardkind and Muggle. It was a bad time."

"And you don't agree with it?" Hermione asked, dropping the book on the lap.

"I do, yes, of course. Some of it," Cillian said, although Hermione knew he was suddenly uncomfortable about the subject. "You read the books, and you tell me what you think. I'll clarify for you what you don't understand. Unless of Severus wants to, that is."

"By all means, enlighten the girl. But in the mean time, lower your voices," Snape said smoothly. "I'm trying to read."

She'd no sooner gotten comfortable and began reading again than Peren popped in with Crookshanks, growling annoyingly in his carrier.

"What in bloody Hades is that?" Snape bellowed, pointing at the carrier.

"My cat!" Hermione stated excitedly, jumping up to sooth her pet.

Snape was suddenly looming over her. "And why is the elf bringing it here?"

Hermione looked up, confused. "I asked her to." Crookshanks continued to growl unhappily in his cage, and Peren tried to duck behind Hermione.

"Where, exactly, did the elf retrieve it from?" he asked, his dark eyes narrowed into a fierce scowl.

Hermione looked up at him from where she squatted down next to the carrier. "The Burrow," she said, waiting for his outburst, and really felt like cowering.

"What did you say to them when you went to retrieve this cat?" Snape barked at Peren, his dark eyes flashing dangerously.

"N-nothing, Master Snape, sir," she replied, peeking around Hermione's shoulder. "Peren only say I is to get the cat, Crookshanks, and his carrier for my mistress."

"Who saw you?" he snapped at her.

"A red-haired girl," Peren said, walking around to face Snape properly. "She had the cat in her room, and she gave him to Peren." She was shivering, and Hermione reached out to try and reassure the elf.

"Did you tell her where you were taking the cat?" Snape asked, glaring angrily at Peren.

"Yes, master. To my mistress, sir," Peren said, cowering.

"I asked her to go," Hermione said, trying to deflect some of Snape's anger off of Peren.

"The house-elf cannot disclose your secrets, Severus." Cillian walked over and looked down at Hermione as she stroked Crookshanks fur through the small opening in the top of the carrier. "Besides, isn't your house under the Fidelius Charm?" Cillian asked.

"Yes," Snape replied sharply.

"Then the elf couldn't have said where Hermione is," Cillian reasoned.

Snape was unconvinced. "But did you tell her that Hermione would be going to school?"

"No, sir! Peren keeps your secrets, sir. She asks all kinds of questions, but Peren said she couldn't answers them. I told her I cannot says anything. I keep my master's secrets," she replied, twisting her fingers nervously. "Peren only said her mistress sent her to get the cat, Crookshanks."

Snape suddenly turned on Hermione. "And why in bloody hell did you ask her to do that?"

"Because he's my pet," she replied defensively, rising up to her feet. "I couldn't just leave him at the Burrow indefinitely and besides, I missed him."

Snape crossed his arms, looking anything but pleased. "And where are you going to keep him?"

"In my room of course just as I've always done," Hermione replied, frightened that he would refuse to let her take him.

Cillian started laughing. "What is so funny?" Snape snapped at his friend.

"Didn't you know she had a cat?" Cillian asked.

"No," Snape said, glaring at the carrier again.

"Well, now you do," Cillian said, turning to Hermione. "Well, go on then, bring him out so we can see him."

Just then a car horn sounded on the street. "You can see the beast at the castle." Snape turned to the bookshelves, opening up the concealed door. "Draco, we're leaving."

The car ride from Snape's house to Hogsmeade seemed fairly quick, but since the car they rode in had the same spells on it as the Knight Bus, it was impossible to tell how far they actually traveled to get to Hogsmeade. Not that it mattered. She had no idea if she would ever return to Snape's home again anyway. Draco, Crabbe, Goyle and Zabini sat in one seat, talking quietly while Hermione had been situated between Snape and Cillian in the back seat. Dwayne Hardgrave and Walter Nott had returned to their homes using Portkeys. Still, Hermione knew that Draco, Crabbe, Goyle and Zabini were only coming to school early because of her and for no other reason.

They'd ridden in relative silence, Hermione making occasional outraged huffs and snorts as she read her book. By the time they reached Hogsmeade, she'd finished scanning the book and was perusing *Of Pride and Prejudice*. To say that this book was going to be any more enjoyable would have been a flat out lie.

The car dropped them off near the Hogsmeade train station, not too far from the platform. Seeing the familiar landmark that signified each new year at Hogwarts for her, Hermione felt a wave of unease she'd never felt before. Cillian helped levitate Hermione's trunk onto the platform with his, receiving a smirk from Snape. She was amazed to see about twenty or more people in cloaks with their hoods covering their faces disembark the train, nearly half making their way to the road where the carriage stood waiting. Everyone was keeping to themselves or in small groups, whispering to each other. It wasn't the cheerful, rambunctious, happy gathering she was used to seeing from years before. The atmosphere was subdued and wary. The Thestrals stood in their halters of the carriages, and Hermione cringed when she realized that she could see them, although she wasn't as intimidated by them. Cillian fell into his seat, and his gaze swept from Severus to Hermione as Snape offered her his hand to help her climb into their carriage, taking his place across from her. Hermione stared out the windows watching as the carriages took off, feeling a little nervous anticipation. She was going to be the only Muggle-born in the school, and the thought was a little unnerving.

To relax, Hermione picked up the book and continued reading.

"So what classes are you going to be taking?" Cillian asked after a long silence.

"She will be continuing in the classes she had last year, with the addition of Muggle Studies and the Dark Arts," Snape said nonchalantly, as he turned a page. "Hermione will get her schedule tomorrow like all the other students."

"I didn't carry on with Muggle Studies past my third year," Hermione said softly.

Snape simply raised his eyebrow and lowered his nose back into his book. Flustered, Hermione did the same. Cillian kicked his feet up on the seat in front of him, completely disregarding Snape's reproachful look, and thumbed through *The Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction of the Condemned Heretic* with a slight scowl on his face, then set the book down and looked out of the window.

Cillian moved over to sit next to Hermione to talk about her past years at Hogwarts, sharing little anecdotes from his own. Several times when Cillian began telling her about his years at Hogwarts, Snape would coolly warn Cillian to change the subject, making Hermione all the more intrigued with what Cillian might have told her. Typically, it was Hermione doing most of the talking with Cillian listening in rapt attention.

"So you really turned yourself into a cat?" Cillian asked, laughing. "Severus, did you know she made Polyjuice Potion her second year? Man, that's amazing!"

"Yes, she's quite the witch," Severus said, his expression indifferent. "You will have your hands full keeping her out of trouble." All too soon, the carriage pulled up in front of the castle, and Snape disembarked, once again holding out his hand to assist Hermione, then turned to Cillian. "I've made arrangements for you to have my old rooms in the dungeons. I hope they suite you."

"I hope the house-elves managed to get the smells of the potions ingredients out of the drapes," Cillian said and laughed when Severus scowled at him. "I'm sure the room will suit me fine, thank you."

"As you well know, it's easy access to my personal lab and storage rooms. I'd rather have you there than some imbecile ingrate who'd mess with my more personal items," Severus said, obviously trying to phrase the statement carefully.

"You mean your poisons and questionable Dark Arts ingredients and potions," Cillian said with a smirk. "I know. Don't worry."

The castle was as she remembered it, although much quieter. They were the last to disembark at the castle steps. Professor McGonagall stood in the Entrance Hall waiting for them. "Good evening, Headmaster. I trust your journey was comfortable."

"It was. Thank you, Minerva," Snape said. "Has everyone arrived?"

"Yes, everyone except the Carrows. I do believe they said they would be Apparating to the gates before dinner so we expect them at any moment. Their luggage has already been placed in their rooms," she said, her posture stiff and her manner formal. "Mr. Gwynek, I'll be happy to show you to your rooms."

"He's staying in my old rooms, Minerva. He knows the way," Snape said with an amiable smile.

Professor McGonagall looked at Hermione briefly with a thin pursing of her lips before she addressed Snape again. "And Miss Granger?"

"Mrs. Snape will be in mine," Snape replied stiffly.

Hermione was a little surprise by the news. "What?" she asked, turning to him.

"Surely..." Professor McGonagall started to say before Snape cut her off.

"Surely what? You were informed of the arrangement. I haven't changed my mind," he replied smoothly. "She will be attending classes like the other students in seventh year and eating at the Gryffindor house table. However, she is my wife and will be staying with me."

Professor McGonagall recovered and straightened her posture to her full height. "Yes, sir," she replied, but Hermione knew she was anything but pleased.

"I will be taking Hermione up to the Headmaster's tower now to see that she is settled, and then we shall join you for dinner. I do believe you wanted to speak to her, Minerva, but you may do so tomorrow, if that's acceptable," Snape said, keeping an edge of authority in his voice. "Hermione, come with me. Cillian, I'll see you at dinner." He nodded to his friend and quickly turned on his heel.

Hermione had to hurry up to catch up to him. "Weren't you a bit harsh with her?"

"No, I was authoritative," he said briskly.

"You were curt," she snapped back.

"Mind your place," he said softly, but with a hint of warning.

Hermione took the hint and looked away. "Yes, sir."

Snape stopped at the entrance of the Headmaster's office. "Digitalis purpurea," he said and walked up the spiral staircase after the stone gargoyle jumped out of his way.

Hermione followed after him and into the Headmaster's office. It looked the same as she remembered it, the only difference being the large portrait of Dumbledore sitting behind the Headmaster's desk and a large dark owl sitting on the perch Fawkes had used. "You can have a chat later," Snape said as he guided her up the stairs at the back of the office, up past a sitting room and finally into a bedroom. The room held a large bed in dark, midnight blue drapes an old well-padded chair and a large double wardrobe. Her trunk was sitting next to the bed, and Peren was already putting her things away. Snape turned to her and crossed his arms. "We go down for dinner in fifteen minutes. I'll be in the office. Come down when you are ready."

"Yes, sir," she replied, sinking into the chair.

He stood a moment watching her. "If you need anything, ask me."

"I will," she said. "Am I to have no contact with my friends?"

Snape smiled. "You'll have contact with those who are returning to school. I don't think either Potter or Weasley will be returning, but there will be students you know. And for obvious reasons, some of your contact will be limited and monitored. It won't be too bad; you'll see. Now get unpacked and come down to the office."

She sighed as he turned and left the room.

The Great Hall was the same as always, just quite a bit less people. The house tables had been moved to the side, leaving only one table down the center of the room. The professors were already were sitting at the far end, and each looked up as Snape and Hermione entered, four of them openly scowling at her. Cillian met them at the door, and Snape carefully guided Hermione so that she was sitting next to himself and Professor Sprout, with Cillian and Professor Flitwick across from her. There was little chatter during dinner. Most of the conversations having to do with school lists, supplies and budget concerns and items that hadn't arrived yet. Hermione found herself eating quickly as she listened, not really ready to engage in conversation. After dinner, Snape asked that any lists of missing or undelivered supplies be brought to his office and he dismissed himself, indicating that Hermione follow him.

Back in the office, he sat down at his desk and began writing. "I have some things that need addressing before the students arrive tomorrow," he said, dipping his quill in the ink and continuing with his letter. "A word of caution. The Dark Lord has control of the school. He will be getting reports on your behavior. Please do not do anything that puts you in any problems with the staff. I don't want to have to punish you."

"You mean don't do anything that would attract the Death Eaters' attention," she said with a sigh.

"Precisely."

Hermione nodded. "I will try. I'm going up to the room and read before bed."

"I'll be up late. I've a lot to do yet," he said, rising. He walked over to her and reached out to cup her face. "I will do what I can to make this bearable; please do the same."

"I'll try," she said before he pulled her closer to him.

"I hope you'll do more than try," he said and kissed her.

Hermione was finishing Snape's book, *Of Pride and Prejudice* in the sitting room, when she realized he was standing over her. He looked at her intently and then leaned down to lower his head closer to hers. Hermione's breath stilled as his lips hovered over hers, barely touching them. "I thought you'd be in bed," he said softly. The next heartbeat their lips touched, the kiss becoming stronger, firmer as he pulled her to him out of her chair and she leaned forward, suddenly realizing she was on her toes. Hermione nearly fell, and Snape held her firmly as she regained her footing, the book utterly forgotten.

When he broke their kiss, his dark eyes met hers with the same intensity as their wedding night. "It's late you should be asleep," he said softly. She simply nodded as he guided her up to their bedroom. She stood transfixed as he dropped his coat and waistcoat on the chair, the focus of his dark eyes never once leaving hers. "I want you," he said. "Let me, Hermione."

His directness made her shudder. "You do?" she asked, fully aware of what his answer would be.

"Yes." He moved over to her and held her firmly in an embrace. "Tell me," he said, his lips brushing her ear, his rich, silky voice full of desire. "I want to hear you say it."

His words sent a shiver of fear down her spine, which dissipated when she felt his stiff penis press against her and the warm caress of his hands. "Tell you what?" she asked, her mind swirling as she inhaled his scent and held onto his body.

"I want to know if you'll let me, if you want me." His hands began to slide down her, firm and strong, pressing their bodies even closer until her groin was crushed against his, his lips just barely brushing hers. "Tell me," he said, so soft and deep it sent shivers through her, his choice of words intensifying the confusion in her mind.

She tried to lift up to kiss him, to push away any thought except of Severus's kiss from her thoughts, but his grip on her hips held her firm, keeping his mouth out of her reach, and she whimpered softly. "Please," she pleaded, sinking back onto her feet. Hermione looked up at him imploringly.

"Please, what?" he asked. "I need to hear you say it."

He was radiating his desire for her, the nearness of his mouth in contrast to his tight embrace was so arousing to her. "Yes, I want you too," she said, straining again to kiss him. His lips met hers as soon as she spoke, tender and soft, as he maneuvered her toward the bed. He stopped long enough to remove his shirt, and he kicked off his boots before reaching out for her, pulling her dress up, his fingertips gliding on her skin sensually as he disrobed her. He unfastened his trousers, letting them fall and pulled her into his arms.

His fingers explored her as they kissed. His every motion was slow and deliberate, arousing her desire and increasing the need she felt for him. Hermione tried to mimic him, exploring his body with her hands, but he merely chuckled against her skin. He stopped only long enough to pick her up and lay her on the bed before joining her, pulling her under him, and parted her legs with his knees. "Who would have thought you would ever want me?" he asked against her breast, sucking and nipping at her nipple, his hands seemingly exploring every inch of her from neck to knees and back.

"I could say the same," she said between moans as he shifted to the other breast. "You could barely tolerate me before."

"Oh, I could tolerate you," he said, his mouth trailing up to her collarbone. "I just didn't want to."

"And what changed your mind?" she asked, not caring what his answer would be as long as he kept doing that with his tongue.

"You were given to me as a gift," he said with a deep chuckle that made vibrations against her neck. "The most unusual gift I have ever received."

His hand found her folds and parted them, his finger sliding over her clitoris. "So now you find me bearable?" she asked between gasps as sensations shot through her.

"Yes, much more bearable," he said. He pushed himself up to look at her face and eased his penis into her.

Hermione held her breath as he filled her, closing her eyes at the pleasure of what he felt like sliding inside her. "Oh gods, you feel good," she groaned, opening her eyes to meet his gaze, only then realizing he'd been watching her.

"I'm glad you think so," he said, smiling and withdrew back, nearly coming out of her.

"No, please," she gasped. "Don't." He laughed softly as he pushed into her slowly, repeating the move several times, watching her face. Her lip quivered, her body arched to meet him on each thrust. She grasped his hips to pull him to her, but he persisted in his with his deliberate long strokes. "Please," she begged.

"Please, what?" he said, enunciating each word slowly.

She gasped, trying to thrust her groin up into each stroke. He nearly withdrew, holding himself still, then pushed into her slowly. "Oh, my... harder," she gasped, clenching down on him.

"As you wish," he said, increasing his pace slightly, caressing her breast. She tried to touch him, caressing his arms and torso wherever her fingers could reach. His hands glided on her skin as he moved, his pace gradually became faster, harder. "Merlin, girl, I can't hold back any longer," he groaned, grinding his groin against hers with each thrust.

Hermione couldn't respond except in gasps as her climax built up inside her each time his groin pressed into hers. She grabbed onto him, trying to match his rhythm, to keep pace, and he gripped her hips as he pounded into her. It was too much, and her body began to spasm as the pressure of her climax seemed to fill her. Suddenly, she felt it turn and roll, pouring through her, and she cried out nearly in tears, "Oh-my, Seve-oh, my, gods, Severus, oh... yes..."

He grunted her name, burying himself inside her as her climax ebbed, and he fell on her, barely holding himself up enough from crushing her. He was sweaty, his hair covered his face against her shoulder. He was shaking as if cold, and she tried rubbing his back to warm him.

"Are you okay?" she asked, concerned. "Are you cold?"

"Yes, I'm okay. No, I'm not cold," he said, lifting up and falling beside her. "Why would you ask me that?"

"You're shaking," she said, wiping at the sweat on his forehead.

He rolled onto his side and stared at her. "Merlin, girl, you ask some of the strangest questions," he replied, smiling. He pulled her to him and cradled her in his arms. "Hermione?"

"Yes?"

He lifted up to look at her, his expression curious. "... Am I your first lover?"

"Why do you ask?" She knew she was blushing, she could feel her cheeks burn under his intense stare. "Did I do something wrong?"

He laughed and kissed her. "No, you did everything right." He pulled the blankets up to cover them and then pulled her into his arms again. Within minutes, he was asleep. Hermione lay there, listening to him breathe, feeling warm and safe in his arms before sleep found her as well.

Author's Notes:

I want to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. And to Coccoachristy for helping me clean up my mess and making this story presentable. Thank you both very much. I appreciate it more than they could possibly know.

First Day At Hogwarts

Chapter 15 of 43

It's first day of school, and the students arrive. Hermione finally learns what's been happening with her friends and just how seriously Cillian plans on doing his job. All in all, it's not a bad first day, just not how she expected.

The warnings I have listed for this chapter are implied. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.



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First Day At Hogwarts

Hermione woke up alone in the room. It was strange being in the Headmaster's suite all by herself. The tall windows were draped in dark blue, the same as the bed, and the stone walls were mostly covered with tapestries, bookshelves, the large wardrobe and a fireplace that was obviously for warmth. She found the private loo, amazed to see her bath products already on the shelves and in the cupboards. The claw-footed tub looked ordinary with a handheld wand for showering, and a water closet hidden behind a lace curtain. It was not how Hermione envisioned the loo would be, and it made her laugh, considering that it was practically feminine with its bright yellow towels and white lace curtains. The image of someone like Dumbledore taking a bubble bath in the tub wearing a shower cap hit her, making her giggle even more.

She freshened up, dressed in her school robes and tried to head out of the tower, hoping to have breakfast alone before any of the other Death Eaters were around. However, she ran into Cillian, who was dressed and waiting for her in Snape's office. "Good morning, doll. Did you sleep well?" he asked, rising as she entered the room.

"Well enough," she replied, coming to a halt next to the desk. "I was... Where is he?"

"He has a meeting with the Heads of House," Cillian said cryptically. "So where are we headed?"

Hermione practically groaned. "Breakfast," she said with a shrug.

"By all means, let's get you fed," he said with a smile. He held the door for her and followed her down the stairs.

"Is this how it's going to be every day? You showing up and walking me to breakfast?" she asked as they walked down the marble staircase.

"Yep," he replied, grinning. "Unless the ol' bat wants to do it himself."

Hermione simply shook her head, amazed that Cillian was so comfortable with Snape to be able to call him that and that Snape seemed to allow it.

The Great Hall was set up the same as the night before. There were only a few people sitting at the table eating breakfast, the professors huddled at the end of the table mostly reading the paper or eating with their heads down, and four others remembered from the night before sat at the end near the door, talking quietly. This time, as she walked by, they all looked up at her, and she got a good look at the lot. There was a surly looking massive blond wizard, and a stout wizard with a scarred, brutal-looking face in black robes, who both sat across from a dumpy, sloping-shouldered, homely looking woman and a squat, lumpy-looking wizard with a lopsided leer, big ears and a broken nose. Whoever those four were, the other teachers were trying their best to keep their distance.

Hermione sat down next to Professors Vector and Sprout, who only looked up at Cillian, made a simple nod and turned back to their own plates. Professor Sprout smiled quickly at Hermione when she asked for the juice, then lowered her head when Cillian reached for the eggs. It was obvious that the four laughing at the other end of the table were making everyone else nervous, but Hermione was surprised that her professors were so aloof towards her and so wary of Cillian. He always seemed so affable to her, it was easy to forget that he was a Death Eater too. Unless they didn't trust her now that she was married to Snape.

She tried talking to Professors Vector and Sprout, but they only made brief, polite replies, obviously uncomfortable with her and Cillian. Hermione ate her breakfast quickly and rose to leave, making Cillian grab bacon and toast in order to follow her.

Rather than let the cold reception from her favored professors bother her, she spent the rest of her morning sitting in the courtyard, reading the three books Snape had given her, under the watchful eye of her bored bodyguard. Hermione would have been laughing at all the misconceptions, outlandish lies and twisted half truths in *The Truth About Muggles*, except that she realized Snape had given her the book for a reason, to prepare her. For what, Hermione was apprehensive to find out, but she doubted it would be the students because only a few seemed to have such misconceptions as she recalled. After finishing *Of Pride and Prejudice*, the only consolation she felt was that she could at least have temperance with the authors considering the historical time frame from which it was written, but felt a deep sense of sadness that such opinions were still believed, if what Snape had said to her was true. Actually, everything she knew about the Malfoys seemed to exemplify the books point of view. By the time she finally finished the last book, Snape came to find her to join him for lunch, and she could return them to him with a sense of relief.

Cillian once again offered to discuss the opinions and facts represented in the books, but Hermione turned him down, making Snape chuckle softly. "You'll find that my wife has an astute mind and in no way misinterpreted the information," Snape told Cillian as they walked to the Great Hall.

Hermione looked at him, astounded by the compliment, and she saw his smirk before he turned back to Cillian. Affronted, she wasn't certain if he'd actually really meant the compliment or not, or if he was chiding her, and she chose to remain silent.

Draco, Crabbe, Goyle and Zabini were sitting by themselves at the Slytherin table when they entered. At the Gryffindor table, the four Death Eaters from breakfast were joined by two more wizards in black robes, one with spiky brown-grey hair around his male-patterned baldness and pale reproachful eyes, and the other a tall, thin, wiry-looking, very hairy wizard with glasses. The professors were interspaced around the Great Hall in small clusters, but oddly, the room was really quiet. Cillian and Snape led Hermione over to the Slytherin table, and Draco cordially greeted them as plates with a hot roast beef sandwiches appeared before each of them.

"So you're gonna be a Slytherin now, or what?" Crabbe asked with his mouth partially full of masticated sandwich.

"Eat with your mouth closed," Snape barked, and Crabbe closed his trap. "She's a Gryffindor, but you already know that. However, you are to show her the courtesy I'd expect you to give her as my wife. Am I clear?"

"Yes, sir," Crabbe said, swallowing his food.

There was some mumbling before Draco asked Hermione what she'd done all day. "Read," she replied. "You?"

"Flying out in the pitch. We're going to be on the team this year," Goyle said proudly.

"We already have our team selected for this year," Zabini stated with a slight curl of his lip. "Everyone who flew last year is returning, unlike the other houses."

Crabbe snickered, and Goyle looked smug. "We'll have a strong team and will be a sure in on the house cup," Crabbe said.

"I assume most of Slytherin is returning this year," Cillian stated, and Hermione looked at him curiously.

Zabini grinned. "Most all will since most of us are pureblood, and very few of us are undesirables," he said smugly. "Unlike some houses."

"So who's expected to be on the team?" Cillian asked, directing the conversation.

Thankfully, for the rest of the conversation the subject stayed on Quidditch, not that Snape participated in the discussion at all, but it allowed Hermione to be able to eat her lunch and ask to be excused. Snape rose when she did. "Hermione, I believe you need to discuss your course schedule with Professor McGonagall. I'll expect you up in our quarters when you are done," he said softly and guided Hermione over to the Gryffindor table where Professor McGonagall was eating. "Pardon, Minerva, but I believe you wanted to see Hermione today. Would now be a convenient time?"

She looked up, giving Hermione and Snape an appraising stare before nodding. "Yes, I'm nearly finished eating anyway."

"Fine. Minerva, if you will please see that finds her way back to my office unencumbered, I'd appreciate it," Snape answered.

"Certainly, Professor Snape," Professor McGonagall replied, stiffly. "Hermione, if you'd follow me." She rose and indicated for Hermione to follow. Neither spoke as they walked, and it was an uncomfortable feeling. Once they were in her office, however, Professor McGonagall pulled Hermione in for a quick hug before backing off primly. "I'm sorry, but I've... There was no word no one knew anything about what happened to you! I was so worried we all were. You just vanished! Then Harry told us you had been abducted and were with Severus. I've been beside myself with worry! What happened? Why did you leave Grimmauld Place? Where did you go...?"

"It was a piece of parchment," she started to try to explain, "which acted like a Portkey, I think, and I was dumped in Snape's lap, so to speak." She was worrying the hem of her sleeve as she spoke. "How much do you want to know?"

"Everything! But wait just a moment," she said cryptically. "Would you like it if I call for some tea?"

Hermione was deeply moved by the affectionate display after having been treated so coolly by her professors. "Yes, I'd really appreciate a chamomile blend if it's all right."

Professor McGonagall smiled and nodded, summoning a house-elf, watching Hermione with a teary, yet warm, expression. "So, has Severus been decent to you? I mean he hasn't..." Professor McGonagall asked, pausing when the house-elf showed up with the tea service. "I was so worried when we read... Well, you're here now and things will be better, or at least, I hope so."

Somehow her tone wasn't nearly as reassuring as Hermione thought her Head of House meant to be. "I've been warned about things."

Professor McGonagall nodded, filling Hermione's teacup. "As you know, you're still a prefect of Gryffindor, although I have tried to figure out what duties you can perform as prefect if you're not even sleeping in your house dormitory. Severus has forbidden you to do rounds, although I have you on the schedule to do so regardless. I think he is worried for your safety from those within the castle, but I cannot see what you'd have to fear since the prefects patrol in pairs. However, he knows these people better than I do. I have to tell you, Hermione, how displeased I am with Headmaster Snape regarding your sleeping arrangements, if it was my choice... but it's not."

"He's kept me with him during the whole time. I can't see that he'd be any different now. When he'd have to leave his house, he'd have Draco watching me. I realize now it was for my protection as well as to keep me locked up as his hostage," Hermione said, with a sad smile. "It's not so bad, really."

She looked up at Hermione with a sad smile. "You don't have to be brave for me; I fully understand how horrible it must have been for you well I can imagine the reports you see." She shook her head and handed Hermione the plate of teacakes, which Hermione declined. "It's the impression the other students will have I'm concerned about," Professor McGonagall admitted. "It's unprecedented. There have been staff members that have been married who've shared quarters of course, but we are here to serve our duty to the school, and as a boarding school, that job is round the clock. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, I'm sure we are a handful," Hermione said, grinning.

"A thousand teenage wizards and witches only a handful?" Professor McGonagall said with a smile. "But really, to marry a student and then keep her in his rooms, well, it will cause plenty of gossip. And not the favorable kind."

"I've had to deal with gossip before. I'll be fine. Don't professors have spouses and families?" Hermione asked.

"Of course we do," Professor McGonagall said with a girlish smile. "My late husband lived in Hogsmeade until his death. I would have weekends and time off during the holiday with my family. The kids are grown now and have families of their own..." She was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Come in," Professor McGonagall called out. Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick hurried into the room.

Professor Sprout looked at Hermione nervously for a few seconds and then pulled her into a hug, much more mothering than the reception she got at breakfast. "You're alive. Well, of course you're alive. We knew you were alive, but the things that were said the speculation... You had us so worried. Oh, just look at you! How are you?"

"Hermione, are you all right? I was so worried for you," Professor Flitwick asked as he sat down next to her, his eyes creased with concern. "So many rumors... and the reportings in the *Daily Prophet* scandalous! I didn't want to believe any of it!"

"I'm fine," Hermione said, trying to sound reassuring. "Snape has been decent to me."

Professor Sprout sat down in the other chair provided, still clasping her hand, and shifted her chair to see Hermione better. "He is a bit possessive of you," she said, worry evident in her voice.

"I hadn't noticed," Hermione replied sarcastically. "Sorry, that was uncalled for."

"It's a little understandable. All right now start from the beginning," Professor McGonagall said. "If this is a long story would you like more tea?"

Hermione nodded and began telling her the story, giving what detail she could about her disappearance, the evening in the glade, and Snape healing her. Hermione told her about the first trip to Knockturn Alley, seeing her friends, and recounted what she vaguely remembered of the second trip, although her memory was fuzzy. She glossed over Wormtail's first attack, and hinted about the second, telling Professor McGonagall about the splinching. She wasn't surprised that Professor McGonagall had heard about it, but was surprised to learn that it had been Remus and Tonks that had saved her upper half. Professor McGonagall interjected her story with questions, and Hermione tried her best to answer her, but some of the memories were too painful. What surprised her professors the most was the way the Dark Lord had treated Hermione, and they were really stunned when Hermione showed her the bruise on her left forearm. In the end, and several tissues later, Hermione sat back in her chair, feeling drained.

"Oh, Merlin's stars!" Pomona squealed when Hermione had finished. "I had no idea! Oh, you poor thing!"

"What an outrage! Who knew that little turncoat was a lecherous satyr!" Professor Flitwick squeaked in outrage. "And he made you splinch! I couldn't believe you would have splinched unless there were extenuating circumstances... but to have been ripped in half! When I heard... but Severus healed you? I heard he had Healers where you'd Disapparated from. I didn't know there were Healers among You-Know-Who's followers."

"I don't recall meeting them, but yes, Professor Snape did tell me that Draco and Cillian went to get Healers when I'd splinched," Hermione admitted. "In fact, he took good care of me each time I was hurt."

Professor McGonagall's posture was rigid, and Hermione knew she was seething inside over her tale. "Is there anything we can do for you?" she asked, looking quite formidable when so provoked.

"Like what? We're married," Hermione stated bluntly. "I have been in his house all summer and been held for the Dark Lord's amusement. As his pawn. Things are well, it's been a rough summer."

"So it's true then, you joined them?" Professor Sprout asked aghast.

"I am married to Professor Snape, yes," Hermione stated and then shook her head determinedly. "But I haven't joined them although I think the Dark Lord thinks I have. It's confusing. I was told that by marrying Professor Snape, I am bound by his oath, and yes, that supposedly makes me a follower... but I can't be. I still support you, the Order and Harry. But I'm trapped in this. I don't know what is expected of me except to obey and..."

"I'll bet. Alecto Carrow is none too pleased to have you here," Professor Sprout said, patting Hermione's hand and giving her a gentle squeeze.

"Who?" Hermione asked, vaguely remembering the name. "I recall something Draco said about a Professor Carrow teaching Dark Arts?"

"New teachers. Alecto and Amycus Carrow are Death Eaters, dear, appointed to the school through the Ministry," Professor McGonagall explained. "There are two more Death Eaters that have been on the grounds frequently, a Mr. MacCavish and Mr. VanHalal, but they seem to keep to themselves."

"Then there is Owain Rowle and Ivor Travers. We don't know why they have been hired, but their titles are security officers," Professor Sprout added with suppressed fury in her voice. "As if we need..."

"Careful, Pomona. Hermione, have you heard from Harry Potter or Ronald Weasley?" Professor Flitwick asked, worried.

"No, I haven't," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Not since June. Why?"

"They are missing," Professor Flitwick stated and Hermione's heart sank at the news.

"Missing means they haven't been caught yet," Professor Sprout said, gripping Hermione's hand as if to give her reassurance. Her hand was slightly sweaty nonetheless, belying her nervousness.

"Missing could be dead," Professor McGonagall said solemnly.

"No, they're not dead," Hermione said, sure of her statement. "Okay, I don't know where they are, but if they were dead, I would know. Besides, I've had a message from him, mostly just asking me to come home, but that was a while ago. If something had happened to them, it would be in all the papers, right?"

"Not necessarily. The articles in the *Daily Prophet* have been vague and similar to what you read your fifth year. You-Know-Who hasn't really been all that active, and there is no news about him at all. It's mostly been his followers, they are the ones doing everything, or at least as far as we hear. I'll try and update you when we have time," Professor McGonagall said, the stern pose gone and replaced with nervousness Hermione had never seen before. "Things in the castle are quite different. There will be quite a few students who are not returning because anyone with Muggle blood has been denied admittance, I'm afraid. Even the curriculum has been changed and... Well, you'll soon see. I'm afraid for you, my dear. Know that we will be watching out for you in every way we can, but our hands have been significantly tied this year. Severus will come looking for you soon. I am sorry, my dear, I really am. I tried to have you back in your own room in Gryffindor tower, but Severus wouldn't hear of it. He was right adamant..."

"It's okay, really. I'll be fine. Oh, I was to ask you about my class schedule." Professor McGonagall handed Hermione a slip of parchment, and she read over the classes listed upon it. "Transfiguration, Potions, Charms, Herbology, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes and Literature... so I am carrying all my subjects... but why Muggle Studies? And what is Dark Arts? Don't we have Defense anymore?"

"No, dear, the students will be learning the Dark Arts this year," Professor McGonagall replied.

"No!" Hermione exclaimed.

"I'm afraid so," Professor Flitwick said, nodding sadly. "It's part of the new school curriculum. Alecto Carrow will be teaching the students curses, hexes and jinxes. Amycus Carrow will be teaching every student returning Muggle Studies. I'm quite sure the context of his class will be slanted and prejudiced in the pureblood mantra."

"Why?" Hermione asked, stunned by the changes.

"New order, new Headmaster, new rules," Professor Spout stated. "I'm even to introduce more poisonous plants this year, and Professor Hagrid will be subjecting students to some very dangerous creatures. Professor Slughorn is to add poisons to his lessons. The primary goal is to bring the students up on the Dark Arts. All of them, in all subjects."

Hermione covered her mouth in shock as she heard the news. "But surely Professor Snape wouldn't...?"

"He's the one that approved the curriculum for the school," Professor McGonagall stated, sternly. "'You-Know-Who is now in control of Hogwarts,' he said. Even the school governors are afraid to challenge him, and there is little we can do."

"Except to try our darndest to protect the students in any way we can," Professor Flitwick stated assuredly.

A grey and white tabby entered the office and jumped up on the desk. Professor McGonagall and the cat looked at each other for a few seconds before the cat jumped down and curled up on the rug. "We'd better go now, dear. Tabitha tells me the Carrows have passed this corridor three times now," she said, rising from her chair. "Pomona, Filius, if you'd slip out after we do, I don't want to raise anymore suspicions than we already have. You should probably Disillusion yourselves as well."

Hermione stopped just before they reached the door and placed her hand on Professor McGonagall's sleeve. "Professor, do you know if Ginny, Neville and Luna are returning?"

"Yes, my dear, we expect them," she replied smiling, opening the door and following her out. "I suppose it will be good for you to see them."

"Yes," Hermione said, feeling a little sense of relief as they walked. "It will be great to see them."

Back in the Headmaster's tower, Hermione found Snape busy at his desk, Cillian sitting casually in the chair in front of him; Aetos was perched on the stand that Fawkes used to sit on, and Crookshanks curled up on the rug by the Floo. "Did you have a nice chat?" Snape asked as she approached the desk.

"Yes, an enlightening one," she replied. She looked down at Snape as he wrote out a letter. "You could have warned me, you know."

"I thought I had," he replied, not bothering to look up. "I have an appointment with a staff member in a few minutes, so I'd appreciate it if you'd busy yourself elsewhere."

"Fine, I'll be in the library," she replied and turned to go. Cillian rose as she turned. "What?"

"Where you go, I go, Hermione," he replied with a smirk. "Your wizard errand at your service."

"You've got to be kidding," she said, reality of his position as bodyguard hitting her full force.

"No," Snape and Cillian replied. Snape's tone hard and final and Cillian's slightly more jovial. "Shall we go then," Cillian asked opening the door for her.

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Severus watched them leave with a sigh of relief. His few minutes of silence was broken when Professor Trelawney knocked on the door. He rose and opened it to greet her. She was mumbling nervously. "Eight of cups misery and repining... sacrifice, and The Moon deception, Death... change with the Devil card discontent, wrong use of

force..."

"Professor Trelawney, come in. Please sit down," he said as nicely as he could muster. The wispy woman entered with a look of trepidation and took the seat Severus indicated with a wave of his hand.

"Sybill, lovely to see you again," Dumbledore said from his frame.

Professor Trelawney looked up at the portrait as if she'd never seen it before. "Am I in some kind of trouble, Headmaster?" she asked, her voice sounding like someone who'd been crying. "The cards tell me of deception, lies and sacrifice... but the Justice card that justice will be done, truth prevailing... Still, the cards frighten me, Headmaster. Something is not as it seems..."

"No, Sybill, you are not in trouble exactly," Snape replied, ignoring her ramblings. "There is some concern among our new staff regarding your appointment the Carrows for instance are very much against your continuing here at Hogwarts and feel that your tenure here should be cancelled. They think you should be dismissed and removed, permanently. Under the new school curriculum, there is still some discussion as to whether I should allow Divination to continue. I was asked to reevaluate your status and determine if the practice has any merit.

"I have been trying to convince Severus to retain you," Dumbledore said, smiling. "You see, Sybill, I believe that the art of Divination should be continued, and that you should remain here in the castle; but I fear for your safety in these dark times."

"But Hogwarts is my home; you cannot ask me to go," Professor Trelawney pleaded, near tears.

"The question I'm to determine is if you possess any real talent, and if so, would you be an asset to the Dark Lord," Severus stated smoothly. "I have so far been indeterminate regarding your abilities, and vague regarding your value. Nevertheless, I feel that you should stay clear of the Carrows and avoid the Death Eaters in the castle."

"But what would you have me do?" Professor Trelawney asked, twisting her shawl in her hands. "Those with talents such as I cannot truly hide that we possess the Inner Eye. My visions come as they will; I see what has been as well as what is and what will come to be, although I do try and conceal what portents my visions give me. But being All-Knowing has always had its price from those who fear those of us Seers with true talent..."

"I have been able so far to retain you, but I must warn you, the Dark Lord is looking for signs of his victory, and you, being a Seer, would be of great interest to him if any of the Death Eaters in this school were to learn about your talents." Severus smiled at her and leaned forward, steeping his hands in front of him. "I would ask that you keep to your tower as much as possible. I know that I'm asking a huge inconvenience of you, but it is for your own safety, after all. You don't want your true talents to fall into the wrong circles, do you?"

"Ah, no of course not! The Inner Eye becomes cloudy when I venture too long among the throng of the corridors. I avoid the mundane and the crowds. I see no reason to face... Stay in my tower? Is that all?" she asked, her eyes growing even larger behind her glasses.

"Yes. Keep to yourself," Severus said again. "Please keep away from the Carrows and the other Death Eaters who will be wandering in the corridors. If you have the need to send me messages of importance, use a house-elf. You may have your meals in your room, and students may visit you as much as you desire, but you really must keep your distance from the Carrows. Is this acceptable?" he asked.

Professor Trelawney nodded and a tear escaped from one eye. "I'm to stay locked up in my tower," she said, her voice misty and sad.

"I do not think you are understanding the situation here, and my concern, Sybill. I am ~~not~~*locking you up* cancelling your classes. You may have visitors, but your wards will be set by myself, and they will be strong. Only the correct passwords will allow anyone to enter your tower outside of class hours. The Dark Lord has gained power again, but Harry Potter lives. Everyone believes that Potter is the one who will vanquish the Dark Lord, and the ultimate battle is yet to be decided. If, and I mean if, the Dark Lord were to know of your talent, I truly believe he would want to abduct you unless you wish to become his personal Seer?" Professor Trelawney became extremely pale as what Severus was saying sunk in. "I didn't think so."

"Nicely put, Severus," Dumbledore said, his smile fading somewhat. "You see, Sybill, I have convinced Severus to keep you in the castle, however, I fear for your safety. I'm not willing to risk your life and allow you to be abducted and used by Voldemort," Dumbledore said sternly from his frame.

"No, no, no, I cannot I could not," Professor Trelawney stammered, her beads and bangles clinking as she shivered. "I will keep to my tower, and I will not wander the castle. I can do this..."

"So I can count on your discretion?" Severus asked, and Professor Trelawney nodded earnestly. He smiled at her. "That is all I ask. If you are agreeable to my terms, you may stay in the castle," he said, rising, and Professor Trelawney rose shakily from her chair as well. "May I see you out?"

As soon as the witch left, he turned to the portrait. "That was handled well, Severus," Dumbledore stated.

"I told her things I should not have! If she is caught, she could be a liability for me," Severus snarled.

Dumbledore smiled down at him. "And if you hadn't, she would not have taken it to heart. You told her what she needed to hear, and she will now hide away. It is for the best."

"I still do not see the need to keep her here," Severus responded. "She rarely makes true predictions, and when she does, she has no memory of having done so."

"Ah, yes, but in fact, she does remember, in her subconscious," Dumbledore said from his painted chair. "The mind is very complex, as well you know. I'm afraid that if Tom was to discover that Sybill was the one to have given his prophecy, he would do anything he could to extract it from her. Besides, I have learned that she does, on occasion, predict events with some accuracy with her cards. This is best."

"But that crazy woman now knows which side I'm on, Dumbledore! I've shown my hand!" Severus said, his tone sharp. "If she is caught, and if the Dark Lord probes her mind, how will I back out of what I told her? The fact that I warned her?"

"She will forget," Dumbledore said, grinning. "She remembers what she wants to remember. And if things go well, she will never fall into Tom's hands. Be sure that the Carrows think she's a 'daft twit.' That will cover you."

"If you say so," Severus grumbled.

~oOo~

Hermione kept curled up in a corner of the library all afternoon. She'd found an old tome on a top shelf and sat under a window reading. Cillian had pulled a chair into the aisle to watch her and had even begun reading out of sheer boredom. When dinnertime drew near, Hermione checked the book out and carried it down to the Headmaster's office to wait for Snape.

He entered the office from the stairs in his teaching robes and glowered at her, suggesting she hurry up and change into her school robes. They entered the Great Hall together, and Hermione sat at the end of the Gryffindor table where Snape indicated for her to sit, and then he took his place in the Headmaster's chair. The dumpy, homely looking witch and squat, lumpy-looking wizard were sitting up at the high table, both looking rather arrogant and smug. Hermione immediately assumed they were Alec and Amycus Carrow, the new professors she'd been warned about. Professor Grubbly-Plank was sitting next to Hagrid, both acting as if they would have liked to have been invisible to Amycus Carrow, who was sitting only two chairs away. Even Professor Flitwick, sitting between Professor Carrow and Hagrid, appeared to be trying to keep himself as inconspicuous as possible.

Cillian sat across from her, trying not to look out of place. Hermione noticed that there was a Death Eater sitting in the middle of each of the house tables, including Gryffindor's, waiting for the students to file in. The massive blond wizard Hermione had seen earlier was sitting at the Hufflepuff table, the stout wizard with a scarred, brutal-looking face was sitting at the Ravenclaw table while the wizard with spiky brown-grey hair was sitting at the Gryffindor table. The tall, thin, wiry-looking wizard with glasses was sitting at the Slytherin table and was engaging Draco, Crabbe and Goyle in conversation.

"Cillian, who are they?" Hermione asked, trying not to point.

"That's MacCavish down there," Cillian indicated with a subtle jerk of his head to the Death Eater sitting at the Gryffindor table, "Owain Rowle is at the table behind you, and Ivor Travers is sitting behind me. The bloke talking to Draco, Crabbe and Goyle is VanHalal."

Hermione turned back around and looked at Cillian. "They are the Death Eaters you and Snape warned me about, aren't they?"

Cillian's eyebrow rose at her statement. "Yeah, they are."

"Why are they here? To keep the students inline, or are they here to recruit?" she asked softly.

Cillian smirked. "Both. They are security for the school, but yes, they are here to weed out those that can be brought over to the Dark Lord."

Hermione felt a chill at his words. "MacCavish won't find many Gryffindors that will turn to him. I doubt that there will be many Ravenclaws or Hufflepuffs."

"You might be surprised, Hermione," Cillian said. "Not all of the Dark Lord's followers are from Slytherin, there were two that I know that were in Gryffindor, a few from Ravenclaw, and yes, I recognized a few faces from Hufflepuff. I'm not sure about which houses the others were from, but housing the Dark Lord during the summer, I saw many that I recognized from school, although I don't know everyone who is loyal to the Dark Lord. Only he knows our true numbers."

Hermione nodded. *The same could be said for the Order...* "I wondered about that, but it makes sense though."

The doors opened and the tables began to fill. Hermione looked around, eagerly anticipating the arrival of Ginny and Neville. As soon as she saw Neville's face, Hermione smiled and waved at him. Neville seemed to tug on someone's arm and came down the table to sit with her, eyeing the Death Eater speculatively as he passed them. When he sat down, she saw that Ginny and Demelza Robins were coming down the other side of the table and sat next to Cillian giving him an odd stare.

"Hi," Cillian said, extending his hand to Ginny, "Cillian Gwynek."

"Ginny Weasley. This is Demelza Robins, Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnigan," she introduced the students who sat down next to Hermione. Like her, Demelza and her friends were casually staring at the wizard who was sitting at the table and noticing the wizard at each table.

"So it's true, you're attending school?" Neville asked stunned. "Dean wasn't admitted. I was told he got an owl that said he was undesirable."

Seamus looked unhappy about it. "Yeah, I got an owl from him over the summer. He and his family, they decided... to leave the country on holiday," he stammered.

"There's not as many as I thought would be here," Hermione said as everyone settled to wait for the Sorting.

"There weren't many on the train, either," Demelza stated. "My dad insisted on Apparating me to the station, but Mum wouldn't hear of it."

Ginny shook her head. "You had to prove your *worth* to attend this year. If you have one or more Muggle parent or grandparent, you were deemed undesirable." Ginny scooted closer to Hermione. "Who are the wizards at the house tables?"

"Death Eaters," Hermione said as Cillian answered, "Security wizards," then scowled at her.

Hermione noted that of the four Death Eaters only one, VanHalal, at the Slytherin table was engaging the students around him in conversation. "Be careful, Gin, I've a feeling things are really different this year."

The doors opened, and the first years entered, following Professor McGonagall through the room for Sorting. The Sorting Hat sang a song praising each of the founders, telling briefly of their achievements and the virtues of their legacies before concluding with a recount of each house's attributes. It was an informative song and longer than Hermione remembered the hat being in previous years. However, the Sorting went quickly, and each new student warmly welcomed to his or her new house tables.

Snape's welcoming speech was simple and elegantly stated, and the entire hall was silent as he spoke. As soon as he concluded, the food appeared and the students dug in. The usual banter was slightly subdued, especially in the center of the tables, but the atmosphere was definitely warmer. Between her friends, conversation was kept to trivial things about occurrences and rumors that had been told to them from the papers. Hermione listened intently, thankful that neither Ginny nor Neville pressed her for information regarding her abduction. They did, however, ask about her wedding, Neville wanting to know if she had really married Snape.

At the end of dinner, Snape rose and requested that prefects take their houses to their dormitories. Hermione rose and followed the Gryffindors, carefully collecting the first years as she headed out the door.

She walked with Ginny all the way up to the seventh floor before Cillian caught up close enough to her to be heard properly. "What in blazes are you doing?" he demanded, talking over the first-years heads gathered between them, his usually warm, brown eyes flashing dangerously with anger as the Gryffindors all gathered in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Horehound blooms," Neville said, coming around the front. "Everyone inside."

Hermione was propelled with the crowd. "I'm a Gryffindor prefect," she called over her shoulder. "I'm doing what I'm supposed to do." She was one of the first to clamber in through the opening into the common room, gazing briefly at the place that wouldn't be her home this year, with a sense of sadness. "Girls' dormitories are on the right; boys' on the left," she said to the group of first years who had followed her, taking the stairs with the girls as if to assist the first years up the tower, Ginny following her closely.

"Hermione, wait," Cillian called out angrily from the common room. She and Ginny had just reached Ginny's landing when the wailing klaxon went off, and the stairs began to flatten. Ginny grabbed Hermione pulling her into her dorm room just as the stairs turned into a slide, sending girls screeching and laughing back into the common room.

"Okay, so give! What happened?" Ginny asked, pulling Hermione to her bed. "All I know is that you went shopping for supplies and books, came back to Grimmauld Place to pack and regroup, and then you vanished! Harry told me that he saw you in Diagon Alley, or Knockturn Alley, according to George, and Ron said you hugged Snape and left with him. Then weeks later, Harry, Ron and I get a message on our coins that you are with Snape, You-Know-Who saw Harry in your mind, and you were a captive Merlin knows where, and you couldn't leave! Oh! And Tonks told us that you'd been splinched in half, and Snape came to get you to take you back, and the *Daily Prophet* announced yesterday that you're married to Snape!"

"Well that pretty much sums up my summer. How was yours?" Hermione asked, pulling Ginny's wand from her hand and casting Charms around Ginny's bed to ensure their privacy. She took Ginny's hands as they sat down. "I'll tell you everything, but please, tell me news about Harry and Ron first. Are they all right? Have you spoken to them? Are they safe?"

Ginny laughed and scooted to the head of her bed, getting comfortable. "Okay, yes, they are fine. You remember your rut sack? Well, Bill gave Ron his pack, the one he used when he was in the field in Egypt. They're in hiding, but I don't know where. Lupin and Bill keep tabs, but they can't do it all the time. Harry keeps them moving around too much. We just wait until he or Ron send word or need something. As you know, Ron is supposedly sick with spattergroit, and so far, that ruse is holding up really well.

The ghoul really stinks, and no one will go near his room. Also, the Order had been spreading the rumor that you ran away to Australia with your parents but with the article in the *Daily Prophet*, I don't think that ruse will work anymore."

Hermione smiled and curled up crossed-legged on the foot of Ginny's bed. "So that ruse worked?"

"Well, not anymore! Everyone knows you married Snape, and by tomorrow, all the students here will have sent owls to their parents, telling them you are here. However, the rumors about Ron and Harry are sticking, or will until someone spots them. Before I left, Ron was trying to learn all the warding spells you tried to teach him and Harry. Harry is pretty good with them now. I still have my Galleon, so does Luna, Neville, Colin and Seamus. I know Fred and George have theirs. We all got your messages. I heard from Dean a while back, but I think... I hope he's okay. No one knows about the coins except DA members, so we can send brief messages. I'm supposed to find out tomorrow who in the DA has returned to school, and Neville wants to restart Dumbledore's Army." Ginny sighed. "That's all I know. Mum is volunteering at St. Mungo's, and Dad is still at the Ministry. Shackbolt is trying to pull the Order together, and Lupin and Bill are fielding loads of responsibility. So are my parents. But there are Death Eaters now in the Ministry, and the *Daily Prophet* is only printing lies or what the Death Eaters want us to know. The *Quibbler* is still going strong and occasionally prints reports and messages in a type of code Luna figured out."

"I heard about the Ministry; Snape told me," she admitted.

"Ron told us you were abducted, and you've been held captive, then we get this," she pulled a copy of the *Daily Prophet* from her bag. The article was about Hermione and Snape's wedding complete with picture of them dancing together. It also stated that Snape would be Headmaster of Hogwarts and outlined the new curriculum for the school year. The article made it sound exciting and new. "So now give. Tell me what's been going on with you. Are you really married to Snape?" Ginny asked.

"Yes," Hermione admitted solemnly.

"So it's true!" Ginny gasped. "Ron was so upset, well, you know, he figured you and he would... So, tell me everything."

Hermione took a deep breath and told her everything. At some point, Ginny slipped from the bed to retrieve handkerchiefs, urging Hermione to continue. Once again, Hermione had someone to pour her heart out to, and she held nothing back. In the end, both girls were crying. "Oh, my gods," Ginny finally said. "How did you ever survive all that? And Peter Pettigrew, Harry's dad's friend, he he tried to... Blimey, Hermione! What did Snape do?"

"The Dark Lord had me try and use the Cruciatus on him, but I couldn't do it. I had to watch as the Dark Lord tortured him. Then Snape had the Rat put back in his cage and left him on the back stoop. I have no idea what happened to him after that." Hermione drew her knees up and hugged them.

"Hardly seems like he was punished enough for what he did," Ginny said. She jumped up again. "Hey, look, I have your trunk." She looked around, then stood up, looking confused. "Or at least I did. I brought it with me. It's gone now."

"Maybe the house-elves took it up to the Headmaster's rooms," Hermione said hopefully. "Speaking of which, I really should go. Snape will be wondering where I am."

Ginny laughed. "How far can you go?"

Hermione scooted to the edge of the bed. "He's been really possessive of me. He has Cillian follow me wherever I go, and I'm also going to be followed by Draco Malfoy."

"You're kidding! Malfoy?" Ginny asked, stunned.

"Yeah," Hermione said with a sad smile. "He's actually been rather decent to me. Odd, but true. Oh, and I have a house-elf, Peren."

"I think I've met her," Ginny said, grinning. "Is she the one that came to collect Crookshanks?"

Hermione nodded. "I hope that wasn't a problem?"

"No. It was nice to know that things were such that you could have him back. That's when I really knew you were all right. I sent a message to Harry, telling him. He was relieved. So you're okay, being married to Snape and all?"

"Yes, so far," Hermione said. "I have to go. I'll see you at breakfast?"

"Sure," Ginny said, getting up to hug her. "I'll even put up with your bodyguard."

Hermione hugged Ginny and turned to go.

"What are you playing at," Cillian bellowed, looking raging mad when Hermione entered the common room.

"My prefect duties," she said calmly, showing him her prefect badge. "You do know I am a Gryffindor prefect?"

He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward the exit. "We're going to your tower, lady, and don't pull that on me again. You hear me!" he snarled, anger making his tone frightening.

"Excuse me?" Hermione asked indignantly, jerking her arm away. "Ginny is my friend! I will visit her and Neville, or Colin, Seamus, Lavender, Parvati, and anyone else who is my friend any time they want me to!"

"And I am supposed to *watch* you," he snarled, glowering at her, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "You are supposed to be where I can watch you."

He was nearly as accomplished with the sneering look as Snape was, but Hermione was too upset with him to care. "What was I going to do? Fly out the window? I don't even have my wand," she said angrily.

"That's not funny," he snarled, standing only inches away, glaring down at her.

"I was only in the dormitory," she answered, trying to control her temper. She turned quickly and crawled through the portrait hole, exiting into the corridor, Cillian close on her heels.

"Well, if you pull that stunt again..." he warned her, obviously furious with her.

"What stunt?" Hermione snapped back, to incensed to be afraid of him. "You knew where I was. There is only one way down." He was still glaring at her angrily, so she stopped to face him. "Ginny is my best friend. Luna Lovegood is another. In the next few days, you will be meeting my friends. I will be attending classes, and I spend a lot of time in the library. That's my life!" She turned and began walking again, still ranting. "I don't have a broom and don't like flying. I am wearing Snape's necklace, and I can't take it off, so I cannot Apparate without losing my head, and since I've already done that once, I will not be experiencing *that* again. So what are you afraid of? That I'll turn into a cat and give you the slip?"

"Okay fine," he said in a scathing tone. "I got mad when you left me in the Great Hall and didn't tell me where you were going. I was mad when you disappeared up the stairs, which turned into a slide when I tried to follow you, and was mauled by a hundred girls falling on top of me. Let's try to get along, okay? I'm here to protect you."

"From what?" Hermione asked, spreading her arms wide.

Cillian grabbed her arm and made her face him, his body stiff and appearing more threatening than she'd ever seen him. "The Carrows would like nothing better than to

torture you simply because they hate what you are Muggle-born. Rowle has some kind of personal vendetta he'd like to exact, and Travers hates you too. I don't know why. Even though the Dark Lord has said you are his, accidents happen. *I'm* to make sure those accidents *don't* happen; got it?" Hermione stared at him with her mouth open. "Yes, you are starting to get it. You have enemies within these walls, and Snape can't always be there to protect you, so I will be. Got it now?"

"Yes, I'm sorry," she said, feeling foolish. *I should have known he'd be angry, but it was just a simple visit, in her room. Not anything dangerous.*

He released her, although he still looked cross. "Good." His face relaxed and he jerked his head as he turned to go, saying, "Let's get you back to Severus. For the record, I *allowed* you to sit and visit with Ginny, *observed*. But don't expect me to cover for you all the time. I assume you wanted to tell her what happened to you over the summer."

Hermione sighed heavily and followed him. "Yes, I did. As far as she knew, I simply vanished, no word, nothing. Then Peren went to get my cat and well, you know."

"Okay, I figured." He started walking quickly, stopping half way down the stairs for her to catch up. "Don't do that again. If you want to talk to your friends, fine, in the common room and in sight. Fair?"

"Yes, fair," Hermione consented, feeling thoroughly chastised. "Cillian, may I ask you something?"

"Depends," he said casually, but he looked wary, a hard tick evident in his cheek.

"I was wondering what happened to Wormtail?" she asked. "Ginny asked me, and I told her about what happened at the Dark Lord's summoning, but she asked me what Snape did?" She bit her lip, hoping he'd be honest with her.

"Let's just say, the Rat was dealt with," Cillian said with sneer, although his eyes suggested something far more sinister.

Hermione stopped and looked at him, worried. "What did he do?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"Cursed him, what else?" Cillian asked with a condescending smirk, looking at her intently. "Why do you care?"

"I don't, well, yes, I do, but not," she stammered. "Did he kill him?"

Cillian laughed, although it sounded cold. "No, he didn't, but he wanted to. Merlin, he was angry." Hermione watched him, staring at his profile, waiting for him to continue. Finally he turned to her, his brown eyes hard and cold. "You really want to know? Okay. Severus cursed him, roughed him up a bit, and cut off his tail, then threw him out. Happy?" He stopped outside the stone gargoyle. "I would have done the same if he tried to molest my girl and got her so upset she splinched herself trying to escape him. Hades, I might have done worse."

Snape was sitting at his desk when they entered. "Where have you been?"

"She took the first years up to the Gryffindor common room and then sat with one of her friends, that Ginny girl, from dinner," Cillian answered casually.

Snape looked at Cillian suspiciously and then seemed to relax. "All right, fine. Here is her schedule," he said, handing Cillian a slip of parchment. "I'll escort her to breakfast with me, and you can meet up with us there."

Cillian nodded. Snape turned on Hermione. "Anything you care to add?"

"I'm not going to lie to you," she said warily. "I went to Gryffindor tower with the first years, then went up to Ginny's room. Cillian tried to follow and tripped the wards on the stairs. Yes, I spent some time talking to Ginny, and I may have stayed longer than I thought..."

Snape had come around the desk and cupped her face. "I'm not surprised. I don't like surprises, remember that."

"Yes, sir," she replied. "It's just I haven't seen her is so long and we... I just wanted to talk to her."

Cillian was looking at her, obviously cross. "What?" Severus asked, catching his friend's expression.

Cillian shook his head and made a sweep with his hands. "Nothing. Okay, I didn't like *not* being told what she was going to do. But we talked," he said, his eyes narrowing, pointing at Hermione. "Got things settled and reached an understanding, I hope."

Hermione nodded, feeling chastised again.

Severus offered Cillian a drink, which he declined, saying he'd rather just head back to his room. Severus nodded and saw him to the door. "If you're feeling antsy, the Astronomy Tower has a nice view, or my favorite is a stroll on the sixth or seventh floor corridors on the north-east or south side of the castle. Good place to catch paramours."

"You ol' bat! Of course I remember," Cillian said, smiling. "But I'll keep that in mind if you ever put me on patrol duty."

Snape laughed. "You've patrol duty every day; just don't expect too many night rounds."

"Deal," Cillian replied. "Hermione, tomorrow then. Good night. you two."

Hermione waited until he was gone, standing at Severus desk, fingering the corner, trying to decide how best to phrase the question she wanted to ask regarding Wormtail. She didn't want to tell him what she had heard from Cillian and yet wanted to know if it was true. "Ask," he ordered softly, crossing his arms.

"What?" she asked, not sure how to approach the subject.

"You want to ask me something," he said. "I know that pose, that look, and you're chewing up your lip. Go ahead, ask your question."

"I was wondering if you would tell me what happened to Wormtail?" she asked *There that's safe enough.*

He cocked his head slightly, trying to look her in the eye. "Why?"

"I was curious. The last I knew, he was sitting on the back stoop of your house in a cage," she said, hoping to draw him out, but still studying the quill cup and inkwell in front of her. "You didn't just leave him there, did you?"

"No, I didn't. He isn't at my house any longer," he said, watching her intently. "Why? What did you want to know?"

Hermione bit her lip, releasing it slowly. "I was just wondering... if you did anything to him?"

His posture became rigid. "Hermione, you didn't honestly think I was simply going to let him get away with what he did, did you? He tried to molest you, twice, the first time hurting you severely. The second time, he made you so afraid you ran, tried to Apparate and splinched yourself in half. And that was *after* I warned him to leave you alone, *several times*. So yes, I cursed him."

She turned to look at him. "But the Dark Lord punished him he made me punish him."

"And you chose to let him live," Snape said, although there was a hard edge to his voice. "You were to be my hand-fast wife! He knew that, and he still lusted after you, so much so that he tried attacking you twice!"

"What did you do?" she asked, wanting to hear him say it and not really wanting to at the same time.

"I hung him upside down and used your Freezing Curse to get my point across," he said, his dark eyes darting to the bookcase. "Then I threw him in the river."

"No!" she exclaimed, appalled. "He could have drowned."

He shifted his gaze back on her. "Yes, but unfortunately, Wormtail does know how to swim."

"Is that all?" she asked, trying not to sound suspicious.

He sighed and shook his head. "Come here," he said, holding out his hand to her. She placed her hand in his and he pulled her over to him, encouraging her to sit on his lap. "Let's just say there is a Rat out there without a tail, and I'm fairly sure that Rat will not be able to sit for several days."

"You didn't!" she gasped.

"I did." He almost looked amused, except there was a hardness to his expression.

"But..."

"I was not going to let what he did to you go unpunished," he said, his arms tightening around her. "I will not have you harmed if I can prevent it. Those who do will be dealt with. You are now my hand-fast wife. I will protect you."

Hermione sighed and relaxed in his embrace. "I suppose I should say thank you. I don't like it, but I understand why you did."

"You are forgiving me for...?" he asked, smirking. "You amaze me. After what he did, and you'd still spare his life?"

"Yes," she said, nodding. "I don't like killing. He was punished, and he's gone, right? I don't have to worry about him anymore."

He brushed her hair from her face so he could see her better. "No, you won't have to worry about him anymore." He held her a moment before, shifting, making her sit up. "I have work to do. Go on up to bed. I'll be up late."

She leaned over and kissed his cheek, and he cupped her face to kiss her lips. "Good night then," she said, easing off his lap.

He watched her walk across the office to the stairs. "Don't wait up. Get some sleep," he said, just as she hit the first step.

Author Notes:

In regards to Hermione's nine classes mentioned, I know she received eleven O.W.L.s, which, according to HP Lexicon, included: Transfiguration, Potions, Charms, Herbology, Astronomy, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, Care of Magical Creatures, History of Magic, Defense Against the Dark Arts, which will be Dark Arts her seventh year and (one unnamed class). As far as I can remember, she dropped Muggle Studies her third year, which she will have to carry under the new policies. I also believe that she dropped Astronomy, Care of Magical Creatures and History of Magic her sixth year so the rest are the classes I am referring to. I have since decided to make the one unnamed class Magical Literature, a study of the writing of famous wizards and not too unlike an English class.

I want to credit the women who did my beta work: I want to send a huge thank you to Southern_Witch_69 for all her help, support, encouragement and cleanup work, and for sticking with me with this story. And to Cocomachristy for her added support in catching my many typos and comma errors. Without you both, this story would never get validated, and thank you just seems so inadequate. I appreciate it more than you could possibly know.

Thank you, Sinbad, for the suggestions regarding the tarot cards.

For the cards Professor Trelawney is identifying, Sinbad and I decided on are as follows:

key 18 'The Moon' summarized as: Deception, unforeseen perils

key 13 'Death' summarized as: Change, Renewal

8 of cups summarized as: Abandoning the present situation

key 15 The Devil summarized as: Temptation, bondage to the material

The Deck Sinbad used is called the Rider Pack (or Deck). The cards noted as 'key' are major arcana cards. (Major arcana cards are when the person being read for is not in 'control', these are the cards of fate, outside influence etc.). The 8 of cups is of the minor arcana. The translation and information: A Complete Guide to the Tarot by: Eden Grey The definitions I gave you are from the Definition Summarized section on pages 172 & 173.

The Only Muggle-born Here

Chapter 16 of 43

Hermione's first week of school, and things are really different at Hogwarts as the Death Eaters begin to exert their presence over the students and on Hermione in particular.

~o 16 o~

The Only Muggle-born Here

Hermione woke expecting to see Severus lying in the bed next to her, but the room was empty. She quickly freshened up in the loo and found her school robes lying on the bed when she returned. Checking her schedule, she pulled out her books for Muggle Studies and Potions and hurried down to Snape's office. He was sitting in his chair, reading a book, and stood when she entered. "You're ready?"

"Yes, sir," she replied as he walked over and looked down at her. His eyes narrowed slightly, and she wondered what she could have possibly done to displease him already.

"What? Did I..."

He turned, his wand pointed toward the stairs, and summoned her Blast-Ended Skrewt jewelry. "I thought I stated very clearly that you are to wear these at all times?"

Hermione looked at the necklace and bracelet as they flew into his hand, really hating what they represented. "I thought that inside the castle, since I'll be followed anyway..."

"No. Open your collar," he demanded. "Now, Hermione."

She slowly opened her collar, fuming, and he stepped behind her to fasten the necklace in place. "Why? It's not like I can Apparate on school grounds."

"Hermione, it's not only that," he said, grasping her wrist. She held it out, refusing to look at him. "I told you that you'd have to wear them, and the others know as well. Don't fight me on this." He tilted her face up to look him in the eye. "I did have them made to have some esthetic appeal by a very skilled goblin craftsman, and there are Charms on them; they repel spells hexes, curses and jinxes."

"To protect me when I don't have my wand and Cillian isn't around," she stated, understanding his reasoning.

"Cillian will be around," he said with absolute certainty, one side of his mouth pulled back into a smirk. Snape touched his wand to the jewelry to activate the spells. "I'm referring to blind attacks. Your wand arm, head and most of your torso are protected. I'm of half a mind to create you a belt. I still have enough of the shell to do so."

"Won't that clash with the school uniform code?" she replied cheekily.

He glowered at her. "For you, I'd make an exception," he said with a sneer and ushered her from the office.

He guided her down the corridors, entering the Great Hall from a side door usually reserved for the staff. With a stiff nod, he turned and walked up to the Headmaster's chair while Hermione took a seat at the Gryffindor table as the rest of the students filed in. Cillian appeared, telling Neville to scoot over so he could have the spot across from her, and began eating. Neville scowled behind his glass, and Ginny gave her a quizzical look, but Hermione simply shrugged it off. MacCavish was sitting in the middle of the table, glowering at the students as they came in, as was Ivor Travers, sitting at the Ravenclaw table. On the other hand, Van Halal was again greeting the Slytherin students as if he knew them well. In contrast, Owain Rowle was trying to engage a group of Hufflepuff boys in conversation, but they were obviously uncomfortable with him, and those sitting nearest to him were keeping their heads down and eating quickly.

Snape stood, made a few morning announcements regarding the new school policies, and instructed all sixth years to remain in the Great Hall for their class schedules.

"Strange, that," Ginny whispered, indicating MacCavish with a subtle nod as she passed Hermione the bacon. "It seems each house has a Death Eater mascot this year," she whispered.

"From what I've gathered, they are here to try and weed out possible recruits and to keep discipline around the school. I've been warned about them. Be careful, too, okay?" Hermione warned as the owls swooped in with the morning mail. Hermione noticed that Cillian received four owls and a copy of both the *Daily Prophet*, plus what appeared to be a German wizard newspaper as well.

"I have a break after my first class. What about you?" Ginny asked, drawing her attention again.

Hermione hoped that Cillian was engrossed in his paper and not really paying attention to her and Ginny, although when she made a quick glance up at the high table, Snape was watching her. Hermione quickly looked away, turning back to Ginny. "Just the regular break. I have Potions after Muggle Studies this morning and Transfiguration after lunch," Hermione said softly. She saw Cillian's smirk as he turned the page of his paper.

"I have Potions first, so maybe I'll see you in the corridor," Ginny whispered. "Have you heard anything about Quidditch? Gryffindor doesn't have a captain yet. Ron was sent the badge, but he's not returning this year. Neither is Dean. Demelza, as you know, is here, and so is Jimmy Peakes. So I only have two Chasers and one Beater... but no captain."

"Sounds like you're captain, Miss Weasley," Cillian said, setting his paper aside.

Ginny blushed. "Professor McGonagall hasn't said who is going to be captain yet. But I'd be happy to do it if it falls on me."

"Gin, who else plays that's come to school this year?" Hermione asked, annoyed that Cillian had been listening in on her conversation with Ginny.

"Jack Sloper there," Cillian said, indicating a wiry, dark-haired boy sitting down the table next to Euan Abercrombie. "I know that Sloper's dad was coaching him pretty hard over summer holiday. He's a fair flyer."

"But he's right dangerous with a Beater's bat," Ginny stated pointedly. "And I don't mean that in a good way."

"His dad bought him the new Nimbus, and he's been practicing with something called a skeeter shoot," Cillian stated.

Ginny looked at him quizzically. "What's a skeeter shoot?"

Hermione burst out laughing as Cillian shrugged. "Dunno," he said, "but I overheard his sister bragging about it in T and T. Apparently Sloper is really good at skeeter."

"Skeet shooting is a Muggle recreational sport where Muggles try to shoot clay discs which are flung into the air at high speed from a machine. I know the machine can throw skeet discs about fifty-five to sixty-four meters at pretty fast speeds," Hermione explained.

"I can't see Harold Sloper using a Muggle machine," Cillian stated amused. "Or even knowing about one."

Hermione shrugged. "Makes sense to me. Wood used to throw golf balls to teach Harry how to fly after the Snitch his first year. The skeet machine wouldn't be too much different, except Mr. Sloper wouldn't have to throw the discs."

"So is it kind of like chasing after the apples my brothers threw for me in the orchard, then?" Ginny asked.

Hermione snickered at the comparison. "Yeah, only the clay discs are about twenty-five millimeters wide and kind of flat so they can fly far. They'd be harder to catch than an apple."

"Yeah, that makes sense, clay discs and apples?" Cillian scoffed. "So, Hermione, which position are you going to try out for?"

"The cheering squad," Ginny replied, giving Hermione a playful jab with her elbow. Both Hermione and Ginny hid their grins behind their pumpkin juice.

"You don't play?" he asked with the slightest hint of a frown.

"Hermione doesn't like brooms," Ginny said, and Hermione blushed.

"I don't like flying," she admitted.

"Too bad; I love flying," he stated, picking up one of his other papers.

Hermione smiled as she watched Cillian's reaction. "That doesn't mean I don't enjoy watching my friends practice." Ginny gave her an incredulous look. "What? I enjoy fresh air as much as the next person."

"Yeah, I suppose you could always read in the stands," Ginny said, snickering. However, both girls caught the curl of Cillian's lip before he buried his nose back into his paper.

*

Just before class, Cillian pulled Hermione aside. "Do you remember what I told you?" he asked in a hushed voice. Hermione looked at him, momentarily confused. "About the Carrows," he hissed. "Watch yourself in there. Keep your cool, and don't rise to his baiting. He will be looking for any reason at all to put you in detention. Don't give him any." He released her arm and ushered her inside the classroom.

Hermione entered the classroom for Muggle Studies with a sense of dread, watching Cillian take a seat from the back row, pulling it to the back wall, before turning to find Neville waving her over. "So you ready to learn about Muggles, Hermione?" Draco asked in an amused tone that lacked its usual sneer, although both Crabbe and Goyle were highly amused by his remark.

"Nah, she could teach the class," Crabbe snickered.

"Oh, bloody funny," Hermione snapped as she walked toward Neville. To her surprise, Alecto Carrow was standing up at the front of class instead of her brother, sneering at Hermione as she took her seat next to Neville and Seamus, stunned when Draco sat down on her other side. Neville looked over at Draco, confused, and then looked at Hermione as if expecting her to explain. Hermione simply shrugged.

Both Crabbe and Goyle took their seats, still staring at Draco and Hermione. "What?" Draco hissed, pulling out his book.

Crabbe scowled, pulling his book and dropping it on the desk with a loud thump. "Why sit with her?" he asked in a hoarse hiss.

"I told you why," Draco hissed back.

Hermione turned to glare at them. "If you want to sit by someone else, you're welcome to. It will not offend me."

Draco sighed. "Look, I want to, okay?"

"You're kidding," Goyle said as Hermione stared at him, her brow furrowed, saying, "As if I believe that," at the same time.

"Oh, give it a rest, Hermione," Draco said, then turned to Goyle. "No, I'm *not* kidding."

Professor Carrow cleared her throat, and everyone turned their attention to her. "In this class, you will be learning about Muggles. There are many misconceptions that have been taught in this subject in the past, and there are many misconceptions you have been told by witches and wizards that are infatuated by the Muggle world. I will attempt to correct those misconceptions." She came to a stop right in front of Hermione. "Ah, yes. How lucky we are to have our token Mudblood in our class," Professor Carrow said softly. "Take one and pass them down," she said to the class, dropping a stack in front of Neville, and walked to the next row of desks as she passed out her handout.

It was a thick packet with several pages stapled together which to Hermione was funny, considering that Alecto, who hated Muggles, would own a stapler. Neville took the top handout and gave one to Seamus, passing the rest to Hermione. She took her packet, looking down at it while passing the rest to Draco, scanning the contents. It was a list of fairytales with brief descriptions of the 'witch' or 'wizard' from the tale.

Professor Carrow strode back to the front of the classroom, flicked her wand at the black board and several pictures of witches with big warts, wearing pointy hats, cloaks and robes, and flying on brooms appeared. "This is what Muggles think of our kind. Today we will be learning exactly what the Muggle view of the Wizarding world is and how skewed their interpretation of us is by comparing their popular literature."

For the next half an hour, Professor Carrow expounded on the descriptions of the witches in several of the Muggle fairytales, concentrating on the portrayals of wicked witches and evil queens. She was especially incensed about tales of witches who supposedly ate children, baked bread from bones, and who were described as hags. Actually, Hermione found her interpretation of the fairytales to be amusing, if Professor Carrow hadn't kept putting her on the spot at every possible opportunity.

Professor Carrow turned and flicked her wand at the blackboard, making the drawings vanish, turning the board white. She turned, walked to the back of the room and summoned a projector to her. With another flick of her wand, the lights dimmed. Several students snickered, and Crabbe leaned over to Draco moaning a, 'Woo,' sound.

"Knock it off; it's not like that," Draco hissed at Crabbe.

"Silence!" Professor Carrow snapped. "This is an example of what Muggles think magic is." It was a show Hermione had seen once on television, about how magical tricks were done. The film started with a man in a suit and cape doing various card and coin tricks. The man was doing them in such a way that the slight of hand was visible while he did the demonstration. The only difference was that there wasn't any sound from the film, allowing Professor Carrow to talk disparagingly about the incompetence of the man and point out where the man was palming or sliding the object for the trick. The show ended with a similar demonstration of magic tricks using props. Again, each time the assistant was shown doing her part. Professor Carrow continued her commentary, pointing out the assistant's movements. Finally, the film was over and the lights came on.

"I will have each of you pick six of the fairytales I have given you to look up and compare to similar witchtales, and write a one foot essay on each. I expect a full analytical comparison and scrutinize all aspects of Muggles misconceptions of the witches, beings, creatures and people in these stories. You're dismissed."

Hermione said goodbye to Neville and Seamus and made her way to Potions without waiting for Cillian before exiting the doors. She was surprised when Draco caught up to her on the stairs as she headed for the dungeons. "Not trying to ditch me, are you?" he asked.

"Ditch you?" she asked, stopping, nearly getting bowled over by Goyle. "What are you going on about? Since when do you walk me to class?"

"Since this year," he said firmly. "Look, we are going to the same class, so let's go."

"Draco, what's going on?" Hermione asked, trying not to notice the looks from the others passing them in the corridor.

"Nothing." Draco kept walking beside her as if unaware of the curious stares.

"You gonna start carryin' her books for her too?" Crabbe snickered from his other side.

"Knock it off. I told you about it already," Draco hissed angrily.

Hermione stopped just short of the door to the classroom, turning on Draco. "I thought it was Cillian's job to watch me?"

Cillian leaned around her and smiled. "It is," he said as he held the door open for them.

She passed by Cillian into the classroom, surprised when Draco plopped himself down on the stool next to her. "So, what is this all about, then? Why you cannot mean...?"

"Nothing, all right. I simply want the best partner for class," he said waspishly, grasping her arm and tugging on it, trying to make her sit at his worktable.

The four other Slytherins at the worktables to their right all started to snicker and whisper. Hermione pointedly ignored them as she stared at Draco. "You mean that you want to work with me as your partner? Since when?"

"Since today," he said, pulling out his Potions book.

"Draco, you don't have to," Hermione stated, crossing her arms.

He turned to look at her angrily. "Don't make this difficult, okay? You're my Potions partner, and that's it."

"Give me one good reason," she stated defiantly. From the corner of her eye, she could see the other Slytherins still paying them close attention, amused by the scene.

"You got an outstanding O.W.L. in Potions, didn't you? And we did all right working together in Snape's lab, as I recall. Isn't that good enough, or do you want it spelled out?" he asked, kicking her stool out a bit further while indicating she should sit down. "Stop making a scene."

"Oh, by all means spell it out for me," she replied sarcastically. "You can barely stand me, and you've never been friendly towards me in school. Why should I trust you now?"

"Look, I have to okay," he spat quietly.

Hermione was surprised, then narrowed her eyes. "Because of Professor Snape or because of *ohim*?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Ahem, good morning class," Professor Slughorn said, drawing everyone's attention away from the argument between Hermione and Draco. Hermione pulled out her new Potions book with a frown on her face. "It's so nice to see so many of you returning for another year of Potions making. As seventh years, we are going to be brewing some of the more difficult and time demanding potions. You will also be learning how to set your potions in stasis and how to magically alter the brewing time to fit the steps into your schedules," Professor Slughorn began lecturing.

Draco smiled, looking rather smug.

"What?" Hermione hissed.

"Snape already taught me this," he stated.

"So maybe you should help one of the others," Hermione hissed back.

"Some of the potions you'll be making will require a day, some will have to be set in stasis until Wednesday when you'll have Double Potions, and you'll have at least one potion assigned to you the start of each month that will take a few weeks to brew. You and your partner will need to coordinate your schedules so that each step is done on time and precisely as needed, regardless of when the potion must be attended to," Professor Slughorn continued as he paced around the front of the class jovially. "For this reason you will all be given special passes which will allow you to be able to move about the castle, even after hours if and I mean only if your potion requires you to."

"Give it a rest, Hermione; you and I will be Potions partners," Draco stated firmly.

Professor Slughorn must have heard Draco because he stopped in front of him, his smile gone. "Mr. Malfoy, if you would please pass out these badges, giving one pair for each set of partners."

Draco walked forward and took the box, walking around the room handing them out to everyone except Hermione, as Professor Slughorn continued. "Some of the potions you'll be brewing will be Polyjuice Potion, Veritaserum, Amortentia, Felix Felicis and the Dagworth-Ameliorate Draught and Limb-Regenerate Potion, to name just a few. For those up to the task, Wolfsbane Potion, Dewitt's Elixir, Integro-Mederi Solution or maybe Reinvigorate Elixir. Today we shall be discussing the concept of brewing two or more potions at the same time. So, since each of you are already paired off, please sign your badges, and it will automatically add the name of the person sitting next to you below your name," Professor Slughorn directed the class.

Draco once again took his seat holding the last pair of badges. "Here's yours."

"Thank you," Hermione replied, groaning silently as Draco wrote his name on his badge as she reluctantly signed hers. The pair of badges glowed slightly, and Hermione noticed that where her partner's name should be now bore his signature. She caught Draco's smirk as she dropped it in her bag.

"So that makes it official," Draco stated smugly.

"Terrific," she replied as Slughorn began his lecture on placing potions in stasis.

~o0o~

As they left the classroom, Hermione saw Rowle and Travers walking down the corridor toward her, and as soon as they saw her, they both looked at her with ugly sneers. Hermione felt her heart skip a beat at the malevolence in their gaze, and immediately felt Draco step closer to her, his hand on the small of her back. "Keep walking," Cillian hissed before she could protest.

Both Crabbe and Goyle moved to the far left as the two Death Eaters approached. "Rowle, Travers," Cillian greeted them amiably, giving Hermione a nudge in the back to keep her moving, although she knew it was safest to just keep walking, especially since she didn't have her wand.

"Gwynek," Rowle said, nodding, his eyes flicking from him to Hermione and back, his wand held lazily in his hand. "See you've got guard duty." He and Travers blocked their path, Rowle's gaze traveling over Hermione's chest and down to her groin with a purely lecherous look. "Offered myself for the job, but Snape said you'd already been assigned for it. Envy you; she's a tight one."

"Well, you know how Snape is," Draco said politely enough. "He's right possessive of her."

"Isn't he though?" Travers asked, smirking, his wand held tauntingly in his hand. "Don't know as why. She's already partied *withus* once before. Wouldn't mind *enjoying* her company again myself."

"Guys, enough," Cillian said, moving forward and grasping Hermione's arm roughly, his wand also drawn, but held passively. "Snape's expecting her in his office for a few minutes before lunch, and I'm hungry. So I'd like to deliver her as soon as possible."

Both men smirked crudely. "By all means, wouldn't want you to miss lunch, would we?" Travers said, moving aside.

Cillian forced Hermione to walk past Rowle. "Thanks just doing my job," he sneered.

Hermione was shaking uncontrollably as the meaning of what they'd said was sinking in, vague memories rushing at her in a confusing, meaningless mess. By the time they reached the stairs, she was near tears. "You all right? Do you need...?" Cillian was saying, although Hermione was lost in thought as fragmented memories of her beatings and abuse came to her, remembering the two men, two of the faces in a circle of faces, although there were huge gaps in her memory. "*Shite!* Draco, I'm taking her up to the Headmaster's office, you can go. C'mon, Hermione." He dragged her up the stairs and all the way to Snape's office.

Snape was on his feet and crossing the room as soon as Cillian pulled Hermione into the office, tears now sliding down her cheeks as her mind filled in some of the blanks. "What happened?" he snapped as Hermione flung herself into his arms. Snape instinctively pulled her close and glared up at Cillian.

Hermione closed her eyes, trying to draw comfort from his embrace, inhaling his scent, trying to push the fragments of memory from her mind as they rearranged themselves, forcing her to vaguely remember.

"Rowle and Travers confronted us in the dungeons," Cillian stated angrily. "Made some blatant innuendos."

"Why, those imbeciles. I'll deal with them." Snape pushed Hermione away and headed for the door. "Where were they headed?"

Hermione tried to reach out, needing him, her hands sliding off his clothes onto nothingness as he moved away from her, and feeling the weight of her emotions hit her.

"I think either the Slytherin common room or to see Slughorn," Cillian stated, but Snape was gone by the time he finished his sentence. Cillian turned and forced Hermione to sit down, then disappeared, leaving her alone with her tormenting memories.

She simply stared at his desk as the portraits rambled, sounding like a buzz in her ear, as her memories continued to ravel and twist in her mind. Fresh tears fell down her cheeks as she remembered the half-skull masks, malicious, malevolent eyes, and sneering grins... Hearing the Dark Lord talking to his followers, caviling and commending them for their deeds, as he paced around her... as she lay on ground, pinned by unseen ropes and barbs, surrounded... hands, fists...

Cillian returned, holding a glass with an amber liquid in it. "Brandy with Calming Draught for your nerves."

"I don't drink," she started to say as he thrust the glass in her hand.

"Drink it," he said forcefully, brooking no argument. "It'll help. You're as white as a sheet, obviously upset, and still shaking." He leaned on the desk, watching her, the warmth of his eyes gone, replaced with anger.

She sipped the liquor, feeling the potion take effect as he stared at her. Hermione was struck by how intense his stare was, how so much like Snape's, although Cillian's eyes were a dark brown when he was angry, instead of deep black...

"Hermione, they were out of line, and," Cillian said, clenching his jaw as evident from the tick in his cheek, "he shouldn't have said what he did."

"They were there..." she started to say, but couldn't get the words out. She took another sip of her drink, the liquor warming her throat as she swallowed. She wanted Snape here to hold her and tell her she was safe. *Where is he?*

"If you're implying what I think you are yes," he said simply, watching her every move.

Hermione saw in his gaze the same dangerous intensity Snape could get when really angry or annoyed. "They..."

"Yes." His eyes softened slightly, but she could tell he was seething. "Maybe, I dunno. I wasn't there. But they're the type that would." He looked at her speculatively. "You don't remember it, do you?"

Hermione shook her head. "Some parts, pieces... Snape said he removed the memories but left enough so I'd know what happened without having to remember."

Cillian nodded and looked at the window. "I'd have done the same if..."

"If what?" she asked, watching the far away look on his face.

"No one. Nothing," he said, although still sounding kilometers away.

Severus entered the office, his robes billowing.

"I gave her Calming Draught," Cillian told Snape.

Snape nodded, a tick flicking in his cheek. "Time for lunch, Hermione," he said smoothly, touching her arm gently. "You'll have to face them. I won't be far, and they will be sitting at Slytherin's table."

She knew he was right and stood to face him. "I'll be alright," she said, drawing herself up, and she saw a quick curl of Snape's lip, almost a smile, that vanished just as quickly.

"That's my girl," he said softly, barely audible as she stood. When they entered the Great Hall from the staff door, Hermione immediately saw Rowle, Travers and Van Halal glaring at her from the Slytherin table. She watched as Snape walked away to take his seat while she found a place at the Gryffindor table. She noticed that the Carrows were glaring at her every move as well. And unlike before, Cillian sat next to her, keeping his front to the Slytherin table.

~oOo~

Transfiguration that afternoon was pretty much normal, with the exception of having Draco sitting next to her on one side and Seamus, Lavender and Parvati on the other, with Crabbe and Goyle directly behind her. Hermione was truly beginning to miss having Ron and Harry around and began to wonder where they were and if they were all right. She realized that not knowing was making her worry about them even more, although Ginny hadn't mentioned that anything had befallen them. Cillian had discreetly handed her her wand before class with a tilt of his head, telling her she'd have to relinquish it after class.

Professor McGonagall demonstrated the techniques of transfiguring her chair into a dog and back, explaining the differences of large objects verses smaller objects for inorganic and organic transfigurations into animal forms. "Now even though the dog will look like a dog, it is still not a living dog. In this case, it is still an object made out of wood. Whereas a gifted witch or wizard can animate the dog to behave like a dog, such qualities must be done during the transformation."

Everyone was given a large rock and asked to transfigure it into a dog, with extra points given if the dog could bark and wag its tail. However, with her concerns about Harry and Ron in her mind, and Lavender asking if she and Snape were truly married, inquiring as to why, if she was truly married to Snape, was she spending all her time with Draco, it was hard to concentrate on the lesson. Thanks to all the distractions, Hermione's dog simply sat, staring at the wall, then fell over on its side.

That evening at dinner, Hermione suggested that Neville and Seamus meet up with her in the library to work on their essays. Hermione was already familiar with several books on the wizard version of her favorite fairytales and had the books piled up in front of her when the guys sat down. Seamus wasn't at all familiar with the Muggle fairytales, so Hermione provided a comprehensive overview of the tales, answering all of Seamus' and Neville's questions about them. It was fairly easy to get the essays started on all six. When Madam Pince announced that the library would be closing, Neville asked if Hermione wanted to go up to the common room to finish.

"No, I have to get Mrs. Snape back to her tower," Cillian stated smoothly from behind them.

Hermione grimaced. "Maybe tomorrow," she said with a shrug. They compared their schedules to pick a time to finish the essays together, deciding after dinner would be best.

Cillian bade Hermione good night at the stone gargoyle, and Snape was sitting at his desk when she arrived. "So how was it?" he asked, rising.

"Bearable," she replied, trudging across the room for the stairs.

Snape followed. "I've already had a complaint regarding your behavior in class. Do you care to enlighten me?"

She spun around on the landing to the bedroom. "What?"

"According to Aleceto, you were rather disruptive today in class. However, Draco informed me you were nothing of the sort," he said smoothly. "I informed Aleceto I'd deal with your insolence."

"I wasn't! Really," she gasped, backing into the room. "So who are you going to believe?"

"Draco, naturally," he stated with an odd curl to his lips. "But I did tell Aleceto I'd deal with you."

"And what do intend to do have me scrub cauldrons?" she asked, dropping her book bag on her trunk, only briefly realizing it was her trunk, before the advancing form of Snape drew her attention back.

He stepped even closer and caressed her arm as he looked down at her. "No," he said firmly. "But I would like to kiss you." He pulled her closer as he leaned down, one hand gently cupping her face, his lips barely touching hers. "Let me in, Hermione," he breathed softly, his breath warming her face before he kissed her. It was a feather soft, tenuous caress, and Hermione closed the gap, pressing her mouth to his. "Merlin, I want to be within you. Please, let me," he entreated in his rich drawl, thick with need.

Hermione simply nodded, feeling flutters in her stomach from the intense desire reflected in his dark eyes as he pulled her with him to the bed. He undressed her slowly, pulling her robes and jumper off, his fingers making deft flicks over her buttons. She watched entranced, feeling self-conscious, as he undressed himself, watching her the whole time as he stripped.

He stepped forward and swept her up off her feet, nearly tossing her onto the bed before joining her, staring at her body, his hands slowly trailing down her every curve. His hand found her folds, and he began stroking her clitoris as his mouth suckled and laved her breasts. When she began to relax to his touch, his mouth moved down, kissing her stomach then her groin, before he finally licked her clitoris, sending shock waves through her. Soon he had her body craving him, her mind screaming from desire as wave after wave rippled through her, and she cried out, sure the portraits in his office could hear her. He pinned her bucking hips down on the bed, laving and sucking on her, headless to her pleas to stop, until Hermione thought she would explode. The fierceness of her orgasm left her gasping and her heart pounding in her chest.

He finally rose, grinning. "I think that will do for your insolence," he said in a nearly feral purr as he slid up her body, positioning himself to enter her. "But I'm hardly done with you yet."

She was still so sensitive she cried out as he filled her in one swift stroke. He moved within her, long and hard, rubbing himself against her with each downward stroke. Hermione felt the building of another orgasm surge, and she clenched her hips, grasping at him with her hands. "Oh my gods! Mother of Merlin," she gasped, and he began to thrust in her more ardently.

"Severus. Say it, Severus," he demanded, his thrusting relentless.

Hermione pulled her legs up, nearly wrapping herself around him, trying to squeeze her thighs to slow him down to no avail. "Severus, please," she groaned. He nipped at her shoulder, gripping her hips as he thrust. Hermione felt her body spasm even before the waves of her climax surged though her a second time. She dug her nails into his arms and cried out his name over and over until her body seemed to melt, and she felt like she had no bones left.

When she opened her eyes, Snape was lying on her, his body sweaty, his breathing ragged, and she tried to wipe the sweat from his face, sighing deeply when she saw his eyes were closed.

He sat up immediately. "Are you all right? Am I squishing you?"

"No," she said, tucking his hair behind one ear.

"Don't," he growled and shook his head. "I don't like that; don't do it again."

"Why?" she asked innocently.

He scowled and rolled over, lying beside her. "I just don't." He rolled onto his side and pulled her to him, holding her tightly. "Thank you," he said softly to her hair.

She felt his body relax, his arm around her became heavier, and his breathing became slow and even. "Are you asleep?" she asked quietly.

"No," he grumbled.

"If I were to ask you something, would you do it?" she asked and felt him shift his weight.

"It depends," he said groggily.

Hermione turned her head, nearly colliding with his nose. "If I didn't want to remember it, would you Oblivate me?"

He leaned up so he could see her better, his dark eyes narrowed questioningly. "Why would you want to forget?"

"So I don't have to remember what they did. Any of it," she said.

He sat up and looked at her, his expression becoming thoughtful. "You're talking about... It's been too long. If I Oblivate you now, everything from then to now might go too."

She was disappointed that he didn't want to remove the memories. "Why not? There has to be a way to remove what you don't want to remember."

"Something you saw is important, but I can't tell you what. Unfortunately, your mind is quick, and you'll piece together what happened, but I don't want to mess with your mind too much." He lay back down and pulled her to him. "Go to sleep."

~o0o~

Tuesday was a much nicer day, although Draco chose to sit next to her in Charms as well as partner with her in Herbology. Cillian had once again given her her wand before Charms and then demanded its return as they left the classroom. All through lunch, Hermione was fending off inquisitive questions about her relationship with Snape and Draco, who Cillian was and why he was following her everywhere, and questions about Harry and Ron. So she and Ginny shoveled down their food, and they tried to escape in the library, except Cillian, of course, followed them. Draco, seeing her leave, grabbed a handful of chicken legs so he could go as well. Hermione and Ginny tried hiding deep in the stacks, whispering quietly to each other, uncomfortably aware that they were still under the watchful eye of Cillian.

"You've really become popular, you know, Hermione," Ginny whispered. "I've been hounded with questions about you and Snape, Draco and Cillian all day."

"I wouldn't be surprised." Hermione wasn't sure if he was close enough to really overhear them or not. "So how are your classes?"

"All right. Yours?" Ginny said.

"Odd. Muggle Studies was rough. Professor Carrow kept glaring at me, making all kinds of innuendos, and Crabbe kept making faces. Draco has been determined to sit next to me in every class so far," Hermione stated. She couldn't help but sound annoyed.

"No!" Ginny exclaimed just as Draco appeared, browsing the books near them.

"Speaking of the ferret," Hermione moaned softly, then shrugged. She really wanted to ask Ginny what she knew about her friends, but kept her conversation with Ginny on benign things.

Finally, Cillian walked up to inform her it was time to head off for Ancient Runes. "See you at dinner," Ginny said, smirking as they parted ways in the corridor.

That night after classes, Hermione met up with Seamus and Neville in the library as planned. However the stares and murmuring from the other students, and constant glares and hushing from Madam Pince was unnerving Neville, so they left for the common room. No sooner had they sat down and began working on their essays than Lavender and Parvati hurried over.

Parvati sat down next to Hermione. "So how did you end up with Professor Snape?" Parvati asked as Lavender sat on her other side.

"How is he in bed?" Lavender asked, her eyes lit up in curious anticipation. "I've always wondered what he'd be like? Is he..."

"I'm not answering that!" Hermione exclaimed, incensed.

"You mean you sleep with him! Are you really married?" Breanna Enfield, another seventh year, asked. "To the greasy git?"

"He's not greasy," Hermione said, rounding on her angrily.

Hermione wanted to leave. At least in the library all she got were stares and murmurs. "Leave her alone," Neville said firmly, and Hermione felt a sense of pride in her friend.

"I thought the *Prophet* got it all wrong," Stephanie Adams stated, trying to nudge Seamus over to sit down. "But the picture was in *Witch Weekly* and *The Quibbler* too!"

"Blimey, you're his student," Breanna Enfield said as Jack Sloper stated, "Yes, it's true. They were bonded in a hand-fasting. I was there."

"What did he do; poison you or something?" Ernie Coppersmith, sixth year, asked.

"Not a poison a potion, you wet prat! She's not dead," Breanna stated. "Well, did he?"

"No," Hermione snarled.

"What about Harry? Weren't you seeing him?" Breanna asked.

"She was seeing Ron, and no, Harry was seeing Ginny," Lavender corrected the girl. "How are Ron and Harry taking this?"

"Oh, this is bloody ridiculous! Hermione, get up," Seamus shouted, grabbing her books and shoved them at Neville before collecting his own. "I want to get these essays done and get started on Dark Arts!" He walked around the table, dragging Hermione to her feet. "We're going to my room." Cillian was on his feet and following them, blocking the others from tromping up the stairs, unbeknownst to Hermione. Seamus dropped his things on his bed, pulling up a trunk for Hermione to sit on. "Go on, sit."

"Thank you, Seamus," Hermione stated, relieved. "I really appreciate it."

"Well, I couldn't get anything done with that lot, could I," he snapped angrily, but she knew it wasn't directed at her.

Neville sat down next to her, looking at her curiously. "Hermione, have you spoken to either Harry or Ron?"

"Very briefly over the summer hols," Hermione admitted.

"Are they is Harry still fighting You-Know-Who?" he persisted.

"Yes, I assume so," Hermione replied. "I haven't really been told anything much, except that the Dark Lord has taken over the Ministry, Hogwarts and Hogsmeade. I feel like he's winning, and there isn't anyone standing up to him."

"I wouldn't be so sure," Seamus stated. "There is a lot of fighting going on, wizards in hiding, and people abandoning their homes."

"And followers of Dumbledore still make news in the papers. Do you think we should reorganize the D.A.?" Neville asked, looking earnest.

Seamus looked at him, gobsmacked. "Are you daft man? Don't say anything around her!"

"Why not?" Neville and Hermione asked.

"You'll tell Snape or that Death Eater who's always following you." Seamus hissed. Just then, Cillian entered the room. Seamus glared at him then averted his eyes.

"This is Cillian Gwynek, my bodyguard." Hermione really wished he'd just let her alone with her housemates. "Do you think you could give me some time with my friends?" she asked Cillian.

"Keeper more likely," Seamus said softly, under his breath. "Don't be too hasty; things are not the same around here. There is a reason that MacCavish is sitting at our table," he warned Neville.

"Believe me, Professor Snape would not like knowing you were alone in a boy's room without supervision," Cillian said, sitting down on Dean's empty bed. Seamus scowled, but kept quiet.

"Neville, I think we should wait on that. Seamus, no, I won't. You should know me better than that." They started discussing the last three fairytales, comparing notes on the corresponding witchtales. Every now and then, either Seamus or Neville passed her notes, asking what she knew about Ron and Harry, telling her about the underground or what they knew about it. Cillian looked bored, leaning against the headboard with his eyes closed, although Hermione knew he was listening. There wasn't a lot of information, rather speculation, but she was glad that the guys were confiding in her.

I read your messages on the coin, Seamus wrote to her when Hermione tried explaining Little Red Riding Hood again. *I still have mine.*

Shouldn't we start the D.A. again? Neville wrote, turning his parchment so she could read it.

Seamus read aloud the part about the witch from the *Woodcharmer's Niece* as she wrote, *Make inquiries, but please be discreet. Find out who's on our side, and be careful about it. Try sending messages to Harry and Ron, but be careful.*

They will want to know about you Neville wrote.

Hermione shrugged as she listened to Seamus explain the witchtale version of Repunzel, Petrosinella. *Tell them I'm fine for now. Ask how the search goes and what they need. Maybe I can find things in the library that will help...*

"Hermione," Cillian said, walking over. "Are you nearly done? I have to get you to your tower."

"Well, Petrosinella, don't keep him waiting," Seamus stated, rolling his eyes.

"Very funny!" Hermione smirked. "See you at breakfast. Neville, I think you're spot on, but Professor Carrow won't like it. I suggest that if you want to, do it carefully and with a lot of tact. Good night." Hermione turned and followed Cillian.

He turned to glare at her several times as they walked. "Don't start instigating trouble."

"What are you t..."

"I mean it, Hermione," he snarled, interrupting her. "I don't want trouble. I know you are Potter's friend, and you were one of Dumbledore's pets. I heard that you were being primed for his Order and that you instigated Dumbledore's Army. I'm not stupid." He stopped, grabbing her arm. "Do you hear me?"

"This is the other reason you are my bodyguard, isn't it?" she asked, angrily.

"Yes. No. Carrow, Rowle and Travers want to they would like nothing better than to get their hands on you. Severus has his hands full right now. Therefore, I'm to protect you. I can't do that if you give them reason to come after you."

Hermione listened, surprised that Cillian was so well informed regarding her relationship with Harry and Dumbledore and that he knew about the D.A. as well as the fact she'd been primed for the Order. He was right, except it had been with Professor McGonagall, not Dumbledore, just as Ron had been given extra lessons with Professor Flitwick to learn advanced Charms and how to duel properly. Hermione wondered what else he suspected about her or if he knew who the other members of the D.A. were.

"Are you going to be good or what?" he asked, clearly annoyed.

"I'll be discreet..."

"Not good enough," he snarled, sounding an awful lot like Snape.

"Harry and Ron are my friends. I am not a Death Eater, and I never will be. Yes, I am hand-fasted to Snape, but I cannot do *not want him* to win. I'm Muggle-born. How long do you think the Dark Lord will tolerate me? I represent everything he despises. I know that as soon as I'm not useful as a pawn, he will kill me hand-fasted or not! He he said..." Her eyes were beginning to fill with tears. "I..." Her hands began to shake. Hermione simply turned and ran, stopping only long enough to open the door. She rushed past Severus and up to the bedroom.

*

Severus looked up from his desk, scowling, as Hermione ran by, followed by Cillian, who plopped down in the chair. *Shite. Hermione is crying again, and Cillian looks murderous.* "What happened?"

Cillian crossed his arms and kicked the leg of the desk with his boot. "You could have told me she was head-strong, willful, obstinate and half her friends are..."

"Yes? What did she do?" Severus asked and waited to hear the worst.

"Not her, that Neville Longbottom," Cillian said, sitting down. "He wants to instigate Dumbledore's Army. They were passing notes in his dorm room."

"Why was she in his dorm room?" Severus snarled.

"Tame your dragon," Cillian scoffed. "It was a study group of sorts. Finnegan and Longbottom. Muggle Studies. They went up to the boys room because several girls started asking questions about your relationship basic intrusive gossip. Finnegan stopped it by dragging Hermione upstairs. I blocked the gossip mongers from following."

Interesting. Severus set down his quill. *Finnegan and Longbottom. Hermione wasn't friendly with Finnegan before... but they were the only two boys left in her year* "Do you think this will be a problem?"

"Dunno," Cillian sighed. "What was Dumbledore's Army anyway? I saw the list, but no one has told me what they did."

"It was a student organization to learn how to do defensive spells," Severus stated. "Hermione organized it, Potter led it. It was effective *And if Longbottom gets them started again... I'll have to speak to Dumbledore's portrait about that and pass on this information...*

"Great. Now I have to worry about her and her friends recruiting and instigating a rebel extracurricular club! I need a drink," Cillian grumbled.

Severus smiled and produced a bottle of Ogden's and two glasses from the desk. "I'm well stocked."

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Author's Notes:

I now have two women to thank for their assistance. I want to express my gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 and Cooachristy for helping to catch all my mistakes and the support they have given me on this story. Thank you so very much. I appreciate it more than you could possibly know.

The Integro-Mederi Solution is my own fabrication from the Latin, Integro: to make whole, heal, refresh; to renew, begin afresh, and mederi: to heal, to cure, assist, alleviate.

Another version of the Brothers Grimm's story Repunzel was Petrosinella or Parsley, written by Giambattista Basile in his collection of fairy tales in 1634, *Lo cunto de li cunti* (The Story of Stories), or "Pentamerone". In this version, a pregnant woman desires some parsley from the garden of an ogress, gets caught, and is forced to promise the ogress her baby. Unlike the tale by the Brothers Grimm, the encounters between the prince and the maiden in the tower are described in quite bawdy language. About half a century later, in France, a similar story was published by Mademoiselle de le Force, called "Persinette". Just as Repunzel did in the first edition of the Brothers Grimm, Persinette becomes pregnant because of the prince's visits.

And The Week Continues

Chapter 17 of 43

Hermione's first week of school progresses, Neville is determined to restart the DA, and Draco is getting frustrated with her, as she just doesn't trust him and his ploy at friendship. What is a girl to do?

My deepest gratitude to Southern_Witch_69 for her help and the effort and support she gave me on this story. And to Coccochristy for helping me clean up my mess and making this story presentable. Thank you both very much.

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And The Week Continues

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By the time Hermione sat down next to Neville and Ginny for lunch, she knew that Wednesdays were going to be her worst day of the week. She had both Muggle Studies and double Dark Arts in the morning with an afternoon of double Potions with Draco to look forward to. If Hermione thought that Professor Amycus Carrow disliked her, she knew for certain that Professor Alecko Carrow despised her. Professor Carrow's lecture had begun much like Snape's had when he'd taught Defense Against the Dark Arts, but he emphasized the true nature of Dark Arts and the practicality of learning them properly.

Thursday proved to be a rather refreshing change with double Charms in the morning with Wizarding Language and Literature and double Herbology in the afternoon. At least in Charms they worked individually, even if Hermione sat with Neville on one side and Draco on her other. Having Draco opting to sit next to her in every class they shared was unnerving, and he was already getting on her nerves. Still, when Professor Flitwick announced that he was reviewing Shield Charms, Hermione relaxed, already having learned them her fifth year with the DA. Even Neville looked pleased. They practiced casting Shield Charms that wrapped around the body, not just a frontal barrier. Hermione was the first to cast a full half circle shield about herself, although surprisingly, it was Neville who was able to do it second. Hermione was congratulating him as they exited the classroom when Cillian approached, holding out his hand for her wand.

Hermione sighed, crossing her arms. "I'd hoped to work on Shield Charms with Neville in the common room until lunch."

"You both managed them just fine in class," Cillian stated.

Neville shifted his feet, looking at Cillian nervously. "We have our essay to write," he suggested. "How about going to the library?"

"Works for me. Hermione?" Cillian asked, holding out his hand again.

"Fine," Hermione snapped, slapping her wand in his palm, making the wand sputter sparks, which Draco found quite amusing as he turned and walked away laughing at her. Hermione bristled and turned quickly, heading for the library, feeling humiliated in front of everyone. She could hear Neville running to catch up to her, closely followed by Cillian.

Cillian reached her first, grasping her arm and pulling her to the side of the corridor. "Look here. Knock that off," he growled.

Hermione roughly jerked her arm free. "You don't have to embarrass me in front of everyone every day!" she hissed at him.

"You are not allowed a wand," Cillian hissed back. "On *his* orders – not mine – and not Severus'. If the Carrows find out I allowed you a wand outside a classroom, it's my neck, and you will be taken before the Dark Lord."

Hermione felt the blood leave her face and her heart drop into her stomach.

"Yes. Exactly! You are being allowed the *privilege* of your education, providing you follow the rules," Cillian stated. "So I expect you to follow the rules."

Hermione looked over at where Neville stood waiting. "So as long as I am practicing my spell work in a classroom, I can have my wand?"

"Yes," Cillian said, stowing her wand in an inside pocket. "I believe you were headed to the library."

Cillian stood back to let her pass him, and Neville took that as his cue to approach her. "You all right? What's that all about?" he asked as they started walking.

Hermione shook her head. "You remember the messages you got," she whispered as softly as she could, hoping that Cillian didn't hear her over the noise of the other students in the corridor.

"Yeah," he mumbled, barely audible.

"I'm still a prisoner of the Dark Lord," she whispered back.

Neville looked stunned. "No! But you're here!"

They entered the library, finding a quiet place to work. "I'll find a way to tell you later," she leaned over to whisper to him as Cillian sat down at the table across from them. "I need to find some books. Watch my stuff?" she asked Cillian, rising from her chair.

Cillian rose too. "I'm to watch you, not your books."

Hermione huffed and headed into the stacks to find relevant material for their essays. Cillian leaned against the sturdy shelves at the end as he watched her with a smirk on his face. Neville showed up in the aisle a moment later. "Okay, give," he said softly.

"I can't tell you everything now, but a parchment transported me to Snape like a Portkey, and I was captured by Death Eaters. Snape was forced to hand-fast with me. I'm supposed to have traded sides and joined the Dark Lord – but that's not true. I am his pawn, and I think he plans to use me against Harry at some point." Hermione realized that Cillian was watching with greater interest and stood up. "He's coming. I'm not allowed a wand. Draco is supposed to befriend me. I'm allowed to be at Hogwarts because it's the easiest place to control me, I suppose." Cillian was walking toward them, so Hermione grabbed a book off of Neville's pile. "This one won't help, I've read it." She handed him a thicker one. "Try this one," she said, then mouthed, 'I'll tell you later.'

Neville still looked confused, but at least he had the presence of mind to drop the subject, even though he grabbed the book she'd discarded. For the rest of the break, they kept their conversation on Charms or Dark Arts as they worked on their assignments until lunch.

When Hermione entered the Great Hall with Neville, followed closely by Seamus and Cillian, she noticed Snape's eyes were riveted to her, watching her as she took her place as far from MacCavish as she could because the first and second years were all huddled together at the far ends of the tables to avoid him, too. Hermione found herself sitting next to an awestruck second year on one side and Cillian directly in front of her, so it was impossible to have any kind of conversation with Neville and Seamus. Even Ginny was subdued and kept her head averted. Hermione ate quickly, excusing herself for the library again.

This time, Cillian had sighed heavily, grabbing his plate and following her. Madam Pince had tried to scold Cillian for carrying food into her library, but Cillian had quickly put her in her place and once again sat at the table across from her.

"What?" Hermione asked as he ate his food in sullen silence.

"Nothing," he said between bites. "Is this how the entire year is going to be, you spending every spare moment in this library?"

"Yes," Hermione stated, propping a book up between them.

"Aren't you involved in any clubs? Groups or anything – I dunno – fun?" he asked.

Hermione lowered her book. "Fun? You mean like uncovering the truth behind the Chamber of Secrets, or freeing Sirius Black, or fighting Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries? Yes, I seem to get involved in one huge thing every year. As for clubs, I could always initiate something," she said, watching him scowl at her suggestion.

"I didn't mean that," he sneered.

"Then what exactly did you mean?" she asked, acting demure.

"Don't play coy with me; it won't work. Your friend Ginny mentioned Quidditch," he said, shoving his plate aside. A house-elf showed up, snatching the plate, but he hardly gave the elf any notice. "Charms club, Dueling club, Gobstones club, anything."

Hermione was frowning at the way he ignored the house-elf. "Nope, too busy helping Harry Potter fight the Dark Lord, win the Triwizard Tournament, fend off Death eaters, and save the wizarding world to get involved in frivolous clubs. I told you, revising, reading, hanging out with my friends and occasionally defeating a Death Eater or two – that's pretty much been my life." She propped up the book as he sat back and scowled. "You could always read something, you know."

"Merlin, now you're sounding like the ol' bat!" he exclaimed.

When the bell chimed announcing the start of lessons, Hermione packed up her things and hurried to class. On her way to Language and Literature, Hermione found herself walking behind Stephen Cornfoot and Morag McDougal from Ravenclaw, who were talking about the attacks on Kevin Entwhistle and his family. "My sister Isabel heard that Sue Li's family was attacked as well. I tried to owl her, but Portus came back with my letter..." Morag was saying before she spotted Hermione and nudged Kevin to walk faster.

Although Hermione had always enjoyed literature, reading many of the classics in ancient Greek and Latin, it was hard to enjoy the day's assignment with everyone staring and whispering about her. She realized that suspicions about her ran high with the other students. Morag was whispering to Claudia Ramirez, speculating as to why Hermione was allowed at Hogwarts when her friend Sue wasn't and gossiping about her relationship with Snape. Some of the comments were becoming quite crude. Hermione buried her head in her book, translating the ancient Greek as Professor VanDerhauthe strolled around the room offering assistance. When Professor VanDerhauthe finally began the discussion, Antonia Gerund snickered at Hermione's interpretation of the text and mumbled something about Muggle stupidity to Claudia, who cast her a disapproving glare.

Hermione squared her shoulders and ignored Antonia, remembering the books Snape had insisted she read before school started. When the class was dismissed, Hermione was nearly the first for the door, eager to get to Herbology and see a friendly face.

However, in Herbology, Draco once again insisted that he wanted to be her partner. "No," Hermione insisted. "I prefer to work with Neville, Hannah and Ernie."

Draco glared at her, obviously annoyed. "There is only four to a group, so you're working with me, Crabbe and Goyle."

"I'm *not* working with Crabbe and Goyle," Hermione argued.

"Give it a rest. Yes, you are," Draco insisted.

Hermione moved closer to Ernie and Neville. "No, I'm not. And if you insist on staying, you'll have to be nice to my friends or you can go work with your thugs." Goyle and Crabbe walked over, obviously hoping for trouble.

"Draco, why not back off?" Ernie asked, standing up straighter and squaring off to Draco protectively.

"MacMillan, stay out of this," Draco sneered.

Hannah looked nervous. "It's okay. We can ask..." she started to say, but Hermione unintentionally cut her off in her anger.

"No, Hannah, I really want to partner with you."

"Fine, but I'm staying." Draco grabbed a trowel and gardening knife. Crabbe looked at him as if he was daft.

Neville leaned close to Hermione and whispered in her ear, "I promised Professor Sprout that I'd help Hannah with Herbology. She did well enough in classes and really well with the practical, although she didn't do well on the exam – cracked under the pressure. She cried to Professor Sprout about loving Herbology, which I know she does, so I kind of have to partner with her..."

"Mr. Malfoy, please join your housemates on the other work table," Professor Sprout instructed before beginning her lecture on dividing mature Screechsnaps.

Draco gave Hermione a fierce glare and shoved Stephen Cornfoot into Isabel MacDougal, taking over the worktable next to Hermione. Crabbe gave Stephen a wicked glare before he confronted Draco about his attitude, and motioned Goyle and Pansy Parkinson over, too. Pansy immediately began complaining about the amount of time Draco was spending with Hermione.

The Screechsnap tubers in the pots wiggled, grinding their teeth in anticipation of being divided. As they started rolling the pots on their sides to loosen the dirt around the roots, the plants began screeching and snapping. "You all right there, Hermione?" Neville asked as Hermione toyed with her trowel, trying not to listen to Pansy and Draco, or Stephen complaining to the other Hufflepuffs.

"Just thinking about..." She looked nervously at Cillian leaning against the greenhouse door. She quickly borrowed his wand and cast an Occulocutus Charm on the four of them so they could hear each other over the noise of the Screechsnap. "Make any excuse to have a study group for class, will you?"

Neville nodded. "Sure, why?"

"So we can talk, like we did Monday night," she suggested.

Hannah set the pot she'd prepared for the tubers on the worktable. "I would really appreciate being in the *study* group. Count me in! Ernie and I will both come."

"Might not be a bad idea," Neville said, smiling, deftly removing a cluster of Screechsnap tubers from his pot. Immediately, the three plants began screeching. "Besides, N.E.W.T. year is supposed to be the hardest year. We can have a study group for each class. We can meet in the Room of Requirement. That way, we'd have all the books we need and enough chairs for everyone who shows up!"

"We'll get caught!" Hannah exclaimed. "Wouldn't it better if we lay low for a while, use the library or an old classroom?"

"Get caught doing what? Studying?" Neville asked, amused, yanking a cluster of young Screechsnaps from their parent root. "It's perfect."

"Neville!" Hannah admonished him. She carefully took the Screechsnap Neville handed her and dropped it in the pot. Ernie started filling it with dirt and dragon dung.

Neville looked at her, grinning. "What? It's just a study group!" He'd obviously spoken to Hannah and Ernie about restarting the D.A. again.

Hermione caved. "Okay, after dinner we'll meet in the courtyard and see who's interested."

Ernie smiled exuberantly. "So the D.A. gang will..."

"Hush, Draco is trying to listen. If he leans too close, he'll be inside the area of the spell," Hermione whispered. Her Screechsnap nearly bit her fingers as she pried the tubers apart. "Neville, why are you so insistent on getting the D.A. reactivated?"

"Look around. Do you see how many of our classmates are not attending this year? Dean had to go in hiding because his family was killed in an attack. Ron and Harry are hiding, too, aren't they? Wayne Hopkins's parents are dead. He only survived because he could Apparate. But he couldn't take everyone at once, so his mum insisted that he take his little brother and go when the Death Eaters arrived. He and his little brother managed to escape to our house, and Gran hid them with a friend in St. Petersburg."

"I had no idea!" Hermione said, aghast.

Hannah handed her two pots. "Yeah, it's bad. Justin Finch-Fletchley had to force his family to move to Alexandria, Egypt," she said, helping jam the tubers Neville gave them to plant. "William Summers owed me after I sent him an owl to see if he was all right. He was terrified. His family had gone biking in Spain, and he was afraid to come home. Gran sent her friend Marge down to help him befuddle his parents so that they wanted to bike all the way through coastal Spain, down across the south of France and through Italy for a year! If You-Know-Who wins this, he plans on becoming an Italian *permanently!*"

"Remember Arnold Goldstein?" Ernie asked while he covered the roots with soil and dragon dung. "He managed to Floo over to our house with his mum, two sisters and his kid brother when his house was attacked. No one knows what happened to his dad. Mum was terrified. We got an owl five minutes later saying that our house was going to be searched. My older brother, Duane, took them away, and I haven't heard from him since. Then Mum got an owl from the Ministry only minutes after Duane left, claiming we were harboring criminals, and Mum was threatened that if she didn't hand over the Goldsteins, she would be sent to Azkaban. Two Death Eaters came and tore up the place, and Mum is now on the restricted list. Lisa Turpin's dad is on the wanted list, and no one knows where they are – they've simply vanished."

"I spoke to Terry Boot, too. Mandy Brocklehurst's and Sue Li's homes were broken into. The Dark Mark was burned into the walls of their lounges," Neville said quietly. "There are so many we know who have been attacked. If you are Muggle-born or have a Muggle-born parent, you're a target." He slyly looked over at Draco, but the screeching of the Screechsnaps were still almost deafening. "If you have a grandparent who is Muggle-born, you can register yourself and hope that you pass the requirements, but that's no guarantee you won't be sent to Azkaban – or worse. It's been awful."

Hermione suddenly felt dizzy. "So many – they were all attacked? Their families?"

"The Death Eaters have been really active since June. The raids started the first of July and haven't stopped," Ernie explained. "The Ministry was trying to stop them, but the Death Eaters got control of the Ministry, and now their actions are sanctioned!"

"Anyone who's known to be a Muggle-born sympathizer is on a restriction list," Hannah stated. "Susan was telling me that several people at the Ministry were arrested."

"Arrested?" Hermione gasped. "What for? Why?"

"Being of the wrong blood, associating with *undesirables*, or standing up to the wrong people," Neville stated, deftly dividing the next set of Screechsnap tubers. "You're only safe if your family can prove at least two or three uncontaminated generations. Some of the pureblood families are even turning in their own relatives, *trimming their family trees of undesirable branches*," he sneered. "If you do, you get a commendation for your contribution to the effort."

Hermione lost her balance, and she started feeling her heart pound in her chest. "The Weasleys?"

"Fred and George are fine," Neville stated, holding her arm to steady her. "George told me that Percy was promoted again, and his brother Bill is okay since he works for Gringotts. The Death Eaters aren't messing with Gringotts – yet. Ginny's here, they think Ron's home sick with spattergroit, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are being watched."

Hermione turned back to her wailing Screechsnap tubers. "I had no idea it was so bad."

"It's bad," Hannah said, fighting with a newly divided Screechsnap tuber.

Ernie leaned closer as he topped off the pots with extra compost. "Harry is wanted by the Ministry, and the *Daily Prophet* runs his picture on every front page, calling him a dangerous miscreant. The raids are not reported outright, but if you read the obituaries and property sale ads, you can piece together who was attacked. It seems that a lot of people are dying, or moving away permanently. Job openings are advertised, but the ads say Muggle-borns need not apply. There has been a lot of chaos these last few months, and it's still going on."

Hannah wiped her face, smudging dirt on her cheek. "I for one am terrified for my friends, and Neville is right, we should see who's up for reinitiating the D.A."

"I think that we should be ready," Ernie added, the determined look in his eyes out of place with someone filling pots with manure.

"Gran told me to stand up for what's right, but to watch my back. So I'm going to do just that. And when Harry's ready, I will be, too." Neville passed two more plants to Hannah for potting. "So are you in, or are you one of them now? The Hermione I know wouldn't sit still while her friends were in trouble or in danger; she'd fight."

"I'm in, but..." Hermione looked at Draco, then over at Cillian. "I'm followed everywhere, and that may be a problem."

Neville smiled. "We can work around them," he said, rolling his eyes in Draco's direction.

When the potting was completed and moved to the side, Professor Sprout announced what she wanted for her essay and dismissed the class. Draco followed Hermione closely as they all exited the greenhouse, and once outside, he pulled her aside. "Why are you being difficult about all this?" he demanded.

"Difficult about what?" she asked him, waving her friends off. Neville and Ernie stayed, watching them from only a meter away, yet close enough if Draco tried anything.

Draco looked up and sneered at her friends. "Your protectors? How sweet."

"Yes, my friends. And they are concerned. You and I don't have a history of getting along, so I suspect they are being protective." Hermione crossed her arms. "Besides Crabbe and Goyle are standing behind you, as usual, so I suppose it's even," she said, lifting her chin toward his thugs. "Make this quick. I want to clean up before dinner."

Draco seemed to seethe with frustration. "Why are you causing trouble? I told you we were going to be partners in class."

Hermione gritted her teeth. "We're partners in Potions, and you're sitting next to me in nearly every class we have together. It's like we're suddenly friends or something, and it's weird."

"Why is it weird?" he asked. "You knew that is the way it would be."

"Draco, we are not friends. You have never been my friend. You hate me – everything about me – and suddenly you want to pretend you're my best mate?" she replied. "I know it's an act – they know it's an act." She swept her arm indicating them, her friends behind her, and the two waiting behind him.

"I was told..."

"Look, don't smother me. I don't like it," she said, cutting him off.

She turned to go, but he caught her arm. "All I want is to get along and do what I was instructed to do," he snarled. "We got on fine at the house – why be difficult now?"

"At the house I had no choice. I was a prisoner, remember?" she asked, jerking her arm free. Neville and Ernie drew their wands, and Cillian stepped in closer as Crabbe and Goyle instinctively drew theirs.

"Stop, no, stop!" Hermione shouted, holding up her hands out between them to halt any fighting. "No, dueling. I'm going up to the tower to clean up. Draco, this is ridiculous – enough." She quickly stormed off, followed by all six guys, Crabbe and Goyle lagging behind, complaining loudly, apparently confused. She ran all the way to the Headmaster's tower.

Severus looked up as Hermione stormed in. "I'm filthy, covered in manure, and I'm going to go clean up," she said as she strode across his office.

"By all means," he replied dryly. "I wasn't going to stop you."

Her bath was drawn by the time she entered the loo. Feeling grateful to Peren, Hermione stripped quickly and washed up, finding that a clean set of school robes were waiting for her when she'd finished. When she entered the bedroom to put away her books, she saw Peren kneeling in front of the trunk Snape lent her, busily stowing her things away. "Peren, wait! I still need my Herbology and Charms book. Maybe you should let me..."

"But, mistress! Peren is being a good house-elf and is taking care of her mistress," she replied. She was looking up at Hermione as if she'd been scolded.

Hermione walked forward and sat on the edge of the bed. "I can appreciate that, but I still need my things. How about if you wait on putting my school things away until I am getting ready for bed, and let me handle it during the day. Is that fair?"

Peren nodded and smiled. "Yes. You is the most fair mistress Peren ever has. You is nice to Peren. I only wants to be a good house-elf to you."

Hermione smiled, sorting out what she wanted put back into her bag, and opened the school trunk, pulling out her homework planner and a revision guide. "Peren, have you seen my Galleon?"

"Your gold coin, mistress?" Peren asked.

Hermione looked at her and nodded. "Yes, my gold coin."

"The one that vibrates," Peren said, nodding. "I puts it with the paper that writes and the quill that spits."

"The paper that writes?" she asked, and her eyes grew large. "Show me – get me the paper and the coin."

Peren closed the trunk, turned the third lock to open the third compartment, and started to dig deeply into the contents, finally pulling out a piece of parchment and her D.A. Galleon.

Hermione stared at the parchment, astounded. "Where did you find this?"

"It was in you trunk, mistress," Peren said, pointing at her old school trunk. "I sees it when I was cleaning your clothes."

"Hide it," Hermione whispered. "Peren, please, tell no one about this."

"Of course, mistress! Peren keeps your secrets," she said, bowing, then quickly buried the parchment at the bottom of the trunk as Snape walked in.

"Dinner, Hermione," he said smoothly, and Hermione grimaced, now too well familiar with that tone of his voice. She wondered what he'd overheard, if any, and if he remembered about the parchment. He was scowling as they walked.

"Sir, I...?" she started to ask and was cut off short when he stopped walking.

"I thought that I..." he started to say, and then inhaled deeply, letting it out slowly. "How many of the Weasleys' products do you have?"

"A fair amount," she admitted. "They are my friends..."

"I know that, Hermione," he snapped, cutting her off. "I never took you for one who indulged in pranks and tricks."

"I don't!" she exclaimed. "Okay, I'm not into them like Ron is, but occasionally I find some of it funny. I have a quill that spits stars, a parchment that insults you when you try to write on it, a reusable hangman game, and some daydream chocolates. Oh, and a trick wand that shoots stars, stuff like that. Why? I'd never use it against you."

"Is this more of the stuff I found on you the night you were dumped in my lap, or is it new?" he asked wearily.

Hermione sighed. "No, it's stuff I had in my school trunk. I also had a lot of their defensive trick stuff in my pockets, you know, for... protection. But Harry, Ron and I were getting ready to go into hiding, and we thought that they would be helpful, like the Invisibility Boots and Headless Hats. The Swamp Ooze, Decoy Detonators and Blinding Flash were in case we needed them."

Severus nodded and resumed walking. "I had better not see any of these things on or near your person. Am I clear?"

His tone brooked no argument. "Crystal, sir."

He pushed open the staff door to the Great Hall, but his arm still blocked her way. "I mean it, Hermione, not a one."

Dinner was a subdued affair since MacCavish had chosen to sit next to Seamus and Neville, trying to engage them in conversation. Hermione, who was already sitting between Neville and Ginny, spent most of the time facing Ginny to avoid MacCavish's glares. Neville ate quickly, nudging her when he was ready to go. Hermione and Ginny collected their bags and followed him to the courtyard, followed discreetly by Cillian. Neville led them to the center of the courtyard, straddling one of the benches to face her. "I told a few people about the study group," he said quietly.

"How many?" Hermione asked, alarmed.

"Just the original group," Ginny admitted softly. "Or what's left of us."

"Neville, I've been giving this a bit of thought, and well, I think we should use Seamus' idea of house commanders – only call them coordinators or something benign," Hermione suggested. She pulled out her homework planner and asked Neville to tell her his schedule. She had just finished writing his down when Hannah, Susan, Seamus, and Ernie came walking over. Terry Boot and Michael Corner also showed up with Luna only moments later. Hermione looked up at Cillian and nearly cringed at the dark expression on his face.

"So are we really going to have a *study group*?" Michael asked, sitting on the ground at Ginny's feet.

"What we need is an idea of how many in each house are interested and who they are," Neville said, taking charge. "Hermione will make a sneak sheet like she did last time, but I'm adding my own spell to it. Gran taught me a wicked one – a variation of the Langlock Curse, the Impotinfantis Genit Hex. When you try to snitch, your tongue sticks and your nose swells so you can't speak – or rat. It's great."

"Considering all the Death Eaters in the school, do you really think this is a good idea?" Terry asked, looking at Cillian nervously.

Several people turned to look at Cillian, and he waved, making all of them quickly look away. "It's a study group. We'll pick which classroom to meet in and be sure to have all your books," Seamus stated sternly. "When we know everyone's schedule, and the Carrows realize that all we are doing *is studying*, then we'll start on the other stuff."

"So, Seamus and I will find out who in Gryffindor wants to be in the study group. Luna, you, Michael and Terry ask around Ravenclaw, and Hannah, you, Susan and Ernie see if anyone in Hufflepuff is interested. If they are, they have to sign the Sneak Sheet. It's to protect all of us if any one gets caught."

"So, what are we going to study tonight?" Luna asked as she handed Hermione her class schedule.

"I think full body Shield Charms would be in order," Ernie stated, drawing his wand.

The rest drew theirs. "Good idea," Luna agreed.

Neville looked at Hermione. She'd been adding Luna's schedule to her planner, cringing when the others drew their wands. "Hermione, you did the best Shield Charm in class. Maybe you could just help the others after you finish getting the class schedules down," he suggested.

Hermione looked up at him relieved. "Sure, Neville," she said, smiling, then mouthed, 'Thank you.'

'No problem,' he mouthed back. "Hannah, you next," he said, indicating Hermione's planner.

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The next morning, when Hermione was in Arithmancy, Draco stormed into Severus' after Cillian'd entered, and started pacing, obviously agitated. "That girl is absolutely impossible!" Draco said, throwing up his hands.

Severus looked up briefly and then resumed writing. "I presume you are referring to Hermione."

Draco didn't even stop in his rant. "She defies me, challenges my attempt to befriend her and won't partner with me in class – choosing to be with Longbottom. Longbottom! I can't get her to agree with anything!"

Cillian lounged in one of the chairs facing Severus' desk, smirking as he toyed with a bent quill.

"What did you expect?" Severus said as he made notations on the most recent requests from Alecto. "You spent six years hexing, jinxing, and cursing each other, and you always called her Mudblood. Hellebore! You even Muggle brawled in your third year."

Draco stopped and stared at him. "She hit me – for no reason..."

"Really? No reason?" Severus sneered and then looked up at Draco patiently. "Look, you'll have to earn her trust if you want to be *friends*. All I'm asking you to do is to look out for her, keep close, and help Cillian keep her out of trouble."

"Why do you care anyway?" Draco asked.

"She is my wife, Draco," Severus said, resuming his parchmentwork. "The Dark Lord wants her alive and appearing to be on our side. He wants Potter to think that she has switched sides! I've had to talk to Crabbe twice now about his attitude!"

"She's bloody impossible!" Draco exclaimed, resuming his pacing. "Okay, we're partners for Potions, Charms, and Transfiguration. During Muggle Studies, we sit next to each other, but in Herbology – she wants to partner with Longbottom, that wet prat! It's easier to simply ignore the Mudblood!"

"She has always had a soft spot for Longbottom," Severus stated, smirking at him. "Need I remind you that the Dark Lord gave you this task, personally."

"Yeah, I know," Draco said, frustrated. "We got on well enough at your house. I thought I'd won her over. Apparently not!"

"Use your Slytherin cunning, Draco. Win her over," Cillian suggested.

"That may be easier said than done," Draco spat.

Severus ignored the outburst. "You'll manage." He folded the parchments and sealed them with wax. "So other than that, how is she doing? Is she cooperating in class?"

"She keeps her head down around the Carrows, if that's what you mean," Cillian replied, and Severus nodded. "She only answers when spoken to and rarely raises her hand. I do warn her before each class. Amycus really wants to get her in detention."

"I'm going to have to do something about that eventually," Severus said, glad that Hermione was trying to control herself in Muggle Studies and Dark Arts. He picked up the next letter and scowled. "Shite, I have to meet with the governors tomorrow and have to be away from the castle," he said, frowning. "I'm counting on you," he said pointedly to Cillian.

"What's up with the governors? Should I owl my dad?" Draco asked, putting his hands on the back of the chair facing his desk.

"Lucius and I have already discussed this. Umbridge has managed to get herself placed on the Board of Governors! I hate that witch," Severus snarled.

"But she sides with us at the Ministry, and Rosier said she's really an asset," Draco said, confused.

He hadn't minded Umbridge all that much, apparently. "I don't trust the witch, never have," Severus stated. "You best be going, Draco."

"Right," Draco said. "I'll send my owl and tell..."

"Our Master that things with Hermione are as we predicted and that she is responding as we anticipated. You are to tell him you have things under control," Severus strongly suggested. "Do you understand?"

"Good enough," Draco said. "Shall I extend any message for either of my parents?"

"Yes, tell Narcissa you'll brew her shampoo," Severus stated with an edge of finality. "I don't brew beauty products."

Draco leaned on the back of the chair again. "Sure, but mine doesn't come out like yours."

"Use rainwater in your base, and use a fork when pressing the knipafolia flower roots, and when you crack the Lavender, don't smash it, roll your pestle," Severus suggested. "And make sure your cauldron is clean."

"That's it?" Draco asked, amazed.

Severus scoffed, watching his confused look in amusement. "I gave you the directions, but yes, that's it. That is where you always make your mistakes. Do that, and she'll stop pestering me about it."

When Draco left, Cillian dropped the quill. "So, Umbridge is now a school governor?"

"Apparently," Severus sneered, reading the next parchment from Amycus.

"You don't like her?" Cillian asked.

Severus crumpled up the offending letter. "She uses people to get what she wants, but it's a façade. She is on her own agenda. She wants me to reemploy all of her insipid decrees."

"Some weren't too bad," Cillian scoffed.

"Most were ridiculous," Severus stated. "Is Draco trying to befriend Hermione?"

Cillian crossed his leg. "Yes, he tries."

"What's the problem then?" Severus asked.

"She doesn't like him all that much." Cillian threw the bent quill at the trash receptacle. "I have to get back before her class is over. See you at dinner?"

"Yes," Severus said, leaning back in his chair.

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Author's notes:

In regards to Hannah Abbot's appearance, I've decided to make Hannah a pureblood by birth and her step-father Muggle-born, qualifying her for attendance but offering a possible explanation regarding the death of her mother. JKR has on three occasions changed Hannah's blood status: in 2001 she indicated that Hannah was Muggle-born and in 2007 stated that she always thought she was pureblood, then later 'compromised' by claiming Hannah was half-blood; therefore, I'm taking the liberty to say she meets the three generation requirement for enrollment.

The Latin I use comes from: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

The Occulocutus spell was derived from using:

Occulo: to cover, hide, concealed, *private*; N. as subst. concealment, secrecy, a secret.

locutus: to speak in *conversation*; to tell, say, talk of.

Impotinfantis Genit hex was derived from:

Impotens: feeble, powerless; with *genit* added means; not master of, unable to command oneself, violent, unrestrained and powerless

Infans -fantis, means: speechless, unable to speak.

Friends and Fiends

Chapter 18 of 43

Hermione is given warnings and a surprise offer from her professors. But as things at the castle continue, Hermione is learning to lean on her friends and keep her head down, but the frustration of being followed is taking a toll on her.

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Friends and Fiends

At the end of Double Transfiguration on Friday, Professor McGonagall asked Hermione to stay behind, although a bit curtly. Nervously, Hermione waited at her desk after putting away her things. As the class filed out, Professor McGonagall looked at Hermione with her hands folded on her desk. "I would like you to please come by my office after dinner," she stated, her lips pursed tightly in annoyance.

Hermione had no idea why she was upset with her. "Certainly, Professor," she answered, trying to think of any reason that her Head of House would be annoyed and came up short until she realized she wasn't staring at her.

"And, Mr. Gwynek, your presence will not be needed," Professor McGonagall called out to him across her classroom.

"I'm sorry, Professor McGonagall, but where she goes, I go," Cillian stated firmly.

"It could hardly be presumed that I would cause any harm to Mrs. Snape, and therefore your presence, while I'm sure is needed in the corridors and in certain classrooms, will not be needed in my office. She will be quite safe with me, I assure you."

"Nevertheless, I will be with her. However, as a courtesy, I will gladly stay at the back of the room so you may talk undisturbed," Cillian stated firmly, crossing his arms.

Professor McGonagall's lips became even thinner as she rose and redirected her gaze upon Hermione. Her voice was soft and tender when she spoke. "How are things with you, my dear? Is everything all right?"

"Yes, so far so good. My first two weeks have been okay." Hermione relaxed. Professor McGonagall's eyebrows rose up in disbelief. "I suppose you heard about the incident in the corridor?"

Professor McGonagall ran her fingertips across her desk blotter as if to straighten out the pristine pad. "Oh, yes, we all heard about that."

"It was nothing really," Hermione said, not wanting to worry her. "Cillian and Draco came to my defense, and Professor Snape went to speak to them the moment Cillian told him about it. I think it was taken care of – although, with those men – I just hope that whatever Professor Snape said it will discourage them from bothering me again."

Professor McGonagall nodded, deep concern reflected in her eyes. "I am glad, my dear. We were all quite alarmed to hear about it in the staff room. I have more I'd like to say, but you will be late for class. We will speak further after dinner," she said, dismissing her.

Hermione hurried to Ancient Runes, stopping only long enough to hand Cillian her wand.

At dinner, Hermione joined Ginny, Seamus and Neville. MacCavish walked up to talk to Cillian, and Ginny took the opportunity to talk to Hermione. "As far as we know," she whispered softly to her, "nearly everyone is up for the D – er, study group. I know that the sixth- and seventh-years are all signing up. Should we include the fifth-years as well?"

"Ginny, are you nuts?" Hermione asked, trying to keep her voice down low. "If we have the fifth- and sixth-years join~~ing~~ow, the Carrows will not believe it's a *study* group!"

"But they want in," Seamus stated, leaning close to the girls with the pretense of reaching for the pumpkin juice.

"Hermione's right," Neville said. "For now we recruit, but we have to keep the study group just among the seventh-years. Encourage the sixth- and fifth-years to meet in groups in their common rooms. What we learn in D-study group, we'll have the house leaders teach the others in their common rooms – for now."

"What are you planning," MacCavish snarled in gruff voice, turning on Neville.

"When Hermione would be available to help me with my Charms, sir," Neville said, looking up at the Death Eater.

MacCavish didn't look appeased. "Don't be planning anything. I'll be watching you."

Cillian sat down with a cross look on his face that didn't bode well. "Didn't I warn you?" he snarled at her.

Hermione turned her head to Neville. "I may have some time tonight after my appointment with Professor McGonagall. I can come up to the common room after, if you like, but I don't know the password."

"Snarglepuffs," Neville said in a whisper. "We'll be by the fire."

MacCavish shoved his way between Janylynn Waithe, a sixth-year, and Cillian. "What's this study group, eh?"

Neville looked up at the Death Eater unabashedly. "It's just friends getting together to revise for classes. NE.W.T.s can difficult and..."

"I don't like it," MacCavish snarled. "You are up to something."

"Yes, getting good grades," Seamus stated, although he kept his head down. With MacCavish glaring at them the rest of the meal, Hermione and her friends ate in silence, shoveling down their food as quickly as they could.

Hermione glanced up at the staff table at Professor McGonagall several times, wondering how long she would take to eat before she excused herself so Hermione could follow her to her office. Professor McGonagall seemed to notice Hermione watching her and likewise ate her meal without engaging in conversation with either of the persons sitting next to her, Snape on her right or Alecto Carrow on her left. Not that Hermione blamed her. Snape was scowling at something, possibly whatever Amycus was telling Professor Flitwick. When the pudding arrived, Professor McGonagall looked at Hermione and nodded as she rose gracefully. She said something to Snape before turning to leave. Hermione took that as her cue and rose to leave as well, whispering to Neville, "I'll be up as soon as I can," as she passed him.

Cillian rose, and MacCavish made some kind of sneering remark to which Cillian simply smirked at and followed Hermione from the Great Hall. Unlike before, he kept a reasonable, but watchful, distance all the way up the main staircase and down the corridor to Professor McGonagall's office. She looked at him expectantly before opening the door. He simply nodded and indicated she should enter with his hand and leaned against the wall next to the door.

Hermione entered, feeling a sense of relief to have the time alone with her Head of House. Professor McGonagall entered shortly after and indicated that Hermione have a seat. "I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I was conversing with Filius about you, and he asked if he could join us. You don't mind, do you?" She made a very subtle flick with her wand before sitting down.

"No, not at all," Hermione replied, wondering what this could be about.

"Now, to the reason I have asked you to come. The Order is most concerned about your being here. While we are most relieved that you are safe, the incident in the dungeons was a cause for alarm. I also know that you were taken to see You-Know-Who, and with what you know... you understand. I need to know if we've been compromised."

"No," Hermione stated emphatically. "I have seen him twice. Once at my hand-fasting and once before that, but he was only interested in Harry. I was surprised, but it seemed like he was searching for evidence of Harry's talents. He was mostly interested in Harry's blunders. I think he wanted to know how gifted or strong Harry is, but what he saw in my mind made him look pretty pathetic."

"That may work in his favor. I'll pass along that information, if it's all right with you. You can understand our concern. You do know enough to cause us some trouble. I was hoping that he wouldn't know that you were privy to anything. Please let me know immediately if he discovers anything about us or probes your mind about the Order." Professor McGonagall seemed to relax a little when Hermione promised. "I must ask you, is the rumor of your parents true? Are they in Australia?"

"Yes," Hermione admitted.

"Are you sure they are safe?" Professor McGonagall asked. "You-Know-Who isn't likely to go after them, but there are wizards living there."

"They have no memory of me or of having ever lived in London. It was tricky, but I think I managed to block those memories, and I pulled out what memories I could about Harry and Hogwarts or anything magical, which I have hidden in bottles. I read about how to do it quite extensively before trying it. As for my grandmother, she has Alzheimer's – she doesn't recognize anyone anymore," Hermione explained. "Every picture of my family I could find is carefully boxed up and hidden, and all my family's

possessions are in storage. I extracted the memory of where I hid it all, and the bottle with that memory is still at Grimmauld Place, but it's safe, I think. I don't want to tell you anything more, but my family is all safe."

Professor McGonagall considered her statements thoughtfully. "And Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley – are you in contact with them?" she asked, inhaling deeply and seemingly to hold her breath in anticipation.

"No," Hermione said, and Professor McGonagall released the breath she'd been holding.

"You don't know where they are? How they are doing? What they are doing?" Professor McGonagall asked in succession. Hermione shook her head to each question. Professor McGonagall exhaled deeply as if very disappointed. "Would you tell me if you did?"

Hermione lowered her head as she shook it. "I think it would be safe to say – no. I'm sorry. If Harry or Ron wanted to get a message to you, they would have – I'm sure of it. But Harry's in danger now, more so than ever. Ginny told me that Ron's ruse of having spattergroit seems to be holding up well enough, of course. I'm hoping that the Dark Lord thinks Harry is on his own, holed up in a cave somewhere. So far, I haven't been questioned about the Order. I don't think the Dark Lord knows that I know anything about them."

"Albus was always adamant that you *kids* be kept in the dark about the Order as much as possible. I'm sure Professor Snape told You-Know-Who that. At least I hope so." She looked up at the door, her brow furrowed. "So far, I don't think You-Know-Who knows Potter's whereabouts because he seems to be making quite an effort to find him. According to the *Daily Prophet*, Mr. Potter is wanted by the Ministry, but there has been no word at all about him from any source," she said, a slight crease forming between her brows. "I must ask you this also. You are spending a lot of time with Neville Longbottom and others of group known from your fifth year as Dumbledore's Army. I have spoken with Dumbledore's portrait, and he and I concur – this is very unwise. Alecto Carrow has the list Dolores Umbridge confiscated. The students on that list are being watched."

Alarmed, Hermione gaped at her, and Professor McGonagall continued, "Especially those in Gryffindor. They already suspect you of regrouping. You could be setting your friends up for trouble, young lady. Even Professor Snape will not be able to protect you if you begin to rebel like you did two years ago."

"As far as I know, we are not reforming the DA," Hermione lied, and she could tell instantly that Professor McGonagall didn't believe her. "But there are a lot of students who are very unhappy with things as they are. And if they get worse..."

"We will need to drown it in the cauldron," Professor McGonagall stated firmly. "Regardless, you are to tell me of any reorganization of *study* group and what you are studying. For now, I will simply insist that you are, as one of the best students in the year, assisting the other students with their N.E.W.T.s. But I warn you, you do not have as much support as you had before. This isn't Dolores and Mr. Filch we are talking about, but eight capable Death Eaters. So, watch yourself."

"I understand," Hermione replied.

Just then Professor Flitwick entered the office. "Sorry I'm late, Ivor Travers is insisting that he must have a password to the dormitories, but the girls are complaining about him, er, 'creeping them out,' I think is how Amanda Cummings put it."

"Filius," Professor McGonagall greeted him. "Yes, I'm having the same difficulties with Mr. MacCavish. Neville is changing the password nearly every night."

He turned to Hermione and smiled broadly. "Miss – Mrs. Snape," Professor Flitwick started to say and corrected himself. "Still getting use to that, sorry."

"It's no problem. I'm still not accustomed to being called Mrs. Snape yet."

Professor Flitwick smiled. "It's a bit of an adjustment remembering to call you Mrs. Snape, but I should be used to it by now – what with the Carrows and those Death Eaters talking about you all the time in the staff room." He sat down and looked up at her fondly, although his expression still showed his concern for her. "How are you holding up? Have you had any other troubles – well, except for that incident in the dungeons? I was really furious – assaulting a student in the corridors. If I... but of course I can't."

"It's all right," Hermione said, trying to reassure him. "Cillian and Draco stood up for me, and Snape went to talk to them as soon as he'd found out. They're apparently the reason Snape has Cillian follow me everywhere."

"My dear, they are not the only ones. Of our new security officers, MacCavish is the only one not saying crude and improper things in the staff room. The Carrows are, of course, looking for any reason to get you in detention. But surely you know this." Professor McGonagall pulled out the prefect calendar from her desk. "As you know, Miss Parkinson and Mr. Malfoy were made Head Girl and Boy. However, Professor Snape has refused to allow you to do any evening patrols, so I'm afraid you have limited duties as prefect. Hermione, I must agree with him. Even if I pair you up, I fear for your safety," Professor McGonagall said solemnly.

"Which gives me more time to revise," Hermione replied with a grin.

"The reason I wanted to see you privately, Mrs. Snape," Professor Flitwick chirped up, "is that I'd like you to consider attending the Charms Club, rather than have any Charms study group. I can more than adequately prepare you and your friends for your N.E.W.T.s, and you may encourage Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood to attend as well as any of your other friends."

"Now, Filius," Professor McGonagall admonished him surprised.

"But if everyone starts showing up for Charms Club..." Hermione started to say then paused. "We'd be learning advanced Charms! I was asked if I belonged to any clubs. I think this would be a great idea! I'll run it by everyone. When do you meet?"

"Every Tuesday," Filius said, obviously very pleased.

"Filius, you're setting yourself up against them," Professor McGonagall admonished him sternly.

"When the students in this Dumbledore's Army were caught by Dolores Umbridge, Miss Lovegood, Mr. Corner and Mr. Goldstein all told me that Harry Potter taught them the Patronus Charm. Miss Lovegood can make a corporeal Patronus. If the rest of Mrs. Snape's study group is up to doing that – just imagine, Minerva!" Flitwick said excitedly.

"Fine," Professor McGonagall sighed. "Hermione, be careful. If it looks like or even hints that this group is reorganizing, Professor Snape will have to come down on you."

"I'll be cautious," Hermione promised.

"All right," Professor McGonagall said, nodding. "You may go now. Hermione, you may come to me for any reason. My office is always open for you."

"Thank you," Hermione replied, smiling.

As soon as she left the office, Hermione ran for the Gryffindor common room, with Cillian chasing after her. "Hermione, wait!"

"No."

"Stop," he demanded, chasing after her.

Hermione turned around. "What?"

"Where do you think you are going?" he snapped.

"Where do you think? To the common room," she barked, then added as if furious, "to give Neville a piece of my mind." She spun on her heel, ran off down the corridor again.

"Oh, this should be good," he sneered, following her.

"And what does that mean," she snapped, stopping before the Fat Lady's portrait. "Snarglepuff." She clamored inside as soon as the picture swung open, spotting Neville surrounded by the other seventh-years over by the fire. "You and I need to talk!"

"Hermione, what?" he asked looking up at her alarmed.

"Don't *what* me!" she screeched as Lavender and Parvati quickly backed off, and Ginny, who was looking at her in dumb confusion, stood ready to defend Neville. Seamus stood up completely confused. "Are you *trying* to get me in trouble with Professor McGonagall now, too, or what?" She mouthed, 'The chocolates,' to Ginny and winked, hoping Cillian hadn't seen her. "And Him!" Hermione said, jerking her head in Cillian's direction. Ginny's lips nearly curled into a smile before she backed off to where several second and third-years were standing. "He's warned me about what you said – and apparently it's all over the castle! How could you?" she screeched, trying to make her anger apparent to everyone in the room.

Neville's brows creased, Seamus was glaring at her, and Ginny appeared to be shuffling the second and third-years aside and closer to Cillian.

"I have no idea what you are talking about!" Neville said, turning to Seamus for information.

Seamus just shrugged. "Got me, mate. What did you say?"

"Nothing," Neville insisted. "Hermione?"

"Well *think*, Neville. What could you have possibly said that..." She was interrupted by a loud thump as Cillian fell to the floor.

"Well done, Brian," Ginny said, walking over to them. "Shall we continue this upstairs, or do you wish the entire house to know?"

"The entire house to know what?" Neville asked, utterly confused.

Hermione threw herself into the sofa and looked up at Neville grinning.

Neville sat down next to her, and Ginny pounced down on her other side. "Good diversionary tactic," Ginny said. Neville looked at her completely bewildered. "While you were fighting, I talked Brian into giving Cillian a Fainting Fancy. He didn't even look to see what he was given. So, what did Professor McGonagall say?"

"You've got to be kidding?" Seamus interjected before Hermione could answer. "You two knew – how?"

"It worked," Ginny replied. "Well, to really make it work we better talk quick."

Hermione nodded, understanding what Ginny meant. "This time. He'll be suspicious next time," she said. "Okay, look, the professors all know. Alecto Carrow has the list Umbridge confiscated when she caught us. Everyone on that list is being watched. It's one of the reasons I think we have Death Eaters at our tables, and why they are trying to get into the common rooms. Professor McGonagall was warning me, just like Snape did. And, Neville – you are *not being discreet!* I might as well hand you a bullhorn!"

"What's a bullhorn?" Neville asked.

"Never mind," Hermione said, waving him off. "Neville, stop being so reckless!"

"But I thought that you were in favor of reforming the DA?" Seamus asked.

"I am – sort of – but secretly," Hermione stammered. "I think I have another option though."

"What?" Seamus asked, leaning closer.

Hermione leaned forward, and Neville and Ginny followed suit. "We've been invited to join the Charms Club."

"What?"

"Why?"

"That's brilliant!" Seamus exclaimed. "Professor Flitwick is a champion dueler. Most of the stuff we were learning from Harry was Charms anyway."

Hermione smiled. She hadn't considered the fact Professor Flitwick was an expert duelist. She'd simply liked the fact that it made a great cover. "Exactly. If everyone who is interested in the DA joins the Charms Club, it will be a much lower profile way of learning what we need to know, and we won't have to rush things so much. And it won't look strange if we have others from different years getting together."

Hermione smiled and continued. "One more thing. Ginny and I will look into ways of communication – secret ways. I'll ask Luna to help, too. The Galleons are great, but the messages have to be short, and well, I'm not allowed my wand outside of class." Both Seamus and Ginny looked at her in disbelief. "It's one of my restrictions – I'll explain later. If we can come up with two ways of communication where we can pass messages, each group would be better connected."

"I think we'd better wake up your bodyguard now," Ginny said, pointing to Cillian as she got up. "We'd all best gather next to him, make it seem like this little discussion never happened. Neville, see if some of the guys will come over too, and I'll get some of the second and third-years too. Let's go."

Seamus rose too. "Geeze, Ginny, why?"

"So when I wake him," she replied, holding the other end of the candy on her palm, "he won't know how much time lapsed."

It didn't take much to convince some of the others in the room to gather around Ginny as she fed Cillian the other side of the chew. Kneeling at his side, Hermione asked, "Cillian, are you all right?" just as he opened his eyes.

"What the fu..."

"You ate a trick candy," Ginny said, interrupting him calmly, although she looked appropriately worried. "My brothers, Fred and George, make them, and well, they're really popular in the house. It got mixed up with the Honeydukes chocolates somehow," she explained as she helped him up. "You might have a bit of a headache. You hit your head when you fell."

"Maybe I should take you to see Madam Pomfrey," Hermione suggested, helping him to his feet. Everyone was slowly backing away as if the show was over.

"I don't need to see the Healer," Cillian snapped as he gripped the nearest chair to steady himself.

Hermione pulled his other arm across her shoulders. "Are you sure?"

Cillian staggered, but he was gaining his strength. "Yeah, I'm sure."

"Maybe Ginny and I should see you to your room then?" Hermione suggested.

Cillian looked at her with a smirk. "And then who'd see you to the tower? The girl?" He shook his head. "No, I'll take you back."

"Regardless, Ginny should come," Hermione suggested as she helped him through the portal to the corridor.

Cillian was obviously feeling better by the time they reached the stairs. "What happened back there?"

"Neville and I were figh-ting," Hermione started to say, but he raised an eyebrow and her words fumbled.

"I told you – you accidentally ate a trick candy – one from my brothers' shop. Kind of stopped the shouting, seeing you go down," Ginny added.

His expression darkened and eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Hermione shrugged.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Hermione asked.

"I'm fine. Miss Weasley, you can go back to your dormitory, now," he said sharply, rubbing his head. "How long was I out?"

"Only a while. The other half of the candy – the one that revives you – it's fast," Hermione said as Ginny shrugged and ran off. "That wasn't very polite," Hermione snapped, pointing at where Ginny disappeared from view. "She's the one who revived you."

"Which I shouldn't have needed," he snarled back. "How am I to protect you if you won't let me?"

"Yeah, like I was in any danger in the Gryffindor common room!" she said, turning on her heel and heading off.

"There are Gryffindors who have sided with the Dark Lord, you know," he stated, his anger evident.

"I already know that," she snapped back. "Wormtail was in Gryffindor. He was a friend of Harry's father."

Cillian gave her a hard stare, but remained silent, glaring at her each time she looked back at him. When she reached the Gargoyle, he simply waved her on.

Snape was at his desk, reading a very long parchment as she entered. She paused in front of his desk, wondering if he would be working all night again.

"Yes," he said slowly, without moving his head.

"Ah, nothing," she stammered. "Good night, sir."

She was just about to go up the stairs when his voice carried across the office. "Did you have a nice chat with Minerva?"

She turned to face him. "Yes."

"Everything in order?" he asked smoothly.

"Yes, sir." She waited a few moments, and then turned to go upstairs again.

"And did you work things out with Longbottom?"

His tone was cool and sent a chill down Hermione's spine, making her pause, and then she turned around slowly. "How did you...?"

He rolled his hand in the air to indicate the portraits. "I was informed," he said darkly.

Hermione felt the blood rush from her face at the ominous tone of his voice. "It won't happen again! I promise. It was a mistake. I didn't give it to him," she rattled off, stepping toward him. "I'm really sorry, but Cillian's okay now."

Snape simply raised an eyebrow as he rose from his chair, his glare intently focused on her eyes.

Hermione swallowed the lump in her throat. "I think it just got mixed up with the chocolates. You know how popular they are and all. We revived him, and he's fine."

"Indeed." Severus walked slowly across the room as she ranted. He stood facing her, his hands behind his back, and simply glared at her. "Gave him *what* exactly," he said in a drawl that sounded much too menacing.

Hermione took a deep breath. "A Fainting Fancy," she admitted, the nervous feeling in her gut increasing. "I was talking to Neville, Seamus and Ginny. The next thing I knew, Cillian fainted." He'd moved closer as she talked and was now standing right in front of her, staring at her coolly with his hands still behind his back. She felt completely intimidated and nervous. "Ginny caught on before I did and found the other half to revive him."

"And Longbottom. Have you given him sufficient warning to leave off?" he asked, but his tone was still cool.

"I think so, sir," Hermione replied. She looked at him, wishing she could read him better, wondering if anyone could really read him well.

He nodded. "Thank you for not lying to me," he said softly. He reached out to her, cupping her face. "I know it seems that I haven't been very attentive to you," he said, moving closer. He lifted her chin slightly, stepping even closer. Hermione's breath caught as he leaned forward and brushed his lips on her cheek. "But I've been very proud of you these last few days. The reports I get are both favorable – and not." His hand slid through her hair as his lips touched hers. "But I expected that of you."

She automatically reached out and grabbed his robes to steady herself as his kiss became more passionate. His arm slid around her, pulling her to him tightly, and she wrapped her arms around him.

Behind and beside her, soft coughs and snores came from the portraits, and a log crackled in the fireplace, but she was oblivious to anything but his kiss. When his lips lifted off hers, she stood frozen a second before realizing he'd stopped, slowly opening her eyes to see him staring at her.

He exhaled as if with regret before dropping his hands to his sides. "Now, go on up. I've work to do."

Hermione stopped and turned when she reached the foot of the stairs. "Aren't you coming up?"

"Later," he said, standing at his desk. He picked up the parchment he'd been reading when she came in. "I have a few matters to address."

He was gone when she woke the next morning. Cillian took her to breakfast and then followed Hermione and Ginny to the library. They were in the Charms section, trying to find spells on how to create communication devices when Draco showed up, and they quickly closed the books, grabbing others before he could figure out what they'd been looking for.

During the Gryffindor Quidditch tryouts, Draco, Crabbe, and Pansy sat in the stands with Hermione, which greatly annoyed Ginny. She was trying to ignore Crabbe's and Pansy's taunting while she tried to select who'd be the best suited for each position. Hermione tried keeping her nose in her book and avoiding looking at Pansy's glaring stare, but after a while she left the stands to sit on the grass by the greenhouses. Needless to say, Draco sat down beside her, trying to engage Hermione in conversation. Pansy simply stormed off in a huff with Crabbe following behind her. After dinner, Snape insisted she spend the evening alone in their sitting room. Unable to persuade him that she needed to be in the library, she reluctantly complied.

Fuming and bored, Hermione tried to peruse the books on the shelves, but several of the bookcases had Protection Charms on them and stung her fingers. She gave up, trying to do first-year spells wandlessly, finally managing to Levitate a small stone ball she'd removed from one bookshelf. But the exercise was exhausting and difficult. She tried to Summon the ball, managing to make it roll to her once and even managing to make it roll off the coffee table with a Repelling Charm. Still, it didn't seem like much, and she grew bored, opting to take a bath with her Transfiguration book instead.

Sunday wasn't much different. When Hermione woke that morning, Snape was gone, and his side of the bed looked as if he'd not even been in it. She rose and dressed quickly, hurrying down to the office, hoping to see him there. Several of the portraits greeted her, but they refused to tell her where Snape had gone. Dumbledore's frame was empty, and one other was blank, the occupants obviously off visiting other portraits.

Phineas told her curtly, "You're to wait here," and then exited his frame when Hermione came down. He returned shortly, grumbling about inconveniences when he returned. "He's on his way to get you," he snapped.

"Who? Why?" Hermione asked, glaring at the portrait.

"Don't be impertinent – because he said so," Phineas snapped back, crossing his arms. No matter how Hermione tried asking him, he wouldn't explain. Several minutes later, Cillian showed up to escort her to breakfast.

Hermione scanned the staff table, looking for Snape, before sitting down next to Ginny.

"Who are you looking for?" Ginny asked, passing her the toast.

"Snape," Hermione said softly. "He wasn't in the tower this morning, and I'm not sure he came to bed last night, either."

"Miss your husband?" MacCavish sneered at her from down the table.

Hermione blushed. "Curious," she replied. Cillian gave her a smirk as he sipped on his juice.

"Curiosity killed the kneazle," MacCavish said, laughing at her. "He's busy running the school, in case you haven't noticed."

Hermione turned her head quickly so she didn't have to look at him, barely catching Cillian's scowl and trying to disregard the whispers and comments from the others sitting around them.

Ginny's dorm mate, Janilynn Waithe, passed her the pitcher. "Thanks," Hermione said.

"You're welcome," Janilynn said. "I hear you're joining the Charms Club."

Cillian stared at Hermione, his eyebrows lifting at the remark. "Yes," Hermione stated. "I was thinking it might be fun and help me with my Charms N.E.W.T."

"Oh, we don't always do N.E.W.T. level stuff," Janilynn stated. "We discuss Charms and theoretical uses and stuff, and we experiment a lot. But it's fun."

Hermione nodded, looking at Ginny, who shrugged. When the owls started swooping into the Great Hall delivering the post, Snape slipped in from the side door for breakfast. He spoke to Professor McGonagall, leaning toward her between bites. Professor McGonagall looked at him as if what he said was disturbing, and then turned back to her own plate, eating primly as if in deep thought. Alecto, who'd watched the exchange, sat in her chair, looking smug. Several times Alecto tried to engage either Professor McGonagall or Snape in conversation, but both ignored her. Finally Snape rose and hurried from the Great Hall, followed by the Carrows.

"I wonder what that was about?" Ginny asked.

"Mind your own business," MacCavish snarled at her when Hermione shrugged her shoulders. Both girls turned to look at him, and he narrowed his eyes, making them look away.

Ginny tapped Hermione's foot under the table and rose to leave, Hermione and Cillian following from the room. "What was that all about?" Ginny asked when Hermione caught up to her.

"I have no idea," Hermione admitted. "But we'd better watch what we say around MacCavish."

"Very good idea," Cillian stated from behind them, making both girls walk faster.

Hermione spent the morning with Ginny in the Charms section until Draco showed up with Pansy and her gang of Slytherins and shooed Ginny away. Likewise, Hermione's afternoon was spent in the library surrounded by Draco, Pansy, and Millicent. Three Slytherin girls, Miss Glenwrythe, Miss Davis, and Daphne Greengrass, sat at the other end of the table watching them, not even bothering to turn their heads whenever Hermione looked in their direction. Hermione felt very alone, although she was surrounded by her peers.

That night, lying in bed, Hermione stared up at the canopy. Snape hadn't been in his office all evening, and she wondered where or what he was doing. She remembered that Dumbledore always seemed busy, but she figured much of his spare time was involved with the Order or the Ministry. However, she didn't know if Snape was in contact with the Order, if it was Ministry business, or if his disappearances had to do with the Dark Lord. Any of the options were plausible, she supposed. Snape came to bed late, pulling off his clothes and simply letting them fall to the floor. He sat on the bed as he removed his boots, but his movements looked as if he was exhausted.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

"Fine," he replied, the weariness in his voice evident. "Sorry to wake you."

"It's all right," she replied, pulling the covers aside for him. He smiled as he walked to his side of the bed and climbed in. He pulled her to his side and cradled her in his arms, fitting his body snugly against hers. She tried to roll so she could look at him, but his arm tightened, and his hand tucked under her breast as he buried his face in her hair. She relaxed in his arms and his body relaxed as well. "Is everything okay?" she finally asked.

There was no reply; his soft breath told her he'd already fallen asleep. She felt a tug in her chest, and her worries about what he must be dealing with became a series of random speculations that prevented her sleep from coming for a long while.

~oOo~

Hermione showed up for Charms Club, happy to see that Neville, Seamus, and Ginny had talked Hannah, Ernie, Luna, Terry, and Michael into coming. The rest of the club members eyed the newcomers speculatively as the members of the DA gathered together in greeting. Cillian sat at the back of the large room, watching with feigned disinterest, although he told Hermione he was glad she was taking an active interest in the club.

"Mrs. Snape, welcome!" cried out Professor Flitwick as he came in the door. "Mr. Longbottom, Miss Weasley, Mr. Boot... you all came. Excellent!" He walked up the steps

to a long platform and turned to face everyone. "We have new members today!"

There were a few mumbles around the room, some happy, some speculative. "For those who don't recognize Mrs. Snape and Mr. Longbottom's friends, let me introduce them," Professor Flitwick called out, beaming happily as he introduced everyone. "From what I remember, these students got together to learn Defensive Charms two years ago. They can produce a corporeal Patronus Charm," the diminutive wizard announced proudly.

Hermione smiled at him, expecting such an announcement. Apparently the others were not, judging by their expressions.

"But Patronus Charms aren't taught until seventh year normally, and I doubt that Professor Carrow will teach those to us this year!" a stocky blonde said from across the room.

"No, I don't think he will, considering what they are used for. I doubt that he would want us to be able to defend ourselves from Dementors, especially since they have sided with You-Know-Who," Luna stated. "But Harry taught us how to cast them. It's easy if you know how."

"Easy?" a fourth-year boy called out as several others began talking to their friends.

"Yeah," Seamus stated as Ginny concurred.

"You *all* can do them?" a fifth-year Hufflepuff asked, her mouth hanging open as she stared at them.

"Yes, Miss Wang, Mr. Briggeman, they can," Professor Flitwick squeaked excitedly.

Hermione turned to look at Cillian, lounging in a chair at the back of the classroom.

"Maybe you'd all like to see them demonstrate?"

Hermione turned back to the tiny professor, dumbstruck.

Cillian rose and walked over to her as the other students made a circle around Hermione and her friends. "Oh, this should be good," he said, joining the circle. But everyone was too excited to pay him much heed, eagerly wanting to see Hermione and her friends cast the Charm.

"To do the Patronus Charm, you simply have to think of a very happy memory," Luna said and without hesitation, she raised her wand. *Expecto Patronum.*"

Ginny winked at Neville as Luna's rabbit Patronus erupted from her wand and circled around them. *Expecto Patronum,*" Ginny said seconds before Neville, both creating corporeal Patronuses, which sprang out from their wands.

Janilynn clapped happily as Neville's beaver, Ginny's fox, and Luna's rabbit bounded around the room. "You can – can't you!" she exclaimed as several of the other students rushed forward, all clamoring excitedly.

Hermione concentrated on the day she became friends with Ron and Harry as she said the spell, and her otter Patronus joined the rest.

After a while, Hermione let her otter fade as a pudgy-nosed girl with mousy brown hair in braids stopped in front of Ginny. "Did you really learn how to do those two years ago?" the Ravenclaw girl asked.

"Yes, er..." Ginny replied, stammering when she couldn't remember the girl's name.

"Bathsheba Weatherspoon, but everyone calls me Babby. This is Will," she replied, indicating a scrawny blonde boy with freckles. Both were looking at Ginny with a sense of awe. "We're fourth-years. Do you think we could do it, too? You would have been in our year when you learned, right? It's supposed to be..."

Hermione was suppressing a laugh as Professor Flitwick called for everyone's attention. "I don't see why not," he said once everyone quieted down. "But first, we need to learn how to do Shield Charms. The principles are the same." There were a few moans of disappointment, but everyone drew their wands to practice. "There are two types of Shield Charms, those which are cast to protect yourself and those which are cast to protect someone else. The Patronus is in the category of a Shield Charm, in that it is cast to protect someone else, because it is cast away from the person casting it. It is meant to move forward, in front of you. The witch or wizard conjuring it can control it, if they can concentrate long enough to maintain the Patronus. So we will try Shield Charms that protect another person. So please form groups of three."

Everyone quickly paired off, several of the younger ones trying to match up with Neville, Luna, Terry, or Hermione. Ginny was already cornered by Babby and Will while Janilynn grasped Hermione's robes, asking to partner with her and her friend, Zane Seymour, a cute girl with a long dark hair.

That night, exhausted, Hermione handed her wand to Cillian as they walked down the corridor. "I didn't know you could produce a Patronus," he said, pocketing her wand.

"Yes," she admitted. "Although I'm surprised you didn't know."

"Severus told me a lot about you," he said, with a smirk, "but he never mentioned you could do a Patronus." Hermione looked at his profile, wondering how much he knew. Cillian's smirk grew as he turned to look at her. "I know you and your friends would sneak out at night and get into mischief. I know you stole from him to make Polyjuice Potion your second year. I know you used a Time-Turner your third year to take extra classes and to free Sirius Black, although why you would is beyond me. In fact, from everything that I've been told about you, you're a remarkable witch."

"Thank you," she replied, still surprised that Snape had said so much about her, and that he'd known about her theft, although she did know that he knew she'd helped Harry free Sirius. "I didn't know he knew... but he never did anything about it."

"Oh, he knew," Cillian stated, crossing his arms as they reached the gargoyles. "Tell the ol' bat that I have to do something. I won't be back until after breakfast."

Snape rose as Hermione entered the office. "Cillian wanted me to tell you he has something to do. He said he'd be back after breakfast."

Snape made a soft chuckle as he rose from his desk. "Not surprised," he said and guided her up to their bedroom. Hermione dropped her things on her trunk and turned to see him watching her. "Why the sudden interest in the Charms Club, Hermione?"

"Pardon?" she asked.

"Charms Club," he repeated softly, standing close to her but not so that he was hovering over her.

She felt very aware of his presence in the sizable room. "I thought it would be a good way to study Charms for my N.E.W.T.s since I'm only allowed a wand in a classroom setting," Hermione simply insisted. She wasn't entirely sure he believed her.

He nodded once, crossing his arms as he simply watched her.

"You've been busy; is everything all right," she asked after a few seconds of silence, shifting uncomfortably under his stare.

"Yes," he replied. "For now." He tilted his head slightly, and she averted her gaze to the wardrobe. The silence stretched as they stood there.

"I'm sorry, did you want something?" she finally asked, breaking the long silence, watching his hands as he unfolded his arms and they fell to his sides.

"Yes," he sighed, turning his head to the window. "It doesn't matter." He turned to look at her again, watching her face. If she'd known him any better, she'd have sworn that he had a look of repining in his dark eyes before he wiped his face with his hand and sighed. He seemed to be staring at a spot on the wall before his gaze moved back to her face. His eyes were so dark as he looked at her, they seemed like fathomless pools under his black eyelashes. Hermione met his gaze for a while then lowered her head, looking back at him when he sighed again and moved to the wardrobe. He began to undress, pausing to hand her one of the silky night slips.

Hermione readied for bed, slyly peeking at him as she disrobed and put on the green slip, then quickly ducked into the bathroom to brush her teeth. When she returned to the room, Snape was standing at the window, staring outside into the darkness. Quietly, she climbed into bed and lay there watching him. He turned; the candlelight illuminated his bare chest, giving his normally pale skin a warm glow, and highlighted the wrinkles of his pajama bottoms while the light of the moon behind him seemed to frame him in an ethereal glow. Brazenly, she allowed herself to study his body, the firmness of his lithe frame and the lean muscle of his arms. The spattering of hair on his chest that narrowed into a thin line where it went down his torso seem to emphasize shadows on his pectorals and abdomen. His penis twitched as her gaze had traveled down his body, but not completely becoming as rigid as it usually did. She swallowed, remembering how the hairs felt when she ran her fingers through them and the firmness of his skin to her touch. When her gaze swept back up to his face, his eyes darkened and his lips curled into a slight smirk. Hermione rose up onto her elbows as he approached the bed, beginning to feel the now familiar flutter in her stomach from anticipation. He leaned down, his hand sliding into her hair as he kissed her, moving to position himself on the bed with her. As his hands and mouth began their assault on her body, Hermione gave herself over completely to the sensations his touch and mouth enticed, responding to him as he made love to her.

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Author's Notes:

I know it's been a while since I updated, but I seem to have divided myself between too many projects lately, and we are gearing up to relocate the clinic I work in into a new hospital facility. I hope to be a bit more prompt in my updates. Thank you to everyone who has been following along with this story. For those who have left me reviews, I really appreciate them greatly as they inspire me to keep going.

I have two women who deserve more than merely a thank you for their assistance. I want to express my gratitude to MMADfan and Cocoachristy for helping to catch all my mistakes in this chapter. Thank you so very much. I appreciate it more than you could possibly know.

Revelations

Chapter 19 of 43

Hermione has another Occlumency lesson, and Severus makes a discovery that really opens up his eyes, answering a lot of questions and erasing some doubts.

I owe some big hugs and much gratitude to Cocoachristy and MadBrilliant for the beta read. You ladies are worth your weight in Godiva.



Thank you to those who requested an update of this story for Christmas on Potter_Place. I am so happy to comply! Merry Christmas!

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Revelations

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Hermione hurried out of double Potions, not bothering to say anything to anyone as she practically ran for the Gryffindor common room. For a week now, Draco had been trying to spend as much time with Hermione as possible, only leaving her alone during meals and when they didn't have classes together. Even through the weekend, Draco had pursued her, having tried to engage her in conversation or simply practice spells. Although Hermione had to admit he was being nice to her, she still didn't trust him. For one thing, he was trying too hard. For another, Crabbe and Goyle kept glaring at her from behind him. That, and Crabbe had a habit of cracking his knuckles whenever she looked in his direction. Then there was Pansy, glaring at her as if she was trying to steal Draco from her, as if that would ever be the case. But what annoyed Hermione the most was the fact that she couldn't research means of magical communication with Draco hovering around her all the time, nor could she find out if Ginny had found anything.

Hermione had just rounded the corner when Cillian caught up to her, grasping her arm and making her turn around. "Now look here, what is your hurry? Where are you off to?"

"My room, for some peace and quiet," she snapped, yanking her arm free.

"Don't just don't! You are *not* to run away from me *ever again!*" Cillian stared at her hard for a moment, his normally kind eyes frosty with anger as he waited.

Hermione glared back at him, then saw Travers walk over to VanHalal in the corridor, and realized he was right. She nodded, ashamed by her behavior, glad when she saw that the two Death Eaters had walked away.

A tick showed on both sides of his face as Cillian clenched his jaw. After a moment, his stance relaxed. "I know this isn't easy for you. Come on." They walked in silence. Once in the office, Hermione hurried across the room, heading for the stairs. Cillian followed. "Hermione."

She stopped and turned. "Look, I'm trying to give you space. As long as you're not causing trouble, I'm... But don't think I don't understand. It's no picnic for me either, having to stand around and watch you read and hearing all the stuff in the lessons all over again. But I'll make you this deal don't run away from me, and I'll try to be less intrusive. I'm not here to box you in I'm here for your protection."

Hermione dropped her book bag. "I know, but it's hard for me, too. You're always watching, following, and I'm not used to it. And Draco I know he doesn't like me, and all of a sudden he's *everywhere*," she said with a flick of her hand. "For six years, he's done nothing but bully me and my friends, and now it's like he suddenly thinks we're best mates!"

"Draco's trying to befriend you," Cillian stated, and Hermione scoffed at him. "He is. I know you don't like him much, but he's an okay kid, once you get past the stuck up, spoiled prat part."

Hermione started laughing.

"See, it's not so bad," he said. "I'm charming and good looking. Besides, those who'd want to hurt you I can take care of them." He offered her a winning smile and then turned to go. "I'll be downstairs, levitating something, so you can be alone. Let me know when you're ready to have dinner, okay?"

"Sure," she said. "Cillian?"

He stopped and turned. "Yeah?"

"I'm sorry."

"No problem. But knock it off, okay?"

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The rest of the week went well, all considering.

For some reason, Severus seemed to be avoiding her, unless she was revising or writing her essays in the sitting room. During those quiet times, he would either come in and read or bring some of his work up with him. He never bothered her studies, occasionally answering her questions or suggesting a book in which she could find the answers for herself. His presence was comforting, and she knew he was watching her, although she never actually saw him looking directly at her. At night, when she allowed Peren to put her things away, sometimes Severus would kiss her goodnight before he returned to his office. Occasionally, Hermione thought she saw a look of longing in his eyes, but he didn't act on it, so she dismissed it as hopeful thinking or a trick of the light.

Likewise, Draco was still making his attempts at fitting into her life, and by now, he'd actually memorized her schedule and his appearances were starting to form a pattern. The few times when Draco had somewhere he had to be, like class, Hermione sought out Ginny. And Amycus was still lecturing them about how inept Muggles were, constantly telling them that Muggles were filthy, stupid, and ignorant, and spouting on about how intelligent and superior wizards were in comparison.

Snape had been gone all day on Thursday, and when he'd returned for dinner, he was in a foul mood. Immediately after dinner, he'd left again, and Hermione wasn't sure if he'd even come back that night or not. She did see him for breakfast when he entered the Great Hall with Rowle, Travers, and the Carrows Friday, but his expression was stony.

Saturday, Cillian had tried to keep Hermione in the Headmaster's suite, encouraging her to have her friend Ginny visit with her there instead, and was adamant about her leaving the castle even just to go outside on the grounds without him. So Hermione and Ginny searched the books in the Headmaster's library for communication spells. When Snape came in, a flicker of surprise crossed his features when he saw Ginny flipping through a book with several more stacked up beside her. "Hermione, I have a scheduled meeting with the Head of Houses today, followed by a meeting with Rowle, Travers, MacCavish, VanHalal, and the Carrows. I don't think you and Miss Weasley should be here. Perhaps you could revise this somewhere else?"

Hermione looked up from her own book and set down her quill. "Sure," she replied, flicking a glance at Cillian. "We'll just go to the library then."

Severus turned to look at Cillian. "I thought it best to keep her here since, you know," Cillian said, setting down the wizard puzzle he'd been toying with.

The girls collected up their things and quickly replaced the books on the shelves. Severus watched with an air of indifference, nodding as Hermione led Ginny down the stairs. "Why was Miss Weasley here?" Severus asked softly, his voice barely carrying down to Hermione.

"Knowing who was in the library, I thought it best," Cillian replied and both girls froze on the stairs to listen. "She is collecting all the old Muggle Studies books and trying to replace them with more suitable materials," Cillian continued. Ginny gave Hermione a knowing look to which Hermione nodded in understanding.

"Tell Madam Pince to put them in the restricted section. I don't want *any* books removed from the castle on *any* subject," Severus stated. "If she questions you, tell her the order came from me. I will address it personally, but I want to know right away."

"No problem; I'll pass on the message," Cillian said.

Ginny gave Hermione a gentle shove, whispering that he was coming, and they hurried down the stairs as quietly as possible, waiting for Cillian near Snape's desk. When Cillian approached, Ginny turned to him. "Cillian, may I ask you...?" she started to say, then stopped.

Cillian shook his head and waved the girls toward the door. "What was it, Miss Weasley?" he asked once they were in the corridor.

Ginny wrinkled her brows. "The Muggle Studies books...?" she started to ask and Cillian cut her off.

"Yes, all the Muggles Studies books. Not that it's any of your concern, but I know Hermione will ask about it later, I'm sure. Alecto is unhappy with the students' essays, and she is blaming the *misinformation* on the *improper* reading material provided in the library."

"Madam Pince must be livid if she's trying to destroy her books," Hermione said.

Cillian nodded. "She's livid. Alecto has an entire collection of defame I mean *proper* reading material."

Hermione looked at him confusedly as they walked down the steps to the fourth floor. "Then why, if Professor Snape is Headmaster, has she decided to replace the books? Surely he has the final say?"

Cillian stopped short, looking both ways in the corridor before pulling Hermione aside by the wall. Ginny followed, her concern masked by her curiosity. "Look, you were told this," he said sternly to Hermione, his expression hardening. He then looked at Ginny, glaring at her as well. "And, Miss Weasley, you may as well know this too. The Ministry has fallen. The Dark Lord is in charge of the school." He lowered his voice to a hiss, and Hermione was astounded how much he seemed like Snape he was when he was irritable. "Alecto wanted the position of Headmaster, but the Dark Lord appointed Severus. She then wanted to be Deputy Headmaster, but Severus convinced the Dark Lord to keep Professor McGonagall in the position. Alecto has been causing Severus grief ever since, not that *you* needed to know that. But he doesn't need any other trouble or distractions from either of you two."

"So, why are you telling us this out here?" Hermione asked with a wave of her hand indicating the corridor. "You could have said this in the office."

"No, I couldn't. The portraits of Dumbledore, Everard, and Fortescue are giving Severus a lot of grief," Cillian snapped in the same soft hiss. "That's why. Now, let's go." He gave Hermione's arm a tug to propel her in the direction of the library, allowing the girls to walk in front of him.

Hermione and Ginny walked silently all the way to the library and headed straight for the Charms section. They whispered quietly about what Cillian had confessed, and Ginny promised to let Neville and Seamus in on the revelation. Turning her attention to the bookshelves, Hermione finally found a book on Protean Charms describing intercatenated and concatenated spells. However, Draco appeared next to her within minutes, as he usually did, as if he had a map telling him when she'd arrived in the library, and insisted on sitting at the same table. Ginny crammed the Charms books they'd found in Hermione's bag before he realized which ones the girls were reading. That evening, Severus was distracted and moody, so Hermione slipped up to the loo for a long soak, then curled up in bed to read, falling asleep early.

On Sunday morning, Hermione joined the Gryffindor Quidditch team to watch them practice, simply to sit in the sunshine for a while. As expected, Draco showed up, followed by his goons, choosing to sit next to her in the stands, much to the chagrin of Seamus and Neville, who had hoped to spend the time talking to her. Of course the Gryffindor team didn't like having the Slytherins in the stands during practice either, so they mostly worked on broom maneuvers, ignoring the taunting from Crabbe and Goyle. Finally, Hermione excused herself and went to the library for some light reading. At least Draco got the hint and let her read, but he remained in the library, watching her over his own book.

After lunch, Hermione managed to slip away from Draco by asking Cillian to walk with her to Hagrid's. The visit was pleasant enough, although Cillian's presence made Hagrid nervous. She gave Hagrid a hug before she left, thanking him for the blackberry scones, but her smile faded when she saw Draco lounging on the grass as she made her way back up to the castle. Draco jumped up as she approached, and she groaned, telling Cillian softly that she was going to hurry up to her rooms. Draco was really getting on her last nerve. It was like having a boyfriend you didn't want, popping up everywhere.

Snape was gone all day, and he didn't show up until Tuesday morning. Hermione watched him as she ate breakfast, wondering where he'd been. Snape looked surly, leaving the Great Hall even before the mail arrived.

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Thursday, Snape surprised Hermione by coming into the loo while she was washing up after double Herbology. "I have wanted to talk to you. I just haven't had the time as of late," he said as he watched her wash. He sat down on the edge of the tub and handed her the shower handle.

"You've been busy," she replied, wishing that the bubbles were a bit higher in the bathwater. It wasn't lost on her how often he'd been called from the castle or exactly how much paperwork and correspondence he'd had to do since their arrival. When he was in residence it seemed he was always writing something or another, even into the late hours of the night.

"Things will settle down soon," he said softly, watching her work the conditioner into her hair.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Hermione," he said, shifting to get more comfortable on the edge of the tub, "we need to talk." His tone made a huge lump seem to drop into her gut. "You were stirring up trouble, and it was getting noticed."

"I wasn't..." she started to protest, then stopped, her hands still in her hair, when she saw him smirk at her.

"Don't lie to me. The Dark Lord asked me about your activities." He rose, stopping at the door. "Finish up and come into the bedroom."

When she entered the bedroom, he was standing, apparently staring out the window while he waited for her. "I told you that if I am to confide in you, you must learn to defend the mind against external penetration," he said bluntly. She nodded, and he moved to stand and face her. "You undoubtedly know what Legilimency and Occlumency are, and I'm sure you could quote every reference you'd read on it when Potter told you I was trying to teach him how to do this." She nodded again, and he smirked. "I thought so. Potter was unable to close his mind. I *know* he didn't take the lessons seriously. I *expect* better from you. Now, close your eyes."

"Yes, sir," she replied in anticipation, keeping her eyes shut. She remembered their first few attempts, and licked her lips.

"Keep your eyes closed, and clear your mind. Push all emotions away. Suppress them."

She tried to do as he instructed, finding it very difficult to do. Every sound, his very presence, seemed to fill her. It was amazing how many little sounds there were in the room. It was also interesting the patterns of reds, oranges, and black that she could see with her eyes closed, as if she were looking at the inside of her eyelids. She heard him move, and her heightened awareness to sounds made it impossible not to try and feel where he was standing and guess what he was doing.

"Ready?" he said, making her open her eyes and look at him. *Legilimens*. Hermione felt the penetration as he forced his way in. Scenes flashed in her mind, quick blurs, and she tried to push him away from them, but she was reacting to his probing, not blocking the images from happening. "You are not even trying," he stated as he broke the contact.

Hermione gritted her teeth. "This isn't easy."

"No, it isn't. If you don't clear your mind of all of emotions, you leave yourself open to being probed. You're allowing your feelings and memories to be exposed and vulnerable. Occlumency is the only way to seal the mind from magical intrusion and influence. Empty your mind, and shut off your emotions. Try again." The second invasion was just as harsh.

Memories began to flash, and she tried shoving each one away as soon as he'd brought it forward. She was only able to simply exchange one memory for another, just as she'd done before. Hermione could feel her frustration rise, and she tried to suppress it so she could concentrate, and the connection broke.

"You are not concentrating hard enough. You almost blocked me before. This time, I could feel your anger increase. You have to try harder," he said.

"Try harder at what?" she asked, trying to suppress the feelings of frustration. "I can feel you enter. I can see what memories you pull up, but I don't understand how to block you."

"Empty your mind. Control your emotions. Concentrate," he said firmly.

"Concentrate on what?" she asked, her frustration now palatable. "It's like you're just reading my mind like a book!"

"Memories are not stored in your brain like a book," he said, brandishing his wand in his fingers. "They are random, in any order, but similar memories can lie along similar threads associated by common emotions. Now, I want you to empty your mind of your emotions." Hermione groaned and squared her shoulders, but he only smirked at her.

"You managed to nearly block me just now. Do it again, but also empty all of your emotions from your thoughts, and shove me away from your mind. Push me out. *Legilimens*," he said before she could ready herself. Several images of recent events flashed quickly, and she managed to shove them away, but was unable to push him from her mind. Hermione tried to direct her thoughts, forcing images of the familiar stone corridors forward in attempt to gain control, but Snape's image kept materializing in her mind.

She found herself distracted each time, as memories of him flickered in and out along the stone corridors. Images of watching him undress, standing before her bare-

ched or nude appeared as if he was doing these things in the school corridors in front of her. She forced herself to focus instead on the image of Snape striding down those same stone corridors, his robes billowing he walked, making it seem like she was actually following him, but the other memories kept breaking through. Hermione tried emptying herself, tried to focus on nothing. But nothing became the memory of Snape standing beside her as they brewed potions together, the way his hands moved, their precision and his dexterity with his instruments. The images of his hands brought forth memories of his hands on her body, and that only made her feelings for him stronger and clearer: her attraction to him, her respect for him, the way he made her feel when they were together, how he made her body come alive just with a kiss or a touch. She tried to shove down the reaction she felt and concentrated on white, plain, blank, white. Of course, this only produced images of his face and body lying next to her in bed, which lead to the times he leaned over her to kiss her. Various images of their coupling flashed uncontrollably, which made her blush and her body tremble. Try as she might, she couldn't push him away, the need for him became almost palatable, and her resolve broke.

When the connection broke, Hermione nearly stumbled. Snape was looking at her with a contemplative stare. She lowered her head and berated herself for being unable to block the feelings she had for him from her mind. "I can't do this. I just can't block you."

"No, but you were creating images until you let your emotions get carried away," he said, his voice thick and thoughtful.

Hermione listened to him, surprised that he thought the images she'd inadvertently shown him were ones she'd fabricated intentionally.

"If you are going to create images to block the Dark Lord, you must not allow your feelings to overwhelm you. The Dark Lord is very skilled at finding what he wants. If you are ever going to be able to lie to or mislead him, you must learn how to shut down those feelings and the memories which contradict the lie. You have to learn how to control your emotions so that they do not contradict the falsehoods you present. Emotions are the strongest link we have to memory association. Learn to control your emotions, such as friendship, love, attraction, and you'll do better."

"In other words, it is more than thinking nothing it's feeling nothing and not allowing him to see or feel anything in your mind. But how am I not supposed to feel anything? How do you repress it?" she asked, distressed.

"You have to discipline your mind. Learn to control your emotions," he said, crossing his arms.

"Like suppressing everything and making my mind go blank?" she said, sensing her emotions ripple and surge in her, and she sighed, feeling completely inadequate to the task. *You have never failed at something once you've set your mind to it before. Get a grip of yourself. Think!* "Can't I concentrate on one emotion so the others don't come forward? Wouldn't it be best to just hold onto one emotion as a focus?"

"Crude concept, but ineffective," he said smoothly. "Even a simple emotion like... respect can open images you don't want him to know. You don't respect him you fear him. It's not easy to speak falsely in his presence, especially if you are afraid or worried. And fear will make you fail. Fear is the strongest emotion you have, the hardest to suppress, and it will be your weakness. If you can't control your fear, it will be impossible to keep him from seeing what you fear. Likewise, you must not allow your mind to be relaxed or become vulnerable." He narrowed his eyes as he considered her thoughtfully.

"But if I can't concentrate on one emotion, how do I erase all my emotions?" she asked, feeling like he was asking expecting the impossible *I can't even block Snape, how am I ever going to block someone as powerful as the Dark Lord?*

"Do not concentrate on nothing. Feel nothing. Memories are associated with feelings as well as sounds, sights, smells, and textures, even tastes. Legilimency doesn't utilize your five senses; it uses your emotional connection to the memories. If you are not able to block your feelings, suppress them. They become a conduit, a ley-line if you will, and will leave you vulnerable to penetration." He exhaled in agitation, his fingers tightening on his wand. "Remember, Legilimency can also be used to destroy your mind, a powerful incursion upon your thoughts and emotions. With it, he can control you, for the weak-minded, with even more accuracy than with the Imperius. Try again. *Legilimens.*"

All his talk about the Dark Lord awoke the fear she had of him, knowing she would face him again, possibly even soon. Memories of her summons, images of the Dark Lord touching her face, caressing her, flashed between visions of red eyes and the long white fingers. Hermione gasped as the memories from the time she was alone with the Dark Lord began to blur with the memories from her wedding night. The image of the Dark Lord leaning close to her, walking around her, pressing his wand tip on the flesh of her forearm, brought up the nightmares she'd had of him after her hand-fasting. Hermione vividly recalled both times his wand pressed down on her skin as he threatened to mark her arm.

"What was that? Did you create it?" he asked, grasping her arms to keep her from collapsing once the connection broke.

"No," she replied breathlessly, staring up at Snape, needing his strength to fight back the surge of despair and hopelessness that was consuming her.

She heard him utter the spell, too emotionally drained to offer any resistance. Hermione had no chance to ready herself. She could feel Snape push into her memories of the Dark Lord's visit after the hand-fasting. *You are mine. You are now bound to me by his oath. You're to be an asset, a loyal Death Eater's wife. I am your master... Hermione or you will be eliminated...* The fear she had when he claimed she belonged to him surged through her as she recalled his threats with perfect clarity. *'My Lord, Hermione,'* he'd demanded in an eerie hiss, his red eyes narrowing. She remembered the feeling she'd had when he'd said it, like she was going to vomit *Say it!* The image of the Dark Lord pressing his wand tip into her forearm repeated as she answered, *'Yes, My Lord,'* mingled with flashes of her nightmares that he'd actually branded her arm. She'd felt a surge of despair, knowing that she would have to do whatever the Dark Lord demanded of her, and it made her nearly panic. Hermione tried desperately to separate herself from her own memories, hating to be reliving them again.

Scenes flashed in her mind as she replayed all the horrors she'd faced in just a few months and felt it overcome her all over again. Hermione felt a shift in the pressure in her mind, and she saw Snape appear in her mind just as she recalled seeing him standing in the door of his loo, casually checking in on her as she cried in the shower, and felt the relief and gratitude his presence gave her wash over her, calming her. She could smell him, the woody scent mixed with herbal smoke, feel his presence, and she anchored herself as she surrendered to it, feeling her emotional turmoil calm by his proximity. He was there, firm, strong, capable, and protecting her. She owed him so much and could offer him so little in return. The memory faded and Hermione tried to mentally grasp out, to bring him back. She saw him bow to the Dark Lord, and leave her abandoned, wandless, vulnerable, and at The Dark Lord's mercy. The despair she'd felt surged, knowing that he did whatever the Dark Lord demanded of him, even leaving her alone and unprotected when asked to. Anxiety and fear rose within her chest. Her pulse seemed to pound in her ears. She was sweating and shaking. Her terror surged unchecked, enveloped her, and made her scream in panic.

She hadn't realized that she'd screamed out loud. Her arms clasped around her middle, and she bent over, crying, completely unaware that the contact had been broken.

Snape grabbed her, shaking her once to try and clear her mind and to bring her back to the present. Her screams subsided as her eyes focused on his face, and she began to shiver uncontrollably. "He did! He told me I was his. He threatened to mark me as his," she confessed to him, tears rolling down her cheeks. "He said he'd kill me. Th-that I was to be an asset or or I was so afraid of him." Tears now flowed freely as she looked up at him imploringly. "He offered me his mark and demanded that I call him *My Lord!*"

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, his voice so controlled that he sounded angry with her.

"And what could you have done? You took me to him! You left the room left me with him!" she wailed, needing him to just hold her and afraid to ask him.

"You were not in any real harm at the time, Hermione," he tried to reassure her.

"When you left, he walked in! He just walked in and he he... You were gone! I was alone with him! Again!" she exclaimed, unheeding his words. "He owns me I'm his he said so. I had no way of escape. No wand. He was going to mark me, to prove I belong to him. Just like he owns you he said so. You can't protect me from him. No one can!" She was crying, rambling incoherently, her knees nearly giving way. Snape caught her before she collapsed on the floor and held her upright in his embrace.

"You're wrong," he said softly in her ear as he held her tightly. "I am protecting you."

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Severus held the sobbing girl in his arms, his mind in a whirlwind. Severus carefully deconstructed the memories he'd seen in correlation to the times he'd been ordered to bring her before the Dark Lord. He remembered the day of her first encounter with the Dark Lord. She'd been as prepared as he could make her, and the Calming Draught had helped. None of the images he'd just seen fit with that summons.

During the second visit, the Dark Lord had been angry because he had expected Hermione to curse Wormtail. Naturally, her caring and kind temperament didn't allow her to use the Cruciatus Curse effectively. Severus was told to leave her alone with him, and he'd obeyed, knowing that Hermione wouldn't have been harmed. Apparently, she hadn't known that. She had walked out of the ballroom with her head held high, although her complexion was nearly ashen-white, and her body was trembling and sweaty, obviously from fear. She had refused to tell him what had happened or confide in him. He'd expected her to be upset, expected more of a reaction, but he had been so proud that she'd handled herself so well that he hadn't pressed her about it. He'd just assumed that she was just dealing with whatever occurred her own way. He'd known what the Dark Lord had planned on doing - intimidate her into submission. Apparently she'd been so frightened she'd been reduced to a state of shock, and he'd mistaken her quietness as bravery - not an emotional break down.

The supposedly tender actions, the caresses the Dark Lord gave Hermione, were the same as he'd had witnessed the Dark Lord bestow on Belinda and Bellatrix numerous times, as well as on Narcissa. It was a display of the Dark Lord's affections, his favoritism, compassion, and caring, which Severus knew was a ruse. Belinda and Bellatrix did not, literally drinking it in like a potion, and basking in the afterglow like an addiction. Narcissa, he knew, understood it for what it was - a ploy. Severus was sure now that Hermione had seen through the ploy as well, but she'd been unsettled by the tactic.

That left the images of the Dark Lord's offer for Hermione to take the Dark Mark.

He had been surprised to see repeated in Hermione's memories that the Dark Lord had pressed his wand into Hermione's skin as if offering to give her the Mark. The image was both vivid and clear, as well as a cloudy, dreamlike replay. That could only mean that it had happened and had repeated in her dreams. Severus recognized the rooms from the images as being in two different places: the Malfoys' ballroom, and their bridal chamber. Severus couldn't figure out why the Dark Lord would have offered her his Mark, but apparently the Dark Lord *had, twice*. He did recall seeing a small bruise on her forearm, but he hadn't really considered the implications either time. But if the Dark Lord had marked her with some kind of Mark that would have connected Hermione to him, the same way the Dark Mark connected the Death Eaters, that would have made the Dark Lord a hypocrite in the eyes of his followers. Although, it would have given a clear message to Potter; Hermione had become his.

The promise of an education, magical knowledge, followed by the threat to behave or face the Dark Lord's punishment or death, the declaration of her role and being told that she was now his to command, followed by the demand to call him master... it all fit together. It was all too familiar to Severus. It also explained the nightmares Hermione had the following night. The crying in the shower...

Severus was surprised to know that the flashes he'd seen the morning after their hand-fasting when he'd preformed Legilimency on her in his shower had not been directed at him, but had only been a recounting of her situation. This time he'd clearly felt her relief at seeing him in the doorway, and the sense of gratitude she'd felt toward him, and still did, had shocked him. Now it all made sense - and he'd been keeping his distance from her. He'd been trying to let her have as normal a school year as he could, trying not to force himself on his wife any more than he could stand, believing all this time that she had been blaming him for all her misery.

Severus hadn't known about the visit to their bridal chamber. When Severus was downstairs, giving Narcissa and Lucius his thanks and informing them he and Hermione would be leaving, the Dark Lord had come down from the upper floor with a smug look on his face with both Bellatrix and Belinda hanging on each arm. Severus had bowed, giving his thanks and affirming that he'd be ready to open the school on time, to be run as the Dark Lord wished. The Dark Lord had been pleased, yet both Bellatrix and Belinda looked at him with expressions of smugness and suppressed envy, respectively. Severus had only assumed that Belinda had been jealous of Hermione, and thought nothing of it - until now. Apparently, both women knew what had transpired in the bridal suite. That galled him.

"Hermione," Severus said softly, trying to calm her enough to talk to her.

She was clinging to him, her face buried in his chest as she cried. "Yes?" she asked.

"Hermione, listen to me. You must get a hold of yourself."

He heard her sniff, and she wiped her cheeks on her sleeve. "Okay," she mumbled as she wiped her face again.

Severus fought back the revulsion he felt regarding her runny nose and the fact it'd been pressed against his coat. It was one of the things, among many actually, that he'd hated dealing with as Head of Slytherin House: crying females and their subsequent runny noses. Without thinking, he conjured a handkerchief and shoved it in her hand. "Here, now blow." He stood back and waited for her to compose herself. He flicked his wand to clean it for her, and she thanked him, dabbing the cloth to cease her tears, then blew her nose again.

Unfortunately, as all girls seemed to find it necessary to do, she held it out to him as if offering it back.

"Thank you," he said with a slight sneer as he vanished the offending piece of cloth. "Sit down." Severus leaned against the wardrobe, contemplating what he should do with his new information. *She is still too open to trust, yet she apparently needs to talk to me more often.* Dealing with her was going to be tricky. "First off, I know you're upset about the Dark Lord's actions toward you."

Hermione looked up at him expectantly, but he pressed on before she could talk. "He cannot give you the Dark Mark, Hermione. It would cause too much dissension among his Death Eaters. Surely you can realize that. He's playing with you. It's a ploy to unsettle you and keep you off balance. The times he's been affectionate toward you - he uses that ploy with the women, especially Bellatrix and Belinda. I've seen him use it on Narcissa, only she's too clever to be fooled."

"I realized that," Hermione stated, toying with her fingers in her lap.

"But you let it upset you," Severus stated. "Your best solution is to accept it as it is, bow before him and then shrug it off after you leave his presence." He watched her nod and wondered if she really understood him or was simply nodding in agreement or only that she'd heard him. "We'll leave off Occlumency lessons until tomorrow, if my night remains free. If not, later this weekend. But in the meantime, you are to practice emptying your mind and ridding yourself of your emotions." He watched her shoulders slump. "It's time for dinner, if you think you are up to it." She only nodded, rising out of the chair. He placed his hand on her shoulder, and she looked up. "Wash your face. Otherwise your friends will think I tortured you," he said, trying to make the comment sound light.

Hermione tried to give him a smile before she walked into the loo, obviously still upset. He couldn't open up to her, but he could at least form some kind of a relationship with her. He wondered if he really should. When the war was over, if it was ever over, and if he and Hermione survived, he still intended to give her the option of following her own dreams and having her own life. If after all Dumbledore's planning and scheming, his intricate strategies and maneuvering, the manipulations of the players as if they were chess pieces worked out, he, Severus, would give Hermione her freedom. Severus mused at the irony of it all. *Chess, it had been all a calculated strategy to Dumbledore. He, Dumbledore, the queen piece, had fallen, but the two kings, Potter and the Dark Lord, still maneuvered around the board.*

Severus walked down to his desk and pulled out the latest memorandums from the Ministry. Dolores Umbridge was once again causing him grief, this time backed up by the Death Eaters in the Ministry and the Death Eaters on the board of governors. The insipid woman hadn't even needed to be Imperiused; she was already fully aboard with the Dark Lord's desires and supportive of his followers. As the chairwitch of the Muggle-born Registration Commission, Dolores was busily instigating and actively implementing policies regarding Muggle-borns, developing the laws enabling the Death Eaters to round up Muggle-borns, snap their wands and send them to Azkaban. Her pamphlet, *Mudbloods and the Dangers They Pose to a Peaceful Pure-Blood Society*, which demonstrated her full support of the Dark Lord's regime, was supposed to be posted on the walls of Hogwarts. Something Severus was loath to do. Dolores also wanted her ridiculous decrees reinstated, and the Death Eaters among the school governors were making demands and issuing new rules in accordance; most Severus had been able to veto or shoot down as unnecessary.

The new Magical Education office at the Ministry wanted Severus' assurances that the new curriculum would meet the requirements for N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. exams come spring, and Severus had forwarded the concerns to the school governors. Likewise, Griselda Marchbanks and Professor Tofty from the Wizarding Examinations Authority were in an uproar about the new curriculum, demanding that, as Headmaster, Severus was responsible to assure that each course taught at Hogwarts had to reflect that which would be on the exams. Now, Dolores Umbridge wanted to rewrite the N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. exams to fit with the new curriculum, and Griselda Marchbanks and Professor Tofty refused to change the exams to meet the new curriculum. As Headmaster, Severus was called upon to justify the changes Professors Alec and Amycus Carrow had implemented, and it took all his skills of persuasion to support changes he himself hated. So far, only Muggle Studies and Defense Against the Dark Arts were the focus of the debates. Thankfully, Lucius Malfoy was on the board of governors again, and he was more than willing to attend the meetings.

Not only that, but the parents who'd always thought that education at Hogwarts was discretionary were now being denied home schooling and had been told that a Hogwarts education was compulsory, mandatory if their children were to be allowed to take N.E.W.T. and O.W.L. exams. This had caused a slight influx of students to enroll at both Hogwarts and Durmstrang, which wasn't a problem at Hogwarts because of all the Muggle-born students that had been removed from the school. But many of the new students were at different skill levels than their peers, making all the professors have additional tutorial lessons so that they could help these students catch up. Which, of course, the teaching staff had all been complaining about. The obvious option for the solution, more of Dark Lord's sympathizers or Death Eaters in the castle to fill in as tutors, which was something Severus really wanted to avoid happening. Six Death Eaters in residence, not counting himself and Cillian, was plenty in his opinion.

And the Dark Lord wanted updates on the new curriculum and how the new policies were working out.

He'd been swamped.

He sighed as Hermione entered his office. *And now I have to deal with her state of emotions without revealing too much to her.* "We are going to be late for dinner. Are you ready?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, at least looking more in control of herself than a few minutes ago.

"All right," he said as he rose. "Let's go."

~oOo~

Author's notes:

Okay, well, you wanted to know what Severus has been up to. Now you know.

Concatenate means to make into a whole by joining a system of parts; to link together; unite in a series or chain.

Strengthening Friendships

Chapter 20 of 43

Hermione has another failed Occlumency lesson, and Draco is being his usual pest. Plus Hermione finds herself in a few sticky situations and in the need to comfort a friend.

I owe some big hugs and much gratitude to Cocoachristy and MadBrillant for the beta read. You ladies are worth your weight in Godiva.

~o 20 o~

Strengthening Friendships

Hermione's Occlumency lesson really upset her. She couldn't stop berating herself for her lack of control. So, in true Hermione fashion, she sought the answer in books. She collected all the books she could on both Legilimency and Occlumency, and even any books she could find on meditation. Of course, the only books she could find on meditation were in the Divination section on opening the mind to 'be more receptive to the Inner Eye' and 'opening your awareness to the perceptiveness of Sight.' She sighed as she closed *Affirmations of Spiritual Magick Through Meditation* and added it to her pile. *I'll just write down the opposite of what these books say and see if it helps. Couldn't hurt any.*

So Draco wouldn't know what she was up to, she carried the lot up to the sitting room in the Headmaster's tower to tackle the problem she was having blocking Snape. During her breaks and after quickly eating lunch, Hermione raced with Cillian up to the tower and her books.

~*~

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~*~

Severus came back from another frustrating meeting with the Heads of Houses, regarding conflicts in the Quidditch schedule and the students' apprehension of having Death Eaters in the stands during practices. Apparently, Professor Slughorn had found out that the Death Eaters in the castle and in Hogsmeade had started taking bets on the house teams and had informed Professor McGonagall. The four Death Eaters, or the Dark Lord's house liaison officers as they were starting to call themselves, were also at the meeting, which greatly hindered any real discussions. Thankfully, Minerva was more concerned about the scheduling than upset by the presence of the Death Eaters, and they were able to resolve the scheduling, but not the matter of the Death Eaters.

When he entered his sitting room, he paused in the doorway. Hermione was sitting crossed-legged at the coffee table, making notations on a parchment, which was already at least four feet in length. She had at least a dozen books opened on the table, floor, and stacked up on the sofa behind her. He stood watching her. She was so

engrossed in her studies that she apparently didn't even know he was there.

Smiling, Severus turned and walked down to his office. He smirked as he selected a book from the shelves and sat down at his desk. He knew what she was working on, but it amused him that she'd revert to the scholastic approach rather than simply practice the techniques. The books would only get her so far, in the end she would have to learn how to suppress her emotions and empty her mind. It was a matter of discipline and practice not some theory one memorized from a book.

Finally, Severus looked up at his clock and sighed. Just as before, when he entered the sitting room, Hermione was still deeply engrossed in her books. "Hermione, it's time for bed," he said, walking over and holding out his hand.

She looked up, stress evident in her eyes. "I just have..."

"No," he said, pulling her to her feet. "Come with me." She grumbled, protested, and tried to resist, but he dragged her with him to the bedroom. A green night slip and robe were already laid out on the bed. Severus smiled as he began to disrobe, unconcerned that she was watching him strip. He put on his pajamas and turned to face her. "Do you need help?" he asked, amused.

"I'm not tired," she said. "I usually stay up revising on Fridays..."

"I know your schedule, and I know what you were working on. You're going about it all wrong," he said, forcing back the smirk he felt at her surprised look. "I recognized the books." He waited, watching her, and she started to squirm. He sighed and turned for the loo. *Even after all this, she still is uncomfortable with me.* A few minutes later, Hermione entered the loo, having changed into the night slip, and started brushing her teeth.

When she rinsed her mouth, he moved to stand behind her. He didn't speak, holding her in his arms against his chest. "Close your eyes," he said softly. "Don't speak. Don't ask questions. Just close your eyes." He was pleased to see her comply. "What do you see?"

"Red, orange in the middle, and black," she replied.

He smirked and waved his hand to lower the lights of the loo so, to her, the room would be practically dark. "And now?"

"Blackness," she replied.

He slid his fingers to her neck and leaned his head down so he could talk directly into her ear. "What do you feel?" he asked smoothly in his teaching voice. He felt her shiver.

"Nothing," she replied, but her breathing was slower and deeper than before.

"Liar," he purred in her ear, sliding his fingers so he could feel her pulse. "Tell me what you're feeling right now, your emotions."

He could still see her reflected in the mirror. Her chest was rising with her breath, and he could feel her pulse increase slightly. "Apprehension, a little nervous, vulnerable..." she listed off.

"Don't move, and don't open your eyes." He waited, his breath warming the side of her face as he watched her in the mirror. He stepped away from her, noting that she turned slightly and leaned back as he'd moved. "Now?"

"Cold," she said.

"Feelings what are you feeling?" he asked, forcing his voice to sound cold and hard. Hermione stiffened at his tone, and he could see the confusion in her expression. "I want you to stand still, and don't turn around. I'm going to hex you, and then release it." He watched as she braced herself for the worst. "Okay, now ready yourself." Severus waited, counting slowly. He reached forty before she opened her eyes a little. "Close them," he snapped. "Now, what were you feeling?"

"I was afraid of what you were going to do," she replied.

"Good. Now suppress it. Push the emotion aside, and force yourself to feel nothing," he said as he reached around her and picked up a toothbrush. He touched the end of the handle to the middle of her back to let her feel it on her skin. He adjusted his frame of mind so that he'd sound harsh and cold. "Suppress your fear, Hermione. It cannot help you. Push the fear down, box it, and push it away." He waited, counting again. He could see her struggling with her apprehension and fear of what he intended to do to her. "Ready?"

She nodded, biting her lip.

Severus moved, making his movement something she could hear. Hermione tensed. "Control your fear. Suppress your emotions," he snapped at her. He could tell she was trying. He stepped close to her and touched her shoulder blade with the lightest brush of the toothbrush handle. Hermione flinched, but her face remained calm. "You're afraid, apprehensive; I can see it in your face. Control your emotions." He stepped back, murmured softly, nearly inaudibly. Hermione stiffened again, and it took a while for her face to relax. Severus waved his hand, casting a nonverbal spell to illuminate the room.

Hermione turned around to face him.

"Not bad, but you still need improvement. You almost had control, but you let your fear and anxiety get the better of you," he said smoothly as he handed her the toothbrush.

"Y-you did..." she stammered, gazing at him before taking her toothbrush.

"Yes, and now you know. It's an ability you have to figure out for yourself." He sat down on the edge of the tub. "You won't find it in a book, Hermione. To be able control your emotions, to be able to Occlude me or him you have to figure out how to do it within yourself."

She nodded and laid the toothbrush down.

He could tell that she was pondering his words. "You already know everything that's in those books, and I know you could practically quote them to me. They can tell you what, but not how. The how, you have to figure out yourself with practice."

"It's just so hard," she said, lowering her head.

"Yes, it is. Otherwise, everyone would be able to do it." His gaze swept down her body, barely concealed by her slip, and admired the shape of her curves. He watched her until she looked up at him expectantly. He stood and walked over to her, reaching out to touch her hair. "Hermione, will you... will you let me?" He hated feeling so unsure, so vulnerable, but he wasn't going to assert himself if she didn't want him. "I know I just made you uncomfortable, so if you'd rather not..."

She looked up at him, so trusting and open, her gaze locking onto his. After what seemed like minutes, she smiled at him, and his heart skipped a beat. "Only if you kiss me," she said.

He moved slowly, cupping her face as he leaned forward. Tonight he wasn't going to rush; tonight he was going to savor her, every inch of her.

~o0o~

Saturday, Hermione woke up twisted up in blankets, arms, and legs. Snape was snoring softly against her breast. She shifted her arm, and he snorted, rolling slightly, but

also tightening his arm around her. She lay there as long as she could, but nature was against her having a nice, long lie in. She untangled herself, trying, unsuccessfully, not to wake him. "I'm sorry, I need to go the loo," she apologized. He grunted and rolled over. Hermione hurried through her morning ambulation and returned to the bedroom, only to find Snape dressing.

"I have a staff... member I need to see," he said, looking up. A parchment fell from his hand as he pulled on his boots. He snatched it quickly, but not before she saw the swirly feminine handwriting.

"Is there something wrong?" she asked, wondering who had written him this early in the morning.

"It's nothing. I'll see you at breakfast," he said, turning to go.

Hermione followed him to the door. "I want to see Luna this morning," she called after him. All she got was a dismissive wave. Sighing, she turned to get dressed.

Peren was waiting beside the bed, pulling out her clothes. "Mistress needs her potion," she said, pointing to the bedside table.

"Thanks, Peren." Hermione looked at her elf as she drank her morning potion. "Peren, are you able to get into the Ravenclaw common room?"

"Yes, mistress, I can go there," Peren said, tilting her head as she looked up at Hermione.

"Do you know my friend, Luna Lovegood?" Hermione asked.

Peren tugged her ear as she thought. "I don't know her, mistress, but Trinna might. I think she can tell Peren who is Luna Lovegood."

Hermione smiled. "If you would, I would like for you to tell Luna that I'd like to see her this morning."

Peren had popped out and back before she could finish dressing, bringing with her another house-elf who looked up at Hermione nervously. "This is Trinna, mistress. She says that Miss Lovegood is in the East Tower, bending."

"Bending?" Hermione asked, and both elves nodded. "Can you take me there?" Trinna nodded, turning quickly for the door to show Hermione the way.

"I should wait for Cillian," Hermione said as hurried after Trinna.

Trinna stopped and looked at her. "Does he want to go bend with miss and Miss Luna?" she asked, tilting her head at her confusion.

"I'm not sure if he'd want to... bend, but he is supposed to go wherever I go," she explained to the elf still unsure what Trinna meant by bending, but they were talking about Luna, so it could mean anything.

"He protects my mistress from the mean men," Peren told Trinna and then looked up at Hermione. "We will protect you, mistress."

Trinna nodded vigorously. "Peren and I will not let them harm you, miss. I know a way they do not."

Hermione followed the elves as Trinna led her. Twice she had to crawl through elf-sized openings in the wall behind tapestries, up several flights of a highly polished wooden staircase, and through a section of wall that looked like solid rock. By the time Trinna pointed to a door, bowed, and left, Hermione was completely turned around.

Luna was standing with her knees bent, her left leg wrapped around the right, and her arms twisted, bent at the elbows. "Hi. Are you here to do yoga with me?" she asked as if she'd been expecting Hermione's arrival. She untangled and shifted her position so that her right hand and right heel were firmly into the floor, and straightened her right leg, simultaneously lifting the left leg parallel to the floor and extended her left hand toward the ceiling. "This is the half moon pose."

Hermione smiled. She'd heard about yoga and immediately thought that learning it might help her. "Luna, isn't yoga a type of meditation specifically designed to help you relax? I think I read somewhere that yoga teaches being fully aware, but not thinking of anything, or closing off your emotions and thinking of only serenity and pretty places."

"Yes, yoga allows you to quiet the fluctuations of your mind. You practice the techniques of blanking out your mind and releasing oneself from conscious thinking by meditating."

"And that is supposed to help you control what you're thinking about. Can it help you control your emotions as well?" It looked hard, trying to empty your mind while standing in the position Luna was. She'd be trying to keep her balance and not think about falling or feeling any pain... *This might actually work!*

Luna straightened and faced Hermione, smiling. "Yes, and, of course, your breathing."

"Can you show me how?" Hermione asked, kicking off her shoes and pulling off her robes.

"Sure." Luna conjured a mat for her. "Just try to do like I do."

Half an hour later, Hermione was trying to fold herself while crossing her right leg around her left. "Luna, I really appreciate the instruction of how to relax my mind, but do we have to twist like this?" she asked.

"Well, you could simply sit crossed-legged, but where is the challenge in that?" Luna said as she stretched forward and balanced in a nearly impossible looking fashion.

Hermione did her best to copy Luna's pose, fighting against gravity and managing not to fall on her face. "I think I'd like to try the crossed-legged position for a while."

Later that morning, feeling stiff and sore, Hermione followed Peren back to the Headmaster's tower. Snape was sitting at his desk. "Where were you this morning? Cillian said he couldn't find you."

"I told you; I wanted to see Luna this morning..." she started to explain and paused as his expression became angry. "Peren and another house-elf took me to the East Tower to see her. We took a hidden way apparently known only to the house-elves... Nothing happened!"

"And you're lucky nothing did!" He swept his hand through his hair. "What do I have to do to impress on you that you are not to leave these rooms without an escort?"

"But Peren and Trinna both promised that they knew a way so that we wouldn't run into the Death Eaters. They took me through tunnels and back stairs. I didn't see anybody until we got to the room Luna was in!" she tried to explain.

He looked at her and wished she'd see it his way. "I know that the house-elves have pretty strong magic in their own right, but the Death Eaters are not going to care about elves."

Hermione turned away from him and then back. "I know they hate me that the Carrows would like nothing better than to hex me..."

"Kill you," he said coldly.

Her eyes widened in shock.

"Yes, kill you. And in a castle like this, accidents can happen. They have before, and I am trying to protect you. Cooperate with me!" He stood up. "It's time for breakfast."

Let's go."

He escorted her to breakfast and even asked her how her visit with Luna went. Hermione really wanted to wipe the smirk off his face when she told him about her attempt with yoga. After breakfast, Snape took her to their sitting room for her Occlumency lesson. However, the lesson didn't go any better than last time, even with the lesson Snape had given her in the loo and Luna's yoga session. She still found it nearly impossible to block him or control her emotions. After an hour, Hermione was still sore from bending and frustrated with her lack of control. Snape had simply told her to practice controlling her emotions and clear her mind, a phrase that was quickly becoming as irritating as it was apparently impossible for her to do.

Since Amycus Carrow was in the library with Travers and VanHalal, Hermione elected to visit with Ginny in her room until lunch, much to Cillian's annoyance, and went to watch the Gryffindor team practice in the afternoon, which he liked much better. When Hermione tried to go to Snape's room after dinner, Rowle, the Lestrangle brothers, Malfoy, Travers, MacCavish, the Carrows, and Avery were waiting in Snape's office. So Cillian prudently took Hermione to an empty classroom and allowed her to practice her spell work until bedtime.

Snape was in the sitting room reading when she walked in. "Hello," she said in greeting, heading for the bedroom.

He set the book down on his lap. "Hermione?"

She stopped and turned, her book bag falling off her shoulder, and she caught it in her hand, too tired to lift it back. "Yes?"

He looked at her and picked his book back up. "Good night," he said softly.

She tilted her head. "Good night, sir," she replied and trudged up to their room. Peren had drawn her a bath and had laid out her nightclothes. Hermione was too tired to bathe, sure that she'd fall asleep in the water and drown. She handed Peren her book bag and carried her night slip in the loo to clean up a bit. She stood in the tub, washed off, rinsed, then dried off, dressed, and headed to bed. She was asleep as soon as she closed her eyes.

On Sunday, Snape was gone when she woke up, and he left the table right after breakfast. Hermione spent the morning in the library, revising. Draco, apparently trying a different track, actually asked if he could sit with her before he sat down. At least he only had Goyle with him, who was struggling with his Muggle Studies assignment. Goyle finally asked Hermione about Muggle public transportation and post, and she did the best she could explaining it to him.

She begged Cillian to allow her to visit Hagrid after lunch to avoid Draco. Not that it did much good. Draco found her after an hour of helping Hagrid in the vegetable garden. The bad news was that he still had Goyle with him. "Oh, look, the Mud..." Goyle started to sneer before Draco glared at him. "Mud is on her face," he said instead.

Cillian simply sat up on his elbows with his legs crossed from where he was relaxing in the sun with Fang.

"What do you want, Malfoy?" Hermione asked, sitting back on her heels and brandishing a handful of Hagrid's radishes. "Don't tell me you're here to muck around in the mud." She could see Hagrid coming up from the greenhouses, bringing up a huge bag of dragon dung.

"Don't be ridiculous, Hermione. I came to see what you're up to," Draco said.

"Gardening, what does it look like?" she asked, tilting her head and lifting a hand to protect her eyes from the sun.

Goyle started to say something, and Draco shushed him.

"It's just like Herbology only outside," she said, pulling up another clump of radishes. "If you're not here to help you can go away."

"I don't muck around in the mud," Draco said.

"Oh, sod off," she said as she bent back to her work. "Just go away, Draco." She watched Draco scowl from the corner of her eye as she pulled out the last of the radishes. Cillian just rolled on his side, and Fang rolled over, hoping to get his stomach scratched. Goyle knelt down and picked up a clod of dirt. "Just pull out the weeds."

He looked at her skeptically. "I'm not going to weed anything," he sneered.

Hermione laughed softly. "Fine, go on your way, then." She sat up and pointed to a trowel. "Would you please hand me the trowel before you go?" Goyle was staring at the trowel, and Draco was looking at her as if he couldn't believe what she was saying. "Fine. Don't strain yourself." She reached for the tool, still slightly out of her reach.

"Oi, Malfoy, Goyle, wha' you doin' here?" Hagrid asked, hands on his hips and trying to glower at them.

Draco tossed her the trowel. "Watching Granger gardening, what else?"

"If you're here to give her a hard time, ya can clear out," Hagrid said firmly.

"So which ones are the vegetables?" Draco asked, and both Hermione and Goyle looked at him in shock.

Hermione's head dropped, and she sighed. This meant that she had the dubious pleasure of Draco and Goyle's company for the afternoon without her wand. At least they hadn't hexed her yet. She looked at Cillian, who was trying to hide his smirk by looking at Fang rolling on the grass next to him.

Hermione resigned herself to the fact that the guys were not going to leave her alone. "These are the beets, then peas, broccoli, cabbages, and squashes. Right, Hagrid?"

"Just follow the markers," Hagrid said, eyeing Goyle as he pulled up a weed. "An' don't pull out the vegetables."

"Isn't there a spell for this?" Draco asked, and Cillian barked out a laugh, holding up his hand to wave him off when Draco turned to face him.

Hermione laughed as she continued weeding. "No. You don't have to whip out your wand for everything, you know," she said, smiling as she realized she'd quoted Mrs. Weasley.

Goyle ripped out another weed and tossed it at the rubbish heap. He sat back on his heels and tried to badger Hermione as she worked or drilled her with questions about Muggle stuff, appliances, electricity, and such. But at least he was nicer to Hagrid than he'd ever been before.

Draco simply sat on the grass and watched. After a while, Goyle started hexing bugs, and Draco had started complaining, asking if she was finished yet.

"You can leave at any time, Mr. Malfoy," she said, hoping that they'd leave. Hermione ignored Draco as she continued, chatting with Hagrid as they worked, until her knees and back were hurting. "Hagrid, I think I've done what I can do."

Hagrid looked up and smiled. "Ya nearly finished me job for me! I really appreciate the help."

"No problem, Hagrid," she said, wiping her hands off on a rag he'd offered her. "I'm glad to do it. It was a nice diversion. I'll see you at dinner, all right?"

"Yeah, all right," Hagrid said as Cillian walked up with his wand drawn.

Hermione turned just as Cillian cast a cleaning charm. "Eh, thanks."

"No problem. Shall we go?" he said, stowing his wand. "Hagrid, it's been entertaining. Good night."

"Mr. Gwynek, thanks for lettin' her come," Hagrid said, wiping his hands.

Hermione bristled as she stormed off.

Draco caught up to her first. "I can't believe you wanted to grovel in the dirt with that oaf," he said as they walked up to the castle.

Hermione stopped and turned, facing him with her fists on her hips. "Professor Hagrid isn't an oaf," she snapped at him irritably, "and it's called gardening. Or are you too high and mighty to have an herb garden? I know your Manor house has to have gardens."

"House-elves and garden-elves ever heard of them?" Draco said sarcastically, and Goyle sniggered.

"Figures," she sighed as she stormed off.

Draco opened the door and watched as Hermione walked in. "So, what are you going to do now?"

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. "Clean up and go revise in the library."

"Sounds good to me," Draco said, and Goyle groaned.

Hermione groaned too.

~o0o~

Wednesday in the *Daily Prophet*, the Muggle Registration Commission announced its progress in rooting out unwanted Muggles from wizarding society. The new regulations were apparently a huge success, according to Dolores Umbridge. A large picture in the center of the page showed Umbridge smiling smugly, standing proudly alongside several other wizards from the Ministry. Hermione recognized Ellidora Saldivar as the witch who'd been at Grimmauld Place for a few Order meetings, standing between a Michael Castillo and the new Minister, Pius Thicknesse. Percy Weasley was standing just behind the shoulders of the new Minister and a wizard Hermione recognized from the fight in the Department of Mysteries. A quick look at the caption identified him as Devon Yaxley. The article under the picture stated that Umbridge was still holding the title of Undersecretary for the Minister of Magic, head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission, as well as chairwitch for the Magical Preservation Society, and Yaxley was a member of the Muggle-born Registration Commission in charge of Muggle Infiltration Defense. Hermione set down the paper with a feeling of disgust.

"Anything good?" Ginny asked with a sarcastic glint in her eye as she picked up the paper. She stared at the front page, her eyes narrowing, and her forehead creasing. "Of all the... Just like when she was teaching two jobs at once, and heading a society and probably only doing them half-arsed!"

"Watch it, Gin," Hermione warned her as MacCavish turned to look at them. Both Ginny and Neville glanced at him and quickly turned their heads. "Talk about another one with too much of a self-superiority complex!" Those around her started snickering.

After breakfast, they walked as slowly as they dared to Muggle Studies. Hermione dreaded the class, mostly because she was constantly picked on and belittled by Alecto Carrow. Hermione had yet to think of the wizard as a true professor, because in her book, any teacher that deliberately taught lies was no teacher at all.

Alecto was standing at the front of the room as they entered. Hermione noticed that she'd hung nineteen full-color posters on the wall, the wizard sort since the ones with clouds and trees in them moved. She took her seat and wondered what lies Alecto had in store for them today. Alecto made a grand sweep of her arm, indicating the posters on her wall. "The nineteen wonders of the world were wizard made. Seven of these the Muggles claim were made by them they were not."

Hermione groaned and started taking notes.

"These Seven Wonders of the Ancient World," she said, pointing to the posters on the left wall, "were the first known remarkable man-made creations of classical antiquity. The ancient Greeks chose seven of the great achievements and wrote guidebooks on them, which became popular among Hellenic sightseers, and only includes works located around the Mediterranean rim. It is well known that the number seven was chosen because the Greeks believed it to be magical."

Hermione ducked her head down to hide her smile. *At least she got that right.*

"However, ancient texts were wrong on one very important fact. These Seven Wonders of the World were wizard made. The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World are the first known list of the most remarkable wizard-made creations of classical antiquity. Without wizard ingenuity, these great wonders would not have been created as it took the creativity and knowhow of the greatest wizards of the age to erect. Although history indicates that a vast number of slave labor was used, wizards created and devised the ideas, presented it to their kings and leaders. Wizards in these ancient times were revered, almost equated to gods in their importance..."

Hermione suppressed a groan. *Here she goes...*

"... even though they do not stand today, records of our ancestral brilliance was carefully recorded." Alecto started to pace in front of the class to ensure that everyone was writing down her comments. "Even the Dark Lord recognizes the importance of the number seven ... There are now several very well written and documented journals from curse breakers on the pyramids and the tombs of the great wizards of Egypt." She turned to walk to the front of the class.

Hermione dipped her quill and continued her notes on Alecto's lecture.

Alecto stopped right in front of Hermione's desk. "So, Mrs. Snape, care to enlighten us on just how these feats were accomplished?"

Hermione looked up and tried to look as confused and innocent as she could. She knew how the archeologists explained how they'd been created, not that she'd dare say it to Alecto. Hermione's father had loved the ancient works and monuments, and he had taken the family to see many of the historical sites around the Mediterranean rim on holiday. "I'm not sure, ma'am," she said as politely as she could.

Draco raised his hand. "Yes, Mr. Malfoy," Alecto said, smiling warmly at Draco.

"I remember reading about a wizard designing the pyramids and the chambers under them. My father has a book we've donated to the library for you."

"Yes, he did, and we thank him for the loan of his precious books," she said with an indulgent smile before turning and waving her hand, indicating the posters on the wall. "These are some of *our* greatest achievements."

Hermione turned to Draco and quietly whispered, "Thank you for that."

"No problem," he whispered back. "You should read it, you know. It's a copy of a very old tome on Egyptian wizards."

"Mrs. Snape, care to enlighten us on the origins of the Great Sphinx?"

Hermione looked up aghast. "No one knows. Everything written about the Great Sphinx is speculation..."

Alecto narrowed her eyes, crossed her arms, and tapped her fingers in annoyance. "You expect me to believe that the resident Know-It-All doesn't know doesn't even have a theory?"

Hermione swallowed her nervousness under the irate professor's glare. "I read that the Great Sphinx predates the pyramids, but there isn't any evidence on whom

actually..."

"Liar!" Alecto snapped, slapping both of her hands on her desk. "Your name appeared on every one of the lender's cards in the books I confiscated on ancient Egypt. I know that you could tell me what they said from memory."

"I don't know who built it, but I know that the Great Sphinx has the face of pharaoh Khafra..." Hermione said as Alecto glared at her. She forced herself to breathe normally. "I saw a documentary on an archeologist, de Lubicz, who talked about water erosion of the Sphinx, indicating that it dated back five thousand years to the Early Dynastic Period, and another man, I think his name is... Smooch, no, Schoch, a professor of geology and natural science..."

"How dare you talk about Muggle lies in my class!" Alecto snarled as she stood up. "Twenty points from Gryffindor." She smiled benignly. "Every Gryffindor will write me an essay on the origins of the great monuments of Egypt due next week."

Neville reached over and squeezed her knee. "It's all right; I always wanted to know everything there is in the library on the Sphinx."

"Ten more points, Mr. Longbottom," Alecto said from across the room. "For interrupting my lecture."

Hermione wanted to bang her head on the desk, but wouldn't give Alecto the satisfaction.

If Muggle Studies was aggravating, Defense was downright torture. Amycus Carrow had started teaching the use of the body modifying hexes and jinxes, demonstrating them on Hermione, Lavender, Neville, and Seamus, which made all the Gryffindors angry and the Slytherins snicker. Amycus paired everyone off, matching Nott with Lavender, Goyle with Seamus, and Draco with Neville, which left Hermione standing facing Crabbe. By the end of class, she'd been hit with both the Barnacle Hex and Wart-horn Hex and had to spend the rest of the day in the hospital wing.

~o0o~

When Hermione arrived to lunch the next day, she found out from Seamus that Rowle, Travers, and MacCavish had been trying to weed out which seventh-years might be up for the Dark Lord's recruitment. He was proud to say that not one Gryffindor had indicated any interest, but Michael Corner had said that there were two in Ravenclaw that had.

Hermione followed Ginny and Neville up to Gryffindor tower with Cillian following in their wake. She plopped down on the couch by the fire and sighed in contentment. Being in the Gryffindor common room was like being home, even with her bodyguard sitting at her side in an armchair he'd pulled over from a table.

Jack Sloper walked over and tossed a copy of the *Daily Prophet* on her lap. "Why is it that you get to be here and Colin can't?" he asked, crossing his arms.

Hermione sat up and turned to look at him. "I'm here because I was sent here..."

"You are a Muggle-born everybody knows it, and yet you haven't registered for the Muggle Registration Commission," Jenny Wang stated, standing next to Jack.

Hermione was confused. "I have no idea I'm sure I'm registered. Professor Snape would have..." She turned to look at Cillian, who only shrugged.

"I don't know if you are or not. The Dark Lord knows about you, so that's all that matters where you're concerned," Cillian said nonchalantly.

"And you!" Sloper turned on Seamus, who was sitting at the other end of the couch with Ginny, reading one of the books Draco's dad had donated to the library. Seamus looked up, his expression like someone who felt like a cornered chicken. "We all know you're dad's a Muggle Lavender told us you'd said so. Your father is a Muggle, and your mum's a witch. You told everyone your first year."

Seamus, Ginny, and Hermione turned around to glare at Lavender, who buried her face in her hand and leaned over her essay.

Seamus turned to face his accusers. "I had to register! Just like everyone did."

"But anyone with a Muggle parent wasn't allowed back in school. How'd you get in?" Jack asked.

Seamus jumped to his feet and told Jack to 'bugger off,' then stomped off to his room. Ginny and Neville jumped to their feet, told Jack to mind his own business, and ran after Seamus.

"He's a half-blood!" Jack shouted after them, then turned on Hermione. "And you you're a Muggle-born!"

"I know that! So does everybody, apparently," Hermione snapped, immediately regretting her reaction. She stood and faced Jack. "Jack, what's this all about? What's happened? Why..."

"They attacked their house!" Jenny said, tears starting to roll down her face.

Hermione reached out and touched her arm. "Whose house?" She had an idea, but hoped she was wrong. *Jenny and Colin were good friends...*

"Colin and Dennis!! They were attacked!" Jenny cried, her tears now streaming down her cheeks.

Hermione grasped both of the girl's arms. "Who told you? How do you know?"

Jack handed Hermione a page torn out of *The Sun*. Colin had written a note on a page of the paper, which showed a picture of a house burning. Hermione quickly scanned the article. "He got out! He's okay." She sighed with relief, but Jenny was sobbing uncontrollably. Hermione took her in her arms and held her. "It's okay. It says that they got out Colin, Dennis, and his dad are all right!"

Cillian handed Jenny a handkerchief. "He's on the run now. They found his house. It was protected by the Ministry, and now he's in hiding."

"You will hear from him, I know it. Colin's a tough little guy, and he, his brother and father go camping all the time! He'll be fine," Hermione tried to reassure her.

"You think so?" Jenny asked, ceasing sobbing, although a few tears still escaped down her cheek.

"Yes, I know so," Hermione said. "Don't blame Seamus for Colin. It's not his fault. And if Colin was here instead of Seamus, and Seamus' house was attacked, he wouldn't blame anyone but Voldemort."

Cillian hissed and glared at her. Jenny nodded, and Jack dropped his arms and sighed. "You're right," Jack said, his shoulders sagging.

"Now excuse me, okay?" Hermione turned and hurried after her friends, Cillian right behind her. Hermione stopped on the landing and held up her hand. "What do you think I'm gonna do fly out of the window? I'm just going to see if Seamus is all right, then I'll come back down. Okay?"

Cillian glared at her, then shrugged. "Fine. Don't be long. If I see any sheets tied together hanging out of the window Severus is going to lose a wife because I'll kill you myself!"

"No climbing out of the window, I promise." Hermione entered the room, and Seamus walked over to her. "Did you tell him?"

"Tell him what?" Hermione asked.

"About me mum and dad," Seamus asked, crossing his arms.

"I didn't say anything!" she exclaimed. "Seamus, I haven't said anything about anyone's parentage! Who am I to accuse anyone of their blood or lineage?" Hermione reached out and laid a hand on his. "Jenny and Jack got a message from Colin saying that his house was attacked. Jenny is upset they both are but not at you. This whole thing, the Muggle-born registration it's preposterous and has everyone scared for their friends, that's all." Hermione let go of his hand as Seamus dropped his arms. "So, you had to register? Was it bad?"

"Look, yes, I lied on my registration well, sort of lied!" he confessed. "I found out that my mum lied to me or she's now lying to everyone else and is claiming that my dad... She said my father isn't my legitimate dad, okay? Happy?"

Hermione sat down at the foot of one of the beds, Ginny clung to a bedpost, and Neville sat on the foot of a bed on the other side as Seamus paced. "Look, I was afraid this summer, the raids and all. We were hit, taken to the Ministry, and my mum told them that my father isn't my father but a stepdad a bloody stepdad," he said, pacing a few times then fell to his knees in the middle of the room. "She said that she didn't know who my real father was because she was raped by a Death Eater and didn't know him. They believed her. Gods, I don't know if it's true or not because she's sticking to her story! I'm so afraid afraid that she's telling the truth or that she's not, and they will find out! And that Cillian he's one of them if he finds out..."

"He won't not from me," Hermione said, slipping to the floor beside him. "Besides, they must have believed your story you're here."

"Yeah, mate, you're safe here," Neville said, sitting next to Seamus and putting a hand on his shoulder. "As long as your mum and dad are okay, that is. Are they?"

Seamus nodded. "I think so."

"Where's your dad?" Ginny asked from where she clutched a bedpost.

"Germany," Seamus said softly. "We have friends there, and my dad speaks the language well enough. Mum forged papers and a passport, and he got a job over there..."

"So, your family is okay then?" Hermione asked, and Seamus shrugged noncommittally.

"I think Dad is, for now. But Germany isn't that far away. And Mum is being watched," he said.

Hermione gave his hand a squeeze. "I'm sure they're all right. Think positive and hopefully all this will come to a head soon, and the war will be over."

Seamus turned and looked at her, then suddenly hugged her. "Thank you." Hermione hugged him back.

"Careful, mate! She's married to Severus Snape not that he's the jealous type or anything... but he's a Death Eater and wicked smart when it comes to curses and potions," Neville said, patting Seamus on the back. "Hate to have you poisoned or anything."

Seamus looked up at him and made a weak smile. "Thanks all of you."

~o0o~

Hermione returned to the Headmaster's suite from double Herbology to find Peren upset that Crookshanks had escaped from the Headmaster's tower. Peren was really distraught, threatening to slam her ears in the door for letting the cat escape. Hermione adamantly forbid Peren from hurting herself. "He probably just got confused and wandered to the Gryffindor tower. It was his home for six years, after all. Tell Cillian to meet me there," Hermione said, cast a quick cleaning charm on her robes and hurried out the door to go get her cat.

As Hermione rounded the corner on the seventh floor, she nearly collided with MacCavish who was standing in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady, threatening to damage her canvas if she wouldn't allow him in. "You," he snapped at Hermione before she had a chance to back away unnoticed.

"Yes," she replied, suddenly realizing she was alone. Violet hurriedly left the portrait, and the Fat Lady tried to tuck herself into the side of her frame.

"What is the password?" he snarled, walking up to her.

She knew that Neville changed the password each night to keep him out, but wasn't sure if MacCavish knew this or not. "It's brunnera folli," she said as he advanced on her.

"Liar," he spat. Hermione backed up, seeing Crabbe enter the hall. "That was last night's. I want today's."

"If it's not, then I don't know it either," she insisted, feeling a sense of both relief and annoyance as Draco scooted to a halt a few feet away.

"Malfoy, Crabbe, what are you two doing here?" MacCavish snarled. "Slumming are we?"

"Granger, come here," Malfoy snapped. "For your information, MacCavish, I was told to. That's all you need to know."

"Spoilt prat you are, Malfoy," MacCavish said, turning on Draco. Hermione eased away from MacCavish, although that meant getting closer to Crabbe. "You don't have Daddy here, boy, to stand up for you."

"I don't need my father to stand up for me, MacCavish. I'm capable of handling things myself." Draco stepped further into the corridor. "Granger. Here. Now." Other Gryffindors were beginning to congregate in the corridor, but no one was willing to go near the Fat Lady with MacCavish standing so close to her.

"What is going on here?" Snape asked, forcing his way through the crowd. Cillian was only a few steps behind him, forcing his way through the students too.

"Snape, I was just asking your wife what the password is when Malfoy and Crabbe showed up," MacCavish stated.

Snape looked from Hermione to Draco and Crabbe and back to MacCavish slowly, his face stony. "I fail to see why, MacCavish, you'd need the password at this time of day when the students are mostly finishing classes and getting themselves ready for dinner. Whom did you wish to see so urgently it couldn't wait until dinner?" he asked smoothly.

MacCavish looked over the crowd of faces. "I was looking for the seventh years," he said gruffly.

"Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Finnegan, come here," Snape called out over everyone's heads. A murmur broke out as everyone turned to look around for Neville and Seamus. "It appears, MacCavish, that Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Finnegan are not present. Unless, of course, you were referring to Miss Brown, Miss Enfield, or Miss Patil."

MacCavish eyed Snape suspiciously, his hand clenching and unclenching in annoyance. "I have my directions, and I wanted to talk to the seventh years," he stated again. "Why is that boy always changing the password?"

"It's what the prefects do, MacCavish. They change the passwords so that only those who are in the house know how to get into the dorm rooms," Snape said coolly.

"What are you doing here then?" MacCavish asked defiantly.

Snape straightened, standing with his shoulders back, his hands holding the edges of his robes as he slowly crossed his arms. "I was informed that my wife was on her way here to see her friend, Miss Weasley," he said smoothly. "And as you can see, here she is." Hermione walked over to his side, but Snape never took his eyes off of

MacCavish. "Mr. Malfoy, will you please escort Mrs. Snape to my office. If you see Miss Weasley on the way, take her as well."

Hermione bristled under his tone, wanting to get in the Gryffindor tower to search for Crookshanks. "But I..."

"Now," Snape's voice wasn't a whisper, but it was so low to nearly be inaudible to anyone not standing as close to him as she was. He turned to the first Gryffindor standing closest to him. "You! Go find Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Finnegan. Inform them that Mr. MacCavish would like a word." The girl, a second year, nodded and took off running.

Draco reached out and tugged on Hermione's sleeve. "C'mon, let's go."

Hermione could see Snape and Cillian still talking to MacCavish as the students starting filing in through the portrait hole. Reluctantly, she followed Draco.

"You like getting into trouble, don't you?" Draco said when they were out of earshot.

"Pardon me?" she asked, still worried about Crooks.

"You heard me," he said. Hermione was stunned. There wasn't a trace of sarcasm or sneering in his tone. "Why'd you go running off? Haven't you been told that you're not well liked around here? How many times do you need to run into these guys to realize they don't like you? Or don't you remember what they did to you?"

Hermione gasped, realizing he was referring to the night she'd landed at Snape's feet. She didn't want to admit that she didn't remember much of what happened that night. "They..." she started to say and closed her mouth. "It was dark and they had their masks on."

"Not according to my dad. But having the Cruciatus used on you repeatedly can really make it hard to see straight, I imagine. Or the Extremus Gelidus, that's MacCavish's favorite one. He likes seeing his victims' skin turn blue." Draco's jaw clenched and relaxed as he walked along beside her.

Hermione grimaced too, remembering watching Draco's reaction to the spell when she'd watched his defense lesson at Snape's house.

"Or should I remind you of their... other diversions and entertainments," he added, and she felt the blood drain from her face.

Draco grabbed her elbow to steady her. She steadied herself and pulled her arm from his grasp. "I just don't get why..."

"Why what?" Draco sneered. "Why they hate you? *You represent everything they are against! What part of that don't you understand?*"

"I realize that they hate Muggle-borns. You do too, as I recall. But I can't help what I am," Hermione said, shaking her head. "I don't know why they are here, especially since the girls are all uncomfortable with them."

"They are here for recruiting," Draco said as he followed her down the stairs.

"Intimidation and lecherous behavior won't gain many to trust them enough to be recruited," she pointed out, stopping at the stone gargoyle. "You do know that the girls are all complaining about their behavior toward them?" Draco didn't answer her. Hermione shook her head. "Verbiascumn," she told the gargoyle and trudged up the stairs, fully aware that Draco followed her. She sat down on a chair staring at the Sorting Hat and Sword on the top of the bookshelf behind Snape's desk. "You do know that it's a blind prejudice, don't you? I mean, I didn't ask to be a witch, it is just something that I am. I didn't really even know I was a witch until I got my Hogwarts letter. I knew I could do magic and all, but I just thought it was psychokinetic or telekinetic ability."

"What is that?" Draco asked.

"How Muggles explain unusual abilities. Well, unusual for them. Making things happen with your mind like, distorting or moving objects, bending things, changing its color, starting fires, making things enlarge or vanish, all the stuff I was doing when I was a kid." She turned to look at Draco. "I started reading everything I could on the paranormal, trying to figure out what I was doing and why."

"You could do it because you're a witch," Draco stated, confused.

"But no one told me I was a witch until I was eleven," she said. "You've known your whole life you're a wizard. Imagine not knowing, having to rationalize out why you did stuff, and your parents didn't have the answers. Imagine having your brussel sprouts shoot across the room and out the window, and your mum getting angry because you didn't eat them. Or how about having your hair turning blue because you hate how it looked one day, or setting fire to the bath water because you didn't want to take a bath, or making the neighbor's dog's legs shrink so it couldn't chase you anymore, or moving the car a few inches so you could get your ball back. At school, I made a toy truck hit a boy that was bullying me, made the red paint squirt all over Jack Nelson because he teased me about my painting. I made the erasers fly across the classroom, bent the bowl of a silver spoon so it would fit in a container, and melded the crayons back together when John Tiswell broke them. I remember playing dodge ball, and the ball would jet off away from me without touching me. And when someone saw me do that, they called me a freak and ran away because it's not considered normal."

Draco shrugged.

"Because to you, all of this *is* normal," she said, trying to make him understand. "I saw some boys throwing water balloons at Jenny's cat and made the balloons all burst in their faces. I was startled in the greengrocer by a man and made several cans erupt all over him, coating him in tomato paste. I made books, toys, or the cookie jar fly to me when I was frustrated that I couldn't reach them. I slammed doors from across the room, made glass shatter, broke a vase without touching it, and made things fall off shelves or the mantel, just because I was angry. I made the toaster fly into the dishwasher once from across the kitchen because the toast was burning, and I was afraid of the smoke. I levitated my bed when I had nightmares, could light candles by wanting them to, and my parents didn't know why I could do these things. For you it was easy you had explanations. I didn't."

Draco was quiet as he listened to her. "What did your parents do?"

"Tried to teach me to control my temper so I wouldn't do those things," she said. "What else could they do? In the end, I think they were relieved when Mrs. Bakalchuk came to the house with my Hogwarts letter and the pamphlet from the Ministry explaining it all. They were glad I was coming here, to a place where I could learn to control my abilities."

Draco looked away from her, staring at the wall. When he didn't say anything for a while, Hermione figured he just felt she was nutters and believed the things Professor Carrow said in Muggle Studies. "I'm hungry," she said, breaking the silence. "Should we go to the Great Hall?"

"Yeah," he said, getting up quickly, leading the way out. Draco was quiet all the way to the Entrance Hall. "I did some of those things too."

"But you had parents that knew why you were doing them. Your mum didn't try to come up with explanations of scientific reasoning, and tell you to suppress it, that you were *unique*, did she?" Hermione asked. "That you were bad *foracting out* and not just crying like a normal kid."

Draco pulled her to the side to let others pass. "It's the same for us. My parents scolded me for doing things."

Hermione snorted a laugh. "Right, like you weren't praised when you started showing magical abilities? Draco, what I wouldn't have given to have been told at three that..."

"Three?" he asked incredulously. "You were doing magic at three?"

"Yes, three. Little things, like making objects come to me, move away, or fly. I used to make my toys move," she said, wondering why he was surprised. "I used to frighten the babysitters so much that my parents had a hard time finding people to sit with me when they went out."

He was looking at her oddly. "Let's get inside," he said turning to go. He held the door for her and walked off toward the Slytherin table without saying anything more to her.

~o0o~

For the next two weeks, reports of more attacks, Muggle-borns being brought in to the Ministry for questioning, or being arrested were reported in the *Prophet*. Luna and Ginny were hanging around Hermione more, either in the library or the Headmaster's suite. Neville was more subdued, and Seamus was spending his free time with Neville and the girls. Jack Sloper, Janilynn Waithe, and Jenny Wang were really sorry for what happened, Jenny most of all, and they were frequently seen with Neville and Seamus whenever possible with their schedules. Breanna Enfield joined them frequently as well. In all appearances, Jack and Jenny had made friends with Ginny and they were seen frequently together or with friends her friends.

Seamus was also seen frequently in the corridors or in the library with Geraldine Smothers. Gerald Summerby and Ernie Macmillan from Hufflepuff, and Terry Boot and Michael Corner from Ravenclaw were frequently hanging out with Hermione, Neville, and Seamus. Neville was seen holding hands and talking to Hannah, and Susan joined them frequently. Occasionally with Terry Boot, Michael Corner, and Claudia Ramirez, a pretty Spanish girl from Ravenclaw, who was rumored to be seeing Gerald, were seen hanging around Hannah and Neville as well.

Luna was appearing to be getting quite friendly with Michael Corner, and Susan, it was rumored, was seeing Terry. All in all, it appeared to be nothing more than budding romances between houses and new friendships developing, except Hermione was starting to see a pattern. And if she was, she was certain then that Cillian was seeing it too, although she had no idea if he knew the significance of the pairings.

She drafted a note to Neville, passing it to him in Herbology, telling him that he and Seamus were not playing the spy game very well if she could easily see what they were up to.

The following week, her friends were obviously trying to be much more discreet, although the new pairs of boyfriends and girlfriends were still seen frequently enough. Hermione knew that neither Seamus nor Neville had given up on the DA, but in all appearances, they were just making it look as if everyone now had friends and girlfriends, or boyfriends, in other houses.

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Author's notes:

Things are getting worse outside of Hogwarts, although they aren't any better in the castle either.

Sorry this took so long to update. I've been busy I know typical excuse and really just needed a rainy day to sit down and type!

It's Starting To Escalate

Chapter 21 of 43

Hermione is still dealing with the difficulties and tribulations of being the only Muggle-born at Hogwarts. Draco starts to have a few troubles of his own, and Cillian and Severus have to save Hermione from Alecto, again.

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It's Starting To Escalate

Severus could hardly believe that it was three weeks into October. The time had flown by for him, especially considering all the stress he'd had to deal with between the Carrows, his fellow Death Eaters, Minerva, his staff, and Umbridge all having conflicting views regarding how he should run the school.

Thankfully, the Dark Lord was preoccupied as of late, running the Ministry from the comfort of Malfoy Manor. However, in the last three weeks, there had been only a few problems that he'd needed to address in the castle, relatively speaking, except for the recruitment tactics of MacCavish, Travers, and Rowle. Lucius Malfoy, Rabastan Lestrangle, and Thaddeus Nott would have been better choices for recruiters. But Severus was secretly pleased with the Dark Lord's appointment; their strong-arm tactics and lustful natures meant that few of the students were being swayed to join the ranks. Unfortunately, VanHalal was having better success if Severus were to believe his claims. Severus had hoped that his Slytherins were smarter than that, more aware of what the Dark Lord had become to fall for the false promises and empty flattery.

He glanced up at the young woman revising at the coffee table in front of him. Her books and parchments were spread out across the surface of the table and the floor next to her. He admired her dedication to her studies, and when he reviewed her essays, he noted that she was finally starting to extrapolate, hypothesize, summarize, and theorize in her own words, using the quotations of the books to substantiate and support her opinions rather than simply regurgitate what she'd read. It had only taken Severus six years to get her to start thinking for herself, and he credited his occasional discussion with her in the quiet hours of the evening in the sitting room, on those rare occasions when Hermione would put her books aside. *If it hadn't been for the need to keep up pretenses during her earlier years, I'd have taken her aside and taught her years ago*, he lied to himself. Now if she'd spend more time focusing on suppressing her feelings and controlling her emotions, he could teach and train her to be a formidable witch. But she couldn't block him, let alone be able to block the Dark Lord, and that was too much of a risk.

The fact was, Hermione's Occlumency lessons were slowly driving him to frustration. She could do it, he knew it, but she lacked the ability to close off her emotions, to suppress them. Severus had kept trying the tactic that he'd used in the loo, using his worse 'professor tone' on her; he was cold, sneering, and as intimidating as he could be toward her. He'd had a large wardrobe brought in that had a boggart housed in it, more for effect and it's constant rattling. It also unnerved Hermione, he assumed, knowing that at any moment he could allow the boggart to escape. She was learning to control her fear, but could not completely suppress it. She was improving; her ability to switch memories at will was impressive, lightning quick, and growing stronger. Nevertheless, by exerting enough effort, he could still break into her mind and find memories he knew she'd rather he didn't know about.

Severus turned to look at the night sky through the window. Outside of the castle, the war raged on. Severus was not as valuable to the Order as he'd previously been, not that they trusted him anymore since Dumbledore's death, well, most all of them at any rate. Regardless, he had very little to report. His role had changed the day Draco had succeeded in bringing in Death Eaters and that rangy beast Greyback into the castle protect the students.

Severus picked up his copy of the *Sorcerer's Sun*. Since the fall of the Ministry, the *Daily Prophet* had become little more than a Ministry propaganda publication. The *Prophet*, as well as the Muggle papers that Dumbledore had subscribed to, which continued to arrive daily, had been reporting on the thunderstorms, increased lightning activity, and hail throughout the country as unusual natural occurrences. Severus was well aware that Miss Lovegood was giving Hermione a copy of *The Quibbler* weekly

to read because he would find the paper on her bedside table. There seemed to have developed a sort of silent agreement between them; he allowed the paper, and Hermione didn't say anything when she saw him reading it.

But it was dangerous to allow her to have them *The Quibbler* was telling the truth. So was Ireland's paper, the *Sorcerer's Sun*. Aaronold Southfield, the chief editor of the *Sun*, and Xenon Lovegood, editor of *The Quibbler*, were both reporting that the lightning storms had frequently been Death Eaters firing spells from their brooms in the sky, as had been the occurrences of the destructive hail storms. The tornados that the *Prophet* and Muggle papers had been reporting along the coast were not the mini-tornados that were common for the late summer season, but had actually been destruction caused by giants that had been let loose on seaside villages. The strange flu that was baffling the Muggle doctors that seemed to take whole families in one night were in fact vampire attacks, and Severus knew that Hermione knew that the wolf attacks that had been reported could be attributed to Greyback and his pack of werewolves.

Severus looked up when he heard the soft pop of a house-elf's Apparation, closing his eyes as he slowly counted to ten, hoping that it was Peren and not another message from Sybill Trelawney. That witch was driving him batty. She was sending him notes more frequently now, saying the same thing: the Dark Lord was coming to the castle, Hermione Granger was in grave danger, strife and suffering were going to happen at Hogwarts, and he, Severus, was going to die. He could bloody well tell the woman all of that, and *he* didn't need a crystal ball, cards, or bloody tea leaves to know this.

He looked at Hermione as she looked up at him and smiled, and the corner of his lips pulled back in response. They held eye contact for only a second until she turned to pick up a book that lay between them. He wanted to move down the sofa and touch her hair, feel the soft curls under his fingertips. He knew it would distract her, though, and he needed to let her complete her essays and revise. He also knew that she'd stay up all hours with her books as well, if he let her.

He looked up at the clock and noted the time. He'd let her continue for another hour before he made her come to bed. The mere thought made his body react. She never denied him when he asked her, but it saddened him that she didn't initiate intimacy between them. Sure she was his charge, so he knew that she still saw him as an authority figure: her ex-professor, Headmaster of her school, and her warden. Well, maybe not her warden so much anymore; he allowed her the delusion that she was a normal student, as normal as her situation would permit.

Severus shifted his legs into a more comfortable position and turned his attention back to his paper.

At least his troubles with the board of governors were finally settling down in his favor. That was one headache he didn't have. For now.

~o0o~

Hermione and Ginny were both becoming more and more concerned about Harry and Ron. Tuesday in Charms Club, Ginny asked Hermione if she still had her DA Galleon between their attacks on Duane Saunders' Shield Charm. Hermione quickly looked around her to see who might be listening and nodded. "I have it, but I it's hard to make it work without a wand," she said between casting jinxes at Saunders. "If I'm really angry, I can make it work, but if I'm frustrated, like I've been these last few weeks, I can't get it to change."

Seamus moved so that he was standing closer to her. "I tried my coin. They are in a glen in Scotland. Well, they were. I know that Dean has joined them," he said softly.

"What?" Hermione asked, her jinx missing Saunders all together and hitting Terry's shield, catching him by surprise.

"What I said Dean ran into them. Good thing too," Seamus said, still holding his Shield Charm against Anthony Brigeman's and Tinko Wang's attacks. "Apparently they were running out of food." Anthony fired a really strong hex that made Seamus stumble into Hermione. She saw the spell coming and was able to brace herself so he didn't knock her over, but Seamus landed on his bum.

Hermione leaned down to help him up. "Are you sure? They're all right?"

Seamus let her help him to his feet. "Yeah, hungry, and apparently in a tent, but they're alive."

Hermione quickly looked at Cillian and turned so that her back angled slightly toward him. "I have to do something. I need to know..."

"Hermione?" Ginny asked as Anthony walked over.

"Finnegan, you okay? Granger? Did I hurt you?"

"Hermione, do what? We can't *do* anything from here. I don't even know where he is," Seamus said, ignoring Anthony.

"I'm fine, Anthony," Hermione said and turned to face Seamus. She saw two Slytherins, Amanda Bergental and Jean Pendergast, who had been practicing with two Ravenclaws, Isabel and Morag MacDougal, watching her and Seamus with unveiled interest. Hermione tried to angle her head closer to Seamus and away from the girls. "Tell me everything you know. Did he say anything about finding... something?"

Seamus shook his head and touched her arm. "I'm fine, Hermione, thanks. No harm done." Hermione's brow creased, then she realized that he wasn't actually looking at her. She turned her head as Seamus turned around and faced his sparing partners. "Good shot, Anthony. Bet you can't do that one again."

Hermione saw Cillian approaching and quickly diverted her gaze to Ginny. "Ginny, I've got to find a way to talk to Harry," she said, squatting down to adjust her shoelace.

Ginny leaned over since Cillian was watching her. "Luna and I have been looking. We found the Protean Charm, and a way to make tin cans work like felly no, telephones. Are you sure you're okay?"

"Hermione, is everything all right?" Cillian asked, walking up and placing a hand on her shoulder.

Hermione looked up and tried to make her face blush. "Yes, I'm he just lost his balance. I'm fine," she said, erecting a shield around herself.

After an hour, Professor Flitwick dismissed the club. As everyone mulled around talking, Hermione leaned over to Ginny. "If I come to your room tonight, may I use your wand?"

"Sure," Ginny said, her brow creasing.

Hermione followed her friends from the Charms classroom and noticed that the two Slytherins, Amanda Bergental and Jean Pendergast, were still watching her.

Hermione nodded at them and walked over to Cillian, handing him her wand. "I want to go to the common room, if that's all right?"

Cillian's smile faded slightly as he followed her and Ginny from the room. "Why?" he asked.

"I was hoping to spend some time with Ginny before curfew," Hermione said, turning for the stairs. Cillian shrugged. Seamus was ahead of them with several of the Ravenclaws, all talking about how well they were able to deflect the spells thrown at them, and parted ways at the fifth floor.

Hermione turned to face Cillian when he scrambled after her through the portrait hole. "I was wondering if I could it's just that there is something I want to talk to Gin about. You know... away from the boys."

Cillian held up his hand. "Hermione, girl talk, I get it. You can have twenty minutes, and then I'm sending for your husband," he said, then held up a finger, pointing at her face as his eyes narrowed. "Twenty minutes. I mean it twenty no more."

Hermione didn't wait to respond; she quickly ran up to Ginny's room. Ginny pulled out her Galleon and handed Hermione her wand. It took a few tries, but she got the coin to read: *How are you? HG*

She waited, watching the gold coin on her palm, not realizing she'd held her breath until her chest started to hurt. "Try sending just his initials. It's what Seamus did," Ginny suggested.

Hermione tapped the coin and changed the message to, *HP how are you? HG*. "It's not working," she sighed, trying again.

The coin warmed on her palm. *Mione?* the coin read.

Hermione bounced, nearly shouting for joy. She made the coin read, *Yes*. She waited a second and changed the words to, *How R things?* The coin vibrated and, *Fine*, appeared. *Where R you?* she asked in her next message, but the response was, *can't say 2 dangerous*. The coin warmed and the words changed. *Can't be found trouble*, then read, *Seaside yesterday but moved*.

"They must be moving around a lot. That's a good plan harder to get caught that way," Hermione said, looking up at Ginny.

"Ask him about Dean. No, ask him about food, if they need food," Ginny suggested. Hermione did, but all she got back was *sometimes okay*. The letters changed to, *Ron says hi*. She laughed and sent, *Hi 2 Ron*. She tried asking about the Horcrux hunt, but she had to be careful and had to break the question up in segments *Did you find any*, then, *any luck hunting down*, and then finally, *how many now*. She was getting frustrated. She made the coin read, *2 hard 2 talk this way*.

There was a long pause before the coin read, *one some three*, then changed to, *no cup no idea*. After a pause, the coin changed and read, *Mirror dad's mirror*. Hermione read it twice, trying to understand what he was talking about. She said it aloud and looked at Ginny, who shrugged. Hermione changed the words to, *What mirror. Who dad?* The coin warmed and she read, *my dad. 2 way*.

Hermione showed the coin to Ginny as Jenny Wang came in the room. "Hermione, that guy that follows you everywhere, he says it's time to come down."

"Thanks," Hermione said and turned back to Ginny. "Does your Dad have a mirror that he can communicate with?"

Ginny shook her head. "Our mirror talks to you, but why would Harry suggest talking to a mirror?"

"He said two way, as in a two-way mirror... The only two-way mirrors I know about are the ones that the police use," Hermione said, but Ginny and Jenny shrugged. "It's a window with a mirror on one side and allows someone on the other side to see into the room. However, the other people, the ones inside, can't see them. But he can't have meant that. He must mean something like a two-way radio. Can it be done?"

Jenny and Ginny simply shrugged their shoulders, Jenny raising her hands, palm up. "I've heard about them," Jenny said. "Colin and his brother had a pair, walk-he-talk-he, I think he said, but they didn't work at school."

"Walkie-talkies use radio waves, but they have a limited range... and I don't have any way of getting a pair." Hermione rose. "If I didn't have Draco following me every time I go to the library, I could try and see what I could find on mirrors."

"Distract him somehow," Jenny replied. Hermione turned to face her, and Ginny sat on the foot of one of the beds. "From what I've seen, that prefect, Pansy, she's really jealous of you. If someone were to flirt with Draco, I mean, really flirt with him, she'd get mad and pull him away."

"Not if it were me. He hates me," Ginny said, shrugging. "Besides, it wouldn't work; Draco would never fall for it."

Jenny's smile became mischievous. "What about Janilynn or me? Besides, someone crushing on Draco he'd be used to girls falling for him even fawning over him. What if, say, he suddenly became, I dunno, like a Quidditch star or something... Oh, I can ask Zane; she thinks he's cute!"

Ginny started to giggle. "It could work. The Slytherins' booked the pitch tomorrow morning to practice. We could sit in the stands, and Janilynn, Jenny, Zane, and I would be 'Draco watching' and acting like groupies. Saturday, after practice, go to the library, and we will take care of Draco! Oh, it could work!"

"I may need more than one day," Hermione said, not sure about the plan. "Draco might not fall for it twice, but he's not dumb, and he might see right through the ploy."

"Oh, don't worry; we're baiting Pansy, not Draco. We'll follow him like the girls did to Viktor Krum when he was here. All we need is to make him frustrated by the attention and fawn all over him. She'll be furious and make him sit with her. I'll tell Janilynn and Zane what we're doing and see if any of her friends want in on the ruse. If it works out and you find a two-way mirror, can I have one?" Jenny asked, looking hopeful. "Then I could talk to Colin!"

A first-year knocked on the door. "Mrs. Snape, that guy, the one that follows you, he sent me to get you."

Hermione gave Ginny back her wand and coin, hugged her, and hurried down the stairs. There was a hard look in Cillian's eyes when she reached the bottom of the stairs, and his jaw was clenched, but he nodded politely to Ginny. "Does Miss Weasley have a clock?" he sneered as he ushered Hermione from the common room.

"Yes," she said as he scrambled through the hole. "We kind got wrapped up in our discussion."

"Stay close to me, and don't run," he said, rising to his feet. "Alecto is on patrol tonight, as is Rowle. I want to avoid a skirmish, if I can."

Hermione noticed that he had his wand out, held casually in his hand. "I promise," she said, embarrassed and understanding his anger. Still, he took hold of her elbow as he walked quickly to the stone gargoyle, and Hermione almost needed to jog to keep up.

Only when the statue jumped aside did he relax. Snape was waiting, staring at the fire in the Floo when they entered. "Severus, I need you to take Hermione to breakfast. I have something I still need to do tonight and first thing in the morning."

Severus nodded. "When shall I expect you?"

"Depends on her mood," he said dismissively and then chuckled. "I'm sure you don't want her coming here."

Snape scowled and rolled his eyes. "Merlin, no."

~*~

Hermione woke up, eased from the bed so that she didn't wake Snape, dressed quickly, and made her way to watch Draco play Quidditch. The castle was quiet in the early morning, and she didn't see anyone until she still bumped into the Slytherin Quidditch team as she descended the stairs to the Entrance Hall.

"What is she doing here?" sneered Harper, Slytherin's alternate Seeker.

Draco was facing the door. He hesitated, then turned around, and ran up to her. "What are you doing here?" he hissed angrily. He grabbed her arm. "Com'on. I'll take you back."

"I wanted to watch you play," Hermione said, jerking her arm free.

Draco stared at her as if she'd lost her Gobstones, and then his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You what?"

"I thought I'd come watch Slytherin practice; you know, get some fresh air and a little sun," she lied.

Draco grabbed her arm, dragging her roughly out the huge oak doors. The grounds were still moist from a heavy dew, and the foggy grey predawn was cold on her face. "Okay, so two out of three watch you practice and get some fresh air," she said and shrugged.

Draco looked at the ground and swore. "I'm going to be on a broom! You'll be alone in the stands. What if I don't... get... What the...?"

At that moment, Zane Seymour and three of her friends exited from the castle, all three Hufflepuffs sporting green knit scarves and caps. One girl was wearing a Snitch-shaped pin with fluttery wings. Another held a small Slytherin banner on a stick that she used to wave at Draco with a huge smile. "Oh, there he is!" Zane squealed exuberantly.

"He's so gorgeous," the one with the banner swooned.

"I can't wait to see him fly!" the other girl Hermione didn't know exclaimed, beaming and waving at Draco, as the girl with the pin clasped her hands together saying, "Oh, he looks so dreamy in his Quidditch robes!"

"I don't need this," he snarled and then looked at Hermione. "I won't be able to protect you."

"Ooo, then let me do that for you, Draco," Ginny said in a cooing, dreamy sort of voice.

Hermione turned around so he couldn't see that she was trying to suppress a giggle. Jenny had apparently been busy. Two Gryffindor girls and two girls from Ravenclaw, stood behind Jenny, Luna, and Ginny, all of them looking at Draco as if he were a teen idol.

Bedlam broke out as the other team members tried, unsuccessfully, to send Draco's new admirers away. Finally giving up, the rest of the team stormed off to the Quidditch pitch with Draco and Hermione, surrounded by his fawning fans, in the rear. Draco insisted on keeping Hermione with him, much to Crabbe's disapproval, making her sit in the corner with a Muffling Charm on her as he went over his strategies and goals for the practice. Afterward, he escorted Hermione up to the stands and flew away, ignoring all the girls cooing dreamily over him.

Hermione leaned over to Ginny. "What is going on? They look like they've all had a love potion or something."

Ginny giggled as the girls all swooned over Draco as he passed the stands. "Well, it's a type of love potion... tell you later."

When practice was over, Draco stopped to hover in front of the stand. "Granger, get down to the ground now," he barked, still ignoring the other girls.

Hermione hurried down to the pitch, and Draco grasped her arm, demanding to know what she was playing at, but Hermione feigned innocence. Draco pulled her with him all the way to the castle and up to the Headmaster's office with Hermione struggling to free her arm the entire way. Draco ranted and raved to Snape about what happened at Quidditch practice, which Hermione denied knowing anything about. She said that she'd only wanted to get outside for a bit, and since Draco was one of her keepers, she'd thought it would be okay. Snape listened to them snarl and yell at each other, his fingers pressed against his temples, until he'd had enough.

Snape swore, placed his hands on the desk and leaned toward her, his face contorted in anger. "If I find out you had anything to do with this fan club following Draco's suddenly acquired, I'll wring your neck." He came around the desk, and Hermione backed off, frightened of him. "We're going to breakfast," he snapped and pointed at the door.

Hermione wanted to tell him that it wasn't her fault, but considered his expression, and she changed her mind. She walked quickly for the Great Hall, Severus at her side. He stopped in the Entrance Hall, took a slow breath and proceeded to guide her in to breakfast as if nothing had happened.

At the Gryffindor table, Hermione asked Ginny again if the girls had taken a love potion. "We did!" Ginny said as Hermione looked at her in shock. "I have this brother, you may remember him, George? He makes these Wonder Witch products..."

"You didn't!"

"Oh, I did. The chews make you swoon for a blond, and Draco is the only blond on the team. Once we get a few hairs from Draco, George can make loads, specifically targeting him. I Flooed him last night, tossed him a letter, and he gave them to me. Then Dobby took some boxes of them to Zane and Luna. You'll see. The next time you're in the library, Draco won't have a moment's peace."

Hermione groaned and turned to look at Snape, cringing when she saw him staring at her. She collected her things and walked with her friends to Muggle Studies, Snape strolling along a few steps behind them.

Alecto began lecturing about European monophyletic monuments, which in her opinion, were all wizard made. "We have numerous stone circles, Pictish stones, standing stones, cups and rings, chambered cairns, Brochs. These are wizard erected monuments: the Newgrange Passage Tomb, Hill of Tara, Stonehenge, and Barry Hill..."

Hermione dipped her quill and continued her notes on Alecto's lecture.

"...Stonehenge..." Alecto paused and looked at Hermione. "Mrs. Snape, care to enlighten us on who created Stonehenge?"

Hermione gasped and looked up. *Oh, lord, not again.* Her first year at Hogwarts she'd gone searching for that very question, hoping that there'd be something in the library about the origins and secrets of Stonehenge. She'd found a few references, but nothing that answered all her life long curiosity of the site. "Some people think that the ancient Druid wizards constructed it," she said timidly. "But, no one knows for sure. Everything written about Stonehenge is speculation... I have no idea, ma'am."

"Professor!" she snapped at her, her hands falling to her sides, clenched tightly in fists. "Do you think we, the superior beings, the ones that created Stonehenge, do not know its secrets?" Alecto crossed her arms and planted her feet shoulders width apart. "And I know you lie. Your name was on the borrowing card for every book that even mentioned Stonehenge. So tell me who built it and when?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, now frightened of the wild look in Alecto's eyes.

Alecto drew her wand. "You insolent little trollop! And they call you a know-it-all!" She aimed her wand at Hermione's chest. "Tell me or I'll make you tell me!"

"She said she doesn't know!" Neville said. Alecto turned her attention to him, but maintained her aim at Hermione's chest. "She told you she doesn't know."

"Neville, please," Hermione said, trying to stop Neville from getting in trouble.

"Silence, you," Alecto said and flicked her wrist, hitting Hermione with a Stinging Hex. Hermione's eyes filled with tears from the pain, but she managed to make only a sharp inhalation and bit back her scream.

Neville was on his feet. "Stop that! You can't hex a student it's against the rules!"

"I set the rules, Mr. Longbottom!" Alecto shouted and hit Neville with a Cruciatus Curse. Neville fell to the floor, banging his head on a desk behind him as he went down.

Draco raised his hand, his eyes straight ahead as if nothing was amiss. Alecto ignored him. "Maybe you should write me a three foot essay and take a zero for the day."

Hermione was outraged. "A zero for not knowing who built..."

"Silence!" Alecto shouted, hitting Hermione with a Stunning Hex, strong enough to knock her from her seat, but not strong enough to make her unconscious. She hit her head on the desk behind her and fell to the floor hard, feeling as if she'd broken her tailbone.

"You, boy," Alecto said to Seamus. "Get her up off the floor and stop disrupting my class. Twenty points from Gryffindor for each of you for your insolence and interrupting my class. All three of you will write me an essay on who created Stonehenge and why. Now get out!"

Seamus stood, turning to stare at Alecto when he'd realized he'd been given the assignment as well, but held his tongue as he bent down to help Neville get up. Draco released the spell, reached down and pulled Hermione to her feet. "Get up," he said coolly, then whispered quietly, "I have the books you need. I'll bring them to you. Now go."

Hermione jerked her arm free of his grasp, staggered and lurched. Seamus quickly wrapped an arm around her waist. She placed her arm around his shoulders and allowed him to guide her from the room.

Cillian opened the door for them. "You know better," he said as Hermione and Seamus walked past him.

She was still holding her head with her other hand where it had banged into the desk. Her head throbbed and she felt nauseous and dizzy. "And what part of that did I deserve the Stinging Hex or the Stunner to my chest? I thought you were supposed to protect me?"

"I am! I told you, as did Severus, she hates you and everything you represent! And you!" he said turning to Neville, "You shouldn't have talked back to her. She is right she can and is setting down the rules. You need to watch your cool and not lose your temper." He turned to Seamus. "And that goes for you as well."

"What did I do?" Seamus asked.

"You're a Gryffindor and his friend that's enough for her," Cillian said.

In double Defense Against the Dark Arts, Amycus Carrow continued teaching the use of the body modifying hexes and jinxes, demonstrating a few of them on Hermione, which made all the Gryffindors angry and the Slytherins snicker. However, it made Hermione feel worse physically than she did when leaving Muggle Studies. Neville and Seamus were in a rage at Cillian, and even Lavender and Parvati were standing up to him in the corridor when they'd walked far enough away from the classroom, asking him why he allowed Mr. Carrow to abuse her like he had done.

Cillian turned on them, his expression furious. "I don't answer to the likes of you. Get off to your next lesson," he snapped. Seamus looked at him with his eyes wide and his mouth gaping open. "I said move on! I'll see that Mrs. Snape is taken care of. Now go!"

~*~

Severus approached the circle of students arguing with Cillian over the unfair house points and the essay assignment. As soon as he approached, Neville and Seamus excused themselves and ran away. "I'll deal with this," he said to Cillian and took Hermione to his office. "What happened? Were you hurt in Defense?" he asked.

Hermione told him about what happened in Muggle Studies and Defense, her voice escalating as she recounted each humiliating experience.

Severus held back the venomous explanative he wanted to say, and looked at her with feigned calmness. "Seventy-five points to Gryffindor will be added by Minerva in her next class. How are you feeling?"

She crossed her arms. "I'm fine, thank you; and you? How are you doing?"

"Don't get smart with me. I was wondering if you're up to another try at Occlumency, since we apparently have a break." He pointed to Dumbledore's Pensieve that sat on the desk. "I have put one of my memories in there. It is from a gathering of sorts, and there are numerous Death Eaters. You will see the Dark Lord and see how he treats his followers. It won't hurt you to know what goes on in his presence. After this, you and I will try your Occlumency skills again."

"Now?" she asked, crossing her arms and staring at the swirling mist in the bowl. "I have Potions."

"Yes, now. The potion Professor Slughorn is having you do is something you could brew in your sleep or the girls' loo in your spare time," he said with a smirk that quickly vanished when he became serious again. "I want you to be able to do this. You could if you'd learn to suppress your emotions... It's necessary, and you could do it if you'd only try harder."

She looked up at him. He was regarding her coolly, and Hermione nodded. He held up his hand, indicating the stone bowl. Nervously, Hermione entered the Pensieve and fell in the middle of a circle of Death Eaters with the Dark Lord pacing, sneering angrily, and inflicting the Cruciatus on a woman. The woman was left curled up in a ball on the floor, crying as the Dark Lord turned on his next victim. A Death Eater fell on his knees, pleading for leniency. After several minutes of torture, the Dark Lord had Severus take the Death Eater's mask, and the wizard was stripped of his robes. Nagini slithered up and encircled the man, bit him, coiled him up in her body, and then started to swallow him alive even before her venom took effect.

Hermione retched on the floor, unnoticed by anyone in the room, until a shadow moved from the wall and Severus a second Severus, walked up and placed a hand on her back. Peter Pettigrew came forward, dragging a crying, pleading girl with him. Hermione stood, holding onto Severus as the Dark Lord questioned the girl, taunted her for thinking herself worthy enough to marry a wizard, then killed her, and tossed aside as if she were a rag doll. All the while, Belinda and Bellatrix were fawning over the Dark Lord. Severus pulled on her arm as a woolly looking wizard started giving a report on village raid. "You've seen enough," he said, and the next minute, Hermione was stumbling back from the Pensieve, still feeling sick.

Snape immediately entered her mind as Hermione tried to regain her composure, and she forcefully erected the memory of a stone corridor to block him, hoping he wouldn't make her review the images from the meeting. But he found them regardless when he pushed, looking for them. He broke the contact, and made contact again, and again, each time pushing around the corridors and rock walls she set up against him, until Hermione's knees gave. Snape caught her and pulled her to sit on his lap, holding her tightly as she clung to him and cried. "Shush, now; you're all right."

"How long ago was that?" she asked, still shaking uncontrollably.

"Before the Rat made you splinch," he said soothingly. "You need to know what to expect if I ever have to take you before him. Your previous encounters were benevolent compared to what he's really like. This was one of the worst types of meetings. Maybe I should have chosen another."

"No, it's okay. I understand," she said, her head still nestled on his shoulder. "You're right, I need to know, but I ... How does he get people to join him if he's like that? Why do they put up with him and stay?"

Snape stroked her arm. "You've seen him when he's trying to win someone over. He makes promises, has a knack of saying what you want to hear... uses your desires and your anger to draw you to him. Once you've taken his Mark, you are his, body, mind, and soul. There is no leaving him. No one lives long who defies him. He learns your weaknesses and takes advantage of them." He put his fingers under her chin to look at her face. "He seduces, Hermione. He can be very seductive in how he manipulates people. He can usually get what he wants and if not, there is always the Imperius. You'd be a fool to resist him." He shifted her on his lap. "That's enough for now, Hermione. It's time for dinner," Snape said firmly, watching her face for signs of distress. "Look, compose yourself. It wouldn't do for them to see you upset."

"I know, sir," she replied, taking a few deep breaths and shaking her fingers to shake off the effects of their Occlumency lesson. "I'm not getting any better at this."

"You will," he said kindly. "It takes practice. I was used to shutting myself off from others when I was your age you are not. It will take effort on your part to learn the

discipline."

He guided her to the stairs, once again laying his hand on the small of her back. Hermione mused that if this had been any other man, she might have shrugged off his hand, but such contact from Snape actually gave her a sense of comfort and safety. They walked in silence once they entered the corridor, his hand still protectively on her back. As they reached the Entrance Hall, several students were milling around, waiting for friends, though most were hurrying into the Great Hall.

As Snape and Hermione approached the open doors, she was surprised when two seventh-year Slytherin girls stepped up to them. "Headmaster, Mrs. Snape," one of the girls greeted them rather formally.

"Miss Glenwrythe, Miss Lockhaven," Snape replied, equally as formal.

"Headmaster," Miss Glenwrythe said, and then turned to nod at Hermione, "my friends and I would like to cordially invite Mrs. Snape to tea with us on Saturday next. I would have sent my invitation by owl, but as we have never been formally introduced, I thought it better to do so in person."

Snape inclined his head slightly. "My wife would be pleased to accept," he said, ignoring Hermione's shocked expression. "She will, of course, be chaperoned."

Miss Glenwrythe's expression had a quick flash of what Hermione could only perceive as feeling affronted before the girl composed herself.

Miss Lockhaven, on the other hand, simply smiled demurely. "Of course, Headmaster. Mrs. Snape, I look forward to Saturday." The girls both turned and entered the Great Hall.

Hermione looked up at Snape, confused. "Why? They always snubbed me before."

Snape smiled briefly then indicated for her to walk on. "It's customary, Hermione. The seventh-year girls always have tea with the new Slytherin girls."

"But I'm not in Slytherin," she said, watching the two girls sitting down at the Slytherin table.

"You've married one," he said, pausing as several students hurried past. "I'm still a past Head of House, and even though I am Headmaster, I am a Slytherin. They are simply acknowledging you. It's actually an honor of sorts. We'll discuss this later." He followed Hermione to her place at the Gryffindor table, nodded politely to Ginny, and walked off.

"What was that about?" Ginny asked.

Hermione shrugged. "Being polite."

When Hermione sat down, Neville scooted closer to her. "Are you sure that you're all right? You were treated rather roughly today," he whispered.

"Not too differently than they have been," Hermione said, helping herself to the chicken. "Professor Snape gave me some potions; I feel fine now."

Ginny looked at her and gasped. "Hermione, are you crazy? It's escalating!"

She looked at Ginny and sighed, her shoulders slouching. "Gin, there's nothing to be done about it. They are in charge of their classes and what goes on in there; Professor Snape told me so. I'm lucky to even be here alive, I mean. If it weren't for Professor Snape, I'd have been killed or died from... They, the Carrows... you have no idea. Let it go. I'll be fine. If I keep my head down and don't cause trouble..."

"You were hexed in Muggle Studies for not knowing the answer, and you're used as target practice in Defense!" Neville sneered. "How can you be ~~keeping~~ *keeping your head down* if you can get hexed for not knowing the answer to a question, or used as a dueling dummy? This is a school; we're supposed to be *learning*, not being beaten up!"

Hermione looked up at Snape and shrugged. "I am learning."

But Ginny wasn't listening. She was glaring at Alecto.

~o0o~

Ginny leaned over to Hermione at lunch the next day. "A few of us are meeting tonight *in the room*, if you can get away,"

"Cillian will be with her, Ginny," Jenny said.

"What's going on?" Hermione asked, afraid that she already knew the answer.

"A bunch of us are getting together, you know, friends," Ginny said, winking.

"I don't want Cillian to know about the room, Ginny. He's still..."

"He's one of them, yeah, I know. Don't worry; I'll be waiting by a classroom door. Just show up late, about two hours after dinner, okay? Tell Cillian I have a book you want or something."

"I'm not going to lie to him, Gin," she started to say, and Ginny looked shocked. "You know I'm a terrible liar he'll see right through me!"

Ginny reached over into Hermione's bag and pulled out a library book. "Just tell him that I want your help with some essay or spell work or something, okay?" she asked as she tucked the book in her bag.

"Ginny, that's a book for my Occlumency with Professor Snape. Cillian will know you're not taking Divination," Hermione insisted, knowing what book Ginny took.

"Yeah, of course I don't. Just tell him I borrowed it from you, and you need it back. But come, okay?" Ginny asked, digging into her food.

When Hermione and Cillian entered the seventh floor corridor, MacCavish was pacing at the end of the corridor. Cillian placed his hand on Hermione's arm, halting her next to the tapestry across from the Room of Requirement. "Wait here, I'll see if I can get your friend to come out."

Hermione sighed as he moved off before she could answer. She paced three times, thinking, 'I want to get in the room with the DA. I hope it's a classroom. The DA classroom,' as Cillian walked up to MacCavish. The door appeared and Ginny opened it. Hermione could see Jenny trying to see her over Ginny's shoulder. Hermione could hear Neville talking inside. "It helps when we stand up to them like when Harry Potter did it. It gives others hope..."

"You're late. I didn't think you'd come," Ginny said. "Where's Cillian?"

Over her shoulder, Hermione saw Cillian walking over. "Coming."

"We got all the DA members to make a wand oath not to reveal or snitch on us," Ginny said softly as she opened the door wider. "I used Fred's concealing ink for the parchment. He said it works like the ink on Harry's Marauders map." The room behind her friends was an odd mixture of living room furniture and desks, as if they had transfigured several desks into sofas and plushy chairs.

Hermione gasped. "You made you didn't?"

"We also have to learn to strengthen our nonverbal spells. It gives your opponent time to react if he knows what you're throwing at him," Neville continued. He looked up and waved at Hermione. "Good Hermione's here."

"You know, like you made fifth year. I found the spells," Ginny said, smiling.

Jack, Janilynn, and Zane clustered on the floor next to Luna, who was leaning on Michael's knees. Seamus was sitting next to Geraldine, Neville, and Hannah on one sofa and on another sat Zach, Susan, and Terry, who had Claudia sitting on his lap. Jenny walked over and sat on Ernie's lap in one of the chairs. Hermione groaned. It was so obvious that this was a meeting of the key players of the DA from all three houses. She had no idea how she was going to persuade Cillian that it wasn't.

Cillian placed a hand on her shoulder making her jump. "What is going on here, Hermione?"

"Friends getting together to hang out, that's all," she said as cheerfully as she could. "We're from different houses, and so it's not like we can be in the common room."

"When I was a student, houses didn't interrelate like this," Cillian said, clearly suspicious.

"It was the Sorting Hat's idea, from last year's sorting song," Michael said, running his hand down Luna's hair.

Luna looked up at him dreamily. "Never sense the founders four were whittled down to three, have the Houses been united as they were once meant to be... and so I tell you this, please heed me one and all... We must unite inside her halls or we'll crumble from within..." she sang in a lovely clear voice.

"Besides," Ernie said, hugging Jenny on his lap, "we're not doing anything but sitting with our girlfriends and talking."

"As if you need an excuse to visit with your friends," Seamus said and pointed to the only empty chair in the room. "We saved you a seat, Hermione."

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Ginny exclaimed, pulling out the book that she took from Hermione earlier. "Thanks for lending me this."

Cillian transfigured a desk into another plush chair, reclining in it with one leg over an armrest and defiantly stared at them all. No one paid him any mind, but began talking amongst themselves.

Janilynn scooted over to Hermione's chair and told her where she thought she was having trouble in Transfiguration, and they discussed the theories involved, as the others talked about Quidditch and the latest articles in the *Prophet*.

The clock on the wall chimed a half hour before curfew. "Time to get back to our common room," Ernie said, pushing Jenny off his lap. She pouted and stood, offering Janilynn a hand up off the floor.

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Severus heard a commotion and turned to investigate, finding Hermione and Cillian cornered in the stairs by Amycus and Alecto Carrow. "What is the meaning of this?" he asked, his eyes narrowing as he took in the scene.

"She was caught cavorting with that group of rebel students calling themselves Dumbledore's Army," Alecto said, looking like a Graphorn who had caught prey.

"Abraxan shite," Cillian snarled, standing so that he was between Hermione and the Carrows. "All you saw was Hermione leaving the seventh-floor staircase."

"That's a lie," Alecto declared, stamping her foot.

"Are you calling me a liar?" Cillian snarled, his eyes flashing dangerously. "I was with her, and she was not at an illicit gathering of unruly students."

"She was running," Alecto sneered, leaning forward as if to glare at him face to face. However, Cillian was taller than she was, and he simply stared down his nose at her.

Cillian let out a laugh that sounded more like a bark. "In a hurry to get to the Headmaster's tower before curfew."

"Is that true?" Severus asked Cillian.

Both Hermione and Cillian turned to face him and said, "Yes," at the same time, Hermione adding, "sir."

"What were you doing on the seventh floor at this time of night?" Severus asked, crossing his arms.

"She was drinking butterbeers and practicing charms with her friends, Longbottom and Weasley and a few other sixth- and seventh-years," Cillian said firmly, turning to glare down his nose at Alecto.

"Liar," Alecto spat at Cillian, trying to stand on her tiptoes. "She was with that Dumbledore's Army lot!"

Severus made Hermione face him and grabbed hold of her chin to make her look at him. He stared into her eyes, holding her gaze for several seconds before he released her. "Fine," he said, taking hold of her arm again. "I'll be dealing with my wife. In the mean time, I suggest you continue your rounds, Alecto. Amycus. Good night. Cillian, come with me."

"She is lying," Alecto said, and Snape whipped around to face her, his robes billowing.

"My wife cannot lie *to me*," he spat at her angrily, staring at her with a superior air. He turned back to Hermione and forced her to walk down the stairs as fast as he could maneuver her, Cillian right behind him.

Approaching the corridor to the stone gargoyle, Hermione nearly tripped, and he tightened his grip on her arm. "Ouch, you're hurting me," she cried out, trying to jerk her arm free.

"Hold your tongue," Severus hissed. "Cynara scolymus." He dragged Hermione with him up and into his office. "Okay, now tell me, is this true?"

Once inside, Cillian told Severus what Hermione and her friends had been doing. "Neville and Hermione were helping Ginny and her mates with nonverbal spells. The others were talking about Quidditch and drinking butterbeers."

"And you were with her?" Severus asked, his voice raised and his tone harsh.

"The whole time," Cillian replied, nodding and leaning against the desk.

"Damn, you. Hermione, go up to our room, now!" he said harshly, making Hermione jump. She started to protest, but he cut her off. "Now. I'll be up to deal with you later."

Severus turned abruptly to Cillian and smirked. "You are supposed to keep her out of trouble!" he shouted, crossing his arms.

"I was!" Cillian shouted back, his arms crossed, but still leaning casually on the desk.

"She was almost caught out after curfew by the Carrows," Severus sneered loudly. "That is not what I call protection."

"We would have been back here in plenty of time if those two hadn't stopped us," Cillian snarled. "Besides, there's still ten minutes before curfew."

"That's cutting things a little too close," Severus sneered, winking at Cillian.

"I'm sorry." Cillian lowered his voice. "She's listening."

"I know," Severus said softly and leaned closer to Cillian. "Was she with Dumbledore's Army?"

Cillian nodded. "She and her friends were practicing nonverbal spells, just like I told you. Neville is a complete incompetent at them." He shook his head when he said Neville's name and waved his hand as if saying 'no.' "But that Weasley girl, she was making progress." He nodded and held his hands up and moved his index fingers apart to indicate 'much more.' "Hermione is quite capable with nonverbal when she concentrates, but when frustrated, she fails," he said, first nodding, then shaking his head. "Jenny was having difficulty with them. Zane, she'll never get it, and Janilynn, she still mumbles her spells." His hand gestures indicated the opposite. He paused and looked at the fire in the fireplace. "There were others, you know. Finnegan, Corner, Macmillan, they're all quite good at them," he added softly.

"Okay, let me deal with Hermione. Thank you for letting me know what's going on." Severus walked over to the door silently and yanked it open, exposing Alecto and Amycus, trying to listen in behind the door. "Was there something else you needed to tell me?" he asked.

Alecto looked shocked at having been caught listening. "Ah, yes, we have finished our rounds and didn't see any students out of bed."

"Already? The whole castle?" Severus asked. "It's barely half past. I suggest you continue your patrols. Cillian, I'll see you before breakfast."

Severus turned and went up to the stairs to find Hermione. He laughed when he heard her scurry up the stairs to the bedroom, presumably to either run away from him or to have him think she wasn't listening in on his conversation with Cillian. He found her standing nervously in the doorway to their loo. He chuckled softly and walked over to her. "Don't run from me, Hermione. Come here. Did I hurt your arm?"

Hermione looked apparently confused by his manner. "I know what you were doing; I saw it in your mind and before you get mad about that, I had to know quickly so that I could defend you against Alecto and Amycus."

"That was defending?" Hermione shrieked. "You hurt me!"

He crossed his arms and planted his feet shoulders width apart and stared at her. "That was showing them that'd be disciplining you not them."

"So what?" she asked nervously. "So what is my punishment for helping my friends with spell work?"

Snape laughed as he stripped off his robes. "Who said I was going to punish you, you silly girl." He took a step toward her and she flinched. "It's late, Hermione, time to go to bed. Unless, you consider that punishment," he said, removing his shirt.

Hermione was confused. He had been so rough towards her in the corridor, and then he'd snapped at her when they'd returned to his office, but he was stripping for bed as if nothing happened. "You used Legilimency on me, without warning or asking, and then said you'd deal with me... and now you pretend like nothing happened!"

He turned to face her, wearing nothing but his pants and socks. "Yes, I will be the one to deal with you," he said his voice thick and silky. The tone of his voice was so seductive and provocative, matching the intent longing in his eyes. He reached out and removed her robe from her shoulders. "I will not allow Alecto to punish you for anything she accuses you of. I will deal with your indiscretions as I see fit. But tonight I think I'd like to compensate you for trying so hard, as well as myself."

She mulled over his actions and what he'd just said, realizing that he'd behaved as he did to demonstrate his position and warn the Carrows off. She'd have to read him and his actions more carefully in the future and not take what he did or said so literally. She looked up at his eyes and saw his desire for her as he seemed to be drinking her in with his gaze, which sent shivers down her spine.

He pulled her jumper over her head and tossed it on the floor. "So unless you are too tired to..." he said suggestively as his fingers flicked open the buttons of her blouse. "Say yes, Hermione, or tell me no."

Hermione's heart was pounding in her chest, and she inhaled sharply the moment his fingers stroked her skin as he slid her blouse off. "Yes," she breathed unable to think of anything but his hands that were sliding down her arms to her wrists.

He moved forward and cupped her face. Hermione rose on her toes to meet his mouth with hers and felt her bra give. He stepped forward, pressing her backward and onto the bed. He moved down so that his mouth covered her nipple, suckling gently as he unfastened her skirt. She lifted her hips as he pulled her skirt and knickers off, taking her socks with them. He leaned forward, slowly kissing her stomach, her navel and then her groin. Hermione sat on the bed and opened her legs in anticipation. He chuckled softly against her skin. "Impertinent witch," he said smoothly against her lips and licked her.

"Please," she moaned, losing herself in the sensations he was creating within her. Nothing else mattered anymore; her mind was only focused on what she knew was coming.

"Please what?" he asked slowly against her clit, then added, "Merlin, you taste good," with a growl, sending shock waves and chills throughout her body. Hermione gripped the bedcovers and bucked against him. He rose, kissing his way back up her body, sliding an arm under her, and pulling her with him further up the bed. "Mine," he said as he slid into her.

"Yes," Hermione moaned loudly as he did, trying to rock and push herself on him as he thrust and withdrew, eventually finding a rhythm, until the sensations in her body, the kisses, caresses, and feel of him inside her made everything else but the man on top of her vanish from her mind.

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Author's notes:

Cynara scolymus is the genera and species for the globe artichoke

Halloween

Chapter 22 of 43

Halloween weekend, Hermione has tea with the Slytherin girls, goes shopping with Severus, attends a Halloween Party

at Malfoy Manner, and comes face-to-face with the Dark Lord again.

I owe some big hugs and much gratitude to MadBrilliant and Kallontista for the beta read. I appreciate it very much.

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Halloween

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Friday morning after Arithmancy, Hermione went to the library with Draco as her escort, Crabbe and Goyle following behind at a respectable distance. As soon as Draco let the door close behind him and his friends, Jenny, Janilynn, an Asian girl, Kim Chua, a blonde Hermione didn't know from Hufflepuff, and Zane immediately rushed over to Draco and began cooing and fawning over him. Under any other circumstances, this would have been a disgusting display, but today it amused Hermione to see how unnerved Draco became. To make matters even more comical, Crabbe and Goyle tried to hide their snickers while still attempting to look stern and intimidating. It wasn't working very well.

Hermione turned away, thankful for the distraction. She found Ginny and Luna in the Charms section three feet from each other, scanning through the books.

"I have found a whole set of books on magical mirrors: this one discusses how to use them to see the future, what has been, and that which has not come to pass..." Ginny said, shoving the book back on the shelf. "Sounds like Divination to me."

Hermione picked two up off Ginny's pile. "To see across distances... seeing beyond the image... seeing your inner self... seeing your true self... Revealing Charms... nope. Darn. Nothing," she mumbled as she crossed books off of Ginny and Luna's list.

"*Interpreting the Visual Image*, to see one's inner self..." Luna said, closing the book with a snap. "Okay, no."

"We are going about this wrong. Maybe it's not the mirror, but the type of spell," Hermione said, looking down the row of books. "We've tried every type of enchanted mirror with no results. Harry said that his dad made one, possibly a pair... a pair! That's it! To connect two objects so that one it's the Protean Charm, it has to be!"

"Draco is coming," Luna warned. "Go. I'll distract him or make him go away."

"Thanks," Hermione whispered and slipped away to another aisle of the Charms section with Ginny in tow.

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Hermione set her stack of books to be returned to the library in the morning on the floor next to the bed. None of them had the variation of the Protean Charm she was looking for. Frustrated, she decided to take a bath to think. She stripped for her bath, sank into the hot water, and tried to relax, but her mind was in turmoil. Without the two-way mirrors, there was no other way to communicate with Harry and Ron except for the DA coins, and they were so limiting. *I wish I knew where they are! I'm sure they're safe, because if they weren't if the Dark Lord had caught them he'd have announced it or summoned Snape to watch him kill Harry, wouldn't he?*

A soft knock jolted her from her thoughts. "Tomorrow, I must take you shopping," Snape said.

"What? Are you taking me to Hogsmeade?" she asked, looking hopeful.

"No." He stood rigidly in the doorway. "You'll need a gown for the Malfoys' Halloween party, and I will not trust Narcissa's taste this time, nor Belinda's. So, you'll go with Cillian and me. Can I trust you to behave?"

"Yes, I'll behave," she replied. She sighed and hung her head as he leaned on the doorframe and crossed his arms. "There's more, isn't there?"

"Yes. The Dark Lord will be there; he may ask to see you," he said smoothly as if they were discussing a book or essay.

Hermione suddenly felt cold, even though her bath water was still quite warm. "I'm not ready to face him!" she exclaimed, sitting up sharply. "I cannot do Occlumency! What if he sees you trying to teach me?"

"You knew that you'd have to face him again. There isn't anything you know that cannot be explained to the Dark Lord's satisfaction," he said with a smirk. "Even our lessons can be explained, but that's not what he'll be interested in. Trust me. Cillian, of course, is coming as well, so you won't be devoid of protection."

"But he doesn't protect me he follows me!" she said, swallowing back the fear of facing the Dark Lord again while surrounded by his loyal followers.

"Cillian cannot take action against the Carrows unless they harm you. However, he is capable of defending you should anyone try to attack you in the corridors. It is a fine line, Hermione, and he plays it well. I have spoken to Alecto about using the Stunning Charm on you, and she will not do so again," he said to reassure her.

"And Draco?" she asked, crossing her fingers under the surface of the water and hoping that he wouldn't be included on their shopping excursion.

Snape's smirk almost looked as if he was about to smile. "No, Draco will be stay here when I take you shopping. However, he will be at his parents' party and will stay with them overnight, so you'll have a whole day's reprieve from his *friendship*."

Hermione slunk down into the water at the warning tone with which he'd said 'friendship.'

"You'll have to come to terms with Draco. You are not allowing him to do what the Dark Lord requested him to do. Do you wish to see Draco punished for disobeying an order?" Snape asked, openly staring at her. "He might even make you do it."

She sat bolt upright again. "No! I can't couldn't not Draco! He hasn't done anything!"

"Precisely. He has not befriended you," he said smoothly. "You won't let him."

"He wouldn't punish him just because I haven't... HE WOULD, WOULDN'T HE?" Her voice almost echoed off the walls of the bathroom. "But why you cannot just force people to be friends..."

Snape stepped forward into the room. "Draco was given an order to befriend you. You are resisting his efforts. Do you really think that the Dark Lord is forgiving to any of his followers who fail a task he has set for them, no matter how small or benign it may seem? Of course Draco will be punished, simply for not yet succeeding." He reached across her, picked up her flannel and soap, and then dunked them both in the water. "Lean forward. I was hoping that you'd have at least seen the advantages of befriending Draco Malfoy."

Hermione wrapped her arms around her knees. "Oh, yes: rich, powerful, arrogant, aristocratic snob, wet prat that he is highly advantageous..."

"Who has had the privilege of having the Dark Lord ensconced in his house since the summer of his fifth year," Snape said as he scrubbed her back. "Did it not occur to you to question why Draco didn't *want* to live at home? Surely, with his skill at Apparation, he didn't *have* to live at my house and sleep in my old bedroom. Even as my

apprentice, he could have stayed at the Manor every weekend, unless tending a potion."

She couldn't believe what he was implying. *He didn't want to be around the Dark Lord?* "So then why..."

"The question I want you to think about, Hermione, is why I would want you, my wife, to befriend a boy your own age and allow him unlimited, even private exposure to you." He dropped the flannel into her bath. "Why risk scandal and gossip when I could just as easily have Cillian chaperone your time with Draco, since that *is* his job?" He stood and backed away, reaching for her towel. "Think about that."

Hermione rinsed and stepped from the tub as Snape wrapped her in the towel. "I expect the Carrows, MacCavish, and Rowle to be in my office this morning. I suggest that you stay up here until they go."

Hermione nodded, and he smiled, leaning down to kiss her. Hermione wrapped her arms around him and he chuckled. "You're getting me wet, and I do have an appointment," he murmured against her lips, holding her close.

"Then I shouldn't hold you up," she replied before he deepened their kiss.

"Witch," he said with a low growl, then moved away from her and left the bathroom.

Hermione walked into the bedroom, smiling. She decided to use her time practicing wandless magic and trying to contact Harry or Ron again on her DA coin, both with little success.

~oOo~

As the morning stretched on, Hermione still hadn't managed to contact either Ron or Harry. Neville and Luna had answered her, and Luna had promised to keep trying to pass on to Harry that she was trying to find the spell for the mirrors. She'd been able to light a candle with wandless magic, much to her surprise, and had even started a small flame in the fireplace. Levitating anything was hard, but she'd managed to lift a book up about an inch. However, despite her best efforts, she couldn't move the book sideways.

Snape came to get her before noon and took her to wait in his office for the Slytherin girls. Cillian was sitting in front of Snape's desk with his boots resting on the corner, tossing an orange. "Hi, Hermione," he greeted her before lobbing his orange at a scowling Snape. "Too bad we're not eating in the Great Hall. They're having fish and chips."

"Terrific," Snape said, directing Hermione to sit in one of the chairs. "I can always have a house-elf bring you a plate."

Cillian dropped his feet to the floor. "Nah, I love cucumber sandwiches," he said sarcastically, grinning as he winked at Hermione.

Snape was cut off from comment when the bell rang, indicating a visitor. "Allow," he said smoothly.

Hermione had been watching them with avid curiosity. Cillian was always so relaxed around Snape, even when Snape was in one of his darkest moods.

Snape called out, "Enter," at the light knock on the door a few seconds later.

Miss Glenwrythe and Miss Lockhaven entered the Headmaster's office and formally reintroduced themselves to Hermione and Cillian. Snape and Cillian returned their greeting just as formally, and Cillian gallantly indicated that they all go. Snape escorted Hermione to the door. "Have fun. You are in no danger with these girls. Trust me on this."

Hermione nodded and left the room.

The girls escorted Hermione and Cillian to a room on the first floor that had tall windows that cast beams of light across the floor. In the middle of the room was an elaborately laid out table set for six and another one set up by the door for Cillian.

"I'm not certain if you know everyone, Mrs. Snape. This is Tracie Davis; I know that you have Charms and Herbology together," Miss Glenwrythe said with a polite indication of her hand toward the girl on her right.

The brunette inclined her head politely as she said, "Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Snape."

Miss Glenwrythe continued her introductions with a graceful sweep of her hand. "Amanda Bergental, I believe you are both in Potions, Alchemy and Ancient Runes together, and Adriana Whitehall; I know you have a few classes together," she said with a friendly smile.

Both girls inclined their heads and greeted Hermione.

"We, of course, all know you." Miss Glenwrythe gestured toward the table and the house-elf that stood holding a chair. "Shall we?"

As the girls all sat down, all the chairs scooted in as if assisted by a gentleman, and the elf vanished.

The tea was a light blend, a perfect complement to the tiny sandwiches, fruit, and delicate cheese parfaits being served. Miss Glenwrythe acted as mother. The girls were quite formal, but friendly, still referring to Hermione as Mrs. Snape. Hermione felt as if she were having afternoon tea with the Queen or someone of equal importance. They discussed current articles in *Witch Weekly* and *The Quibbler*, the weather, current fashions, shoes, and books the girls had read. They asked Hermione polite questions about herself, and each of the girls answered Hermione's inquires on these benign subjects with equally gracious candor.

"Mrs. Snape, if I might be so presumptuous to ask, what are your intentions toward Mr. Malfoy?" Miss Lockhaven asked pointedly. Every girl looked casually at her, two while sipping their tea.

"Draco?" Hermione asked, nearly choking on her tea. "Nothing!"

Miss Glenwrythe set down her cup. "Mr. Malfoy has taken an interest in you that has not gone unnoticed."

Miss Whitehall looked pointedly at Hermione. "If you have intentions of having an affair..."

"What?! No!" Hermione gasped, alarmed that these girls thought she'd been flirting with Draco. Still, Hermione felt an avid curiosity radiating from all of them.

"I didn't think so. Headmaster Snape wouldn't take kindly to you skirting around," Miss Davis stated demurely.

Hermione realized that Draco's attention toward her was the reason the girls wanted to have tea. "I don't even like Draco that way!"

Miss Glenwrythe's smile became a subtle smirk. "But you are on a first name basis with him now." She held up her hand before Hermione could respond. "Look, you are not familiar with our ways," she said, her tone still friendly but with a subtle hint of warning. "No, hear me out. May I be blunt?" Hermione nodded and she continued. "When there is dissension in our house, it's dealt with. Tension creates disharmony and an uncomfortable atmosphere. So, when two or more of our housemates are causing friction, it is addressed."

"What she means is, you are creating an adversary that you don't want," Miss Lockhaven said. "Pansy Parkinson. She considers Mr. Malfoy to be her beau."

"And since you're not permitted a wand we've noticed sorry. I mean no disrespect, nor am I asking the reason why, but it has been remarked upon," Miss Glenwrythe said apologetically. "You are at a slight disadvantage of not being able to defend yourself. We presume that is why you have a protector." She made a nod of her head as her gaze flicked over to Cillian and then back to Hermione.

Hermione glanced quickly up at Cillian, who was carefully avoiding eye contact as if he wasn't listening in on the conversation. "No, I'm not allowed a wand in the corridors," she admitted, turning back, feeling a slight warmth to her cheeks.

"I didn't broach the subject to make you uncomfortable," Miss Glenwrythe said with a polite smile. "However, it would behoove you to make your intentions or, in this case, lack thereof, known."

"There is nothing between Draco and me," Hermione stated emphatically.

"All right then," Miss Glenwrythe said, placing her napkin on the table. "If you'd allow me to express your sentiments, I'm sure that this matter can be laid to rest." All of the girls placed their napkins on their plates as Miss Glenwrythe rose to go. "Mrs. Snape, it has been a pleasure. I hope you've enjoyed our company and might consent to take tea with us again."

Hermione felt as if she were being dismissed. She rose from the table, and the other girls stood as well. "It was nice of you to invite me. I did enjoy it, Miss Glenwrythe, thank you," she said, unsure of how to respond.

Cillian was standing at the door when Hermione turned around to leave. He smiled as they walked back to the tower.

Hermione finally turned and frowned at him. "What?"

His grin became a cocky expression that irritated her. "You don't know, do you?" he asked.

She had no idea what he was smirking about. "Know what, exactly?"

He shook his head. "Miss Glenwrythe carries a lot of influence in Slytherin. She has chosen to befriend you."

"Befriend?" Hermione stopped briefly and then hurried to catch up. "She treated me as if we were..."

"Yes, she was formal. First tea is always formal, Hermione." Cillian paused to wait for her.

"They called me Mrs. Snape the entire time," she said, confused by his assessment of Miss Glenwrythe's motives.

"And she will for at least a month." Cillian stopped and faced her. "At which time you'll be invited to call her by her first name." Hermione mouthed 'a month,' and Cillian chuckled at her confusion. "You two may have known each other before, but you have never been in her social circle, nor she in yours. Had you grown up in the pureblood circles, you'd have met or been introduced by your parents. If the two of you had become friends then, as children, you'd already be on a first-name basis. Since you were not you're being inducted into her circle of friends formally. It's how things are done. C'mon, I want to get going."

"I can't believe you're that eager to go shopping," she said, still perplexed.

"I love shopping," Cillian said with a smirk.

Snape was standing by the fireplace, holding several traveling cloaks. As they approached Snape, he held up Hermione's cloak for her. "So, did you get mine as well?" Cillian asked.

"Obviously," Snape replied as he draped one cloak about Hermione's shoulders and then handed Cillian his dark brown one. "We will go first. Borgin is expecting us." Cillian nodded. Severus took her hand and pulled her into the Floo with him. They emerged in the Dark Arts shop, which hadn't changed much since Hermione had last been there. The only noticeable difference was the absence of the vanishing cabinet. In its place stood an old grandfather clock with three hands and two rings of symbols: one ring in numbers for the time, the other in runes and symbols.

"Headmaster, Mrs. Snape, so good to see you," Mr. Borgin said, wringing his hands in mock delight. His smile grew even bigger with Cillian's arrival. "Mr. Gwynek, a pleasure."

Cillian simply said, "Borgin," absentmindedly as he dusted himself off.

"Thank you for the use of your Floo, Mr. Borgin," Snape said formally. "We shall return in a short while."

Mr. Borgin covered his look of annoyance with a bow. "Always a pleasure to serve his most trusted follower," he groveled pathetically.

Snape took Hermione's arm and led her to the door. Quite a few shoppers wandered the street, casually looking in the windows of Knockturn Alley. Hermione distinctly saw three men, one a thick, scruffy man, the other two both rather gruff-looking, move from the wall and follow them as they passed. She was certain that she recognized two of the men, one of the gruff-looking wizards and the scruffy one, but wasn't sure. Regardless, the scruffy one was definitely familiar to her, but she couldn't place the name or where she'd seen him.

Snape's grip tightened slightly on her arm. "Don't get any ideas," he hissed softly. "Those three aren't the only ones here today."

Hermione shook her head, keeping close to Snape. In a window reflection, Hermione saw another short, squat wizard she thought she recognized join the other three wizards who had been following them. Cillian hissed at her to stop trying to watch the wizards behind them and to keep her eyes forward.

In contrast to Knockturn Alley, Diagon Alley had fewer shoppers, but still enough to make maneuvering necessary. Most people stayed close together, averting their eyes, giving them, and the four dark robed men behind them, as wide a berth as possible. Snape led her straight to Madam Malkin's.

Inside the shop, a smiling, middle-aged, squat witch approached them. "Headmaster, Mrs. Snape, good to see you. You're right on time. I have selected several gowns, as you requested." She turned and smiled at Cillian. "Mr. Gwynek, how good to see you."

Snape smirked as Cillian smiled and greeted the proprietor. "Well, let's see what you have for us," Snape said, drawing the woman's attention to the task at hand. She motioned to a rack of robes. Snape flipped through them, grimacing or frowning at the garish costumes. He pulled one out, a black robe with long sleeves and streamers that looked like a Halloween witch costume, and then shoved it back.

"If these don't suit you, I have more," the witch offered, looking worriedly at Snape.

Cillian had moved into the shop and was looking at the robes. He handed one to the shop assistant and then another. Snape looked at the robes Cillian had selected and led Hermione to the dressing room to try them on. The first was a red dress with a wide, low cut neckline and frilly ruffles. Snape shook his head. The second reminded Hermione of Morticia Addams, and it fit her just as tight. Snape waved her back into the dressing room with a frown. He vetoed the next two, as well, in a similar fashion.

"Here, try this one," Cillian said, shoving a gown through the curtain at her.

It was blue, comfortable, and flowing, but when Hermione stepped out from the changing room into the shop, Cillian's eyes widened, and Snape scowled darkly. "Absolutely not!" Snape snapped, motioning her back into the dressing room.

When Hermione turned around and saw her reflection in the large mirrors surrounding the dais, she saw why the gown looked like she was wearing nothing but blue-tinted water and was just as transparent.

The next gown she tried on looked like layers of leaves cascading down her body. The one after that made her look like she was engulfed in flames. Snape's eyes narrowed at the gown as he walked around her slowly. Two small broaches held the gown at her shoulders, and the uneven neckline matched the hemline. Her arms were bare and bodice was fitted, but not tight. The full skirt of the dress seemed to float and flicker she moved. Cillian nodded when Snape looked at him. "Fine, she may have it," he said as if it had been Hermione indicating that she wanted the dress, rather than Cillian smiling in approval.

Madam Malkin walked up, smiling. "Excellent choice! It fits her so well," the woman said, placing only two pins in the sides of the dress.

"Have it delivered to the school," Snape said offhandedly, gesturing for Hermione to go change.

Afterwards, Snape took Hermione to browse in the bookshop, then to check on his order in the Apothecary and to buy a new cauldron. At each shop, two wizards stood sentry by the doors, guarding them as the other two loitered nearby. As they passed Eeylops Owl Emporium, Hermione saw both Fred and George in the window of the shop, but Snape grasped her hand firmly, and Cillian shook his head at her, warning her not to try anything. The two wizards, who had guarded the door of each shop they had entered, stopped at the door of the Emporium, and the other two continued to follow them. When Snape and Cillian guided her down Knockturn Alley, she saw all four wizards reflected in the window of a shop that sold charmed and cursed candles. Hermione was relieved when Snape pulled her into the Floo in Borgin's shop to return to the castle.

She emerged and turned, expecting to see Cillian follow. When he didn't, she looked at Snape in confusion. "He has somewhere to be this afternoon. So you shall spend the day with me," he said quietly.

"I had hoped to spend some time in the library," she said wistfully.

Snape smirked at her. "Of course you did. Get your things."

Hermione raced to get her bag. Snape walked her down to the library and nodded respectfully to Madam Pince as he surveyed the students at the tables. Draco looked up and sighed heavily. "Stay where I can see you. What subject will you be reading on?" Snape asked softly.

"Charms," Hermione answered, and he held his hand up allowing her to go. Hermione saw Draco approach Snape, and they moved to the side to talk. Hermione moved down the shelves. For the most part, Snape was visibly watching her, but he allowed her to move freely through the stacks like Cillian usually did. She searched through the books as she looked for any means of enchanting mirrors.

Snape came up to her after what only seemed like an hour and insisted that they go change for dinner. Hermione took a quick shower and dressed in fresh school robes. The Great Hall looked the same as it did for any Halloween feast, save for the added presence of the Death Eaters at each table, and everyone was much more subdued than in previous years. Hermione whispered to Ginny about her trip to Diagon Alley and seeing Fred and George in Eeylops. Ginny was glad that her brothers seemed to be all right and expressed her wish that she could have sent Hermione with a note to them.

"He led me right past them. I wasn't even allowed to wave or say hello. Even under better circumstances, I seriously doubt Professor Snape would have allowed me go to your brothers' shop. Could you imagine him buying any of their products on our shopping trip?" Hermione asked. They both grabbed their goblets to keep from laughing and drawing attention to themselves.

Ginny told her about the latest letter from her brother Bill, and Hermione told her what she'd read in the library. She passed her a list of the books she'd read. "Just so you don't look in the ones I did."

"Thanks," Ginny said, stuffing it in a pocket to read later.

Snape came up to Hermione when the pudding was served. "Come with me," he said dryly.

Hermione rose and followed, feeling a sense of dread. Her new dress hung on the wardrobe door, and her lingerie lay on the bed.

"Hurry up and change. Leave your hair down," he said as he removed his own teaching robes. He pulled out his nicer frockcoat and vest and began to change. "Well, hurry up. We're already late as it is."

Hermione stripped quickly, letting Peren help her with her backless wizard corset and her garters and stockings. Snape handed Peren a pair of pretty combs for her hair with a delicate, intricately carved pattern. Nevertheless, Hermione's mouth quirked when she recognized that they were made from more of the Skrewt shell. He handed her a white mask adorned with thousands of tiny, gold flower-shaped beads and picked up his Death Eater's mask. He showed her how to fit the mask magically, since there were no strings to hold it. When she held it up to her face, the mask seemed to mold to her like a thick layer of makeup. Snape draped her cloak on her shoulders and led her to the Floo. "Relax, Hermione, it's a party. No one will harm you tonight," he said before they were whisked away.

They emerged from a huge marble Floo into an opulent study. "Good evening, Severus, Hermione," Lucius Malfoy greeted them politely. Hermione greeted him as politely as she could as Snape removed her cloak, then his, and handed them to a waiting house-elf. "He is in the drawing room," Mr. Malfoy said smoothly to Snape. "But he hasn't asked for you yet."

Standing this close to him, Hermione was stunned to see the wariness on Mr. Malfoy's face. He looked thinner than she remembered him, although his robes were perfectly tailored to his frame. Even his hair seemed less smooth and silky. Both men put on their masks, and Mr. Malfoy indicated that they follow him. Snape held up his arm. Hermione gratefully accepted it and took a deep breath. "Relax, you'll be fine," he said smoothly though the mask. Hermione cringed, hating the way his usually velvety smooth voice sounded slightly hollow and distant through the slits of his mask.

The ballroom was nearly filled to capacity. The ladies wore their finest robes, most in vibrant colors, and the men sported black robes; those who could afford them donned smart black tuxedo robes. Hermione gripped Snape's arm tighter as her gaze swept the room, observing the guests gathered under the sparkling chandeliers. Throughout the room, everyone's face was hidden behind a mask; most of the men, and several of the women, were fully or partially hidden behind the skull-like Death Eater masks. She noticed that many of the guests turned to observe them as they entered, leaning toward whom they had been conversing with as if Snape and Lucius Malfoy were celebrities. Hermione suddenly realized that she was the one drawing everyone's attention and blushed, lowering her head slightly, knowing that under any other circumstances any one of them would have likely killed her on the spot.

She stood as close to Snape as she dared, clutching his arm like a lifeline. He turned to look at her, but said nothing, only giving her hand a gentle squeeze. He accepted a pale, green drink from a house-elf and passed it to Hermione. "Sip sparingly or not at all," he whispered in her ear as he picked up another.

Nervously, she followed him as he walked slowly around the room, stopping on occasion to speak with a fellow Death Eater. When the music changed, he led her to the floor for a few dances and then led her to the side of the room. Hermione noticed that he was quiet, rarely seeking anyone out, and he stood stiffly when approached.

"Severus, my dear," called out a woman in clingy, dark blue dress robes as she approached and tried to cozy up to him. "It has been far too long."

Snape nodded curtly, standing like a stone statue, except for the arm Hermione clung to. "Belinda," he said smoothly as if addressing an annoying Gryffindor student.

Belinda apparently didn't catch the inflection of annoyance in his tone as she slithered closer. "You haven't returned my owls," she pouted behind her mask, blatantly ignoring Hermione's presence. "One would think that you haven't had time for a friend."

Hermione tasted her drink, grimaced at the sharp tang of the alcohol, and swallowed reluctantly. She wished for a butterbeer or water but kept quiet so as not to attract any further attention from any of the Death Eaters.

"I've been busy," Snape said with cool politeness. "How is Horrynce?"

Belinda waved her hand dismissively. "Attending to business as usual. I have invited you repeatedly to join me for lunch; surely you're able to get away." One of her hands clasped his arm that hung at his side as her other brushed his shoulder.

"I'm running a school, as you well know, and my time is preoccupied there," he said, looking straight ahead at the revelers in the room.

Belinda's hand slid down Snape's back as she leaned into him. "Surely you could make time for a close *personal* friend."

"What time I have for pleasure or amusement, I spend reading or with my wife," he said smoothly indifferently as he turned slightly to look at her. His shift made him stand closer to Hermione, but he made no move to shove Belinda off.

Belinda's hand stilled on Snape's bum. "Surely she cannot fulfill *all* your needs," she said coquettishly.

Snape's eyes from behind his mask looked coldly amused. "I get what I need, given or not," he said coolly.

Hermione inhaled sharply, wanting to draw away, but Snape's hand captured hers.

He turned toward Hermione and ran a finger along her jaw. "When revision allows such... enjoyments," he said silkily.

Hermione blushed, unseen from under the mask. Snape fingered Hermione's wedding band where her hand still clung to his arm, making the light glint off both their rings. Belinda huffed and moved away, her shoulders held back and her spine rigid.

"Pretenses. Remember that," he added before standing rigid by her side again.

She sighed, understanding him perfectly. She recognized Draco by his hair, standing among several wizards wearing what she remembered as being the recruits' masks. Snape leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Three of them talking to Draco are recruits; the others are new members who have not earned their Death Eater masks."

"What do they have to do to get one?" she asked, biting her lip.

"Don't ask," he hissed softly.

"Draco's mask matches his father's," she said softly, spying Mr. Malfoy and two other men as they watched them from across the room. "Did he get his for his part in killing Dumbledore?"

Snape squeezed her hand tightly. "Stop prying."

She watched a small group of people pass by as they walked to the refreshment table. "Snape, a word with you," a heavyset wizard asked from behind her, making Hermione jump. "Without the girl."

"Stay here. I won't be far," Snape said and stepped away, following the wizard in a Death Eater mask that looked like it was made from an actual skull. Hermione felt isolated and suddenly bereft of her protection. She could see Cillian's curly hair a short distance away, surrounded by three young women. She chewed on her straw as she pretended to sip her drink.

"Are you having a good time, Hermione," Draco asked, suddenly appearing by her side.

"Not particularly," she said, sucking the drink up her straw and letting it flow back to pretend that she was enjoying the beverage.

Draco laughed. "You're not good at deception," he said, and she could hear his smile in his voice. "Care to dance with me?"

"Not really, Mr. Malfoy," she replied as politely as she could.

He leaned closer to her. "Maybe you'd like to meet a few of my friends," he suggested teasingly.

Hermione blanched. The last thing she wanted to do was meet Death Eater want-to-bes. "Draco, I'd love to dance."

He was a good lead, but he held her lightly. He kept her on the floor for three dances, conversed easily with her, and returned her to where she'd been standing. "Thank you," he said. Cillian looked at him, then turned his head as if to indicate the group approaching. Draco nodded at Cillian and moved to intercept them, leaving Hermione alone again.

"Enjoying yourself?" Hermione jumped, startled by the languid drawl of Lucius Malfoy from behind her. "Don't cause a scene," he beseeched softly, although it still sounded like a sneer. "Dance with me." He took hold of her elbow and guided her to the dance floor.

"Do I have a choice?" she asked. She considered pulling her arm free and walking off. But there was something in his eyes when she looked up at him that pleaded with her not to.

Mr. Malfoy pulled her closer and led her in a smooth waltz. He was a strong lead, confident and sure, guiding her easily to the music. "How are you getting along with Draco?" he asked.

Hermione lifted her head again to look at him. "Well enough. He hasn't hexed, jinxed, or cursed me at all this term, and he's stopped calling me a Mudblood. Apparently, he's decided that we're to be friends."

"No, the Dark Lord desires it. Tell me, how do you like the Carrows' lessons?" he asked and then lowered his voice. "How do they treat him?"

"I can't say I enjoy their lessons at all," Hermione said coolly, trying to keep the hateful edge from her voice, but stiffened slightly, nevertheless. "They treat *him* just fine. They usually focus their ire on me and my friends."

"At least you are receiving your education, are you not?" Lucius leaned in close to her ear. "Please allow by-gones to be by-gones. I can make it worth your while," he said, his tone one of a concerned father, not of an arrogant Death Eater.

"And how is that exactly, as I am only alive at the Dark Lord's pleasure," she said softly, keeping her wits even though his actions surprised her.

The silver-blue eyes regarded her a moment. He pulled her close for another turn. "A Mudblood like yourself? Surely, not only for his pleasure," he sneered and then lowered his voice. "I can be an ally or an enemy; I suggest you consider my offer."

"And what exactly could you do for me?" she asked, confused by his constantly changing demeanor.

"Please," Lucius said, then suddenly stepped back and stood rigidly as the music stopped. "It's a pity you'll be terminated when you no longer serve a purpose. You are quite feisty, you know," he said in his usual arrogant tone. He gripped her chin and swept his eyes down her body. "Yes, such a waste. I'll have to convince your husband to bring you here again."

Hermione tried to hold back her revulsion at his implied suggestion.

He let go of her chin as Snape approached. "Severus," Lucius said with a slight incline of his head.

"Lucius," Snape said, placing his hand possessively on Hermione's back.

She watched Mr. Malfoy walk away, wondering what all that was about.

"Did you enjoying dancing with him, Hermione?" Snape asked coolly, his fingers tightening on her hand when she clasped his arm.

She looked up at him and leaned closer to his side. "I had the strangest exchange with Mr. Malfoy," she whispered.

"Oh?" he asked, although he didn't flinch or move a muscle. "What was said?"

"Between the insults? He asked me to befriend Draco," she whispered, looking over his shoulder at three wizards standing behind them, hoping they were out of earshot. "He said that he would make it worth my while."

"Keep that to yourself," Snape hissed, looking over her head at the couples dancing. "You'll tell me everything he said when we return to the castle."

Hermione nodded, but Snape didn't relax his pose any. "Are you ready?" he asked.

Hermione caught her breath, and she recoiled in shock. "What? Now?"

"Yes," he said, taking her elbow and leading her to a drawing room. The Dark Lord sat on a tall armchair set up against the wall. Several people gathered near the entrances, but the middle of the room was unoccupied as if no one wanted to be there.

"Severus, come in and bring your wife," Narcissa said, just inside the doorway. "He's expecting you. You're to remove your masks."

They entered, removed their masks, placed them on a table situated inside near the door and moved to the center of the room. Hermione followed Snape's lead and knelt on the marble floor with her head bowed.

"Rise, Severus, and tell me of Hogwarts," the Dark Lord said in is high-pitched sibilant voice.

Snape rose and approached him, gave an accounting of everything at the school and answered the Dark Lord's questions. He made the situation at Hogwarts seem normal as he related the events at the castle.

The Dark Lord had his head turned toward Snape, but Hermione felt as if his gaze were still upon her as well. "And the governors, are they leaving you to do what I've asked?"

"Yes, my Lord. Only Dolores Umbridge is a constant thorn, but she is easily ignored," Snape said smoothly.

"And the Carrows, how are they getting along? Any more trouble from the staff or students?" the Dark Lord asked, his tone bearing a harsh edge, and Hermione felt that this subject could possibly be a dangerous one for Snape to answer.

"Alecto and Amycus have been using spells for discipline that are not normally allowed by the staff, and there is still animosity and resentment from the other professors, mostly from the Heads of House. Slughorn is silent enough, but then, he knows better than to complain." Snape related a few events that he'd had to deal with, all of which he'd easily handled.

"Very good," the Dark Lord said, clearly pleased with Snape's report. "Hermione, please, my dear, come here. No need to bruise your shins on that cold floor."

Hermione looked up, fighting her fear and focusing her mind on nothing but the stone corridors of the school. She'd have gladly stayed put, even to the point of her legs going numb, rather than approach him. She climbed to her feet and took a tentative step forward, watching him cautiously.

"You look lovely," the Dark Lord said, leaning forward on his chair, his full attention now focused upon her.

"T-thank you, m-my Lord," she stammered, unable to meet his intense red eyes.

The Dark Lord motioned her forward. "My, my, dear, no need to be afraid. Have I not given you everything I promised?"

Snape stood unmoving, watching her impassively, offering her no encouragement at all.

"Yes, my Lord," she said, taking a few steps to stand in front of him. She swallowed nervously and bowed her head.

"Look at her, Severus. Such modest respect she shows me. Or is that fear... I will not hurt you, Hermione. You have not done anything to garner my displeasure. I have heard that you are obeying me and serving Severus well," the Dark Lord said kindly, although he was still staring at her intently. "You are doing well in your lessons, aren't you?"

"I try my best in every subject, my Lord," Hermione admitted as if answering her father's inquiry and not this terrifying wizard's.

"Ah, such modesty," he said, smiling at Snape, then turned to her again. "I have been told of your ability in school: your dedication to your studies, your brilliance, your capabilities, and your talents."

Hermione smiled weakly and nodded, uttering a soft, "Thank you, my Lord."

"Hermione, come to me," the Dark Lord demanded. Hermione stepped closer, and the Dark Lord reached for her hand, pulling her to stand practically between his knees. "Kneel."

She fell to her knees without question, and he gripped her chin to make her look at him. The intrusion into her mind hit her with a thrusting force. Thousands of images flashed through her mind: writing her notes in class, reading and searching for things in the library, sitting at the coffee table in the sitting room doing her essays, struggling with a Carnibus root in Herbology. He paused at memories and feelings that were associated with Draco and smiled at her memory of her watching Draco practice Quidditch and the few times she'd been with him in the library. He focused on several memories of her lessons with the Carrows. Many of the images flashed so quickly, she had little control over them, but when an image of the bedroom almost came into focus, she quickly slammed a mental door and showed one of her walking down the corridor with Cillian. The Dark Lord laughed. "I have no interest in your sex life, girl."

He released her, and she almost fell forward. "You have been busy, haven't you?" he asked, smirking at her.

Hermione sucked in her breath, wondering which image or images had upset him. "It is my N.E.W.T. year, sir," she said, wondering if he'd punish her or not for not befriendng Draco.

"Ah, Cillian Gwynnek, come in," the Dark Lord said, waving him into the room. "Do take Mrs. Snape back to the party and dance with her. I want a private word with Severus."

"Absolutely, my Lord," Cillian said, bowing. He stood and extended a hand toward her. "Hermione, come away."

Hermione rose, curtsayed, and backed out, only turning her back when Cillian took her hand to draw her away.

"Are you all right?" he asked, handing her her mask so she could put it on. Narcissa watched them leave with a satisfied smirk.

"I'm fine," she said, grateful to have the mask back in place again. "He didn't punish me for any of it."

"Why would he? You've been behaving," Cillian said, leading her to the dance floor. "There is nothing you could have shown him that Severus or I haven't told him about."

Hermione felt guilty, knowing that the Occlumency lessons had almost been discovered. They danced for several songs; all the while Hermione watched the room for a sign of Snape. She finally spotted him standing on the sidelines with Belinda.

"Damn, my sister is fawning over him again," Cillian sneered. "Want to rescue your husband?"

Hermione nodded. Cillian led her to Snape. Belinda's eyes turned icy when they approached. "Sis," Cillian said in greeting.

She answered with a stiff, "Cillian. I see you have been entertaining our Muggle-born guest."

Snape moved away from Belinda and placed a hand possessively on Hermione's back. "He intends on adding two more wizards at the gates for the Hogsmeade weekend," Snape told Cillian casually as if he approved.

"When will that be?" Cillian asked, accepting two orange drinks spewing a white fog over the rim. He handed one to Hermione.

"It's to be next weekend," Snape said, ignoring Belinda's attempt to take his arm. "I'm to inform the students at breakfast. You and I will escort Hermione to town. I think early morning would be best."

Cillian turned his head and nodded.

"Brilliant," Belinda said. "We can have lunch at the Carriage House Inn."

"My wife and I will have limited time," Snape said casually. "We will have to purchase parchment and replenish her school supplies. She will want to visit the bookshop and undoubtedly the confectioners. I have to be at the castle before lunch, so it will be a quick trip for necessities only."

Belinda looked affronted. Cillian and Snape started talking about Potions. Hermione, piqued by the conversation, joined in. "So, Hermione, you agree with Wainwright's theory about the different properties of the runespoor venom?" Cillian asked.

"Professor Snape showed me Wainwright's article in one of his monthly Potions journals, and I did some checking to the references he made. Because the three heads are so different, each with their own personality traits, their venom has been treated as having different properties for such a long time. It's well known that the left head, or critic, is the most venomous of the three, and the right head or planner's venom is used in antidotes to the potions which utilize the critic's. Wainwright's study of the properties of the dreamer's venom is intriguing, although I have only seen it used in potions for sight, awareness, and mental acuity."

Belinda watched her, her eyes narrowed in anger, and then stormed off. Snape relaxed slightly and Cillian chuckled. Snape gestured for them to move back toward the wall as they continued to discuss the attributes of various venoms in potions.

Narcissa came up and asked Snape to dance. Hermione danced with Cillian until Bellatrix asked to cut in, at which point Hermione danced with Snape again. "You are holding up well," Snape commented on their third time on dance floor as Cillian danced with a slender blonde girl.

"Thank you," she replied.

"You want to leave," he stated, and she could hear the smirk in his tone.

"Yes, I do. Being around so many Death Eaters in their masks is a bit unnerving," she replied. She wanted to lay her head on his shoulder and make the room fade away a bit.

As if reading her thoughts, Snape pulled her closer and stroked her hair. "We cannot leave until the Dark Lord does," he said, softly into her hair.

Hermione nodded, breathing in his scent and closing her eyes, letting herself relax in his arms.

His head shifted. "How much have you had to drink?" he asked, his tone concerned.

She looked up at him, focusing on his eyes and not the mask. "Some. Almost nothing. I sucked the drink up the straw and then let it drain back, but I didn't like the taste of the drinks all that much. I think Cillian was doing something to the glass, because it would empty slightly each time I lowered it."

Snape laughed softly. "We both were," he said. "At least I don't have to be too concerned about the effects. I'll have to teach you that spell later."

She leaned back and wished she could see his face and not the disturbing mask. "I don't understand, what effects? Are you saying they were spiked with a potion?"

"A lust potion," he said smoothly. "If you didn't drink very much, you didn't consume enough to effect you. Most don't check the beverages."

"Why would Mr. Malfoy drug his guests?" she asked. The thought of him deliberately doing so bothered her.

Snape shrugged slightly and pulled her close again. "It makes his parties more interesting toward the end, hence the rumors of the Death Eater revels. Most couples leave as soon as the Dark Lord does, but I've known a few men to be grateful to Lucius for the spiking."

By the time the Dark Lord joined the party, then retired shortly after, Hermione's feet were killing her, and she was exhausted. Snape and Cillian led Hermione down to the garden gate to Apparate to Hogsmeade, since Snape had only activated the Floo connection to allow them to arrive to the Manor, but not to return. A school carriage waited in Hogsmeade to take them back to the castle. Hermione laid her head on Snape's shoulder as the carriage took off and, lulled by the gentle, rocking sway, she drifted asleep. Snape woke her when they'd reached the front doors, but he had to carry her up to their room. The last things she remembered were Peren helping her to remove her clothes, climbing into bed and Snape lying down beside her.

~o0o~

Hermione woke up alone. She dressed and went to look for Snape. She stopped at the top of the stairs that led to his office when she heard Alecto Carrow's shrill voice screeching, "Vandals will not be tolerated in this school," followed by Professor McGonagall's stern reprimand.

"Of course, vandalism isn't tolerated but you have no proof!"

"They did it, I know it, and they will be punished," Alecto sneered venomously.

"You cannot claim that Miss Weasley and Mr. Longbottom are responsible for this!" Professor McGonagall protested loudly, her stern voice carrying well up the stairs. "You have no proof!"

"Who else but those hooligans would have vandalized the school walls?" Alecto screamed. "They wrote, 'Tired of being abused? Stand up for what's right,' on the walls on

every floor!"

"Very appropriate saying, considering the way you and your brother mistreat the students!" Professor McGonagall sneered back quite loudly.

"I do not tolerate insolence in my classroom!" Alecto shouted.

"Nor do I!" Professor McGonagall said.

Hermione shook her head, wondering if it had been Ginny and Neville as she returned to her room. When Snape appeared in the doorway, she decided to leave the question of the writing on the wall alone and instead asked if she could go to the library. Snape smiled. "Of course," he said softly. "But you'll have to come back here. I can't spend the day watching over you."

On their way, they passed Filch, who was busily cleaning the writing off the wall. Hermione looked at Snape and cringed slightly at the hard, cold expression on his face.

He sat at the table closest to Madam Pince's desk to wait as she turned to the bookshelves.

'I have to think outside of the box,' she mumbled silently to herself as she moved through the stacks. 'Somehow I have to link two mirrors so that what I see in mine is the image of what Harry would've seen in his mirror and vice versa, but I also need to make it possible for us to talk to each other... I need one that allows communication.' She opened up a tall, thin book and flipped through the pages, then set it back in disgust.

'Mutual exchange... transmitting and receiving... What in the wizarding world does this? Protean charmed objects only exchange words or symbols. What I need has to be not only visual but conversational.' She perused the titles, still mumbling silently to herself, tapping her lip with a finger. 'Floos... Floos connect through fire. I haven't seen anything with a spell that connects through glass no, through reflections. Reciprocal images connecting a reciprocal mutual exchange... It cannot be that simple! It's a Conjointment Charm on a matching object. Oh, my gods, it's simple! But how?' She turned to the shelf where the book with the Protean and Conjointment Charms were. She pulled down every book that had either mentioned in its index. There were eleven that had Conjointment Charms and four that had both. Two other books each had a Charm for Reciprocal Imagery. In another, there was an explanation that seemed to be close to what she wanted. 'Modulate the reciprocity of the charm to both verbal and visual on identical objects!' she mumbled and closed the book with a smile. 'Compacts. Muggle compacts. But who can send me identical Muggle compacts? I'll need two no, four. The fewer who know, the better.' She kept the seven books, put back the others, and started on the next shelf.

"Hermione, did you find what you needed? I have to return to my office," Snape said, coming into the aisle beside her.

Hermione hadn't heard him approach and jumped in surprise. "I think so," she said, picking up the book she'd dropped. He helped her collect her books and carried them to his office.

Hermione went up to her room to get her fifth-year Charms book and spotted the thin brown journal that she'd pulled down off Snape's bookshelves in his bedroom back at Spinner's End. She stared at it, concerned, remembering his admonishment not to remove his books from the house. Her fingers stroked the binding of the books next to it, *The Rise of Darkness*, *Fastosus Opinio Praejudicata Defendo*, by Myles Stanridge, and Snape's old Charms book. She slid her finger across the two others that had been on her bedside table as well. *Peren must have packed them by mistake*. She closed the lid, hoping he'd not be furious at her for having them.

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*Author's notes:*

*I'm quite sure we'll see Belinda again, unfortunately.*

*Can anyone guess what's up with the Slytherin girls?*

## Riddle of Occlumency

Chapter 23 of 43

Hermione spends her free time working on her Occlumency and trying to solve the problem of the mirrors. However, a troublesome visit from Belinda with horrible news for Cillian could have been disastrous for Hermione.

*A huge thank you to Dungeon\_Butterfly and DutchessOfArcadia for reading this over for me and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much. Also, smooches and a big thank you to DuchessOfArcadia for my lovely banner! I really love it, doll.*

*I added child torture because the punishments will start to become more severe. Not too bad, but some of the stuff mentioned by Neville in DH will be described or mentioned.*

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Riddle of Occlumency

"We've looked through every book there is," Ginny whined as she closed the book she'd been reading.

"I've spent weeks reading every entry in the books concerning Protean and Conjointment Charms, trying to find any way to combine the two spells on a pair of mirrors," Hermione said, sitting back on her heels. "Well, when I wasn't writing essays or revising for classes or presented before Vol er the Dark Lord. I'm certain that this is the answer." She showed Ginny the old Charms book she'd inadvertently taken from Severus' house as well as one of the books from the sitting room.

Ginny opened the book up to the marker. "Hermione, are you sure this is the answer?"

Hermione nodded. "I have compared several different variations, and I know okay, think it should work, but I have no way of finding out without mirrors and my wand."

"You could use mine," Ginny offered, handing back the book.

"Muggle mirrors."

"Oh, yeah." Ginny's eyes glazed slightly as she stared at the bookshelf behind Hermione. "Are you sure they have to be Muggle?"

"Gin, we have to be able to link the mirrors across long distances, kilometers, possibly across the country. The strongest version, well according to the books, counteracts with the typical magic used on wizarding mirrors. It clearly states an 'uncharmed object,' and, in magical mirrors, the charms are used in the making of the mirrors. Plus, the Conjointment Charm won't work with most metals. Silver is best, but most mirrors have silver nitrate or aluminum. And the Protean Charm doesn't work on glass."

"So, until we get the mirrors, we won't know if they'll work. I wish Harry had his dad's mirror. That would've helped. At least we'd know what type worked."

Professor Snape entered the room and leaned against the entry.

"My cue to go," Ginny said, collecting all her things in a hurry. "Do you have any books that need to be returned to the library?"

Hermione shook her head, laughing. "Nope."

"Miss Weasley," he said as he crossed the room.

"Headmaster," Ginny answered politely. Hermione rose and walked with her to the office. She hugged Hermione, whispering, "We'll figure this out," in her ear. "I can always ask Dad or Fred and George."

"Let's leave them out of it for now," Hermione said, letting go of her friend. "When you talk to Luna, ask her if she's done with the book."

Ginny smiled at their code for updating Luna on what they'd found. "Will do."

Hermione watched the door close behind her and returned to the sitting room. She knew what awaited her, a half hour of Legilimency torture, Professor Snape's version of Occlumency lessons. Last time, she'd managed to close a mental 'door' a few times on her more embarrassing memories like she had when the Dark Lord had invaded her mind. But Snape had merely laughed and forced his way through the door, making her want to scream in frustration.

She'd been practicing, trying to clear her mind, attempting to empty the jumble of thoughts and emotions surging through her while soaking in the tub and occasionally during her breaks between lessons. That was if she could find a quiet place to *not* think. But she just couldn't close her emotions off. She could segregate them, categorize them, even compartmentalize them, but not be rid of them. It was frustrating her to no end.

Only fifteen minutes into the lesson and Hermione was in tears. "You're not trying," he said after breaking contact.

"You're dredging up my nightmares!" she wailed back at him and wiped her cheeks with her sleeve.

He handed her a handkerchief. "You're letting me. Would you prefer me to evaluate your romance with the Bulgarian Quidditch player?"

"If that will make you happy sure!" she said, grabbing the cloth. She threw herself on the sofa. "My head hurts."

"The Dark Lord would not care if your head hurt," he said calmly.

She hated it when he was calm, especially when she wanted to yell at him. "He's never been this... forceful before."

"He hasn't needed to be. You've shown him exactly what he wanted to see," he snapped at her. "Not that I didn't think you would."

"Yeah, every memory of Harry screwing up!" she said and blew her nose.

He crossed his arms. "Is that what he wanted last time?"

"No, last time he wanted to see how I'm doing in school and my memories that included Draco," she answered, holding out the cloth.

He cleaned it with a flick of his wand, then crossed his arms again. "Keep it. Why you never have one on you when you cry is beyond me." He raised one arm and stroked his bottom lip. "Potter's ineptitude at performing spellwork, his inability at brewing potions, your aptitude with your lessons, and your friendship with Draco. Nothing else?"

She shook her head. "I was worried he'd see my Occlumency lessons, but he didn't want to see our private moments."

"But he was interested in how you've been getting along with Draco?" Severus asked thoughtfully, staring at the wall behind her.

"Yes. I've been doing what you wanted of me, I'm befriending him." Hermione had made allowances, such as being Draco's partner in Herbology, but only if he promised to be nice and polite to Neville. In Potions, she shared a worktable with him and Goyle, and she saved him a seat beside her whenever she was in the library, but he had to be polite to her friends. But that was as far as she'd go. Draco seemed to take the olive branch she was giving him and stopped pestering her in Charms and Transfiguration. Nevertheless, he still insisted on walking with her between lessons, especially if they were going to the same classes.

"And I appreciate the effort. How is your hand?" he asked.

"It's better, thank you." Ever since Halloween, Alecto had been using a new disciplinary tactic; she carried a type of ridding crop in her hand that was as flexible as a whip, striking the back of the hands of anyone who irritated her in class or in the corridors. Likewise, Amycus carried a thin, ruler-like piece of wood, about two and a half inches wide and twelve inches long, to whack the knuckles of the students that aggravated him. Of course, that mostly meant the Gryffindors. It was becoming commonplace to see Gryffindor students of all levels with their hands wrapped up with bandages soaked with Murtlap Essence.

She sighed and stood up. "I'm ready to try again."

"*Legilimens*," he said, before she even finished her sentence.

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The small bell on his desk chimed, indicating that someone was seeking admittance at the gargoyle. Severus touched the bell and heard the stairs moving. A moment later, a rapid tapping announced the visitor. He looked at the clock and knew that Hermione would be back soon. "Come," he called out. He was not the least bit pleased to see Belinda enter his office.

"Severus, darling," she said, sauntering up to him.

"Belinda." He moved away from her when she leaned down to kiss him. "What brings you to see me," he said softly, his annoyance clear in his voice. He dipped his quill and continued writing the response to Umbridge's insistence about reinstating her decrees.

She sat on the corner of the desk, leaning forward, offering him a view of her breasts. "I came by to see my little brother, of course. Being able to spend time with you is an added bonus."

"I'm busy," he said coolly.

"Oh, don't be like that," she purred, running a hand on his arm. "We had some good times, you and me. Don't you want that again?"

Severus dislodged her hand. "Belinda, you'd told me that you and Horrance were separated. However, he had merely been in Italy, dissolving his late brother's estate." He affixed the school seal on the bottom of the page by his signature.

"For a year and a half, and leaving me all by my lonesome here in dreary, old London," she cooed as she watched him fold his parchment.

"And led me to believe you were a single witch," he said tartly as he reached for the sealing wax. With a small flick of his finger, a flame erupted on the end of it, and he allowed the wax to drip onto the parchment.

"Now, would you have entertained me if you had known?" she said with a pout and reached up to touch his hair.

Severus jerked his head from her fingers as he sealed the correspondence with his signet ring. "Absolutely not." He set the letter aside and laced his fingers together as looked at her with the cool detachment he'd used so effectively as a professor. "You could've gone and enjoyed the entertainments of Italy."

"Why would I do that when I can enjoy the entertainments here instead?" she asked, leaning toward him.

"Belinda, I'm married," he said, blocking her hand with his.

"You're hand-fastened, and, after the end of the year, the Dark Lord plans on giving your toy to Lestrage to play with," she said with a pout.

Severus allowed his hair to fall over his face to hide the anger he couldn't suppress at the statement.

"Surely, you don't want to keep the Mudblood?" she asked, placing her hand on her chest in shock. "It's got to be so hard for you, night after night, having her in your bed. At least you can vent out your frustrations by using the girl. But I hate to think of you meeting your needs on such filth, whether it is given or not."

"Enough, Belinda," he growled, his voice a deep warning resonance.

"All we'd have to do is open my robes and free yourself," she purred, slowly undoing the buttons on her robe. "Wouldn't you like to take me here on your desk?"

"I wasn't aware that you were into exhibitionism," he sneered and swept his hand at the portraits in the room. "These walls have eyes, or haven't you noticed the portraits." He thought that he heard the stairs moving and prayed that he was right. "Cover yourself up!" he snapped as Cillian opened the door for Hermione. She took two steps into the room and froze, making Cillian collide into her back. Belinda turned to smile sneeringly at Hermione before demurely clasping at her robes.

Severus pushed himself away from the desk and stood, hoping that Hermione was smart enough to realize he hadn't wanted any part of what Belinda was offering, but keeping the sneer firmly in place. Hermione glared at him and hurried across the office, heading for the stairs. Severus moved quickly, intercepting her before she reached them. "It's not what you think," he hissed softly.

"What exactly is there to misinterpret? I'm not blind, and I'm not stupid. She's undressing in your office, so I presume that she's throwing herself at you," Hermione said softly, indicating Belinda with a sweep of her hand, who was now arguing with Cillian. "Pardon me for interrupting. I just wanted to exchange my books."

"I didn't want you to think I am..." Severus looked up and sighed. Belinda had thankfully buttoned up her robes. "That was unwanted attention. I *did* not encourage her nor invite her to be here," he said quietly, his tone harsh because of his frustration. "I am not having an affair with her. Stay, please, until Cillian and I can get rid of her. There is nothing going on that you cannot be witness to."

Hermione nodded and followed him to the desk, dropping her bag in a chair.

"Don't lie to me, Bell. If you had, you would've owed me, not simply sauntered up here to seduce Severus," Cillian snarled.

Belinda waved her hand as if to brush him off and picked up Hermione's bag, casually dumping it on the floor. "Severus and I are long time, well-acquainted friends," she said, sitting in the chair and setting her bag on the floor beside her chair. "Besides, my Avion is busy delivering the invites for my tea this weekend."

Cillian crossed his arms and glared at her. "So, you just stopped by to say hello. Is that it?"

"Of course, dear brother," she replied, rummaging through her bag, picking up what looked suspiciously like a daily planner. "Now where is my quill? Oh, here." She looked up and beamed at Cillian. "Besides, I have good news, baby brother. The Roquewoods have agreed to a union between you and their daughter. The Dark Lord approves."

Cillian turned away, swearing, and Severus glared at her.

"I thought you'd be happy. She's a delightful girl. She's well off, attractive, the right sort," Belinda said, pulling a letter from her bag and glancing at Hermione. "We can set the date, and you can give up babysitting this..."

"I don't care for the girl," Cillian sneered, cutting off his sister before she truly insulted Hermione.

"Cillian is here by my request, and his position was approved by the Dark Lord," Severus stated sternly. He smiled at Hermione briefly, trying to reassure her.

"Other arrangements can be made," Belinda said cooly. "There are a number of his followers that could hold reign on your little Mudblood Dolohov or Macnair for instance. They are currently available."

Severus had noticed Hermione wince from the mention of those particular Death Eaters. He walked up and slammed his fist down on the desk, rattling his inkwell and making Hermione flinch, but Belinda only smiled. "I will bring this matter up with the Dark Lord, Belinda. And you will *not* come here without notice, is that understood? You are not banned from the castle, but this is a school not a social club. You will send Cillian or I notice *before* you make any future visits. *And* you will not bother me in my office unless you have an *appointment*. Do I make myself clear?"

"If I want to visit my brother, I will do so," Belinda said as she lifted her bag onto her lap and shoved the planner back in among the contents. "Besides, I couldn't wait to

give my darling brother the good news of his impending betrothal."

Severus stepped over to Belinda, grasped her arm and pulled her from the chair. "You had best go. Cillian will walk you to the gate."

"Well, I never!" Belinda huffed, jerking her arm free of his grasp. She squared her shoulders and held her head high as she turned and stormed out the door.

"I'll be back," Cillian stated and ran after his sister.

Hermione grabbed her bag and practically ran as she headed for the stairs.

"Hermione?" Severus called out after her. He punched his desk once more to get his emotions under control before he went up to speak to her. The last thing he needed was for her to be mad because of Belinda's actions. He counted to ten slowly, then turned. The portraits were all awake, several starting to give him their opinion on what had happened. "Not now!" he snapped.

"Severus, Dolohov and Macnair must not be allowed in the castle," Dumbledore's image stated urgently.

"I am aware of that!" Severus snapped irritably. "Dolohov hates Hermione more than Rowle and Travers, and I know about Macnair's penchant for knives and his proclivities toward young witches! Excuse me; I have a witch to console." He crossed the room and ascended the stairs to search for Hermione.

He was momentarily startled when Peren appeared as soon as he reached the top of stairs to the sitting room, her ears drooping and wringing her hands. "What is it, Peren?"

"It's my mistress, sir. She is staring at a book, sir," the elf said, taking a few steps forward. "I can't get her to let it go, sir."

"She is probably revising, Peren," he said, sighing. *If she's sulking that would be bad, unless she's simply revising... maybe she's not upset with me.*

"Oh, no, sir. Peren finds ugly book. I tries to warn my mistress, but she she can't put naughty book down to answer Peren."

Severus hurried past Peren and ran up to the bedroom. Hermione was on her knees, entranced by thin book held open in her hands. "Hermione?" he asked, walking over to her.

She didn't respond or move a muscle. Her cat was circling her, making annoying growling and hissing noises.

"Hermione, talk to me," he demanded. He tried to pull the book from her grasp and felt a jolt shoot up his arm. The color of her skin was starting to pale, yet she didn't waver at all. He drew his wand, running through a series of identifying spells as he repeatedly called out her name. Finally, the wand tip glowed red. A few more flicks and he identified the Incapacitation Curse infused with the Enrapture Curse and the Assiduous-Immersion Curse. "Shite," he swore, weaving a complex series of charms over Hermione's body. He managed to reverse the Assiduous-Immersion Curse easily, as it was the weakest of the three. He then focused his attention on drawing the influence of the Incapacitation Curse back into her arms and down to her wrists with a purging counter-curse. "Peren, when I release her, she might collapse on the floor. I don't want her to hit her head."

Peren moved into place, and Severus increased his determination, concentrating on strengthening his counter-curse as he drew the spell into her hands. Her hands shook violently as the magic struggled against his charm.

Hermione looked up, her eyes pleading with him as he forced the Incapacitation Curse into the book and kicked it out of her hands. Severus swished his wrist, sending the book flying into the fireplace. The book emitted a thick, sickly fume, and Severus grabbed Hermione's wrist, dragging her from the room, ignoring her cries of pain. "Peren, help her, send for Draco, and get some elves up here to help you air out the room," he snarled as he strode across the sitting room and bounded down the stairs. He was hoping that Belinda hadn't left yet as he jumped from stair landing to stair landing and ran from the castle.

Cillian was on his way back up to the castle by the time he was out on the grounds. Severus grabbed his arm, turning his friend around to go with him as he told him about the book. Cillian swore and took off running for the gates, Severus right beside him.

"I'm not sure, but it's possible. But when? In your office? She wouldn't dare be that bold. You we were right there," Cillian said as they ran.

"Has anyone been in the bedroom but us?" Severus asked. He scowled when they were near enough to see the gates.

"House-elves and possibly her two friends... but the girls stay in the sitting room. Frankly, I haven't seen anyone in the castle with a grudge against her except the Carrows and our fellow Death Eaters," Cillian said, running a hand through his hair and scanning the grounds for any sign of his sister. "A few students, Crabbe, Goyle, Bulstrode, and Parkinson, they don't like her... but they've never been in your tower."

Severus turned to look at the Headmaster's tower, noticing that the windows were all open. "Could it possibly have come by owl?"

"Maybe. I doubt it. All mail is checked by the Heads of House before delivery well, except for morning post."

"I may have to change that," Severus said, pursing his lips in annoyance.

"You mean have all the mail inspected?" Cillian asked with a smirk.

"Umbridge did that once. Things still got through," he said and considered it anyway. "I wonder if I should get Hermione a Sneakoscope?"

Cillian laughed at him. "Once she stepped a foot away from the office into the school, the thing would go off until she returned," he scoffed.

Severus knew he was right; it would only be a nuisance. He'd have to rely on warning her about checking objects before picking them up. *Might be a good thing for the Charms Club to learn.*

"Is Hermione all right?"

"I caught it before the spells made her go rigid. But if it hadn't been for her house-elf... I managed to draw the curses back into the book and burnt it, but I will check her again just in case." He cursed himself for being so lax. He regretted burning the book, but once a cursed item had hold of the unsuspecting victim, the only way to ensure that the item wouldn't lure the victim back under its influence was to destroy it. "But until I know how she got the book, I don't know how to prevent another similar occurrence. I can put spells on the windows to prevent owls to enter, except the one in my office, and put Peren on notice for suspicious objects..."

"I'll be more attentive to her book bag and try to see if anyone looks at her with animosity," Cillian said, sighing heavily. "But I can't believe Bell would be so bold as to make an attempt on her life so blatantly. I mean, even under the Dark Lord's regime, that is attempted murder and the Dark Lord wants the girl *alive!* Her other attempts were subtle and anonymous."

Severus nodded. "The gown and the pearls Draco told me." He was certain that Belinda was no longer on the grounds. "Why in bloody horntails is your sister so persistent? It wasn't that great."

Cillian smirked. "Well, according to the gossip I picked up, you are incredible: abilities, techniques, unnaturally attentive and intuitive, and you can go for hours," he said and took a step back in case Severus tried to hex him, smiling at Severus' stony glare. "At least that was what was said about you at tea. Of course, Belinda never said names, but if you recall Roxanna Lamont became quite interested in you..."

"Enough," Severus growled. "I'm nothing of the sort!" He turned to go back to the castle. "She's an unsatisfied, posh, pure-blood housewitch who married an older wizard for his money. We both know that." He ignored Cillian's look of derision. "Thank you. But this isn't over. If it was her, she'll try again. I only hope that all future attempts are as futile and inept."

When Severus and Cillian entered his sitting room, they both started laughing at the humorous sight of six house-elves, each with their heads incased in huge bubbles, dusting off every surface of the room. Even her cat, busily grooming himself after he'd apparently been given a bath, was encased in a bubble. Hermione turned, her own face distorted with a bubble. Two elves were dumping something that looked like purple dust into a magical bin.

"There is an easier way," he suggested. He drew his wand, and Hermione hurried over to him.

"No!" she shouted, holding up her hand to stop him. "Evacuation and cleaning charms only made the smoke denser! Peren tried that, hence the purple dust everywhere. We are sweeping up the dust up by hand!"

It was hard to hear her through the bubble.

She indicated the bubble around her head. "Sorry, the dust made us all wheeze. Draco had to go to the hospital wing."

Severus took her hand and pulled her to him. "Peren, can you and the others cope without my wife?"

"Yes, Headmaster, master, sir," Peren shouted through her bubble as several of the others nodded.

Severus tugged on her hand, led her to his office and ended the Bubble-Head Charm. "How do you feel?" he asked, checking her hands and arms for any sign of the curse. She was lucky. Her skin, though slightly a pale, grayish tinge, was warm, and her capillary refill in her fingernails was good. "You had a very close call."

She shivered and wrapped her arms around her as if cold. "I know, I felt like I was being smothered and drained at the same time. If you hadn't come..."

"You'd be dead," he finished for her. "The spells on the book were the Incapacitation Curse, which drains your magical power, weakens you while the Enrapture Curse prevents you from fighting it. The book also had the Assiduous-Immersion Curse. From now on, Hermione, don't open or pick up a strange object unless either Cillian or I check it."

"But, it was only a book," she protested, continuing even though he was about to explain that books could be very dangerous. "It looked exactly like one I had borrowed from the library, until I opened it. Then the pages... There was something odd about the pages. I didn't have to turn them, the words changed as I read."

"Peren told me that she told you not to pick up the book," Severus said, narrowing his eyes in confusion. "Why didn't you listen to her?"

"It was I thought that maybe I had forgotten to return it," she said, her shoulders slumping in defeat. "I thought it was the book on divining runes or until I opened it."

"Where was the book when you found it?" Cillian asked.

Hermione turned to him. "On the floor."

"So," Cillian said, turning to Severus, "it could have come by owl then."

"I thought it had fallen from my bag," Hermione stated. "I threw my bag on the floor by the bed because I was angry. I had to pick up the things that had fallen out and the book was there on the floor. I thought it had fallen out of my bag."

"So we are back to either Belinda, another student, or an owl delivery. I think we can rule out the Carrows," Cillian stated with a smirk.

Severus nodded thoughtfully. "Or one of the others." He called for Peren, and when the small elf arrived, he asked for Hermione's and Cillian's cloaks. Severus turned to Hermione. "You and Cillian are going to go visit Hagrid for an hour or two. I have some work to do."

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Hermione found out just how bad the Incapacitation Curse was. The next day when Cillian had returned her wand to her for her Charms lesson, she had immediately felt a difference. Her wand had felt inert in her hand, and she hadn't had any strength behind her charms. Draco had also seemed to notice and had stayed close to her, even attending the lessons they didn't normally have together. When Cillian had escorted Hermione back to the Headmaster's tower, he'd stayed to have drinks with Snape. Hermione had watched them, but they simply turned to face the window and lowered their voices.

She hadn't been allowed to attend Charms Club on Tuesday. Instead, she'd found herself surrounded by Miss Glenwrythe's friends in a cozy corner of the bailey, laughing and gossiping about various articles in the wizarding magazines, with Cillian standing guard several feet away. At least they hadn't talked about Quidditch the whole time. Hermione now realized that the Slytherin girls were divided into two groups: Pansy Parkinson's circle or Glenwynn Glenwrythe's. That night, until she and Professor Snape retired for bed, Cillian and Severus had sat across the sitting room by the windows while Hermione had revised at the coffee table. Hermione had observed them with furtive sly glances, admiring the relaxed and easy comradeship they had with interest.

Wednesday, as she'd passed Nott and Goyle in the corridor just before Muggle Studies, Goyle had hit Hermione with an Antlers Hex, which had given her six pairs of antlers. She'd had to stay in the hospital until dinner. On Friday, someone had hit her with a Tripping Hex just before Defense, and Cillian had carried her up to the hospital wing to have her ankle checked. Since Draco, Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott were on the stairs behind her, she had no idea which of them cast the hex. But judging by Crabbe's laughter, Goyle's glare at Nott, Nott's dark frown in her direction, and Draco's hissed chastisement of his friends, she had a pretty good idea of who'd done it, either Crabbe or Nott.

Crabbe, Goyle, and Nott were given detention with Amycus. However, Amycus only had them sipping on firewhisky in his office and telling Muggle jokes, according to the portrait image of a sexy bar wench that hung in his office. Professor Snape had been furious, but only thanked Tiffney for her assistance, then told her to keep vigilant and keep him appraised.

That Saturday, however, Professor Snape had a meeting with the Board of Governors at the Ministry of Magic, so Hermione decided to spend her time in the library. She was halfway through her Herbology essay when her curiosity got the best of her, and she asked Cillian how he'd met Professor Snape.

"Severus is only about five years older than I am, remember? He was in his sixth-year when I started school," Cillian stated. He was lounging casually in a chair next to the cubical desk Hermione was using, one ankle perched on his knee and holding a book on his leg.

She liked this desk; it was beside a window. She turned slightly to face him. "So you met when you were students."

"Yes, of course we met at school. But my first two years, he was always revising, brewing, or reading and didn't want anything to do with me. Besides, I had my own friends," he said, looking up from his book.

"So I don't get it, when did you become friends?" she asked, twirling her quill in her fingers.

"My sixth year," he said with a grin. "I remember when he first started teaching..."

"You were his student? He befriended you when he was teaching?" she asked, amazed that that's when it started.

Cillian chuckled softly. "When he came back, he was my Potions professor and Head of House. I was impressed. Severus was well connected, respected, and obviously

knowledgeable since he was hired to teach so soon after leaving Hogwarts. Besides, I thought it a quill in my cap to have my Potions professor and Head of House as a friend. It took a while, but he warmed up to the idea."

She couldn't help but stare at him in amazement. "Somehow, I can't see him befriending one of his students like that. I can't fathom Severus Snape, my stern, aloof Potions professor, befriending a student. At least not while he was his student."

Cillian laughed at her. "Nah, I was a nuisance," he said, closing his book. "I used to go talk to him in his office. He couldn't get rid of me. Of course it helped that I was a Prefect, but I know he found my presence annoying until he got accustomed to it. He was really easy to relate to. I looked up to him, but I think saw him more as an equal. He's brilliant, very well read, and really knows a lot about a lot of things. Besides, we actually have a lot in common."

Hermione glanced at the book on his lap. It was a book on reversing Dark Arts spells she'd read as soon as she'd started her fifth-year, knowing that the Dark Lord had come back. "You like the Dark Arts?"

"Yes, I like the Dark Arts. They're enthralling and powerful. I wanted to know all about them. I wanted to be a great wizard. I wanted power, Hermione, and knowledge. I grew up with a sizable library in my father's study, dueling instructors, tutors, all the advantages. I wanted to know all the spells not so much the theory just how to do them. Severus liked the theories. Man, the debates we'd have," he said, chuckling softly again. "We developed a comradeship and friendship as my school years went on." He smiled and caressed the book. "Can you imagine having to have to talk to a guy only five years older than you about career options, girl problems? Heck, we even discussed a few of his girl problems."

She looked at him incredulously, hardly believing that Professor Snape had girl problems like Cillian was suggesting.

"Yes, Hermione, some Slytherin girls saw him as powerful, connected, and in position to get them what they wanted. He's always had trouble with girls," Cillian said, smirking at her, his brown eyes full of mirth.

"It's hard to believe, I mean, he never seems all that social," she said, dropping her quill.

He flicked his wand to retrieve it for her. "Oh, he's social but never with a female under his charge. Although you're right, he didn't socialize with the students like Professor Slughorn does."

"What was he like as a student?" she asked.

"I told you. He was quiet, studious, and was always reading or brewing something or another. He hated the Golden Boys of Gryffindor as he called some of them: Potter, Black, that werewolf, Lupin, and that vermin, Pettigrew. Dumbledore's favorite four. Well, actually, ol' Dumbledore had six, I believe. Evans and MacDonald were always hanging around them. Oh, and Jones from Hufflepuff, her, too. Of course you're a Gryffindor and one of the Golden Trio, I believe he calls you and your two friends and a royal pain in the pants. You never really bothered to get to know him, did you?"

"He never wanted to get to know me," she said, watching the edge of the feather as she slid the quill between her fingers. "From my first day in class he called me a silly girl and an insufferable know-it-all... I tried so hard to impress him, but I never could. Nothing I did was ever good enough."

"You're wrong!"

Hermione looked up, catching his grin.

"Oh man, you really you don't know. He talks about you all the time... The things he's told me," Cillian said. "Is that why you never say his name; you only see him as your professor?"

"I call him by his name!" she said, sitting up a bit straighter at the odd question.

"No, you don't. I've never heard you call him Severus," Cillian said, laughing. "You call him sir or professor and refer to him as Professor Snape, but never Severus."

"He hasn't given me leave to," she said in stunned disbelief at his suggestion that she should use his given name.

"You're his wife you're in his bed... What? Do you want permission to? Do you expect him to tell you it's all right?" Cillian asked, and she looked at him, stunned. "You do, don't you? Merlin, girl! Look, Hermione, he loves you."

Hermione turned her head, staring blankly at the wall as she considered what he was saying.

"Don't scoff, he does."

Hermione's head snapped back, and she looked him in the eyes.

"I've seen how he looks at you and how he glares when any other man pays attention to you well, except for Flitwick and Hagrid. Incredibly enough, he's even jealous of Neville Longbottom," Cillian stated, smirking at her.

"No, he's not!" she exclaimed, thinking he was daft if he thought Professor Snape, no, Severus, was jealous of Neville.

"You don't see it? Blimey, you're blind, girl!" he scoffed at her, shaking his head.

Her eyes narrowed at him. "If he's so jealous of every guy I talk to, then why isn't he jealous of you? Or Draco? I spend more time with you than anyone even him."

"We've been friends for ages; we've built a trust," Cillian stated then turned his head. "Besides, I have a girl." He turned back to look at her. "He knows that he can trust me, and Draco isn't interested in you like that. Just think about it, all right. Finish your essay."

Hermione picked up her quill and stared at her parchment, her mind mulling over what he'd just said. She realized that he might be right. She'd try using Severus' name and see how he reacted. It couldn't hurt.

That night when she returned to the tower, she casually said, "Hello, Severus. I'll be down for dinner in a minute," as she passed his desk.

His head jerked up at the sound of his name, but other than that he'd only nodded and watched her walk away. When she came down, he was reading a very long scroll of parchment. "Severus, are you ready? I could..."

He turned to look at her sharply, and she felt her cheeks warm up. "I mean, I can wait if you're not ready."

"No, I can finish this after dinner," he said, letting go of the scroll. It jumped in the air, rolled itself back up and landed softly on his desk. He led her to her usual place beside her friends and walked away.

After dinner, he caught up to her, Cillian, and Ginny in the Entrance Hall. "I'm going to revise with Ginny tonight, if that's all right?"

"Fine. I'll see you before curfew," he said curtly and strode off.

"What was that about?" Ginny asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I don't know."

It had taken a bit of coaxing, but finally Cillian agreed to let Hermione go up to Ginny's room.

"I found it," Ginny stated as she flooned down on her bed.

Hermione was adding a note at the bottom of Ginny's letter to her parents, telling them she was all right and that Severus was being nice to her. "Found what exactly?"

"Actually, Luna found it." Ginny pulled out several old book-lending cards. "They have Sirius Black's and James Potter's names on them."

Hermione gasped when she read the titles on the card heading. "I have this book and this one... and... Ginny, I have these books in my bedroom!"

"So we can make them, right? You found the spell?" Ginny asked excitedly.

Hermione shook her head. "Spells, two, the Protean and Conjointment Charms. But I can't figure out how to combine them, and I don't have two identical mirrors. That's the key though; they need to be the same."

Ginny leaned back against her pillows, deep in thought. "When I go home for Christmas, I can talk Dad into taking me to a Muggle store to get some. Are they expensive in Muggle shops?"

"No, but I suggest that you get what's called a compact. It's a mirror in a plastic case like a clamshell, sort of. The mirror would be protected somewhat," Hermione said as she thought things out. "I will want one... no, you should have it. Less suspicious than if I do, and one for Harry."

"I think you should have one, me, Neville, Seamus, Luna and Michael, and Susan and Ernie, that way we have all the houses covered," she listed off the key members of the DA on her fingers. "So, that's ten."

"That's too many! They only work between each other, as in a pair," Hermione said, astounded by her suggestion.

"Oh, and Jenny wants one. That would be twelve, her and Colin," Ginny reminded her. "She's joined the DA by the way."

Hermione was stunned. "You're still recruiting?"

"Of course, and growing," Ginny said proudly.

"How many?"

"Nine so far, but I think there are six more," Ginny said, grinning. "Mostly from my year and fifth."

"You're holding meetings?" Hermione asked aghast, wondering why she hadn't heard anything.

Ginny shook her head. "Not exactly. So far, the Heads of Houses are in Charms Club with us, and they teach what we learn to the others in their common rooms. If there are meetings, only the Heads get together. You've seen us, intermingling in the library or in the empty classrooms. Neville and I arranged it; every one of us is seeing someone from a different house, so being together isn't suspicious."

"Don't tell me anymore!" Hermione said, covering her ears and closing her eyes.

Ginny pulled her hands down, laughing at her.

Hermione grasped her hands. "Gin, at Christmas I'm bound to be summoned by the Dark Lord. If he sees this in my mind you're sunk!" She jumped up from the bed. "I have to go! I'll see you tomorrow." Hermione bounded down the stairs, catching Cillian's attention when she jumped off the last step and motioned him to follow her. "I have to ask Sev-Professor Snape something!" she told him before scrambling through the portrait hole. She ran all the way to the gargoye with Cillian close beside her.

Professor Snape looked up as she came to a halt by his desk. "I was wondering if you had time to help me, er, with my... lessons," she rambled as she caught her breath.

His eyes narrowed, a crease deepening between his brows. "Your lessons?"

"I well, yes, for Defense, since you're so good at defense," she stammered, wishing Cillian hadn't followed her to the office. She wanted to get Severus to help her with Occlumency and needed him to leave.

Severus' lip curled slightly. "I'll be up as soon as I finish this."

Cillian raised an eyebrow as he regarded her.

"Okay. Good night, Cillian, I'll see you tomorrow. Severus, I'll..." Hermione wondered if she'd crossed a line she was not supposed to, or if she'd have to explain things to Cillian. She was not a good liar. "All right. I'll just go... practice."

~*~

Cillian drew Hermione's wand from his pocket and set it on Severus' desk. "Are you going to tell me what that was all about?"

"No," Severus replied, getting to his feet. "At least not until I figure it out."

"So you have no idea what she's talking about?" Cillian said, crossing his arms and narrowing his eyes at his friend. "I'm perfectly capable of working with her on her Defense spells."

Severus laughed. "It was a diversionary tactic for 'I want to talk to you.' I can assume that Miss Weasley had something to tell Hermione."

"About Potter?" Cillian asked, angling his head slightly, his eyes still narrowed in suspicion.

"Possibly, but unlikely." Severus rose to his feet. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Oh, count on it!" Cillian said as he turned to let himself out.

"Hermione?" Severus called out as he entered the bedroom.

"Here," she said, climbing off the bed. "Is he gone?"

"Yes. Do you want to tell me what that was all about?" he answered smoothly. "He's now as suspicious as I am. What did Miss Weasley say about Potter?"

"Nothing!" she exclaimed and from the quickness of her reaction and her startled look, he knew she was telling the truth.

He waited, forcing her to fill the silence as he stared at her. When she did, it was not what he'd expected to hear.

"I'm going to have to see him again, aren't I? I mean, Christmas is only just a little over a month away, and I'm going to have to face him!"

"Yes, very likely," Severus said, crossing his arms.

"And I cannot close my mind! I cannot control my feelings, and I cannot block you!" she ranted while pacing.

Now was not a time to try teaching her, she was too riled up. "Hermione, if you want we can have more lessons, but until you learn to control your emotions..."

"And be shut off and cold like you? I can't do it!" She suddenly stopped and covered her mouth as she turned to face him, her eyes huge. "Oh, Severus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

He was smirking at her. "Oh course, you do. I take great pride in my ability to close myself off. It has saved me countless of times. I have learned to keep my face expressionless and my eyes penetrating but blank so as to properly terrorize students." *And not to give anything away*, he added mentally. "But you are not able to do this."

Her shoulders slumped as she sat on the bed. "I'm a failure."

"No, you're not. Not everyone can do it, Hermione. It's really quite hard to do, especially since you're the type of open, giving, caring person that you are. Draco can do it, but then his parents raised him to conceal his emotions and true feelings. You were not," he said smoothly. He sat down next to her. "I'll ask Dumbledore's portrait for advice on teaching you."

She looked up at him, and he hated the look of defeat in her eyes. "May I ask him? Maybe I misinterpreted something?"

He smiled and brushed her hair back from her face. "I doubt you have, but yes you may talk to him. However, not tonight. You need a clear head for this. Maybe tomorrow." He turned her face toward him and kissed her. "You'll get it. Someday it will just happen. You get so close now, and you are much faster at changing images or putting what you want to show me up front. And there are times I have to push fairly hard to get what I want."

"But you always get through," she said, although not as defeated as she'd sounded before.

"But you *are* improving," he replied and kissed her again. "I haven't written you off as a lost cause, yet."

Hermione rose to her feet and turned to face him, biting her lip. He looked at her, unsure what she wanted. She looked so adorable, uncertain, but obviously contemplating something. He'd seen this look in her eyes many times before. Then without saying anything, she climbed up on his lap. He grasped her bum to keep her from sliding off onto the floor as she cupped his face and kissed him. "Do you have anything that you need to do right now?" she asked, leaning back a little to look him in the eye.

He was stunned. *She's initiating...! She wants me!* She kissed him, and all other thoughts flew from his mind as her tongue touched his upper lip. He lay back on the bed, making her fall on top of him. "Nothing pressing at the moment," he replied, pushing her hair back so he could see her face.

Her hand slid down quickly to his crotch before his mind caught up to what she was doing. He hissed as her fingers slid up his erection.

"That's not true."

He smiled at her, and a soft groan of pleasure escaped his throat from what her touch was doing to his body. "Well, nothing currently that would take me away from you."

She started to fumble with his buttons. He had no idea what had spurred this on, but he was going to let her do whatever she wanted. He lay there, staring at her, his hands stroking her thighs as she slowly opened his clothes. He closed his eyes for a moment when her hands began to caress his skin. However, she didn't seem to be doing much of anything else, except playing with his chest hair and teasing his nipples. "You're going to drive me crazy, woman."

"I was only touching you," she said innocently.

He sat up, making her rise to stand in front of him as he stripped off his clothes. "Well, then let's give you more to touch."

She suddenly looked shy, curling her hair around a finger while she watched him.

He couldn't understand why she liked to just stand and watch him undress all the time. He laughed softly. "Allow me," he said, divesting her of her school robes.

Hermione backed up from him. He smirked as she removed her skirt and knickers. But then she tried to push him back onto the bed. Smirk spreading to an appreciative smile, he complied, landing as far back onto the mattress as his knees allowed him. She climbed up and straddled him with a mischievously playful grin. As if doing a strip tease for him, she rubbed her wet warmth on his cock, arousing him even further, while she slowly removed her blouse. He watched, running his hands all over her skin, amazed as each button revealed more of her luscious breasts while her rocking movements caressed his length with her wet heat. He fondled her lower lips as she shed her blouse, then reached behind and unhooked her bra. She closed her eyes and hissed when he stroked her sensitive spot, making his penis twitch against her. When she casually dropped her bra on the floor, he drank in the sight of her. "Put me inside you," he said, hoping it didn't sound like an order, but his mouth was dry and all his blood seemed to have gone south from his brain.

She smiled and clasped his hand in hers, bringing them down to his cock. "Help me?"

He didn't need to be asked twice.

~o0o~

In Muggle Studies, Alecto was still droning on about the animalistic and barbaric nature of Muggles, lecturing about the genocide of witches and wizards during the so-called witch-hunts as examples of Muggle atrocities against their own kind. She was particularly vocal about the Spanish Inquisition and the random purging of thousands of men and women accused as heretics during the Dark Ages.

Goyle, and occasionally Nott, had made several furtive glances in the direction of the Gryffindors, especially at Seamus and Hermione, although Crabbe and Pansy had been snickering during most of the lecture. During her revision time, Hermione had sat in the library grinding her teeth while writing an essay on the subject to appease Alecto. Draco had commented on her distracting him, then leaned over and asked her what her real opinion was. Ironically, even though they had gotten into a rather heated debate in hushed hissing tones, Draco had been surprisingly open-minded.

After two weeks of listening to lectures on the mass arrests, tortures, and killings during the Spanish Inquisitions, even Seamus and Neville were getting disgusted. Finally, Neville snapped. "But isn't that exactly what Voldemort is doing to the Muggle-borns?" Neville asked, without raising his hand.

Alecto was so angry, she whipped out her wand and cut his cheek with a Slicing hex as she screeched, "I am trying to enlighten you to the truth, you blood traitor!"

Cillian jumped to his feet and crossed the room, shouting, "That's enough, Alecto! You cannot slice and dice the students!"

"This is my classroom, and I will not tolerate insolence!" Alecto shouted, her wand pointing at Cillian.

He had his out as he approached where Hermione was leaning over Neville, trying to staunch the flow of blood with the edge of her robes. "I'm taking him to the hospital..."

Lavender pressed a wad of cloth into Hermione's hand, asking her how bad it was.

"He dared to say his name and question me! Me!" Alecto shouted, so mad there was spittle on her chin.

Cillian looked up, his eyes cold and hard. "I know! I heard *exactly* what was said and done! I *felt* it the same as you." He gripped Neville's arm, pulling him to his feet. "Let's go, Longbottom. Hermione, you're coming too." Alecto opened her mouth to protest, and he leveled his wand at her chest. "Now, Hermione. Mr. Finnigan will collect Mr. Longbottom's belongings, and Draco will collect yours."

Hermione urged Neville to wrap his arm across her shoulders as she supported him from the classroom. In the corridor, Cillian pulled out a flask of Dittany to staunch the blood flow and marched them up to see Madam Pomfrey.

Afterwards, Cillian took Hermione to the Headmaster's tower to change, growling, "It's not hers. Hermione, go change your bloody robes!" Snape had jumped to his feet the moment they entered his office. Hermione looked from Snape to Cillian, but the glower in Cillian's eyes made her hold her tongue, and she ran upstairs to change.

When she came back down, Snape was absent. Cillian caught her arm. "And where do you think you're going, eh?"

"I have I," Hermione stammered, stunned by the hard coldness in his expression.

"You're staying here until lunch," he said, his lips curved in a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Hermione looked at the door and back, confused. "I have Defense..."

Cillian chuckled, his shoulders relaxing but he was still angry. "Do you honestly think that after that display in Alecto's classroom, Amycus is going to let this go unpunished? You're staying here."

She felt like her stomach lurched. "But I didn't..."

"Mr. Longbottom did on your behalf. Look, you're staying here. So go read something."

She nodded and dropped her bag. "Where is Professor Snape?"

Cillian looked up at Dilys Derwent's empty portrait. "He went to check on Mr. Longbottom."

She nodded solemnly and looked up at him, imploringly. "May I have my wand to practice my spells?"

"No," he said, urging her to go up to the sitting room with his hands. "You can read or revise no wand."

Sighing, Hermione went back upstairs, hoping that Madam Pomfrey and Severus would be able to heal Neville's wound.

~*~

Neville was released Thursday. He had red scar that made Hermione cringe when she saw him. However, he merely shrugged off her concern. Snape kept her out of Defense Friday, using the class time to work on her Occlumency.

Hermione was getting frustrated with herself. If she was honest, she'd have to admit that she was failing at Occlumency and she hated failing at anything. She pulled out all the books on the subject, stacking the ones that explained how to do it beside her and sat down with her quill. She started listing the key phrases from the books and placed a check by the ones she repeated. *The ability to extract feelings and memories seals the mind against influence and intrusion... anger, hurt, happiness are the strongest... Shut down the feelings and emotions attached to certain memories... Close off your mind. Clear your mind. Remain focused and calm... visualize something calming or solid to repel the invasion...* "Argh, I'm never going to get this!" she exclaimed, slamming the book closed.

"What are you doing?" Luna asked, sitting down demurely on the sofa behind her.

"It's something Professor Snape wants me to know," Hermione asked, startled to see her. "How did you..."

"Mr. Gwynke let me in," Luna said as she picked up a book from Hermione's pile and set it back down again. "Oh, that's why you wanted to do yoga. You haven't been back, so I thought you stopped because you didn't like it much. But it was nice doing it with you."

"I thought that it would help me to learn how to close my mind and empty my emotions," Hermione admitted, still disappointed in her lack of progress.

"That's not possible," Luna said, picking up another book. "Why try to empty them? They are part of you."

"But I have to clear my mind and empty my emotions to do Occlumency! The Dark Lord is a very strong Legilimens. I should know! When I face the Dark Lord, he'll be able to see anything he wants," Hermione admitted, looking at the book Luna was flipping through.

"Not so," Luna stated with a dreamy smile. "Show him what he wants to see, and he won't go digging through your mind to find what you don't want him to know."

"But that's the problem; I'm not supposed to *let* him see anything," Hermione said, exasperated with a sigh.

"But if you block him, he'll push. Show him what he wants or what he thinks he wants. You don't have to show him the truth, just what he wants to know." Luna set the book aside and picked up a thin one. "What has he wanted to know about before?"

"He wanted to know about Harry's abilities, his spell work how capable he is," Hermione admitted, turning sideways and resting an arm on the sofa. "Every time Harry failed at something and my daily activities."

Luna turned the book sideways. "And what did he see?"

"What I've been doing at school..." *How I'm getting along with Draco.* "Oh, Luna, you're brilliant!"

"You-Know-Who is egoistical, and he scoffs at love, right?" she asked and Hermione nodded. "Show him what he expects to see."

Hermione picked at a thread on the sofa. "But what if he wants to know about Professor Snape and me?"

Luna's grin turned into a huge knowing smile. "Show him."

Hermione looked up, gobsmacked. "What?"

"If he wants to see you and Professor Snape, give him flashes of you *together*. If he wants to see anything about your parents, show him your memories with them happy times. He'll pull back because those things will annoy him."

"That's brilliant, but really hard to do..." Hermione suddenly realized what Luna was saying. "Luna, do you know how to do Occlumency?"

"Oh, yes. My mother taught me how well, in a way," she replied, her expression becoming wistful. "I have rooms that I put things in. Some doors are big and easy to open some are really small or hidden, like the doors of this castle. Things I keep to myself are behind small doors or concealed ones. It's like a house with many rooms. I put like

things together in rooms, and then I can remember them easier."

"I do that with books," Hermione said, and Luna cocked her head. "I make books of things I want to remember. When I need to recall something I simply have to open the book I want." She looked at the books next to her. "So, I might be able to do that with memories?"

"Yes," Luna said, smiling. "But you have to keep it well organized or you'll forget things."

"Oh, I can do organized!" Hermione said with a chuckle.

"So, if someone was to try and enter your mind they would have to find the right book. It's like if someone wants to see something I want kept private, they have to find the right door. Some doors are not easy to see," Luna explained.

Hermione rubbed a finger on her lower lip as she contemplated the idea. "So all I have to do is create a bunch of rooms, segregate my emotions and memories into categories and put them behind doors..."

"Takes practice, but you might have a problem. You use books," Luna stated, setting the book down on the pile. "It might be easiest to keep your books in a room, like a library, and segment other things by room, like private things between you and Professor Snape in a bedroom you'd have to figure out what will work for you."

Hermione asked Peren to bring them tea and asked Luna how things were going for her. "It's tolerable. But I don't have the same problems you have. Oh, Neville showed me his scar. It looks much better. I'm sorry he has a scar, but it makes him look dangerous, kind of rakish and daring."

Hermione smiled despite herself. "I'll tell him you said so."

Later at dinner, Luna walked over to Hermione at the Gryffindor table. She reached into her bag and pulled out *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci*, *The Method of Loci* by Giordano Walberg and *The Art of Memory* by Dame Frances Amelia Yates. "Here." She leaned down to whisper in her ear. "Make your memory palace. Design a floor plan and make your rooms. Identify each specific location. Memorize your memory palace or floor plan. Then place the things you want to remember in each room. It helps to use a place or style you're familiar with. It takes some time, but it's easy."

"Thanks, Luna," Hermione said, giving her hand a squeeze. "Thank you."

Author's Notes:

And now you know a bit about Cillian. Yep, he was a Prefect!

Hidden Passages

Chapter 24 of 43

Hermione discovers some secret passageways hidden inside Hogwarts walls and incorporates them into her memory palace. But Severus is furious over her disappearance, and Hermione makes a cold hard comparison that rattles Draco.

I'm sorry it's taken so long to update, but I have the next chapter nearly done. I'm back and happily typing away. Thank you to everyone who is sticking this out with me, I appreciate the support. I have added a warning to this one, only because there is some minor violence.

No monies coming my way. I'm only doing this for entertainment of the free variety.

Thank you hugs and smoochies to Dungeon_Butterfly and EverMystique for reading this over for me and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Thank you DuchessOfArcadia for my lovely banner, it's perfect. It's got everyone in there!



~o 24 o~

Hidden Passages

Considering that almost all of Hermione's free time was devoted to hours of revising or working on her essays, she was thankfully current on all of her class work and reading. Even the six essays which had been assigned over the weekend were outlined, her quoted material copied or paraphrased and her footnotes complete. Hermione rose from her quick, early morning bath and returned to the bedroom, seeing her clothes laid out on the bed for her. She shook her head; she really missed the days when weekends meant slipping into comfortable jeans and a jumper. She dressed in her school clothes, leaving the robe on the bed, and pulled out the parchments of annotations regarding Occlumency and the book Luna gave her on the memory palace. She walked over to the windows and opened them, smiling at the Hufflepuff players on their brooms flying in the pitch. The sun was still low on the horizon, its soft, dawn glow making everything look fresh and new.

She turned and sat crossed legged on the rug on the space on the floor by the fireplace to read over her annotations, selecting the sheet with Severus' admonishments.. *similar memories can lie along similar threads associated by common emotions...* 'So, I have to be careful that the doors I make are not emotional entries. 'Memories are associated with feelings as well as sounds, sights, smells, and textures, even tastes.' Right. 'Legilimency doesn't utilize your five senses...' So, he can't actually sense them the way I do, but he can feel them, is that it? '... it uses your emotional connection to the memories ...' So, if I do shut my memories away in rooms, my rooms have to hold my feelings associated with these senses inside, encapsulate them... like putting things in boxes on a shelf.

That was where she'd get hung up she couldn't suppress her emotions. She could catalog them, sort them, and separate them, but that was different than suppressing them.

Hermione closed her eyes and mentally walked herself through her memory palace. The castle corridors were as clear to her as tangible as the castle itself. Sounds wafted from the windows: birds, the crack of a Beater's bat, the hum of the wind and rustle of the curtains. She forced herself to focus on nothing but the stone corridors and the main rooms of the castle. *Now, what are my most dangerous memories... My Occlumency lessons keep them in the bedroom. My DA activities, keep in the Room of Requirement. My conversations in the common room...*

She opened her eyes. She was going to have to create a false common room and dorm too much planning, too many discussions happened in the Gryffindor tower that could be very dangerous for the Dark Lord to see. The normal activities those weren't a problem, revising with Harry and Ron, helping them with their essays... he'd like seeing those times, but the planning no. *I have to do something about those memories.*

"What I need is a secret entrance to a Gryffindor common room," she mumbled with a sigh.

"Miss wants to know the secret entrance to the red and gold rooms?" Peren asked.

Hermione turned to look at her, confused, and saw two sets of ears peeking up from the other side of the bed. "I know; it's behind the Fat Lady," she replied.

Peren shook her head as she placed the fresh pillowcases on the bed. "The house-elves do not use the student's way, Mistress. We is not to be seen by the students when doing our duty, Mistress."

Hermione smiled as she recalled the route Peren and Trinna had taken her the day she tried yoga with Luna. "Do the house-elves have a secret passage to the Gryffindor Common room?"

"Oh yes, Mistress. We's have secret passages to all the rooms," Peren said with a huge grin.

One of the other house-elves peered at them from around the bed. "No, you can't tells her," the elf, possibly a male, hissed loudly.

Hermione ignored the other elf. "Peren, show me," she said excitedly, climbing to her feet. "Take me to the Gryffindor common room."

Peren pulled on her ear as she looked up at her, her forehead wrinkled, her eyes worried and her grimace askew. "I cannot, Mistress. Peren is not to let Mistress come to harm. The bad men is roaming the castle, and the mean teachers is watching the students. Mistress, it is not safe for mistress without master or mistress' follower to go in the castle today."

"Is there a way to go from the Headmaster's tower to the kitchens without being seen?" Hermione asked.

"Yes, Mistress. A tunnel, Mistress," Peren exclaimed, motioning for Hermione to follow.

"Peren is not to show students the tunnels," the elf said, stepping out with his hands up to block them.

Peren whispered something to the elf. The second elf, a female, shook her head while the first, definitely a male, tugged on his fingers. "We is not to."

"Miss gives Dobby clothes!" the male said angrily. "Miss is not to be trusted."

"I didn't understand about the symbiotic relationship that the house-elf servitude offers house-elves and what it means to you to have a home to serve. I thought that all slavery was wrong," Hermione said in her defense. "I didn't even know house-elves existed until my second year, and I was shocked when I found out that Hogwarts *even had* house-elves my fourth year. I was brought up thinking *all* slavery was bad I didn't understand."

"And you do's now?" the female asked.

"Mistress is the nicest mistress Peren ever has!" she said emphatically. "She gives Peren a pillowcase off mistress' own bed for Peren, and I has a pink pet, Peren's favorite color..."

"Miss is a *student*," the male interrupted. The elves all started talking at once, softly, heads close. Finally the female looked up. "Dustin and Kwink will show miss. But miss must keep tunnels a secret. Miss must promise."

"I promise," Hermione said, crossing her heart.

The elves looked at her action as if it was strange, then Kwink shrugged, leading the way. Hermione flowed behind the house-elves, down the stairs into Severus' office. Behind the pillar at the base of the stairs was a carefully concealed small door Hermione had to crawl into. The room was elf-sized, but much larger than the plastic dog house at Severus' house. It was immaculate, containing a nice bed and a table where the pigmy puff sat in the wicker cage. Hermione recognized Peren's tiny pillow and blanket on the bed.

"This ways, miss," Kwink said, leading her through a tunnel and down stairs that Hermione had to occasionally crawl or stoop low to pass. Surprisingly, the tunnels and stairs were as immaculate as Peren's tiny room.

Eventually she found herself stepping into the kitchen. She stood there, smiling as the elves clustered around her.

A squeal could be heard louder than the others, saying, "Her-my-ne, miss! Harry Potter's friend!" Dobby appeared before her, hands clasped in joy, his smile radiant. "What is Miss want of us?" He was wearing a pair of tan children's shorts with supports, Ron's old sweater, and two miss-matched socks with little trainers. He had one of her knit hats on his head with a 'Potter Stinks' badge pinned on his chest.

"Dobby, you look wonderful!"

"Thank you, Miss," Dobby said as elves handed Hermione a cup of tea, a sliced apple, and a fresh brownie still warm from the oven.

"My mistress wishes to know secret way to the red and gold rooms," Peren stated.

There were immediate gasps, grumbles, and squeaks throughout the assembled house-elves. "Dobby will shows Harry Potter's friend," he said, taking her hand.

Even though the majority of the house-elves seemed against it, Dobby opened the porthole behind Hermione. Unlike when she'd followed Kwink, Dobby explained which stairs and tunnels went where as they made their way up through the castle. Several times, they had to cross corridors, so Dobby and Kwink both peeked out around the edges of the tapestries before summoning Hermione and Peren to follow. Finally Dobby opened a small door.

Hermione crawled out of the doorway and into the Gryffindor common room. The house-elf entrance was in the far corner to the right of the fireplace opposite the room from the Fat Lady's hole. She turned around, amazed to find the room empty, and realized that from this side the small door looked like just one of the panels under the bookshelves. "Where else can you take me?"

Dobby smiled. "Dobby can show miss the swimming pool," he said in a delighted squeak.

With the excitement of her excursion, Hermione nearly missed lunch. Dobby and Kwink had shown her all over the castle, even letting her peek into the dungeons before taking her back to Severus' office. She ran into an irate Severus Snape on the stairs. "Where have you been?" he snarled.

"Peren was showing me her bedroom," Hermione lied, surprisingly convincingly enough.

His eyes narrowed as he thrust her robe at her. "I was about to send the portraits after you!"

She smiled, knowing that wouldn't have done him any good.

"Let's go," he snarled, indicating for her to go down the stairs. Considering his dark mood, she walked in silence until he said, "After lunch I'll escort you to the Quidditch match."

Hermione replied, "All right," politely, then bit her lip at his dark scowl and looked away. He was really fuming, and she hoped he'd get over it soon.

As Hermione and her friends finished eating, Hermione followed along with the conversation, listening to Ginny, Demelza, and Gryffindor's Beaters, Keith Kleith and Jimmy Peaks, speculate on the Quidditch match between Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. As soon as the plates were cleared, everyone hurried out for the Quidditch pitch. Hermione found herself drawn along with the throng, arm in arm with Ginny, until Severus took hold of her other arm.

"I told you, you were to wait for me."

"What's wrong with sitting with my friends?" she asked, embarrassed to be treated like a small child in front of everybody. Ginny waited patiently, but Kleith and Peaks shifted nervously under Severus' glare.

"We can keep her safe enough in the stands," Ginny said and shied when Severus' glare turned on her.

Hermione saw VanHalal, Travers, and MacCavish making their way to the pitch. Apparently they were going to be sitting with the teachers, so now that was the last place she wanted to be, anywhere near them. "I'll be safer with my house mates than I would be in the teacher's stand, Severus," she said, pointing to the Death Eaters.

Severus's eyes narrowed, and Hermione turned her head, seeing Neville and Seamus waving at her to join them, along with Janilynn Waithe, Jenny Wang, and Breanna Enfield. Severus seemed to be watching her friends and the students filing into the pitch as well. "Fine, but you are to meet me immediately afterwards," he said sternly. "You got that? You are to be on the ground as soon as the Snitch is caught."

Hermione nodded and promised him, then hurried over to her friends. "Well that was close; imagine having to sit with the Carrows and her security goons during the game?" Ginny said as they started up the stairs.

"Good thing MacCavish wanted to be in the teacher's seats," Breanna said over her shoulder from the steps above Hermione.

"You'd've been hexed or worse for sure," Jenny added from behind Ginny.

Janilynn turned her head, squinting as they came out of the stands into the light. "Let's sit by Stephanie and Ernie," she said, pointing. "More wands."

Stephanie Adams, Jack Sloper, and Ernie Coppersmith all smiled as their group took the row above them, and Demelza, Keith and Jimmy filed in to sit on the top bench. Ernie leaned back to ask Neville, "You don't think they'd really do anything here, do you?"

"Keep wands handy just in case," Neville said, patting the sixth-year on the shoulder.

Hermione looked quizzingly at him, but he only smiled. "Better safe than sorry."

"What did you hear?" Hermione demanded.

Ginny shrugged as the whistle went off, and the Quaffle was released.

Garrett Shadwell, commentating for the game, announced that Zacharis Smith won the tip off.

"Charles, Sean, and Paul," Ginny said, pointing at the Hufflepuff Keeper and two Beaters. "They're in the DA now; and, well, they overheard MacCavish tell Rowle after breakfast that with Cillian away and Severus scheduled to meet with the governors this morning that you'd be easy pickings. Rumor was you were missing this morning, so we called everyone to search for you. But then you showed up for lunch with Severus so we knew you were all right."

"Yeah," Seamus said, leaning around Neville. "If you're going to go missing, could you at least warn someone? You do know how to make the coin work, right?"

Garrett Shadwell announced loudly, "Charles Swindlehurst, Hufflepuff's Keeper, hands off the Quaffle to Zane Seymour, and she's off, making a run for the goal. Oh, look, Sean Nauman blocked the Bludger from hitting her!"

"I was fine," Hermione said, now glad that she'd explored the house-elf tunnels with Peren, Dobby, and Kwink instead of going to the library as she'd planned.

The Hufflepuffs roared as Garrett Shadwell shouted, "... and Gerald Summerby scores!" and all her friends clapped or whistled as well.

"All I'm saying is that we were worried," Janilynn said. "Apparently the Headmaster has a meeting with the staff tonight as well or so we heard, so if you go wandering off tell us so we can come find you."

"... and Summerby pulls a Dementiva dodge, tosses the Quaffle to Zacharis Smith. Smith dodges a Bludger and Plansky rolls! Oh, he nearly collided with Koomer! He shoots... Yes, scores! The Quaffle got in the lower hoop before Christopher McCracken could block it."

"Good shot!" Janilynn shouted, jumping in her seat.

"Zach is taking a lot more chances this year," Ginny stated. "His aim has really improved as well."

The game moved swiftly. Garrett Shadwell gave a play-by-play as Zach knocked the Quaffle away from Koomer. Koomer flew half the pitch and made a wild throw intercepted by Summerby, who shot to the goal hoops and scored ten points for Hufflepuff.

Zach caught the Quaffle, but Plansky knocked it from his grip. Brigezman caught it, made a daring drive, shot for the goal posts and scored ten points for Ravenclaw. Zach caught the Quaffle and made an amazing pass to Summerby, but Sean Nauman collided into him, successfully keeping the Bludger from hitting him in the head. However, Koomer snatched the Quaffle only to lose it to Zane.

Zane chucked the Quaffle at the left goal hoop, but it was blocked effortlessly by McCracken. McCracken threw the Quaffle a fourth of the field to Anthony Brigezman, who caught it and flew the length of the field, making a diversionary dodge around Zach that set him up for the goal, giving Ravenclaw another ten points.

Charles Swindlehurst threw the Quaffle to Gerald who passed it to Zane. Zane managed to pass it back to Gerald to score just before Paul Peterson nearly ran into her, making her swerve as he stopped a Bludger from hitting her on her leg.

Hermione glanced up as the Ravenclaw Seeker, Stewart Ackerley, made a spectacular twisting roll and reversed his direction, making a steep dive straight for the teacher's stands.

Alecto drew her wand as she stood up, but Hagrid clamped a hand on her arm, making her nearly fall on her face. "Unhand me, you oaf," she screamed as Stewart swerved in time to miss the professors and raced down the wall of the pitch as Hufflepuff's Seeker, Owen Cauldwell, a lanky, speckled boy, turned sharply, colliding with the wall.

MacCavish and Rowle both stood up, wands pointed at Hagrid. Even from where Hermione sat, she could tell that Severus was obviously angry as he tried to get control to the situation. Travers and Amycus were also defending Alecto now, and Professors McGonagall, Sprout, and Sinistra all stood up to defend Hagrid.

Hufflepuff scored, and then Ravenclaw, both goals missed by the spectators since a majority of the students watched in shock as the teachers and Death Eaters squared off. Even Garrett Shadwell ceased commentating on the game as he stared at the commotion and had to be reminded to update the score. Finally, as Ravenclaw made another goal, the tension in the teacher's box settled down again, but Hagrid had left the box.

"Oh, my gosh!" Janilynn exclaimed. "They made Professor Hagrid leave?"

Hermione was distracted by another spectacular save by the Hufflepuff keeper.

As Garrett Shadwell announced, "Swindlehurst tosses the Quaffle down the field wow what a throw... and Yes! Gerald Summerby caught it!"

Hermione looked up and saw Hagrid take a seat in the Hufflepuff stand. Hagrid crossed his arms, looking dejected until Hufflepuff scored and then he cheered along with the students.

After what seemed like hours to Hermione, Stewart Ackerley made an astonishing move along the wall of the pitch directly under the Slytherins and caught the Snitch, giving Ravenclaw a hundred and twenty point victory over Hufflepuff.

Hermione leaned over to Ginny to whisper in her ear as the students around her burst into applause. "I have to get on the ground, now!" she shouted over the roar as she rose to her feet. Ginny lightly smacked Neville to get his attention and indicated to Hermione. Neville nodded and nudged Seamus' shoulder as he moved to lead Hermione out of the stands. Janilynn Waithe and Jenny Wang saw them leaving and nudged Breanna Enfield, who tapped on Stephanie's arm to get her and Ernie to follow.

Hermione felt ridiculous, having nearly all of Gryffindor's sixth- and seventh-years leaving the stands with her. She was even more surprised to see Terry Boot, Michael Corner, Claudia Ramirez, and Geraldine Smothers emerging from the Ravenclaw stands and heading their way. "The DA stands by their own," Seamus said with a sharp nod of his head. The group marched Hermione over to the celebrating Hufflepuffs. "You weren't the only one they wanted to get their hands on."

Her inquiry of "Why?" was lost amongst the cheering and laughing as Hermione was engulfed within the Hufflepuff students. She happily congratulated the students she bumped into, wondering who was being singled out as well.

Luna appeared in Hermione's line of sight, standing next to Swindlehurst and Ackerley, holding a small rock in her hand. "You're improving on your dive, but you still don't trust your broom," Luna stated dreamily to Stewart Ackerley.

He looked at her, his forehead wrinkled and his eyes narrowed, but Luna was examining the shell-shaped rock she'd picked up. "I look forward to the Quidditch game between Hufflepuff and Slytherin. Draco doesn't like plunging dives for the ground, and he tends to break out to hard. But he flies fast so I think you're well matched."

"Er, thanks for the tip," Ackerley said, his attention diverted by a housemate.

Janilynn Waithe pointed to the Carrows walking away from the pitch. "I think it's safe to go now."

Ginny hooked her arm with Hermione's. "We're going up with Hufflepuff, so act like you were favoring them to win. Besides, with the majority of the school watching, and surrounded by a hundred students, it'll be hard to get at you."

"Ginny, surely," Hermione stated to say, but Janilynn cut her off.

"They threatened to get you," Breanna stated. "So don't say it isn't anything to worry about. Besides we're only going in for dinner, so what's the big deal?"

Hermione hoped they were right, but another quick glance at Severus told her that he was still angry.

When they reached the castle, her friends started guiding Hermione to the Great Hall for dinner. She turned around, looking for Severus as she sat down, and saw him watching her with a scowl on his face.

Severus approached Hermione just as the plates cleared for pudding. "You're coming with me," he said in a tone that made her cringe inside.

She said good night to her friends and followed him from the hall, surprised when Draco caught up to them on the stairs. "Going to the library?" she asked Draco, mentally chanting, *say yes, say yes...*

"Nope, I'm spending my evening insulting you," he said with a smirk that faded when Severus scowled at him.

"I'd rather you chose the library," she mumbled.

"He's going to be in the tower with you and you will get along," Severus snapped.

He'd been in a bad mood all day, and Hermione wondered if it had anything to do with her being gone all morning or what Ginny mentioned about the Death Eaters.

Peren approached her as soon as Hermione entered the sitting room. "What would Mistress like Peren to gets her for pudding?" she asked with hopeful eyes.

Remembering the brownie, Hermione asked for one, topped with ice cream and chocolate fudge.

Peren disappeared before Draco opened his mouth. "Well, that was..." He was cut off when Peren returned with two plates with ice cream sundaes atop fresh baked brownies. "That looks good."

Hermione sat down at the coffee table, frowning when Draco joined her on the floor. He shoved his bag over by the sofa and helped himself to one of the brownie sundaes treats.

"Merlin, this *is* good," Draco commented after a few bites.

"Typical Muggle treat," she chided him, closing her eyes as she took another mouthful. When she opened her eyes, he was staring at her, his expression unreadable. They ate in silence, Hermione watching the fire more than Draco. When she'd finished, she pulled out her Dark Arts essay.

Draco snatched the parchment. "Maleficium, the Latin term meaning wrongdoing or mischief, is used to describe malevolent, dangerous, or harmful magic, such as

evildoing or malevolent sorcery. In general, the term applies to any magical act intended to cause harm or death to people or property. This type of magic would be invoked to kill, more specifically, the Avada Kedavra or Killing Curse, or to cause extreme pain, such as the Cruciatus Curse. Other acts of maleficium include: to steal, to injure, to cause misfortune, or destruction," Draco read aloud and smirked as he handed it back to her. "Droll. Not your usual standard, I'm sure."

"He only wants a straight definition and examples," she pointed out. "No point writing anything too complicated it confuses him."

Draco smirked at her comment. "Okay, that's part of it. Your basic categories are: sharp, pointed or pointy, prickly, caustic, severe hot or cold, love or sexual spells, binding spells, and illusions."

"Oh yes, I forgot, you're quite proficient in the Dark Arts," she said mockingly with a sideways roll of her eyes.

"I'm adept in them, yes," he said snidely, setting his spoon in the dish.

She studied his calm mannerism critically. "How much experience do you have?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her. She knew that Severus had taught him Dark Arts over the summer, but wondered just how excessive those lessons went.

"Much more than you," he said, bending his leg and resting his arm on his knee.

She waved her hand dismissively. "That's not saying very much; I've only used what I've learned in class."

"And that's not much at all. You and your Gryffindor friends are simply target practice for those of us who are on the right side," he stated, smirking at her.

Hermione jumped slightly and turned to face him more squarely. "What do you mean target practice?" she asked alarmed.

"Haven't you noticed that Breanna Enfield and Charlene Weston are rarely singled out? Yet you, Longbottom, Finnigan, Brown, and Patil well, she's not picked on as much as you other four."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, trying to divine why he'd mention that. *Surely they're not siding with Voldemort? Breanna was part of the group protecting me... but...? Weston?*

"Which one shocks you? Patil? Engaged or will be this Christmas hols. Weston as well, but she doesn't wear her ring. Miss Enfield is already betrothed, I believe, but nothing will be said until June when it will be made formal."

Hermione sucked in her breath. "To whom?" she breathed, unable to find any strength to her voice.

Draco laughed. "They haven't said anything? Aren't you close to your own dorm mates? Oh, that's right; you're here in your tower, married to Severus Snape, Death Eater and one of the Dark Lord's favorites."

Hermione simply stared at him not daring to taunt him, because it might make him too angry to tell her. "Charlene Weston is betrothed to Egmont Bole he was a Beater on the Slytherin house team. His family is good friends with the Warringtons and Flints," he added when Hermione didn't recognize the name.

She still couldn't remember him. "And Parvati?" she asked softly, hoping for a better match for her.

"I'm not really sure, but I think its Edgcombe's eldest son," he said offhandedly. "But then I don't follow the social register like my mum does."

Hermione picked up her quill and tried to concentrate on listing the curses, by category as directed by Amycus. He didn't even want more than the name, incantation, and the wand movement for each one.

Pointed: Needling Hex Compunxi; wand movement is a stabbing poke.

Knife-Edge Curse Mucronis; wand movement... point and cut downward, like a knife.

Stabbing-Pains Curse Punctim: a pointed thrust movement, opposite of Caesim which is a thrust and cut movement.

Piercing-Pain Curse Perfigo, another thrusting point movement.

Shooting-Pain Curse Valdacus; again, a thrusting slash movement...

Hermione set her quill down after finishing all the ones she found in her assigned book. None of these were especially hard to remember. In fact they were downright simple; the incantation was usually close to the equivalent Latin word for the name or affect of the spell, and the movement, as one might expect from the name, as if using a knife or a sword to do the act. She started on the category prickly, realizing that she knew most of them already. *Stinging Hex, Itching Hex, Tickling Hex, Tongue Blisters... Lingua vomica blisters on the tongue!* The accompanying picture on the page made her sick to her stomach, the huge blisters, several oozing pus and blood on a grotesquely swollen tongue. "And he's going to let them use this on us?!"

"Which?" Draco asked, looking up.

She saw him swallow hard and exhale from his mouth as he looked at the picture, then shoved it away.

"You've seen this one, haven't you?"

"Yes, it's not pretty." He turned to look at the window. "The counter curse only works in the first few seconds before the boils start to burst. It's Lingua mederi, but it's nonverbal, and you end up swallowing... you don't want to know."

"Swallowing what?" she asked, feeling a panic that it had to be horrible if he couldn't even say it...

"The scabs," he admitted, looking sick and wrinkling his nose. "It's better than the alternative."

"The alternative?"

He refused to look at her as if refusing to respond. She stared at the picture and noticed that the sores did appear to be on the inside of the mouth as well. She looked down at her parchment, counting how many she'd done so far. She had all twenty, thank Merlin. "Draco, do you think we could quit for now. I'm not feeling so good, and I'd like to... take a bath."

Draco nodded in understanding. "Sure, too much for you, eh? It's all right." He collected all his things. "Remember about the Tongue-Healing Charm. It's easy as long as you think your *mouth, throat, and tongue*, and really want it to heal *and* you can't panic it won't work if you panic."

"Draco, who...?"

"Leave it. It's none of your business who," he snapped as he stood up and walked away. "I'll see you in class. Enjoy your bath and think of something else, okay."

Hermione watched him hurry past Severus without saying good bye. She turned and headed for the stairs, wondering who'd he'd seen cursed with the Tongue-Blisters

Curse.

Severus reached out and touched her arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, I just finished my Defense well, Dark Arts assignment," she replied dolefully.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously. "What upset Draco?"

"The Tongue-Blisters Curse," Hermione answered. "He's seen it, but didn't tell me on whom."

"The Dark Lord used it on Narcissa when Draco and I returned to the Manor the night Dumbledore died," he said, his voice strained to maintain a smooth aloofness.

He'd witnessed Mrs. Malfoy... The picture of the woman gagging on her blistered tongue, the thought of the blood and pus running down her throat haunted her. "Why did he do that?"

"She came to my house."

Hermione looked up at him, her mouth agape. "He did that to her because she paid you a social call?"

"I can't tell you why," he added sternly and let go of her arm. "Why were you looking that particular curse up?"

"Amycus Carrow his assignment he gave us a list of spells to write out the incantation and the wand movement... so we could do it in class." She covered her mouth and stepped back. *"So they could do it on us!"*

Severus' eyes narrowed, darkened, and grew cold. "Not if I have a say in it he won't," he snarled and turned. "You are to learn the counter curse for each curse you wrote about tonight. Do you understand me? Each one. If you cannot find them ask me."

Hermione's hands were clasped together against her lips as he turned around, her breath making her finger warm with each breath. "Of course," she said, watching him go. She had nervous knots in her stomach. *If he reacted like that just because... and Draco...* She turned and hurried up to the room to write Draco's warning and counter spell on a slip of parchment.

She could hear Peren filling the tub for her. "Peren, I need you to take this to Ginny or Neville. It's really important."

"Yes, Mistress," Peren said, taking the parchment and disappeared.

She sank down into the hot water and tried to calm her racing heart. She closed her mind and forced herself to picture her memory palace, mentally constructing new tiny elf-sized doors, many concealed behind tapestries, statues, a section of stone, or a panel, much like the real house-elf doorways to hide her secrets behind. Eventually she relaxed, absorbed in the process of organizing and rearranging her mind.

It took time to selectively organize her thoughts into new classrooms replicas of the larger ones for the memories she didn't want anyone, specifically the Dark Lord to find, putting all her personal memories into places she could now easily hide.

The water cooled and she drained some of it, turning on the hot water tap with her toe. She could calmly imagine her hidden passages: the corridors, all the duplicate rooms, and the small concealed doors, mentally mapping it all out carefully, like a secret Hogwarts inside her Hogwarts. All the tapestries, statues, paintings, suits of armor, and windows she knew so well in the real castle, hiding all the secret entrances and carefully concealing them from view. The only room that remained the same in her memory palace was her library her ever increasing library.

As the water cooled again, Hermione's memory palace was a solid to her as the real castle and as definite in her mind. She dried off, slipped into the green night slip Peren had laid out for her and crawled into bed.

"Your hair is wet," Severus stated from his side of the bed.

"I dried it the best I could with a towel," she replied, knowing that only did half the job on her curls.

"Sit up," he demanded.

Sighing, she complied and turned her back to him. A warm heat engulfed her head. "Thank you." She pushed the covers off to go get her hairbrush.

"Where are you going now?" he asked in the darkness.

She turned, confused. "To get my brush." The door slammed closed before she reached it, and she whirled to face the bedroom. "What...?"

His hands landed on the door and wall on either side of her, making her press her back against the door. "You *are not* to hide from me, *ever*. Is that understood, Hermione?" he asked, his voice cold and low, making shivers run down her spine. "You are *not* to leave this tower without my knowledge, nor are you to wander from this castle, for any reason, without my consent. Do. I. Make. Myself. Clear?"

She tensed, her lips quivering at the anger in his tone. It became hard to breathe normally at the forcefulness of his words. He hadn't spoken to her like this since her first days of her capture. "Y-y-yes," she managed to croak out audibly. She tried to move away and he stopped her.

"If I have to I can and will apply the same wards on the stairs going up to the sitting room as in my house," he warned her. "It is not safe for you to wander around the castle and grounds unescorted."

"I wasn't wandering around the castle, and I wasn't alone, I was with Peren!" she said petulantly, even stomping her foot. "Now, it's late and I'm..."

"Not done with you," he snapped. She crossed her arms and sighed stubbornly, her eyes now fully adjusted to the exceptionally dim light. He slapped his hand on the wall by her head and stood back, standing with his arms crossed glaring at her. "I want to know where you were. And don't lie to me, I know you were not in this tower."

"No, I wasn't, not really. I went with Peren to see where she goes when not in the room I was curious." She leaned against the door waiting.

"And that is all you're going to tell me?" he asked, and for a minute she thought she'd won.

"Fine, have it your way," he growled, his teeth barred as he exhaled. "You will not be able to open the door from now on." He grasped her arm, yanking her with him to the bed.

She noticed that the covers were pulled slantingly across the bed to the floor from his hasty exit, but his grip on her arm as he thrust her toward the bed made it impossible not to trample on them. As she tried to turn to sit on the bed, she slipped on the corner of the sheet and fell, crashing into him. He caught her, sort of, tumbling onto the mattress in a heap, his hand landing on her breast. Hermione tried to sit up as he extracted his hand, putting her foot on the mattress, and her head collided painfully with his collarbone. "Ouch!"

"Well, you shouldn't have tripped me," he snarled as he tried to right himself while she squirmed to find a seating position, accidentally knocking his arm in the process. He fell on top of her again.

"Stop struggling," he snapped as she started to laugh. "Only you would find this amusing." He was now straddling her on all fours but she still had one leg hanging off the mattress. "Scoot up and try to avoid banging into me." He shifted as she brought her leg up and tried to move toward the headboard. Now he was straddling her legs, his hands on either side of her waist, staring at her chest intently.

She realized what he was staring at the night slip had pulled down, revealing her breasts above the neckline.

"What am I going to do with you?" he asked. His tongue flicked her nipple once before he sucked it into his mouth as his hand slid slowly down her side, making her move slightly toward the center on the bed.

Hermione forgot about his anger as she closed her eyes, enjoying the attention of his mouth on her breast and the feel of his hands sliding under the slip on her skin. "Anything," she groaned.

"Anything?" he asked as he raked his fingernails down her sides, making her arch her back from the tantalizing tickle. His nose bumped her abdomen as he descended down her body.

"Yes," she replied, raking her nails wherever she could touch him.

"Good answer," he replied and flicked his tongue at her groin. "Open up for me, Hermione."

She complied as he raised her legs, bending her knees to open her fully to his gaze.

"Lovely." He thrust a finger into her as the tip of his tongue made circles on her sensitive spot.

"I thought you were mad at me," she said with a moan, fully enjoying the attention he was lavishing on her. He was such a complicated man; first he was furious with her, being rough with her, and now he was ravishing her as if nothing had happened.

All he said was, "Hmmm," against her clitoris as his fingers stroked her, and she gasped from the sensations, immediately feeling her orgasm build. He shifted, making the feeling ebb, and repeated the action, exciting her again and frustrating her at the same time. A soft chuckle escaped his lips, doing the same thing to her as his hum, but he ignored her squirming and pleading as he continued to ravish her core and clitoris. Her orgasm hit hard, making her scream and thrash, pleading for him to stop stimulating her with his fingers and tongue.

Instead, he flipped her over and pulled her to her knees, entering her from behind and repeatedly thrusting into her hard and unrelenting strokes.

She was still sensitive from her orgasm, squeezing down on him with each thrust, her breasts bouncing to his rhythm. Hermione tried to relax, but his fingers found her clit, and he flicked it as he thrust, increasing the tension inside her. She grasped one breast, trying to keep them from swinging, and he bent over her, making her shoulders collapse onto the bed.

"That's it, play with yourself," he urged her.

She could barely respond; the sensations from his fingers and the way he moved brought her to orgasm again.

"That's it. Scream it, Hermione," he said, pulling her up against his body, still stimulating her roughly. "I want to hear you scream."

She clutched at him, her nails digging into his flesh as she pleaded for him to relent. "Too sensitive, Severus, please... too much..."

"Say it," he demanded, bending her forward, holding her to him with one arm as he pounded into her, his fingers still manipulating her below. "Scream for me."

"Severus, please, please," she pleaded, getting louder and louder, the sensations never ebbing, the last orgasm seeming to build again as if never ending. "Severus, I I can't I...stop. Oh, gods, Severus, stop too much SEVERUS, NO! GODS, NO!"

"Say it," he growled. She could tell by the huskiness of his tone that he was close to his own orgasm. "Say my name."

Her body seemed to explode and melt at the same time, all coherent thought except his name escaping her. "SEVERUS OH, SEVERUS GODS, SEVERUS! HOLY SHITE, SEVERUSSSSS!"

He grunted, growling in her ear as he made one last thrust and pulled her down on his shaft with both hands, burying himself deep while holding her so tight he was hurting her. He was shaking as much as her own body, the pounding of her heart even seeming to skip a beat as her labored breathing made her lightheaded. She felt limp in his crushing embrace, unable to move or collapse. She could feel his hot breath on the base of her neck and the heaving of his chest.

He finally moved, half collapsing, half stretching as they both lay out on the bed, his arms still tight around her. She felt his penis slip from her as he snuggled her to him, his body wet with sweat, and knew that he'd fallen asleep.

Hermione lay in the dark, listening to his breathing until sleep took her as well.

~o0o~

Sunday morning, hundreds of owls flew into the Great Hall during breakfast, each dropping several copies of *The Quibbler* on the house tables. Ginny snatched the publication before it landed in her eggs. "Oh, get this!" she exclaimed, holding the paper for Hermione to see the headlines.

It was hardly necessary, all around the Great Hall, on every table, a bright yellow band bore the words, *Support Harry Potter*, in huge black letters. *'It's your duty as free wizards to support Harry Potter,'* was in strong, bold, neon print across the middle.

Hermione leaned close to Ginny and read the article with a grin. "His articles certainly are bold." However, as she read, certain phrases and statements popped out at her, veiled sentences of the truth, scattered throughout the paper.

"Luna's dad must have a new journalist," Ginny remarked, turning the paper over.

"Why do you say that?" Janilynn asked on her other side.

Ginny turned her head to look at her. "It's the answers to one of the quizzes in the column titled, *Mystic Crosswords*."

That was not the answer Hermione was about to give, and she looked at Ginny questioningly.

Ginny put the paper down and looked at Hermione and Neville. "Have either of you got a quill on you?" Neville handed her his. "A friend of prince hamlet," Ginny said aloud.

"Horatio" Hermione answered, thinking that an easy clue for a crossword puzzle.

"The color of sapphire? Blue. How to eat an orange? Peel it," Ginny rambled on. "These are really easy... wait." Ginny tapped the paper with her wand, saying, "Horatio's blue peel," and gasped. Some of the words on the paper turned blue.

"Need a way out, go to the street near Cresant Park in Heathfield or St David's Station near Muggle University in Exeter noon. Will provide transport. Magnolia crossed south. Baines all out of house fine. Burns ten all six r fine now."

"Burstein could that be the Burnsteins?" Janilynn asked softly. "I read about them. Their house was the target of a raid; it was burned down and the family was killed."

"Kennel and drew gates in hid 'ing hiding.' Kenneth and Drew Gates? Really?" Ginny said, her mouth falling open. *The Quibbler* is hiding messages about friends and families. Oh! 'Carmichael wife freed. Hordes escaped Ministry free, not a lie. Weasley and Potter accused of breakout.' Ron and Harry!"

Neville frowned at his copy of *The Quibbler*. "Thomas boy wanted for robbery at Ministry it's now confirmed that Mr. Dean Thomas, wanted for confirmation of his Muggle-born status, took part in the mass escape from the Ministry of Magic late Thursday, apparently aided by two other wizards one confirmed as the notorious Harry Potter! The other wizard suspected to be Ronald Weasley they are alive!" he said and looked up at Ginny with a huge grin.

Hermione was elated.

"It says, that 'the subjects were all awaiting their hearings before the Muggle-born Registration Commission regarding their eligibility to carry a wand and use magic'" Seamus read aloud. "... During the mass breakout, a locket was stolen from Dolores Jane Umbridge ..." He looked up confused. "Why would Dean steal a locket from Umbridge?"

Hermione quickly grabbed her cup to hide her shocked expression. *They did it! They have the locket!*

"What do you know?"

Hermione turned to stare at Ginny, knowing that she couldn't tell her or try lying.

"What do you know?" Ginny repeated, now turned in her seat to face Hermione.

"Gin, I'm not sure, really only a well, I hope... Without asking Dean, I can't be sure. We've got to get mirrors, and then we'll know for sure. But the article in the *Prophet* about the progress of the Muggle-born Registration Committee blood status trials they lied."

"Oh course they lied!" Ginny exclaimed. "Where have you been? The *Prophet* is as slanted and riddled with Voldemort's propoganda as it was my third year after Cedric Diggory died, and Harry announced that Voldemort was back!"

Hermione saw MacCavish rise to his feet. "Gin, stop it!" Seamus warned. "Travers and Rowle are glaring at you, and they're getting up, too."

Hermione turned to look at Severus, surprised to see him striding toward her.

"You are not to say his name you spawn of blood traitors," MacCavish snarled, pointing at Ginny from across the table. Jenny Wang and Stephanie Adams, sitting across from Janilynn and Ginny, tried to move down the table from MacCavish as he loomed over them to glare at Ginny and Hermione.

Ginny paled slightly, but raised her chin to look up at the Death Eater. "But Dumbledore said "

"Miss Weasley, on your feet now," Severus said coolly, his expression furious. "Hermione, you too *Now!*"

Hermione scrambled to her feet and faced Severus. He was glaring at Ginny. "Follow me," he snapped. "MacCavish, I have this under control."

"Yes, sir," Hermione mumbled, feeling sick of being cloistered away in the tower when the morning had begun so promisingly.

Severus led them outside and down the path. "Where are we going?" Hermione whispered.

"To serve a detention of hard labor," Severus said softly.

Hermione looked at his back, not understanding what he could possibly mean.

Severus stopped once they reached the school's greenhouses, opened the door to greenhouse five, the one never used for lessons, and ushered the girls inside. The garden greenhouse was huge inside, with rows upon rows of every kind of vegetables in all stages of growth. Hagrid looked up as Severus approached. "Hagrid."

"Headmaster," Hagrid replied formally, standing straighter.

"These two have violated the Dark Lord's taboo. They are to weed the entire greenhouse as a detention," Severus stated. "I shall be back to collect them before lunch."

"Yes, sir, Headmaster. I will be glad to supervise their detention, sir," Hagrid replied as if speaking to a commanding officer.

Severus nodded and drew Hermione aside. "Call for Peren if MacCavish or Rowle enters."

"Yes, sir," Hermione said as she nodded. "Severus, why?"

"When you say his name, we feel it, Hermione. There is a Tracing-Tracking Spell on the name as well he feels it. Now I have to send him a report that the students abusing the right to speak his name, a right not even his closest followers are allowed, have been properly punished. Not in a manner he'd have chosen, but effective in my own opinion," he said softly. "Now, if either MacCavish or Rowle come in here, have Peren take you to my office immediately."

Hermione nodded again and watched him leave. Hermione could see MacCavish standing outside the door when he opened it, and she heard Severus order him to return to the Great Hall as the door closed. Hermione rubbed her hands on her upper arms as she walked over to Ginny and Hagrid, examining the neat and weed-free rows of green beans, tomatoes, peppers, and broccoli.

"So what are your plans today? Well, besides enforced gardening," Ginny asked, pouring herself pumpkin juice into a glass where a wide path of flat dirt separated one garden patch from another. "Here, want some?"

"I don't get it?" she asked, looking around. "What weeds?" The rows of leeks, cabbages, carrots, and beets were neatly laid out with freshly laid manure.

"There aren't that many, wha' with all yeh kids being sent ta me for their detentions," Hagrid said, sitting on a sturdy bench with his ankles crossed. Hermione sat down next to him. "This is me garden," he said proudly with a wave of his hand. "When the weather gets bad, I grow everythin' in here. Well, me and Professor Sprout, o' course."

"We either come in here or the animal paddock, well, the older students do, and occasionally we have to go into the forest with Hagrid. But mostly, we visit er, do our detention in here," Ginny said, smiling up at Hagrid. "Beats the alternative."

"Such as?" Hermione asked, sipping on the pumpkin juice.

"Detention with them Carrows," Hagrid replied with distaste. "Don' wan' any of yeh with them." Hagrid stood up. "Now then, 'cause yeh have to have dirt under yer nails or them Death Eater's will think I wen' soft on yeh... we can... pick tomatoes and leeks for dinner." He picked up two huge baskets. "Now just pull 'em up, cut off the roots and stack 'em in the basket."

It didn't take as long as Hermione thought it would. Halfway through, Zane Seymour and Farrah Chambers, a fourth-year Hufflepuff, joined them. The task Hagrid gave them was dividing sweet potatoes, dipping them in Root-Starting Solution and planting them.

"So what is your plan this afternoon," Ginny asked, wiping her forehead with her sleeve.

"Most likely sequestered in my tower, revising and working on my essays," Hermione said with a heavy sigh.

"Great, some of the girls will come up and see you," she said with a grin. "At least I will."

Severus came to collect all the girls before lunch, sending the Hufflepuffs and Ginny running for their common rooms to clean up. Severus waited in his office as Hermione washed up, and escorted her to the Great Hall. By the time she'd finished eating, he was waiting to escort her back to their tower.

"Where is Cillian?" Hermione asked, hurrying beside him to keep up with his long stride.

"Out on personal business," Severus said coolly without even turning his head. Only when they were in his office did he bother to look at her, frowning, arms crossed, and his feet planted firmly a shoulders-width apart. "So are you going to tell me where you were for four hours yesterday?"

Hermione stared at a design on the cover of a book lying on his desk. "I was with Peren," she replied and waited, her hands clasped in front of her. He was silent, his body rigid, watching her. Hermione simply stood patiently for the inevitable questions. The bell on his desk broke the silence. "That would be Ginny."

"You're expecting her?"

Hermione looked up and shrugged. "She's my friend. Friends do things together talk, you know"

"Enough! Fine. Allow," he snarled. "This isn't over. I don't want you lying to me."

Her head tilted to the side as she sighed. "I wasn't hiding!" she implored, knowing that he'd be even more furious if he knew the truth. "I wondered where Peren went to at night, and she showed me." A sharp knock on the door gave her a moment reprieve. "You do know that I detest house-elf mistreatment, don't you?"

"Oh, really. You think I was unaware of your pathetic attempt withspew." Whoever was at the door knocked again. Severus waved his hand dismissively in the direction of the door, wandlessly making the door open, and barked, "Enter."

Hermione was not pleased to see Draco Malfoy. "You may revise in the sitting room," Severus said and walked around his desk.

Draco smugly indicated for her to show him the way. Hermione glared at him, went up stairs and picked up a book to read, opening the book to the marker. He watched her, leaning casually against the bookshelf with his arms crossed. She kicked off her shoes so she could curl up on the sofa. Draco walked over and sat down next to her. Hermione turned to lean against the armrest with her knees bent so she could rest the book on them. He turned sideways, one arm on the back of the sofa.

She turned the page, wishing he'd stop staring at her. "What?" she finally asked.

"You're ignoring me. It's rude."

She sighed and stared at the book, forcing herself to concentrate. "I wasn't expecting you. Don't you have some revision to do elsewhere?"

"We could do some spell work," he offered as he angled his head to try to catch her eye.

She finally finished one paragraph. "I am not allowed a wand."

"We could practice wandless."

She exhaled and looked up at him, then back at her book. "I'm not able to do wandless."

"You're not really reading," he stated.

She looked up at him again. "Not with you jabbing away." She let the book slide down her thighs. "Why? What could you possibly want to talk about?"

He rested his head against his hand. "We could talk about class."

"Which one?" she asked, feigning interest as she turned the page.

"What interests you?" he asked.

"Magical flora and fauna, gossip regarding the interpersonal relationships of my classmates, hair and fashion trends of the teenage witch, Quidditch guys on brooms, and makeup tricks to make my lips and eyes look fuller," she said and started to chuckle. "You?"

"Personally, I like the female Quidditch players," he said with a smirk. He picked up a Potions journal Severus had been reading. "Besides, you don't wear makeup."

"I have, but only for special occasions," she replied, picking up her book.

Draco snickered actually snickered, lowering his head as if to conceal his derisive laugh behind the journal. Hermione bristled at the action, lifting the book and tried to tone him out. They sat in silence for a while, the only sounds in the room, the turning of a page or the snap and crackle from the fire.

"You like magical flowers," Draco said softly, shaking his head. "Who'd have thought?"

"I'm intrigued by them, all right," she said curtly, burying her nose in her book. "So why are you here, besides to annoy me?"

"What? Can't a guy just want to hang out with you? After all, you're used to hanging out with guys, aren't you?" he asked, still holding the journal open on his lap. "I thought you were best mates with Potter and Weasley. Heard from them lately?"

Hermione bristled and lowered her book. "No, and even if I did, I'd not tell you about it. You'd just go and tell your Master. So bugger off, Malfoy."

"Unfortunately for you I've agreed to keep an eye on you," he said and turned so he could prop his feet up on the coffee table.

"I don't need you keeping an eye on me, thank you very much, so you're free to go. Oh, and tell your father when you see him next that even his money can't buy my friendship."

This struck him; Draco's turned and glared at her. "My father wouldn't stoop so low."

"You'd like to think so," she replied, wishing he'd leave. "That's not what was said at the Halloween party. Even your master wanted to know how we *were* getting along." She thought of going up to the bedroom, but he'd probably follow her there.

"Of course the Dark Lord wanted to know how we *are* getting along because he wants to know if you're *rebehaving yourself*. You have a tendency to get mixed up in stuff

you should've left well enough alone, and involve yourself on the wrong side of things. You don't have that privilege anymore this is *his* school, or haven't you noticed?"

Although his tone didn't have any of its normal bite it was condescending. "I am well aware of that, thank you," she replied tersely. "I am reminded of my precarious position on a daily basis."

Draco looked up. "I didn't mean... Merlin, you are a pain in the arse, you know that?" he asked with a roll of his eyes. "What's wrong with trying to get along, anyway? Why is it so difficult for you? It's not as if you have better options."

She ignored him, shifting slightly and returned her attention to her book.

"Why is this so hard for you?" he asked, closing the journal and holding it on his lap. She looked up at him quizzically, and he frowned. "Us. Why do you fight me all the time?" His frown deepened when all she did was raised her eyebrows at him at the ridiculous question. "I'm trying, damn it! I don't know what to do to get you to see that I'm trying."

Hermione set the marker in place and put her book aside. She stretched out her legs as she leaned forward and gently took his left hand. She tightened her grip as she shoved his sleeve up exposing the lower half of his Dark Mark. He tried to pull his hand free, but she had a good grip on him.

"Because of this! I know you don't mean any of it, Draco. You are only being nice to me because you've been told to." He jerked his hand away, and she smirked at him. "If it weren't for my situation here the fact that I am *your* Lord's captive you'd still be calling me a Mudblood and hexing me any time you could get away with it. That's why. Don't think I'm oblivious to reality. You don't like me anymore than I like you."

"You're wrong," he mumbled, barely audible.

"Pardon me? What was that?" she asked, sure that it was some snide remark.

"You were at least tolerable at Severus' house," he snapped, reaching for the journal that had fallen on the floor. He stood up and walked around the coffee table.

"Leaving?" she asked, hopefully.

"Looking for a better book," he snapped.

She turned back to her book.

"What are you reading?"

She looked up. "A wizard's account of World War II. Apparently, some wizards joined the armed services during the war."

"Mostly the Muggle-borns," Draco stated, sitting in the chair nearest her, "although there were some wizards who took an active role in the war. When they lived in Holland, the Pendlehursts smuggled Jewish wizards into their basement."

"I'm reading about a man who hid Jews in his attic," Hermione stated, now curious. "The Reeders had a home in Amersfoort, Holland in 1942. His parents hid Jews at the request of the Dutch resistance movement. Did you know the Pendlehursts?"

"No," Draco said, leaning forward to rest his arms on his legs. He stared at his hands. "Aunt Andromeda knew them. I just knew about it."

"You know this war has a lot of similarities to that one," she said brazenly.

He sat up sharply. "It's not the same at all!"

"Really? Then you should be the one revising your history. There are a lot of similarities; Death Eaters very much like the SS. A charismatic dictator bent on the genocide of people simply because of their bloodlines I'm surprised I'm not sporting a star or something on my chest. And the Muggle-born Registration Commission trials to prove who worthy to carry a wand, people being sent off to prison for having the wrong parents... just like what was done to the Jews. Nope, nothing in common at all."

He sat back, and a tick flickered in his cheeks as he regarded her through narrowed eyes.

"Do you really think that this war is so different? Do you really think that Hitler's ideals are any less twisted than your Master's? Are you really that blind, Draco?"

"I don't have to listen to this," he said, jumping up and turning to go.

"Deny it all you want you're a member of the wizarding Schutzstaffel, the Death Eaters are little more than the Dark Lord's SS. The Gestapo, secret state police, kept a close watch on activities," she said over her shoulder, "just like you and those Security wizards, MacCavish, Travers, VanHalal and Rowle, have been enlisted to keep a close watch on activities here at school and elicit new recruits. Amycus Carrow is trying to sway the students into accepting and using the Dark Arts, training up new recruits. The *Daily Prophet* and Alecto Carrow are promoting the Dark Lord's propaganda. The Death Eaters have taken over the government and the media, started segregating the population, segregated the school, just like Hitler did in Germany. Surely you know your European history, Draco?"

The room became very quiet. Hermione even began to think that maybe Draco had left while she'd been talking. She turned around, surprised to see Draco still standing in the room staring at her. "You're wrong," he said again.

"I happen to know that all the history books are still in the library, Draco. If you don't believe me, go read them yourself." She knew that she was taking a huge risk pushing him like this, but he couldn't deny the facts.

Draco turned and slowly walked out of the room. Hermione shrugged and turned back to her book.

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## One Step Forward

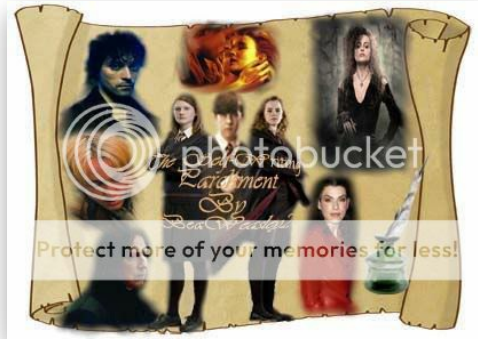
Chapter 25 of 43

Hermione is still dealing with the difficulties and tribulations of being the only Muggle-born at Hogwarts. However, she gets news from a friend. Draco tries again to befriend her, and Severus has to deal with Amycus' teaching method.

No monies coming my way. I'm only doing this for entertainment of the free variety.

Thank you hugs and smoochies to *Dungeon\_Butterfly*, *Looney2*, and *EverMystique* for helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much to *Pookah* for being the shoulder I needed to write this chapter.

Also, a huge thank you to *DuchessOfArcadia* for my lovely banner.



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### One Step Forward

Hermione could hardly believe that Alecto was *still* ranting about the atrocities of the witch hunts of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. As if that was the only thing the woman knew anything about only she was so historically inaccurate, Hermione was certain that the witch had never actually studied the history of the witch trials. It was like listening to Professor Binns and his bloody Goblin wars only at least *he* taught facts.

Hermione kept her head down and never once raised her hand, but that didn't stop Alecto from picking on her to answer questions, grilling Hermione on each one of her made-up points. No matter what her answers were, they were the wrong ones, and each time Alecto used her wand to secure Hermione's hand to the desk so she could whip it savagely with her riding crop to punish her. By the end of lessons, her hand hurt so bad it felt like the skin had been flayed.

Hermione hurriedly stuffed her things into her bag and ran from the room, ignoring both Draco and Cillian as they followed after her. All she wanted was to run cold water on her skin to ease the pain.

"I said to wait," Cillian snarled as he rounded the doorway of the girl's loo.

Hermione refused to answer him as she thrust her hand under the cold tap, allowing her tears to fall freely, unchecked down her face. Cillian walked over, the anger in his brown eyes softening as he approached. He leaned against the wall and waited quietly. "What? No snide comments or scathing remarks about running," she sneered softly, wishing he'd leave her alone and not just stand there and watch her cry.

He shook his head. "You should use murtlap essence..."

"It doesn't work unless I have cuts," Hermione snapped, wiping her tears with her sleeve.

Three girls entered, glancing at Cillian and shyly taking the stalls at the end. Cillian cast a charm to block any sounds.

"Hermione, don't let her get to you," Draco said from the doorway.

Hermione turned and faced Draco. "Oh yes, Ferret, let's see how long you can take her abuse no wait, I forgot. You're one of her favorites. Never mind! You have no idea what it's like every single day to be singled out for this torment." She turned back to the sink and thrust her hand under the water.

"You don't!" Draco started to say until Cillian raised his hand to cut him off.

One by one the girls exited their stalls and came by the sink to wash their hands, one of the girls snickering until Cillian shot her a reproachful glare. Hermione turned off the tap and walked out of the loo without drying her hand. Cillian held Draco back, both walking behind her as she headed for the library. She saw Ginny sitting at a table with Janilynn and Jenny, and the redhead looked up, smiling as she waved at her, indicating for Hermione to sit in an empty chair at their table. Hermione joined them, sighing as Draco dropped his bag on the space next to her. Janilynn frowned at him, then looked up at Hermione apologetically while Jenny merely shrugged with a reproachful glance at Draco and resumed writing.

"I need to get some books," Hermione stated, more for Cillian's benefit than the girls.

Ginny smiled. "Hurry back."

As Hermione scanned the shelves for the books she wanted, she heard hushed whispers from some of the younger students apparently passing around some Skiving Snackbox treats. She smiled, hoping that they wouldn't get into any trouble, and half-heartedly wished that she could use them to skive off Muggle Studies and Dark Arts, too.

She selected *Unveiling the Muggles' Lies* and walked around the stack into the next aisle, smiling at the startled sandy-blond third-year Gryffindor boy dispensing brightly wrapped toffees to his friends. "I wouldn't use the Nosebleed Nougats, if I were you. Amycus likes to see Gryffindors bleed," she stated offhandedly with a smile. "But the Fainting Fancies would work. He might even think you'd been hit by a hex he didn't know the counter curse to."

"See, Euan, I told you the Fancies were better," the boy said as Euan turned and thanked Hermione.

"I won't tell on you, but be sure you don't get caught by Professor McGonagall; she knows all about Fred and George's Skiving sweets," she warned them as she pulled *Muggles' Most Horrifying Torture Devices in History* off the shelf. She selected *Method and Methodology of the Muggle Mind* and *Muggle Corporal Punishments Moste Cruel: Historical Interrogation Methods* for her latest essay for Alecto.

Hermione returned to the table and began reading the books. The grotesque descriptions and drawings made her swallow in nervous sympathy for the victims. She diligently tried to find the answers Alecto wanted for her questions in the books written by wizards against the evil Muggle inquisitors.

She felt the disquieting feeling of being watched and glanced up, getting odd looks from Glenwynn Glenwrythe and Theodore Nott who were sitting at the next table. Nott looked down at his paper, but Glenwynn stared openly, the slightest curve to her mouth. For a moment Hermione thought of the Mona Lisa's smile. Hermione returned a small smile, and Glenwynn turned to Nott.



"You okay?" Ginny asked, breaking into Hermione's thoughts.

"I heard that Glenwrythe and her friends are talking to you now," Draco said, obviously having watched the exchange.

Hermione shrugged. "Yes, although I think it's to warn me off of you," she replied noncommittally, turning her attention back to her books and the repulsive images.

"Warn you off me?" Draco asked, looking at Glenwynn and Nott.

"Yes," Hermione stated, turning the page. "Apparently Pansy was getting jealous of the attention you've bestowed upon me lately."

"Oh, that," Draco said, resuming his writing. "Don't worry about Pans."

"Oh, I'm not," Hermione said, glad that she didn't have to say any more on the subject.

That afternoon in Literature, Professor Adrienne Greenblatt had assigned the class to read and translate the tome, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: the Babylonian Epic Poems and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, then compare the story to other contemporary authors. There were seventeen poems, twelve known to Muggles, copied from the original clay tablets written in the Ancient Akkadian dialect, and from the Babylonian and Sumerian clay tablets, about the great King of Uruk. Professor Greenblatt had introduced the early Mesopotamian literature last year, though Hermione found last Thursday's lecture on their historical and literary background interesting.

The poems originated as a series of Sumerian legends, but there were a few magical historians who believed the stories held their basis in actual historical facts. The wizarding world recognized Enkidu, Gilgamesh's companion in the legends, as being a half-blood wizard who had remarkable 'insight' and skills of persuasion.

They were to finish the translation of the story of *Gilgamesh and the Serpent Goddess* and *Gilgamesh and the Veiled Arch of the Underworld* two of the ancient Babylonian tablets the Muggles thought were missing, but had been actually been archived in the Great Wizarding Library of Ancient Magical Antiquities in Alexandria, Egypt. However, Hermione had translated them a long time ago and knew that she had her translations in her trunk. So instead, she tried concentrating on organizing her thoughts and memories into her hidden room as she blocked out the chatter of her classmates, the occasional scrape of a chair and the other noises around her.

When the end of class bell toned, she packed up her things and headed for the door. "You were distracted today," Cillian said as she fell in step with him.

"I've read them already. Well, I had to translate them in order to read them so I'll find those pages in my trunk later," she said, catching his amazed look from the corner of her eye. "I read the story of *Gilgamesh and the Horntail Lair* in hopes of helping Harry find a way to fend off a dragon our fourth year he was one of the Triwizard champions, you know. The story *Gilgamesh and the Veiled Arch of the Underworld* I'd read in my sixth year, after hearing about Sirius passing through the arch in the Department of Mysteries."

"I suppose that makes perfect sense. Do N.E.W.T. level translations to help a friend fight off a dragon," Cillian scoffed.

"Steal an egg from a nesting female. Didn't you read the *Prophet*? They covered the tournament all year," she said, albeit a bit snidely as she also recalled what else Rita covered.

Cillian snorted as he chuckled. "I also recall that Potter was weeping over the loss of his parents, and you were rather a bit of a hussy, dumping Potter and then became cozy with the Bulgarian Quidditch player."

"Harry and I were never a couple; we're friends," she said tersely.

"I'm well aware of that," he said while opening the door for her. Hermione saw Hannah Abbott with Ravenclaws Geraldine Smothers and Claudia Ramirez, who were now 'friendly' with Seamus and Terry Boot, sitting clustered together by the windows in the library sharing translator guides and decided to join them.

Hannah moved her books aside to make room. "Hi, want to help us with the runes translations? This tablet rubbing is really tough," Hannah asked as she watched Hermione sit. Cillian took a seat at the next table and leaned back in his chair.

"Sure," Hermione said, turning her attention back to her friend. Her DA coin vibrated, and she pulled it out, hoping that Harry or Ron was trying to reach her. The coin read, '*Clear go.*' Not sure what it meant, she answered Geraldine's question about the various rune combinations they'd been assigned.

"You make it seem so easy," Claudia said, rubbing out the answer she'd written and wrote down the last one Hermione had given them.

"I find it easy. It's mostly memorization and knowing which translation book to look in," Hermione said while rubbing her thumb on her DA Galleon in her hand. She wished fervently that Cillian wasn't sitting so close, reading a Quidditch book as she checked the grammar of her translation.

"Hermione, you seem awfully distracted," Hannah whispered softly beside her.

Hermione looked up, surprised that Hannah was leaning so close, as if reading her essay.

"Are you all right?" Hannah looked at Hermione's hand and sighed. "Can't make it work without your wand?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Do you need to send a message? You may use mine if you like," Hannah offered, slipping her wand into Hermione's lap.

Hermione forced her expression to remain as neutral as she could, quickly glancing furtively at Cillian, then back to Hannah's wand. "Really, you don't mind?"

"Sure, I don't mind," Hannah urged her, nudging her gently with her arm. "Go on." She placed her left elbow on the table and leaned her head on her hand so her body shielded Hermione's hands from Cillian's view. Claudia noticed and copied the pose, effectively closing Hermione from both sides and quietly asked Hannah about a passage in the text.

It took a two tries to make the wand work properly, finally activating the initials for Harry on her coin. Her coin vibrated on her palm '*HG is U?*'

Making her movement as determined as she could in the confined space she made the coin read 'Yes me,' then changed it to '*How is the hunt?*'

The coin vibrated, the messages reading, '*Still have L,*' then '*No C,*' and changed again to read, '*No others.*' Hermione sent the message, '*Destroy L.*' The Galleon vibrated as Harry said '*Can't,*' then '*Tried,*' and then '*Can't*' again. She wished that she could ask him why not, but knew that it would be hard to explain this way. She sent the message, '*Know what the,*' and '*others are?*' and waited.

His response was a disheartening, '*No.*' The Galleon vibrated again and his question of, '*Do you?*' made Hermione's gut clench.

*So he isn't anywhere closer to finding out what the other Horcruxes were* she thought dejectedly. '*No,*' she responded and added, '*Will try lib tom*' His next message was, '*Need 2 know,*' as if she wasn't aware of that. '*I know,*' she answered, adding, '*I'll look up.*'

She tapped Hannah's wand on the coin, then sent, '*Found spell 4 mirror.*' '*Need mirrors,*' she informed him, then added, '*Need anything, food or warm blankets?*' in three

segments. Sending messages in pieces with a wand that was sluggish to respond to her was really aggravating. She wondered briefly why Ginny's wand was so much easier to use.

Oddly the coin vibrated and read, *Wait!* She stared at it in confusion for a moment, before it vibrated and changed again. He sent *Ron got,* then *Dean fish,* and *Stove warm.* She was about to send another when the coin read, *Got to go, Dean say hi.* The coin went cold in her hand.

"Good news?" Hannah asked as Hermione returned the wand.

The galleon vibrated again and the coin read, *Wait!* again.

Hannah shrugged and picked up her quill.

Hermione noticed Glenwynn Glenwrythe, Daphne Greengrass, and Felicia Lockhaven watching her from another table, but turned her attention back to Hannah's questioning face and forced herself to frown. "Harry, Ron, and Dean are alive, and apparently Dean can fish, I think. They said to say hi." She smiled and quickly glanced at Cillian, glad that he wasn't paying attention to them.

"But that's good news right?" Geraldine asked with a confused smile. "They're alive."

"Shh... We don't want her follower to be suspicious. Good, he's not looking," Claudia whispered, making a quick glance up at Cillian. "I'll tell Neville and Seamus tonight. Geraldine and I are meeting them later."

Hermione nodded, glancing slyly at Cillian. "Tell Luna too."

"Oh, the message will get around, don't worry," Geraldine said with a smirk. "I'm glad they're all right."

Hermione saw Cillian glance their way. "I should go. I want to drop off my bag before dinner."

Hannah placed a hand on her arm, restraining her. "But we haven't finished..."

"Really, you should stay a while," Claudia urged her, picking up one of Hermione's dictionaries.

Hermione slipped it from her fingers. "You only have a few more and they're not so hard if you use the same translation theory as in questions four, nine, and eleven," she suggested, collecting the rest of her books. "Thank you for your help."

The galleon vibrated again in her pocket.

Hannah's answering smile seemed strained. "Are you sure you won't stay?" she asked as Geraldine pleaded, "Please stay."

Hermione shook her head, kind of pleased that they wanted her company so badly. "Not tonight, but maybe after dinner we could meet up again," she replied, hopefully.

"Sure," Claudia said, biting her lip and looking at Cillian

Hermione turned and waited for Cillian to get up, then led him out of the library. They walked in silence to the gargoyle. "Bye," she said as the statue jumped aside.

"For now," he replied with a smirk.

When she entered the Headmaster's office, she smiled at Severus seated at the large desk, reading a particularly long scroll of parchment. For the first time in a long while, he wasn't surrounded by piles of parchments. She stopped in front of him and dropped her bag on the floor.

He looked up at her when she placed her elbows on the desk and leaned her head in her hands. "Hermione, I'm busy."

"I see that," she said, smiling up at him.

"Did you want something?" he asked, setting down the scroll.

"You are always so busy," she said, examining his face. He didn't look too bad, but the signs of stress were there: a slight puffiness under his eyes, worry lines pronounced around his eyes and forehead, his lips pressed thinly.

"The Dark Lord is considering Umbridge's proposed changes to the school charter," he said, his dark eyes narrowing under her scrutiny. "If you don't have anything else to do go practice your Occlumency."

Hermione sighed. "I do. Nearly every evening, between revision times, in the bath..."

"*Legilimens,*" he said with a smirk, his wand flicking at her so quickly she hardly had time to react.

Images of the girls in the library quickly changed to a view of the corridors. Hermione concentrated on her memory palace and the corridors became clear, however several snapshots of her lessons, and one of her hurrying past VanHalal and Rowle when they were making snide and rude comments to her flickered in her mind. Hermione smiled inwardly until she felt him push harder, searching. She inadvertently showed him various snapshots of her revision times with her friends in the library, Draco talking to her in the sitting room. Hermione shoved hard at the memory, recalling her library, and the image of a book opened. He pushed past the book and caught a glimpse of Hannah and Claudia both leaning toward her over a book, and she pushed it away, hoping he didn't see the wand in her hand. The thought of a wand brought up Charms club, which she also pushed away, starting to feel frustrated with herself.

"Not bad, but too slow. I shouldn't see any of this," she heard him say, as if in her head. "Now, where were you Saturday?" he asked and pushed harder.

She saw the bedroom in her mind, the fire, the house-elf ears poking up behind the bed, and he forced her to focus on the memory of following Peren down the stairs to his office. She tried to bring back memories of Peren in the bedroom again, putting away her school things, but he laughed, making her angry. Peren's small bedroom came into view, revealing Kwink. Hermione shoved it away as he pressed in on her, and the image changed quickly to when the elves gave her the brownie and sliced apple the kitchen.

"I was hungry," she said defensively, shoving back at him, the corridor appearing in her mind. The connection broke, and Hermione staggered, landing undignified on her bum, staring up at him leaning over his desk from the floor.

Severus walked around to her and helped her to her feet, pulling her to sit on his lap. Hermione relaxed, laying her head on his shoulder and burying her nose into his neck. "You are doing much better," he said softly against her hair. "I wasn't really able to feel the stronger emotional leads."

"So I'm improving?" she asked hopefully, thinking that her attempts were great considering he didn't see what she didn't want him to find.

"But I think you're showing me what you think is benign. It's not, Hermione. Even what you think is innocuous isn't." He turned his head to look at her, and one of his hands rose up to push her hair back from her face. "You're improving."

She closed her eyes from the sensation of his fingers stroking her hair. His hand moved, and she lifted her head with his hand, wanting the feel of his touch to linger. She

opened her eyes, shifting in his lap a little.

He was watching her intently and smirked. "Minx," he said softly, cupping her cheek and turning her face to kiss her.

Hermione wiggled slightly so she could kiss him properly, eliciting a moan from him. "Do not do that," he growled softly, more like a warning purr. "Not right now. I do have to walk to the Great Hall in a few minutes."

"Do what," she asked innocently, then smiled when his hand on her hips clamped down tightly. "I like kissing you."

"I'm glad, but this is neither the time nor the place for this," he said abruptly. He pulled her head close to his mouth. "Never in the office. Portraits."

Hermione blushed, her eyes darting toward the portraits of sleeping past headmasters and headmistress. "Later?" she asked.

"Count on it," he said softly and kissed her cheek. He was smiling slightly when she leaned back to look him in the eye.

The bell tolled the dinner hour, and Severus made Hermione get off him. "Peren will put away your bag," he said and placed his hand on the small of her back to guide her from the office. He asked her about her treatment in class and inquired about the images he saw of her classes. Hermione admitted to doing fine in her lessons, refusing to talk about either Alecto's or Amycus' classes.

When they descended the stairs to the fourth landing, Hermione gasped in shock. *Dumbledore's Army now recruiting* was spelled out in bright red letters on the wall.

"This wasn't there a moment ago," she said in shock.

Severus was scowling darkly at the graffiti, making those students who had stopped to read the writing scurry away. "No, Cillian would have brought it to my attention," he said in his deep dangerous tone. "Besides you left the library and came to the tower that's in the other direction."

As they continued, they saw *Dumbledore's Army the Right side the side of Light* had been written on the third floor, and *Dumbledore's Army Now Recruiting* on the landing of the second floor. Severus' jaw clenched as his expression became stony, and he deducted points from the students who didn't run past them quickly enough.

Hermione held her tongue, not wanting to infuriate him further by telling him he was being unfair. It was hard not to stop and stare, thinking a Notice-Me Charm might be in place on the writing.

On the first floor, both in the corridor and on the landing, someone had written, *If you don't believe in Witch-hunts, join us! Dumbledore's Army!*

Severus expression was that of controlled rage, his posture stiff and his tone biting sharp as he ordered the students to move on, taking ten points each.

As they descended to the Entrance Hall, Hermione saw the same words, *If you don't believe in Witch-hunts, join us! Dumbledore's Army Now Recruiting. Join the Right side Join the Light!* had been written in huge bold letters. Many of the students lingered, gathering in front of the wall and staring at the bright red writing. "It has a Notice-Me on it," Hermione finally stated.

"I'm aware of that, Hermione," Severus snapped coldly.

Alecto came up to them followed by Filch and Professor McGonagall. "Don't bother telling me, Alecto, I can see it for myself."

"Red. Gryffindor red! It's the DA you see it's them," she sputtered, her arm waving as she indicated the wall.

"It's blood red, Alecto, not Gryffindor crimson," Cillian said, having arrived.

Severus turned and looked at him, glaring darkly. "The color is irrelevant." He faced his staff and squared his shoulders. "Minerva, Alecto, I will require your assistance. Mr. Filch, if you'll collect about twenty scrub brushes and mops please," he said with forceful authority. He grabbed Hermione's arm and dragged her with him into the Great Hall.

"It's them DA hooligans! Did you know that my third- and fifth-year students from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff all had been hit with various hexes to skive off my lesson today! Amycus told me that his students, the second- and fourth-year Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students, all had fainting spells to avoid his practical? It's bedlam, Severus. You have to"

"Enough, Alecto," Severus snapped, cutting her off. "I'm aware of it. Madam Pomfrey will deliver her report to my office tonight."

He held Hermione's arm and forced her to stand next to him in the doorway to the Hall. "If I call your name, get over here *immediately*: Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Finnigan, Miss Weasley, Miss Lovegood, Miss Brown, Miss Patil both of you, Miss Abbot, Miss Bones, Mr. Macmillan, Mr. Boot, Mr. Corner, Mr. Smith..."

Hermione cringed as she watched all her friends from the original DA rise reluctantly and come forward. Professor Flitwick and Amycus were hurrying along the tables as well.

"Miss Waithe, Miss Wang, Mr. Coppersmith, you too," Severus ordered and turned to look at the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff tables. "Mr. Summerby, Mr. Cornfoot, Miss Ramirez, Miss Smothers you as well."

Hermione watched as the girls looked at each other and rose slowly. She jumped when Severus shouted, "Now!" When the students he'd called all stood in front of him, he ordered them into the Entrance Hall, dragging Hermione along too. Filch was still pulling mops and buckets out of his supply closet. "Professor McGonagall, if you would oversee Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Finnigan, Miss Weasley, Miss Patil," he said pointing at Parvati, "and Hermione cleaning that off the walls here, I'll have Alecto take Mr. Boot, Mr. Corner, Mr. Cornfoot, Miss Ramirez, and Miss Smothers to the first floor."

Alecto looked positively delighted at her appointed task as Severus turned to look down at Professor Flitwick. "Professor Flitwick, if you'll monitor Miss Waithe, Miss Wang, Mr. Coppersmith, Miss Bones, Mr. Macmillian, and Mr. Summerby on the second, and Flitch will take Mr. Smith, Miss Brown, Miss Abbot, Miss Patil," he said, pointing at Padma, "to the third."

Professor Flitwick nodded with a stern expression on his face as Filch smiled smugly, apparently pleased that he wasn't required to clean off the offending graffiti.

Hermione was outraged at his unfairness. "But Geraldine, Claudia, and Hannah were with me in the library, they couldn't have written the words on"

"Silence," he snapped, not even turning to look at her. "Professor McGonagall, your group can clean the fourth floor as well. You may need to produce ladders for the students. Please see that no one falls or injures themselves. Also, Professor McGonagall, you will oversee this lot in detention the rest of the week doing lines."

"Lines! You've got to be kidding me"

"Yes, Alecto lines." He turned back to Professors Flitwick and Filch. "When each group is finished cleaning off the walls, they may scrub anything else until ~~the~~ everyone is finished cleaning these words off the walls. I'm sure that Mr. Filch can find something in this castle that needs scrubbing. Then they are to be sent to their dorms without supper."

"As you wish, Headmaster," Professor McGonagall nodded and started to separate the students into their assigned groups.

"No talking," Alecko snapped, pleased to be in charge of her part of the detention.

When Hermione turned to face the defaced wall, three sturdy double-sided ladders now stood at even intervals for their use. "Well, you heard the Headmaster. Grab your scrub brushes and buckets," Filch snarled, pushing buckets at the students being shuffled to the stairs.

Hermione grabbed a bucket and climbed up one side of the ladder with Ginny climbing up the other side to face her. "Sorry you were sucked into this," Ginny said, solemnly. Behind them Neville was talking softly to Parvati.

"No talking," Professor McGonagall admonished them.

Both girls pulled out sopping wet scrub brushes and started trying to get the writing off the wall. The solution worked well, but made the red paint or ink run down the wall. "Looks like we'll be cleaning this all the way to the floor," Ginny whispered.

They worked their way down the wall, moving down each rung of their ladders until they landed on the ground. Hermione dropped her brush in the bucket and started to mop up the mess now on the floor. Parvati did the same thing as Ginny, and Seamus and Neville finished the last streaks of red off the wall.

When they were done, Professor McGonagall ordered them to pick up the buckets as she shrunk the ladders. "Mrs. Snape and Miss Weasley, bring the ladders," she said and hustled them up to the fourth floor.

On their way up, Hermione saw her friends, all on their hands and knees, scrubbing the corridors on each floor they passed. "Don't dawdle," Professor McGonagall said sternly. With a sigh, Hermione set down the ladder and Professor McGonagall made it grow to the necessary height. "Get a move on. The sooner you finish the sooner your friends will be done."

The lower year Gryffindors entered the corridor and scurried quickly by on their way back to the common room, a few snickering while others looked at them with sympathetic glances. Like before, the red oozed down the walls and had to be mopped up off the floor. By the time they were done, Hermione's arm, back, and neck were sore.

"All right, Mr. Longbottom, Mr. Finnigan, Miss Weasley, Miss Patil, you'll return Mr. Filch's ladders and buckets to his broom closet, and then I expect the four of you to return to your dorms," Professor McGonagall instructed. "Mrs. Snape, I will escort you to the Headmaster's tower."

Cillian stepped into the corridor, apparently having been waiting at the top of the stairs for Hermione. "Professor, I'll see her back," he said, holding out his hand for Hermione to come to him.

"Fine, Mr. Gwynek," she replied, turning her attention to the other four.

Hermione was glad that the clean up was finished and stretched before starting up the stairs with Cillian. "Just so you know, Alecko and Amycus are livid about the detention." Hermione looked up at him and he smirked. "A weeks worth of lines is hardly what she would call a proper detention."

"What does she think is a proper detention?" she asked concerned. "Flogging?"

His answering smirk nearly made her stop and gawk at him. "She likes whips and floggers, yes. Filch has quite an assortment of chains and such... Believe me, you're getting off easy."

"But I didn't do it and neither did..."

"I know," he said, cutting her off. "I was there, remember. *la/so* saw Miss Weasley and her dorm mate, the one with short, sassy, dark hair and dark eyes, not the Asian with long dark hair, in the library after you joined the other girls."

Hermione smirked to herself at his description of Janilynn and Jenny. "But you didn't say anything..."

"This was a punishment for the students we know are involved with Dumbledore's Army, and before you say anything, your name is on the top of the page," he said, glaring at her. "So, you were all made to pay the price for angering the Dark Lord."

"The Dark Lord..."

"Will know about the graffiti from either Carrow or his security officers," he said sternly. "Everything gets reported to him in one way or another. At least I can say you were not a participant."

"Will you vouch for my friends the ones you saw in the library?" she asked, watching him carefully.

He turned to look at her. "Why?"

"So they don't get in trouble either," she replied.

He laughed and stopped, turning to face her. "He doesn't care about them." She scowled at him and Cillian shook his head, still laughing silently. "If he asks."

Judging by the dark look on Severus' face when she entered his office, he was in a sour mood, so she hurried past him and up to the sitting room to finish her essays.

~oOo~

Once again the students rebelled against the Carrows the following day. The second- and sixth-year Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students had outbreaks of fevers, boils, nose bleeds and symptoms of various hexes, and the third- and fifth-year Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students apparently had fainting spells in Dark Arts, putting many of them in the hospital. Severus was called down in the afternoon to assist Madam Pomfrey with diagnosis and potions remedies.

Hermione had wanted to ask Professor Flitwick about the theory of combining Protean and Conjointment Charms after Charms, but Draco had walked up to her to walk with her to Arithmancy.

During her afternoon revision time, he'd managed to find her in the library and insisted on sitting with her. Hermione caught a glimpse of Pansy talking to Goyle. "Wouldn't you rather sit with Pansy? I mean, I've loads of reading to do, so maybe you should spend some time with her."

"She's sitting with Goyle," Draco said, scowling at her.

"Suit yourself," she replied, selecting a thick book from the shelf and adding it to her pile. Hermione simply ignored him as she sat down next to Cillian to read through the books she'd collected.

In Herbology, they had to cull the new shoots off the Devil's trumpets without getting bitten or strangled by the larger parent plants. Fortunately, Neville and Hannah knew just how to handle the Devil's trumpet, so their group was able to cull out the young shoots easily enough with only a few of the plant's tendrils getting snagged in their hair and obtaining a few cuts and scratches, but Ernie did get a black eye. However, Neville had to help Stephen Cornfoot and Della Maggiora untangle Isabel MacDougal before she was strangled to death when Crabbe had chopped one of their baby shoots in half. Professor Sprout was trying to rescue both Pansy and Draco from their angry parent plant. Draco, Pansy, Goyle and Isabella were escorted to the hospital after class.

Hermione made Draco a get well card during her revision time before dinner at Cillian's urging. "It will appease the Dark Lord to know you're at least trying," he'd insisted.

She figured he was right. She folded a piece of parchment in fourths and traced a leaf on the front with Jenny's color-changing ink, adding the words *Hope you are feeling better soon,* inside the leaf shape. She copied a poem from a book in the library that she thought he might like and signed her name. It was childish and crude, but all she had available. He'd probably hate it.

She slipped up to see him before her detention with Professor McGonagall.

"So what, you came to gloat did you? That bloody plant nearly killed me," Draco said a bit condescendingly, obviously shocked to see her.

"I saw that, and I'm sorry. I just wanted to see if you're going to be all right," she replied, setting the card on the table with the others. "I can't stay, I have detention."

"Fine, go," he said crossing his arms.

Hermione shrugged. "I just hope you're feeling better soon. Bye." She turned and walked away, but when she'd glanced back at him, she saw him reading the poem she'd written in the card.

Detention with Professor McGonagall hadn't been too bad. She had everyone in her classroom spaced apart in every other desk and had them write *will not deface school property* for an hour. Afterwards she asked them to please feed her animals and change the cedar shavings in the cages in the adjoining room. Then she allowed them to work quietly on their essays for another half hour before dismissing them.

Back in the bedroom, Hermione concentrated on focusing her wandless ability to make the DA coin connect to Harry's that night. After a few tries, she saw *HG?* appear.

Thrilled, she made hers read, *Yes.* The coin warmed and *DT* appeared. Sighing, she managed to make the coin read, *where HP?* The response of *sleep,* made her smile. She thought, *Still have L?* and smiled as the coin reflected her question.

He replied, *yes,* followed by *creepy.*

If the locket was anything like the way Ginny had described the diary, she didn't doubt it, but his reply of *makes bad dreams* alarmed her. She asked *No C,* hoping he'd know what she meant without having to spell it out.

He replied *No luck,* making her sigh again. *Destroy L* she told him and he sent back *Can't,* then *Tried.*

*You have 2!* she told him, now worried. He repeated back *Can't we tried!*

Sighing, she read, *know another?* *No,* she replied, the wandless ability actually getting much easier now. *Need 2 know* the coin on her palm read. *I know trying,* she lied to him. She'd been so busy she'd not been researching anything about the founders.

The coin vibrated and read *HG?* again.

*Who?* she asked. The coin now said *RW* followed quickly by, *How is GW?*

She suppressed her flair of happiness and focused on the coin. She managed to make it read *Fine* then asked *U ok?*

His quick reply of, *Yes,* then *U?* made her spirits rise. She told him she was *Alright!* Several messages flashed, happening too quickly.

When the coin was still on her palm, she made her coin read *didn't get that.*

His next message was typical Ron. *Hungry.*

She thought a moment then sent, *Call Kreacher* through the coin. *Harry not* was quickly followed by, *want 2.* She'd let that go for now. Kreacher had turned on them during their last Christmas together. *Destroy L* she said, only to have *I know* appear and changed into, *Can't!*

The coin vibrated again with, *Gotta go,* spelled out and became inert on her palm. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, she went over the conversation in her mind.

She slipped her coin in a safe place and went to take a bath. Lying in the warm water, she tried to remember everything Harry had told her about the memories Dumbledore had shown him about Tom Riddle. There wasn't that much. There was the obvious connection to the founders there was Hufflepuff's cup and Slytherin's locket, so that left Ravenclaw and Gryffindor. *The sword is obviously not a Horcrux Harry had used it in his second year, and it hadn't tried to possess him. Gryffindor what would he own? He was a knight a fighter... a knife possibly... a sword and wand? Odd combination for a wizard. A ring maybe? Ravenclaw... lovely Ravenclaw books, smart... female. Jewelry perhaps...*

Harry thought they'd have plenty of time to discuss it while in hiding. But then that parchment had mucked things up and she was stuck here and had no idea where the guys were. She needed to figure out what the last two items could be, but she needed to talk to Harry to work it out. Dumbledore hadn't shared the memories with her that he'd showed to him, and she wanted the details that only he'd remember.

Frustrated, she resumed her usual bath time occupation. She tried to segregate her emotions, carefully keeping the memories with the strongest emotions especially the ones she never wanted the Dark Lord to see behind the now hidden rooms and smallest doorways.

The last Occlumency lesson hadn't been a failure in her mind, regardless what Severus had said. With only a few exceptions, he hadn't seen anything she had wanted to keep from him, really. She sent the creatures of her nightmares into the forest, where nightmares belonged. Her strongest places were the stone corridors and the library. It was the DA memories she worried about the most and the times planning for the Horcruxes with Harry and Ron, which she tried desperately to segregate into her hidden Gryffindor common room.

~oOo~

Amycus stood up as the class took their seats. He walked down the aisle, making a stack of thick books float in front of him. With flicks of his wand, books began to fall on several desks with loud thuds. When Amycus returned to the front of the class, he turned to face them with a cold smile that had Hermione wanting to slink down under her desk. "Now you know how to cast Dark Arts. You have to want to. So I want to see you doing it."

Several of the students exclaimed in shock at the pronouncement as he flicked his wand at the blackboard, making a list of spells appear. Hermione gaped at the list of curses with a sick feeling in her gut. *Needling Hex, Knife-Edge Curse, Antler Hex, Stabbing-Pains Curse, Piercing-Pain Curse, Shooting-Pain Curse, Stinging Hex, Itching Hex, Tongue-Blisters...*

"Well, you are gonna do them today," Amycus said as he faced the class.

Hermione stared nervously at the spells on the list. She turned in her seat to glance at Cillian, licking her lip nervously at his stony stare. Only he wasn't glaring at her, he was glaring at Amycus. The crack of a ridding crop on her desk made Hermione jump and face Amycus. "Pay attention."

Hermione nodded silently.

"I'm gonna pair you up, and today is gonna be *apRACTICAL* exercise. Crabbe, you is gonna go with... Longbottom. You'll hex or curse while Longbottom defends. Malfoy, you're with Mrs. Snape. Goyle, you try your luck against Finnigan; Finnigan you're to deflect what he fires at you. And, let's see, Miss Parkinson, you're with Miss Brown, and Miss Bulstrode, you with... Miss Patil. So C'mon up here and let's see how you do." Charlene Weston and Breanna Enfield both sighed in relief as Elizabeth McFaul and Blaise Zabini both crossed their arms in annoyance.

As the pairs moved to the front of the class and spaced out, Amycus made their desks shrink and fly to the side of the room. Cillian moved forward, his wand drawn. The other students, except McFaul and Zabini, all tried to move further back, away from the coming fight. "Who goes first?" Cillian asked the same time Amycus shouted, "Start."

Five flashes of light shot from the Slytherins' wands, most successfully deflected by the Gryffindors. Parvati screamed in pain as her foot turned into a stick. "That is not on the board, Miss Bulstrode. Five points for ingenuity," Amycus said as Cillian turned Parvati's stick leg back into a foot. "Again!" Once again, the Slytherins' struck, Crabbe and Goyle given points for hitting Neville and Seamus. The next time, all the spells were deflected. The fifth time, Hermione had the impression, as she hung upside-down wandless, that Draco wasn't really trying to hurt her.

"*Liberacorpus*," Draco uttered, making her crumple on the floor and hit her head.

"Mr. Malfoy, curses, not hanging her up like laundry," Amycus grumbled as Seamus gave Hermione a hand up and handed her her wand.

The next few times Crabbe, Goyle, and Bulstrode fired with more viciousness, their curses hitting Neville, Seamus, and Parvati. Pansy was reprimanded for going easily on Lavender, even though Lavender was now limping and her skin was covered in what looked like scales. The next round, Millicent was reprimanded as Cillian tried to reverse the Tongue-Blisters Curse on Neville. Seamus was limping in agony, and Lavender was in tears, doubled over.

"This is fun, ain't it, Mr. Finnigan?" Crabbe taunted him.

As the others took aim and fired, Draco snarled, "*Glacious Maximus*," aiming his wand at Hermione, making her fall on the floor, freezing, feeling like a thousand knives were stabbing her at once.

"Enough!" Cillian shouted. "Reverse the curses, now." Draco quickly complied and was hit by a hex from where the Slytherins stood gloating.

"That's why we have a hospital, Gwynek," Amycus snarled at him. "You're too soft on them." He pointed at some of the students in the back. "Help them to the hospital. Malfoy!" Draco turned to face him. "Fifty points from Slytherin for not even trying. Now carry her to the Hospital. The rest of you are dismissed. I want you to write a foot each on the spells on the board; how to cast them and how to reverse them."

Charlene Weston and Breanna Enfield came up and together helped Parvati, who was in a fetal position on the floor. Theodore Nott picked up Lavender and Glenwynn Glenwrythe levitated Neville. Felicia Lockhaven took note and levitated Seamus as Cillian scooped Hermione into his arms. Adriana Whitehall and Tracey Davis opened the door and followed Glenwynn and Felicia, using their wands to assist their friends with the two guys.

Cillian thanked the girls after they deposited Neville and Seamus on cots in the hospital wing. "We were told to help, Mr. Gwynek," Felicia said, then gave Hermione a sympathetic smile. "I hope you feel better."

Madam Pomfrey asked Cillian to wrap Hermione in a blanket heated with a Warming Charm and give her Pepper-Up Potion as she attended to Neville, Seamus, Lavender, and Parvati. When Hermione's lips turned from blue to their normal pink, she was released to go.

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A loud "Ahem," came from the frame of Headmistress Derwent. Severus looked up, wondering what she'd seen. "You wanted to know if the students you disciplined were sent to the hospital today."

"And..." he said to make her get on with her report.

"The seventh-year Gryffindors are in the hospital wing," she stated, "even your wife."

Severus hurried to the hospital wing and ran into Cillian at the door. "Hermione's fine just needed Pepper-Up Potion. Malfoy went easy on her. But the others were not so lucky."

"Damn him. I have warned him, multiple times, and he in turn sulks off to our Master and complains about my interference," Severus replied frostily in a soft hiss. He turned and strode angrily to Amycus' classroom. Severus opened the door wide and walked in casually, easily deflecting a rogue spell that nearly hit him.

"What are you doing here?" Amycus snarled. "Stop your wand waving," he shouted at the students.

Severus walked up to the front of the class, his robes billowing but his expression neutral. "It has been brought to my attention that there has been fighting in your classroom, and I came to see if you had need of assistance," he said softly to Amycus as if being discreet, but he knew just how well his voice carried when the students were all silent. Like they were currently.

"I don't need any help from you," Amycus snapped, not bothering to lower his voice, and indicated Cillian with his chin. "What's he here for?"

Severus turned to face the class. "Leave now. You will all report to the library and write out how to reverse the curses listed on the board five hundred words on each curse, including the affects, with specific emphasis on the counter spell due next class." The students all scrambled to collect their things, not needing to be told twice. Severus turned back to Amycus. "Apparently you seem to need help with your dueling sessions. Were you not aware that you agreed to follow standard international guidelines for practicing dueling in your classroom?" Severus said smoothly.

"An' I is," Amycus sneered.

"By allowing seven pairs of students to duel in your class at once?" Severus asked smoothly. "Guideline rules state that two qualified referees are required for each dueling pair. I see only two qualified wizards at the present."

Cillian repressed a smirk as Amycus looked around Severus at him. "I got it under control," he said, apparently not getting Severus' jibe at his expense.

"And when the students get hurt...?" Severus asked coolly.

Amycus bristled and stood defiantly facing Severus. "That's what we got a hospital for, ain't it?"

"Do you not recall me telling you that each time a student is hurt, sick, or serves detention that we are obligated to send family notices to the student's parent or guardian?"

Amycus' expression of stunned disbelief was utterly comical.

"Every detention *and every injury* as mandated by the school charter," Severus said coldly. "And it is reported to the Dark Lord. You're supposed to *beteaching* them how to do the spells. I'm not sure how well the students are learning *how* to use Dark Arts when they are lying unconscious in hospital beds?"

"But... I am teaching them how to use them..." he argued defiantly.

Amycus, although quite knowledgeable of the Dark Arts, was proving to be woefully ignorant and completely inept in reversing them. Severus now assumed that he'd never cared, nor bother reversing anything he'd ever cast. It made him a good wizard to have on a raid, but a poor choice for a teacher in Severus' view, but he was stuck with him.

"And exactly *how* are the students learning them if they're incoherent? If you are going to have dueling, a qualified wizard must be present for each dueling pair. Cillian is more than qualified, as am I, and Professor Flitwick most certainly is. However Cillian is not available, and Professor Flitwick has his own lesson to teach. So either I must attend each of your lessons or you will have to modify your teaching style until you can present me with a list of Dark Arts spells you intend to teach these eager young minds *with their counter spells*," Severus stated with authority while maintaining his indifference. He narrowed his eyes and looked down his nose menacingly at Amycus. "But I must insist that you refrain from teaching any spell you cannot reverse yourself."

"I don't need you in my classroom!" Amycus sneered, spittle flying from his mouth, but the wizard cowered slightly.

"If you continue to fill the beds in the hospital with your ineptitude, it may become necessary," Severus snarled back. "Do not think that this is over, Amycus."

"You ain't got no right talking to me like this! The Dark Lord he told me to teach them how and I'm gonna," Amycus snarled, and a calculating look crossed his features. "You're not his favorite anymore, you know. He will hear about this."

"He already has," Severus said coldly, crossing his arms. "I will be in your office tonight after dinner to further discuss this," he said calmly, turning to go. "Unless you'd prefer me attending all your lessons until you've learned the counter curses yourself?"

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Ginny asked Hermione where the others were when she arrived at the Gryffindor table for lunch, and Hermione told her about Amycus' class. "You're kidding?" Ginny asked, covering her mouth with her hand.

Janilynn paled. "We have him next."

"Forewarned," Hermione said, thankful to be eating hot food.

In Potions, Professor Slughorn started on the complicated Marsayass Potion, a potion that was used to reverse ineptly attempted human-to-animal transfigurations. "Your assignment is for each of you to brew the Depilatory Potion today as well as the base for your Marsayass Potion, which you'll brew as a team. You will have to coordinate your efforts with your partner to accomplish this, and you'll have to arrange who will be making which steps on your Marsayass Potion throughout the rest of the week around your class schedules," Professor Slughorn stated as he rocked on his heels. "Keep in mind that whichever partner brews the better Depilatory Potion that potion will be added to your Marsayass Potion at the appropriate time... You may begin."

Hermione looked at the directions carefully, pulled out her revision planner and began writing in the necessary brewing times. "You can't be serious," Draco sneered, looking at the planner.

Hermione looked up. "What?"

"You actually have your entire week already planned out to the minute?" he scoffed at her.

"Not to the minute, but I do have my schedule in here as well as yours." She made several entries, realizing that he'd have to do three steps by himself. "I'll copy this down for you."

"Why bother? Just tell me when you need to come down here, and I'll escort you."

She looked up, the brewing schedule half way done. "Oh, it will be my pleasure considering I don't want you to miss a step or do it late and mess up the potion."

"Fine," he said, setting up the cauldron. "Suit yourself."

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Cillian heard a commotion in the corridor just outside the classroom. Hermione was working diligently on her potion with Draco, and he knew she would not leave without him. He slipped quietly into the corridor and drew his wand. He heard MacCavish's voice and Miss Parkinson's just around the corner.

Miss Parkinson sounded aggravated. "If you value that hand, remove it."

"Awe, doll, your daddy and I go way back," MacCavish said. "I might even see if he would let me court you."

Cillian peered around the corner and saw Miss Parkinson brush his hand away with her arm. "Don't count on it," Miss Parkinson sneered, "I'm practically spoken for."

"Look here, girlie," MacCavish snarled. "You come by all flirting like and expect a guy not to react?"

"Is there a problem?" Cillian asked casually as Miss Parkinson snarled, "I simply said hello to you."

"Miss Parkinson, aren't you supposed to be in class?" Cillian asked, holding his wand casually in his hand, and MacCavish turned to glare at him.

"I have revision time right now," she replied. A flicker of relief flashed in her eyes as she addressed him, then disappeared behind an arrogant sneer. "Aren't you supposed to be watching the Mudblood?"

"She's not all that fun to watch. Besides she's in class. May I escort you somewhere?" he offered, ignoring MacCavish's glare.

Miss Parkinson shrugged one shoulder as she slipped by the other man. "If you've nothing better to do," she replied offhandedly.

She walked quickly until they reached the stairs to the Entrance Hall. "Thank you," she said and hurried off.

Cillian checked his watch and hurried to Severus' office to report the incident.

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Despite Draco's sarcastic comments, they worked flawlessly together, and by the end of the class, they had the base completed and the depilatory part of the potion that would be added on Friday, according to Hermione's calculations. Hermione handed Draco her vial. "Would you take this up for me, and I'll clean up."

"Sure," he said, finishing marking his own sample.

Hermione deposited the ingredients remains in the bin as Draco carried both samples up to Professor Slughorn's desk. She then carried their base to the cupboard the advanced students used to store their work in progress, thankful when Terry magically sealed the cauldron for her. "Thanks," she said, wondering if everyone knew she wasn't allowed a wand.

He smiled and placed his cauldron next to hers. "Not a problem."

"Ah, Mr. Zabini!" Slughorn gushed as he examined the color of one of the potions he set on the desk. "Excellent as always. I so did miss you at my Halloween party. Nothing too fancy, just the Slug Club mind, but you are still a member if you should fancy attending."

Hermione was gobsmacked. *With everything going on, he was still hosting his parties?*

"My family attended a party at the Malfoys', which we were privileged to attend," Blaise said curtly, smiling at Draco.

"Oh, I know about the party at the Malfoys'. Who in proper wizarding society doesn't? We are having a lovely lunch the end of the month. I would like to count on your joining us?"

Hermione put away her planner as she looked about for Cillian. She was surprised that he wasn't in the back of the room waiting for her.

Padma and Terry returned from the Professor's desk and gathered their things. "Hermione, are you ready?" Terry asked.

"Yes," she replied, wondering where Cillian was.

"So, where are you headed?" Ernie asked.

"I have Transfiguration now," she said as she grabbed her bag. She followed Ernie, Terry, and Michael as they headed for the door, figuring that they would walk with her to her class. She ran smack into VanHalal and MacCavish as she turned from the doorway into the corridor.

"Well lookie here," MacCavish said with a sneering grin.

"There's my little wench," VanHalal sneered as he cornered Hermione against the wall. "Decided you needed a real wizard between your thighs, girl?"

"VanHalal, back off her," Draco sneered loudly, thankfully drawing the attention of Ernie, Terry, and Michael, who had stopped and turned around.

Hermione suppressed the urge to panic. She was wandless, but hopefully Professor Slughorn would come out, or Cillian would show up.

"Or what? You'll send for Severus to protect his toy?" MacCavish sneered.

"Wife, imbecile, or weren't you paying attention at the wedding?" Draco snapped. "You know how protective he is over her."

"It was only a bloody hand-fasting, as I recall, and my name's on the list for when the year is up," VanHalal said, eyeing Hermione lustfully. "Oh, I did love feeling you wiggle under me as I thrust into you, girl. Your screams were such a turn on." His voice was only a whisper, but his breath made her as sick to her stomach as his words did.

Draco seized Hermione by the arm as she tried to duck out from under VanHalal's arm, making her hit her head on his forearm. "I see you like being rough with her as well. Just like your daddy did."

Ernie, Terry, and Michael now had their wands out as they approached. "Wands away kiddies," MacCavish snarled. "Or it's you and me in Filch's dungeon room."

Draco gave Hermione a shove in the direction of her friends. "Go, Granger," he snapped.

Hermione tripped, but Michael caught her arm and helped her regain her balance. "C'mon," he said, pulling her with him.

Behind her MacCavish and VanHalal were laughing coldly.

They hurried out of the dungeons, Draco catching up to Hermione and the guys on the stairs. When they reached the Entrance Hall, Hermione was relieved to see Susan Bones and Gerald Summerby among the Hufflepuffs coming up the stairs. Ernie signaled to Susan and she nodded, getting Sean Nauman's and Paul Peterson's, Hufflepuff's two Beaters, attention. They pushed their way through the other students and ran to meet them.

"What happened?" Gerald asked coming to a stop.

"Those Death Eater creeps accosted Hermione," Michael stated as Severus and Cillian finally appeared. Paul, a large, burly boy for his age, scowled as he glared at Draco. "They said some pretty foul lies to her as well."

Sean moved to shadow over Hermione. "You all right?" he asked in a deep baritone voice.

Hermione smiled and nodded, remembering that Ginny had said the two large guys had joined the DA. "It was unnerving but I'm fine. Thank you."

Sean smiled back and uncrossed his arms.

Ernie was looking at the stairs to the dungeons as Susan looped her arm with Hermione. "Well, you're with armed friends now," she said, walking with her toward the stairs.

"I was with her," Draco snarled.

"Yes, but they don't seem to take you seriously, do they?" Ernie said accusingly.

"Is there a problem?" Severus asked, and Hermione turned, watching her rescuers wave good-bye and hurry up the stairs to get to their own classes.

"Nothing that couldn't have been avoided if she'd only waited for me," Draco snapped. He told Severus what had happened as they walked the Transfiguration classroom. Severus expression was stony when he left them at the top of the stairs and watched Hermione and Draco leave for class.

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Before taking his seat in the Great Hall, Severus pulled Amycus aside and handed him a letter signed by all twelve of the school governors. "Apparently Avery, Rosier, Nott, and Rabastan Lestrangle are coming tonight to confer with you about your inability to effectively teach without severely injuring the students."

"They don't need to come," Amycus sputtered, handing back the letter.

"The Dark Lord insists," Severus said smoothly. "You simply cannot teach curses that you cannot reverse."

"But... I don't need them in my classroom," Amycus snarled.

"Until you can produce me a list of curses with their counter curses and demonstrate the ability to reverse them to Avery, Rosier, Nott, and Rabastan Lestrangle, you will need to take a more academic approach to your lessons. I am to allow them in the school every night until they feel you've gained the necessary knowledge. They will be staying in the Three Broomsticks." Severus met Amycus' glare with a condescending scowl. "In the meantime, limit your duels to one pair at a time so that you can properly monitor them to make sure the students are *learning* the spells properly." He turned, his robes flaring, and walked to the Headmaster's seat.



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Author's Notes:

*The Epic of Gilgamesh is an epic poem from Ancient Iraq and is among the earliest known works of literary writing. The magical context of the legends is my fabrication.*

## Hogsmeade Weekend

Chapter 26 of 43

It's a Hogsmeade weekend! Ginny asks Hermione a startling question, Hermione's Occlumency improves, and the students are rebelling. And Severus takes a decisive action.

The warnings I have listed for this chapter are implied. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.

*No monies coming my way. I'm only doing this for entertainment of the free variety.*

*To WriterMerrin, EverMustique, DuchessOfArcadia, and Dungeon\_Butterfly, huge hugs and smoochies for giving this a polish and making this chapter presentable. I'd be lost without you helping me. Pookah, thank you for helping me break through my block.*

*Thank you, DuchessOfArcadia, for my lovely banner.*



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Hogsmeade Weekend

Hermione convinced Cillian to allow her to visit Neville and Seamus in hospital after dinner. The room seemed longer, somehow, with even more cots than before, in two long rows. "Madam Pomfrey must have expanded the hospital," Hermione said softly as she walked down the rows, looking for her friends.

"The room automatically stretches to meet the Healer's needs," Cillian stated as if she should know that.

Neville was asleep, but thankfully looked normal, except for the bruising to his face and arms. Likewise, Seamus appeared to be sleeping, but his head was wrapped in a dressing and his arm was in a sling. Jack Sloper and Ernie Coppersmith were both heavily bandaged, and Charles Swindlehurst was lying on a cot, his face swollen, as well.

Ginny's eyes fluttered open when Hermione stopped by her bed. "What happened?"

"Ashton Bole," Ginny said, grimacing in pain as she moved up a bit in bed. Hermione hurried over to help her with her pillow. "I still don't know what he hit me with, but at least the tentacles are gone. Jenny is in here, I think. She was hurt in class, and so was Jack. Ofelia Tredwell, she's over there next to Stephanie Adams," Ginny said, indicating the fifth-year Gryffindor across the room. "Julia Sweet and Sorcha O'Brien," she said, indicating a brown-haired girl from Ravenclaw on the cot to her right, and a round-faced, freckled, Hufflepuff girl who lay on the cot on her other side. "They got the second half of their Skiving sweets mixed up somehow, and the reaction was pretty bad."

"But why so many?" Hermione asked, gazing about worriedly.

"Some of them are suffering from being attacked in class, but others because they lost the other half of the Skiving treat they ate to avoid the Carrows," Michael Corner said, stepping around the curtain. "Oi, Ginny, glad you're awake."

Hermione turned around, waving to Padma who was standing behind him. "You came to see Lavender and your sister?"

Padma nodded solemnly. "They are both sleeping actually. I wanted to see how you're doing," she said to Ginny.

"Better, but I'm here for the night," Ginny stated.

"Why isn't your husband stopping them from hurting us?" Michael hissed angrily at Hermione.

"I'm sure he will when he finds out," Hermione said, hoping he would. "I'm sure that Madam Pomfrey has reported..."

"Of course she's reported it, she has to," Michael said, raising his voice.

Padma placed a hand on his shoulder. "It's not her fault, Michael. Besides, you know our parents will get notices, too."

"Lot of good it will do," Michael sneered, jerking his shoulder to dislodge her hand and walked off.

"His girlfriend and best mate are in here," Padma said with an apologetic smile. "I'm glad you'll be all right." She turned her head and then looked back at the girls. "I'm worried for Parvati. The impact of the spell almost burst her kidney."

Hermione touched her arm. "I'm sure Madam Pomfrey will heal her," she said, giving Padma's arm a reassuring squeeze.

Padma smiled wanly. "I know she will, I just hate seeing my sister in so much pain. I'll see you later, all right?" she asked and slipped away, leaving Hermione alone with Ginny.

Ginny tried to sit upright on the cot and reached for her wand. "I heard that you spoke to Harry?" she asked, looking up at Hermione with pleadingly hopeful eyes. "I spoke to Colin."

Hermione pulled the curtain closed. "You did? How..."

"*Muffliato*," Ginny said with a flick of her wand, adding, "*Repellere*," as Hermione drew the chair over closer to the bed. "I used my DA coin, hoping to get Harry, but I got hold of Colin instead," Ginny said softly. "They're all right. I think. The building where their flat is was attacked, and they can't go back, but apparently they have everything in a tent. Something about packing stuff in a rover..."

"Possibly a Land Rover or Range Rover a type of 4x4... It's an off-road, all weather type suburban car that Muggles use to enjoy the outdoors you know camping," Hermione tried to explain until Ginny nodded in understanding.

"Yes, that makes sense. Colin said they go camping every summer," Ginny said, looking relieved. "I thought he meant a dog. Anyway, he said that his dad had had them pack when he'd heard about the Muggle-born Registration... Well, the coin read 'MoM MBR notice' so I assumed that's what he meant."

"Good, then they're all right." Hermione sighed in relief. "Jenny must be relieved."

"Hermione, I wanted to ask you about something." Ginny leaned on her elbow to get closer to Hermione. "I saw some of your messages, and I was wondering... Is the L something that belonged to Tom Riddle like the diary was? And what is the cup?"

Hermione recoiled in shock. "Gin, I can't; I'm sworn to secrecy," she whispered, glancing at the curtain, hoping that no one was going to open it and hear. She bit her lip and dug her nails into her thumb, not sure how to evade the inquiry.

"I cast the Deafening and Repelling Charms on the curtain," Ginny reassured her. "If you don't trust my abilities, you can use my wand to reinforce it."

Hermione shook her head and Ginny smiled. "Okay, then. So, if the L is a locket, and the cup and the locket belonged to Riddle, would they be like the diary? Would there be magic in them that possess people like the diary did me is that what Harry has to find cursed objects that possess people?"

Hermione cupped her hands over her face. She was going to have to get a grip on this.

Ginny pulled one of Hermione's hands down, staring into her worried eyes. "Look, don't lie to me and tell me I'm too young. I'm not. And don't tell me it's none of my business or that I wouldn't understand. And I'm not imagining things, I just know, okay?"

"But how did you...?" Hermione asked, not really wanting the answer.

"I'm not blind, and I'm not dumb. I'm as smart as you!" Ginny snapped, grimacing at the effort. "I oh, all right, I was eavesdropping. Extendable ears! You didn't think they were only used to eavesdrop on Order meetings did you? Happy? You, Harry, and my brother were planning something over the summer, but you tried to keep me out of it I overheard you. And you keep asking Harry if he found something. It was in code, but I figured it out. It has to do with his mission, doesn't it? He has to find these things, doesn't he? That's why you are so desperate to make the mirrors. So you can help Harry find these things."

Hermione was at a loss. Ginny had no idea how dangerous this was. "You have to keep this a secret! Promise me! If the Dark Lord finds out that we know his secret, he'll hide them well, move them. The more people that know, the greater the chance he might find out, the less chance Harry will have of finding what he has to..."

"Well I'm not going to tell anyone else!" Ginny exclaimed, then added resolutely, "So that's Harry's mission, to find cursed things that belonged to Riddle?"

"Yes," Hermione admitted. This was going too far. "Gin, this is really dangerous. I wish you hadn't figured it out."

Ginny's lips stretched into a smile that surprisingly resembled Fred or George's mischievous smirks. "I'll keep quiet about it. I swear. I can help you really I can."

Hermione hung her head and sighed, remembering what Ginny had gone through.

"He's been *in my head*, Hermione! He used me! I wanted to know everything about him. When I had tried to destroy the diary instead of giving it to Harry as it'd wanted, the memory in the diary had been furious with me. I had to know what kind of guy he was... for my own sanity."

Hermione stared intently at Ginny. "How well did you get to know Riddle?"

"Well enough," Ginny admitted. "Riddle was a half-blood, he lived in an orphanage it was a miserable place. He looked just like his dad did you know that? He showed me once. He's a lot like Harry. Both got special awards for the saving the school for the same thing! Both are Parselmouths, played Quidditch, and their wands share cores phoenix feathers. I could go on." Ginny turned on her side. "You'd be surprised what he told me in the diary to gain my trust, and the rest I pieced together from the school records, articles in the *Prophet*, and from Hagrid he knew him. They wrote up all kinds of things about him when he won those awards, like he was something special."

She picked at a thread on her blanket. "So I want to help. I don't want to be pushed away and told to stay out of it. I've been in it since my first year at school." She looked up at Hermione, and Hermione was shocked by the hurt in her best friend's eyes. "You're my best friend. Do you really think I could forgive myself if Volder... You-Know-Who won and you were killed for nothing? Just because you don't have magical parents?"

Hermione looked away. Ginny was right, but she didn't want to involve her.

"You're just like Harry; you think you have to take all this on by yourself. You don't, you know, that's what friends are for," Ginny said, falling back on her pillows.

Hermione leaned closer to Ginny. "Gin, I wasn't supposed to get anyone else involved."

Ginny huffed in annoyance, and then turned her head to look Hermione in the eyes again. "Why are you three so thick? Don't you get it it's what the DA is all about standing up to him, *whatever the cost*, because living under him is *not* an option!"

Ginny was right it was the same argument she and Ron had had with Harry before going to the Ministry fifth year and after Dumbledore's funeral and again at the Burrow...

"So if we get the mirrors, you'll be able to help Harry, right?" Ginny asked, breaking into Hermione's thoughts.

"Yes, I think so. Or at least be able to look stuff up for him," she admitted.

"Okay, count me in on that, too," Ginny stated emphatically, her expression turning to hurt disbelief when Hermione sighed. "What? I'm good at research, too, you know."

Hermione shook her head. "It's not that I should've known you'd find out. I mean, it'll be good to have help, someone to confide in. I'm sorry for not trusting you. But *terlo* one else. This is a secret the Dark Lord can't find out we know about these objects. That's imperative!"

"Okay," Ginny said, lying on her back again. "I won't tell the *Dark Lord*."

"Smart arse," Hermione said with a smirk, getting up to go. "Rest. I'll see you tomorrow. We have a lot of searching to do this weekend in Hogsmeade."

When Cillian left Hermione at the gargoyle, she was bone weary, so she rode the stairs up rather than walking them. The office was empty.

So was the sitting room.

She dropped her bag on the floor by the bed just as Severus stepped from the bathroom. "Are you ready for another round?" he asked casually as if asking about the weather.

"Another round of what?" she asked, collapsing on the bed.

He reached out and pulled on her hand, making her sit up. "Prepare your mind, Hermione."

She had only a few seconds before he said, "*Legilimens*."

The bedroom came into view, and then her friends lying on the hospital cots. She immediately put her memory palace in place. She managed to keep the calm, cool corridors of the castle in place, allowing him to see her revising or in lessons, but he pulled forward the scenes from Alecto's class even though Hermione tried to push them away. She finally managed to throw up the smooth stone walls of the corridor again for a while. She managed to hide her doors, the ones she didn't want him to see, but Amycus' class came into focus, and scenes of her friends dueling flashed in her mind. She shoved them away quickly, but he pushed at her feelings of frustration and her dueling again, and several images of her fighting with her friends appeared. She finally managed to shove them down and away, and he broke contact. Hermione leaned over gasping for breath, not realizing how hard it had been to keep her mind so controlled.

"What was that? Are you and your friends...?"

She braced herself before she looked up. "That was my fifth year," she lied, interrupting him and inhaled deeply. At least she hoped they were from her fifth year and not from the Charms Club. "Charms Club and my Dark Arts lessons." She'd pushed the memories away too quickly to be sure. She closed her eyes and wiped her mouth. She stood up and faced him, still shaking.

He stood there regarding her. "Fine. We're done for the night," he snapped at her, turned and left.

As Hermione's breathing slowed, she sat in the chair facing the fire and berated herself. She tried to recall exactly which memories Severus had seen. It had to be Charms Club. *No, he knows what we're doing in Charms Club but that shouldn't anger him. Cillian's there he'd have told Severus if we were doing anything wrong* She got up and went to find him. He was standing at the bookshelf, reading the titles. "It was not what you think it was," she stated.

"You told me what you think it was," he said, his finger stroking the bindings gently. "It was not Dark Arts class because you were not squared off with Draco. I know who was in Dumbledore's Army from the list that Umbridge confiscated, and there were students in the memory that were not part of that group." He turned to face her. "It is this year, and you were dueling. So either tell me the truth or go to bed."

"I told you, you were drudging up memories from my fifth year DA meetings and from Charms Club," she admitted and flinched at his scowl. "Are you really surprised that Professor Flitwick has been showing us how to defend ourselves against the curses we are being tortured with in Amycus' lessons?" she asked, hands on her hips.

He started to walk over to her, and she backed up, afraid of his anger but ready to defend her actions all the same. "Even you told me to learn them, so I've looked them up. But I'm not allowed to do them except in a classroom setting. So I..."

He placed a finger on her lips to quiet her. "I don't like being lied to. I'm aware that Professor Flitwick has been coaching you and your friends. It's why I haven't interfered. So far, the Carrows are ignorant of the lessons."

She stared at him in disbelief, and he laughed at her. He was so complicated he was angry about the dueling but he was allowing it.

"Cillian is with you at each meeting. I have an update from him every week. Unlike Professor Carrow, I trust Professor Flitwick's abilities."

"You don't trust the Carrows?" she asked, gobsmacked by the confession.

His smile faded. "You're not practicing closing your mind or controlling your emotions. You are using the castle, someplace you know well, as a wall between your memories and my probing. You're becoming proficient at it," he said with a slight shrug. "It's not effective, not by a long shot, but you're only allowing me to see what you think is benign or what you think I expect to see."

She nodded, pleased that he understood. "I can't turn off my feelings..."

"And the castle is safe to you. The corridors are as calming as the library," he stated. "It's not the best solution. You still have to learn how to control your emotions especially your fear and frustration."

~\*~

Severus watched her with inflectionless eyes, openly staring at her. She wasn't even trying to control her emotions; they were right there, displayed on her face and in her body language. He knew that she felt some satisfaction at her pathetic attempt and was obviously confused by his silence. He stood motionless, his eyes the only part that moved as he let his gaze wander over her.

He entered her mind easily, sorting through the maze of the castle she erected. He tried to trace her activities for the day, getting glimpses of Alecto postulating in front of the seventh-years. He pushed on the tinge of discomfort and saw the witch striking Hermione's hand repeatedly with the riding crop. He saw her wash her hands... her tear-streaked face in the mirror.

She shoved him away, visualizing the corridor. He felt her embarrassment and pulled on the emotion, seeing Draco maneuver himself between her and VanHalal. She effectively shoved the memory away again. He smirked. Pushing again, he saw Amycus' classroom with flashes of light and the floor. Hermione seemed to open this to him, allowing him to see more of the dueling. He clenched his jaw and pushed away. He saw her in the hospital, taking off a blanket, and then the memory changed. She tried to push him away from the memory of her friends lying unconscious on their cots. A white light flared, obscuring everything, and then familiar stone walls...

Severus withdrew. He crossed his arms and silently stared at her again, unmoving, unresponsive, a self-controlled mask of nothingness. She faced him as if accepting a challenge to a staring contest, which amused him. He'd win. *It's not a contest you could win, Hermione.*

She started to fidget, she sucked her bottom lip under her teeth and her eyes searched him for any sign at all to what he was thinking. She blinked.

*Yep, I win.* He smirked, waiting. She sighed as she leaned against the chair, still watching him cautiously. At least she wasn't trying to talk, that was something.

"Ineffective," he finally said, breaking the silence. "You are as open a book as you've ever been."

A slight curl of her lip caught his attention, only a tiny flicker, before she shrugged and frowned. "I keep trying. I just can't do empty."

"You have to concentrate, clear your mind," he said, exasperated with her. "You have to learn to control your emotions or these lessons are a waste of time."

She looked up imploringly. "I keep trying; I practice whenever I can. I promise to try harder..."

He moved forward and pulled her to him, enveloping her in his arms. "I know, but you let me see too much, Hermione. When we have these lessons, don't trust me. Close off your emotions and push me from your mind."

"I try to! It's not that easy shutting my emotions off," she said, clinging to him.

He tipped her face up and lost himself for a moment in her warm, brown eyes. "I know." He leaned down and kissed her, leisurely exploring her mouth, savoring her responsiveness to him. She rose up on her toes, her arms about him for support, and he deepened the kiss, holding her tightly to him. He was growing hard with anticipation and pressed his erection against her stomach. He released her mouth and moved her hair to kiss her neck. "Come to bed with me," he said softly in her ear.

She nodded, uttering a throaty, "Uh huh," as she peered up at him seductively.

He turned her and followed her up to the bedroom, the sway of her hips on the stairs making his erection even harder. "Minx," he purred, grasping her from behind and kissing her neck. She squealed and turned when he nipped her flesh. "Undress for me," he said, already half way done with his own buttons.

~oOo~

The next morning, the writing on the walls had returned. *If you don't like the Dark Arts, join us! Dumbledore's Army Now Recruiting.* Severus was livid.

"Well, it wasn't Ginny, Neville, or Seamus they were in the hospital last night," Hermione stated, and he glared at her.

"I'm well aware of who is in the hospital, Hermione," he said in a low voice, intended only for her. He saw Alecto and Amycus approaching him *Just what I need.* "Well, it was one of your friends that did this," he snapped.

"I have no idea who is doing this," she protested innocently.

He knew she didn't, but it irritated him to know her friends were doing this. He turned to face her. "And of course you'd tell me who it was if you knew," he said in an angry hiss. She reacted as he thought she would, eyes wide, hand on chest, gaping at him in shock. "Just as I thought. Go in for breakfast," he snarled at her. He watched her as she recoiled and turned, hurrying into the Great Hall. Alecto stopped right in front of him. "Before you even start I can see it for myself, however, the usual suspects are all accounted for, thanks to your teaching methods, Amycus."

"Not all of them," Alecto stated, glaring malevolently at writing on the wall.

Severus turned on his heel and strode into the Great Hall, searching for the faces of the students on the list among the house tables. He walked over and yanked Ernie Macmillan from his seat. "You three, Miss Bones, Miss Abbott, Mr. Smith, get up and come with me."

Alecto followed the students out with a smug grin plastered on her face.

"Clean this up. When you're done, you will go directly to class," Severus snarled. "Professor Carrow, you have the privilege of *watching* them." He strode back into the Great hall, smirking that Alecto and Amycus would miss eating breakfast, but he knew very well, Minerva would give the students Scottish eggs before her class began. He'd even suggest it, in a vague way.

By lunch, half of the second-, third-, and fourth-year Gryffindor and Hufflepuff students had outbreaks of fevers, boils, nose bleeds and various swollen body parts that put many of the them in the hospital. Severus was called down to assist Madam Pomfrey diagnose the conditions and brew the potion remedies. He walked up to the first cot and gripped the boy's chin roughly.

"Severus," Madam Pomfrey admonished him.

"Empty out your pockets," he demanded. The boy paled. "Now!"

Owen Cauldwell, a Hufflepuff fourth-year, nervously pulled his pockets out and looked up at Severus, his eyes full of dread.

"The inner pockets," Severus snapped impatiently.

Mr. Cauldwell hesitated a moment then reluctantly complied. A yo-yo, paperclip, small penknife, folded scrap of parchment, and half a nougat in a crumpled wrapper fell onto the floor. Severus summoned the candy and examined it. "It's one of the Weasley's Skiving treats," he snapped, rolling the half-eaten toffee in his fingers. "Anyone caught with a half eaten candy will spend the day as they are. You may allow them to reverse the effects after dinner." He pulled his wand out making all the curtains open to draw everyone's attention "I want each and every one of you to turn out your pockets. Now! Everything on the cot for inspection."

Thirty students had half-eaten Weasley treats, which Severus confiscated. "From now on all students must have their pockets searched before you give them any potions," he told Poppy. "Under no uncertain terms will they be allowed to reverse the effects until the end of the day, is that clear?"

"Absolutely, Headmaster," she replied, pursing her lips and frowning.

Severus joined Amycus in his classroom for the afternoon, simply as a casual observer, making a mental note of the spells Amycus was introducing to the students. Most were caustic curses, and more than two-thirds did not have the counter curses. Severus suggested sternly that the students write a thousand words on each curse, including the affects, with specific emphasis on the counter spell, irritating Amycus. He didn't care. At least they'd learn how to defend themselves one way or another.

Hermione was soaking in the tub, reading a novel for her Literature class, when he went up to the room to get her. "You'll be late for dinner," he said smoothly.

"Thank you." Hermione levitated the book safely to the counter and rose from the water, completely at ease in his presence.

The fact that she'd mastered the simple spell wandlessly didn't go unnoticed. Nor did the fact that she was no longer embarrassed for him to see her naked. The latter pleased him, even if the fact she'd been practicing wandless magic didn't. *Just how long has she been doing wandless magic and just how capable is she with it?* He wondered as she dried herself off with the towel he'd handed her. He tried to recall any signs of her use of wandless magic and couldn't. *She's doing it when she's alone, obviously. Hiding it from me, or is it just that she didn't think to tell me?* There were too many secrets between them.

Watching her wrap the towel around her body, hiding it from his view, made his body react, and Severus stopped her when she tried to walk past him. "Where do you think you're going?" he teased her and kissed her lightly on the lips as he pulled out the stick holding her hair up on her head. She reached for it as he nibbled at her ear lobe. With his shampoo, her hair was much silkier to the touch. He loved the feel of the curls in his fingers.

"I thought you were mad at me?" she asked as she rolled her head to the side to give him better access.

"I am," he growled just below her ear.

"Odd way to show it," she said, holding the towel tight with one hand.

"I don't like being lied to," he said, stopping abruptly and standing to his full height.

"I wasn't!" she exclaimed, stepping back and away from him. "I don't know who is writing on the walls."

His eyes narrowed in annoyance. That wasn't what he'd been thinking, and he was annoyed about the graffiti now that she'd reminded him of it. "But I don't expect that you'd confide in me if you did know, would you?"

"You don't confide in me either," she said as she turned to the mirror and reached for her hairbrush.

He stepped back and leaned against the doorframe. "I can't."

"Won't," she said petulantly as she brushed her hair.

"Hermione," he said in a low warning voice, "it's not the same."

"Isn't it?" she asked, turning to face him. "I'm not doing it and I have no idea who is. And even if I was involved, Cillian and Draco follow me around everywhere! I'm never alone. So why don't you ask them?"

"I have," Severus said, looking down at his boots. "I want you to tell me if..."

Hermione pushed past him and entered the bedroom. "You should know that if I *had* seen anyone writing on the walls, your spy would've informed you."

"Your protector!" he snapped, turning so he was in the bedroom, still leaning on the doorframe.

"Whatever," she snapped, pulling on her knickers as he watched her. He closed the gap between them to help her with the clasp on her bra.

"I've got it," she snapped, turning slightly as she strained to do the hooks.

"I was only helping you," he said darkly, the hurt in his voice evident even through his angry retort. He grabbed her blouse to hand it to her. It was usually amusing to him to see her twist her arms like that behind her, but tonight it irritated him. She was purposefully keeping her back to him so he couldn't read her face. "I know that you're still getting together with your DA friends, Hermione. I know what is going on..."

She shook her head, putting on her blouse. She turned to face him as she did up her buttons. "What would it matter if I am practicing the curse ~~your~~ Dark Arts professor is teaching us, anyway?"

His jaw clenched as he exhaled slowly. "I don't want you practicing Dark Arts..."

"He's teaching them to us in class! Professor Flitwick is trying to teach us deflections and shield charms to defend ourselves! How can that be wrong?" Hermione straightened as she pulled her skirt up. "My friends are still in the hospital because of what happened in Dark Arts." She faced him squarely and put her hands on her hips. "Why do you think all the kids are afraid of his lessons?!"

Severus' eyes narrowed dangerously. "I don't want you and your friends taking on the Carrows..."

"No, we're just supposed to stand there and take it, right? Isn't that what you told me? I was to keep my head down and be a good girl, so the Dark Lord won't punish me. Well, I'm being punished every day! I am tortured in class by your *friends* and I take it all right? I take it!"

"They're not my friends! They are fellow Death Eaters," he snarled at her, teeth bared and hands clenched. *How dare she... I'm just trying to keep her alive, for Merlin's sake!* He grabbed her robe and thrust it at her. "We're late for dinner."

He walked to the Great Hall, still fuming at her for her insolence. At least she was behaving respectfully, following him quietly. Filch was standing guard at the wall as if to protect it a lot of good it did. He couldn't stand there all day or all night.

When they stopped at her usual place at the Gryffindor table, he leaned down and whispered, "This is not over, Hermione," before walking away. Alecto smiled smugly at his dark expression, and he nodded to Minerva before standing up at his chair. "Before dinner, I have a few announcements," Severus stated clearly. The students all quieted down and turned to look at him. "From now on anyone with self-induced outbreaks of fevers, boils, pustules, growths, nosebleeds, or whatever else you come up with, will not be excused from attending Muggle Studies or Dark Arts. You will attend your lessons *and then* you may go to the hospital. And any student caught owning even a *wrapper* of a Weasley Skiving Snackbox will be repeating the lesson in detention over the weekend. Same thing will apply if you faint you'll repeat the lesson in detention over the weekend."

That made Alecto and Amycus smile. Many of the students groaned and slumped in their seats; however, several Gryffindors, ever the brave and defiant, had looks of barely concealed mutiny. Severus sat down and pointedly ignored Minerva and Alecto throughout dinner.

~oOo~

Hermione was surprised on Friday when she and Cillian walked into Dark Arts and saw Severus leaning against the bookshelves under the windows, arms crossed, casually watching all the students filing into the classroom. Each desk held a rat in a large jar and about thirty spells already written on the board.

"Take your seats," Amycus snarled, already in a foul mood.

Hermione cringed and quickly obeyed.

"You'll be lookin' all these up," Amycus said, indicating the board. "Them is the caustic curses, which as you knows, means that they is capable of burning, corroding, dissolving, or eating away somethin' that you want to burn, corrode or dissolve, see. I want ya to write the affects of each, the wand movement, and counter spells... and the potions that cures it," he added with a quick glance in Severus' direction, then turned back to the class, "if there is one. And I want the writing neat so I's can read it."

Hermione turned her attention to the board and sighed as she read the current list: Hot-foot Curse, Blistering Curse, Burning Curse.. *Where you're skin feels like its on fire?* Skin-Searing Curse, Fiendfyre *he added Fiendfyre as a caustic curse?* Blood-Boiling Curse, Scalding Curse, Burning-Flesh Curse, Corroding-Flesh Curse, Dissolving-Muscle Curse, Dissolving-Tissue Curse, Necrosis Curse, Eating-Away Curse, Slicing-Cutting Hex ...

"And you'll be doin' 'em on the rats," Amycus said with a quick scowl in Severus' direction, drawing Hermione's attention.

"Saves your hide, Mudblood," Crabbe said as he leaned forward over his desk behind her and Draco. Zabini, Goyle, Pansy, and Millicent all snickered, but Hermione purposefully ignored them. She saw Severus glaring at the Slytherins, but he remained silent.

But Draco turned around. "Not that you can do any of them, Crabbe, without..."

"Malfoy, I is talking now, not you," Amycus snapped, aiming his wand at him like a pointer. "Ten points for not payin' attention."

"Way to go, Malfoy," Crabbe sneered.

Zabini snickered softly. "He got house points *for* not paying attention," he said softly enough so only the students around him could hear. "By all means, let Malfoy talk!"

"Now the Hot-Foot Curse is funny," Amycus continued, ignoring Crabbe's outburst. "It makes your victim hop around, see..."

Hermione watched in horror as Amycus pulled her rat from the jar, held it over Hermione's desk and aimed his wand, *Fervens pedis*. He dropped the rat back in the jar and watched the poor animal prance around in pain unable to stand the feeling of the shavings on its tiny feet.

"Now you try it," Amycus told the class as Hermione quickly searched her book for the counter curse to help the poor rat.

She found it, quickly casting it on the rat, and it lay panting, its nose and whiskers twitching. Amycus glared at her. Reluctantly, Hermione picked the rat up and tried the curse, but only managed to make the rat flinch, since she just couldn't bring herself to torture the defenseless animal. By the end of class, she'd lost Gryffindor forty points.

By contrast, Hermione's Transfiguration lesson was much better. Professor McGonagall had explained the principles of Transformations of humans to small mammals in her lectures, and they'd had the week to compare notes on transforming someone into a small mammal. "To change the appearance, or form, of another person, or yourself, into that of an animal you must be aware of the physical differences of the animal's anatomy. You must alter the physical anatomy, sometimes changing the function or range of movement of the joints, and sometimes their position, as well as adding the different structures of the animal's physique, such as tails, whiskers, claws, fur things you don't have. You therefore must have a clear picture in your mind of what you are creating during the transformation in order to complete the spell. Doing it halfway can be quite dangerous. So select your partners..."

Draco immediately clasped Hermione's hand, and she shrugged at Seamus when he tried to take her other hand. "Sorry; ask Lavender. She's really good at Transfiguration," she suggested.

"And you may try the transformation on each other. Who wants to go first?"

Draco raised his other hand, and Professor McGonagall nodded. "Fine Mr. Malfoy, you and Mrs. Snape."

They stood and took position at the front of the room. Draco took aim and said the incantation with the swirling twirl of his wand. Hermione felt herself shift and shrink, the room seeming to enlarge around her as her perception changed, before things in her mind became somewhat fuzzy, then seemed to settle and become clearer. She landed on all fours on the floor and sat up to get a better view of things. Her body didn't feel wrong as she'd expected it to... only lighter and far more agile. She turned around, sniffing the air, amazed at her heightened sense of smell.

She heard Draco say, "*Retexere Incantatem*," and her body lengthened and grew heavier... fuller... and she found herself back in her clothes, staring dumbfoundedly at Draco.

"Now who's the ferret?" he asked with a smirk.

Hermione looked at her hands in disbelief. They felt the same only bigger.

"Very good, Mr. Malfoy, ten points to Slytherin. Now Mrs. Snape, before you forget, write down everything you remember," Professor McGonagall stated, turning to Parvati and Breanna Enfield.

Hermione wrote the experience down: the sensations of the transformation, the feeling of movement in her agile state, the avid curiosity, the smells, the sounds, sharper hearing, and feeling lighter... then the change back, how she could feel herself become thicker, heavier, swelling...

"You can't have felt all that," Draco said, leaning over her shoulder. "You lose yourself in the transformation."

"Your turn," she replied, setting down her quill and picking up her wand.

Draco held up his hands as she took aim. "Been there done that..." he said just as Hermione cast the spell.

She smiled as she watched him shrink into a lovely white ferret a really quite handsome ferret, in Hermione's opinion. She changed him back, and he staggered on his feet, trying to get his bearings.

"Argh, Merlin's mother's tits! I hate that feeling," he complained as Hermione, smirking, turned to help Lavender with the wand movement.

"Language, Mr. Malfoy! Five points from Slytherin," Professor McGonagall admonished him from across the room while helping Daphne Greengrass and Pansy Parkinson with the wand movement. "Very good, Mrs. Snape, ten points to Gryffindor."

Glenwynn nudged Daphne to get her and Adriana's attention as Hermione stood back to give Lavender room. Lavender successfully turned Seamus into a rabbit; however, she was distracted when Daphne, who was still watching Hermione, whispered something to Pansy.

Hermione transfigured Seamus back to his human form for Lavender. "Thank you, Mrs. Snape, ten points for your assistance. Miss Brown, you have to maintain your concentration. Two points for Gryffindor for the successful transformation." Professor McGonagall turned to the Slytherins. "Girls, which of you are going first?"

"I always get so nervous when the Slytherins stare," Lavender said and apologized to Seamus. "I'll try harder next time."

"No problem," Seamus said, smiling as he jotted down what he could remember. "But it's not you they're staring at it's Hermione. They stare at her all the time."

"Must be nerve racking, for you," Lavender asked Hermione.

"Not so bad well, I simply ignore them," she replied.

Seamus finished his notes and stood up. "Okay, Lavender, your turn."

~\*~

During her revision time after class, Hermione went to the library, smiling when she spotted Ginny at one of the tables. She hurried over and sat in the chair across the table from her friend. Draco plopped down in the seat next to Hermione, and Ginny frowned. "Hello, Malfoy," she said without looking up from her essay, "still following Hermione around?"

"Yeah, Weasley, I am," he said, pulling out the assignment Professor McGonagall had given them.

Glenwynn, Felicia, and Adriana walked over and sat at their table, Glenwynn and Felicia next to Hermione, Felicia taking the seat next to Ginny. "Hello, Hermione. I was wondering if you were available for tea tomorrow," Glenwynn asked with a sweet smile.

Hermione looked at her, deciding if she wanted to. "I think it will be alright, if the invitation includes Ginny and Luna Lovegood. I've already committed to spending tomorrow with them," she said, ignoring the widening of Ginny's eyes when she looked up.

"I thought..." Ginny said and then turned to smile at the Slytherin girls. "I can't speak for Luna, but I'd be delighted."

Glenwynn glanced quickly at Ginny and opened her mouth, but Felicia quickly said, "That would be lovely. We didn't think you'd be interested, Miss Weasley, considering your family's disregard for my house."

Glenwynn smiled politely. "Yes, I didn't know you'd be inclined to join us, but of course you're welcome to come. It will be at two. The Willow House on North Street in the garden room."

As the Slytherin girls got up to go, Draco leaned over to Hermione, smirking. "I seriously doubt that had anything to do with me," he said smugly.

"Oh yes, ferret, because the world revolves around the Malfoys," Ginny said as she dipped her quill in her ink. At dinner she asked why Hermione had included her. "The idea of an afternoon with the Slytherin girls isn't my idea of fun! I thought we were going to look for mirrors?"

"We are," Hermione said, lowering her voice. "Gin, why would they be trying to befriend me? They never have before. And Severus is supportive of my forming the friendships the way he says it there is something going on. And besides, haven't you noticed that Slytherin seems to be divided?"

Ginny shook her head. "You're hanging around too many Slytherins. They look out for their own you can't trust them."

"What if you're wrong?" Hermione asked, turning to look at Severus. "What if not all Slytherins are on the Dark Lord's side?"

"There wasn't a Slytherin that..." Ginny started to say but Hermione cut her off.

"Sirius hated Slytherins all Slytherins. What if he was wrong?"

~o0o~

Saturday morning Hermione was still trying to convince Severus to let her go to Hogsmeade. "If you and Cillian come, that's two wizards to protect me. The village is full of students what could go wrong?"

"The village is occupied by Death Eaters, Hermione," Severus said as if she were a petulant child.

"So is the school," she reminded him as the bell on his desk intoned the arrival of her friends.

Severus barked, "Allow," and scowled at Hermione.

"It's not safe," Severus hissed.

Cillian shrugged, twirling his wand in his fingers as he stared out of the window.

"You're not helping," Severus snapped.

"It's a Hogsmeade weekend. You knew she'd want to go, and the guys know that she's not to be touched," Cillian stated. "Between us, how much trouble can one girl be?"

"Quite a handful, I assure you." Severus glared at her warningly. "I want your word, no problems. If you promise to behave," he said, staring at her, his eyes narrow darkly. "I mean it, Hermione; I want no trouble from you."

Hermione clasped her hands and smiled, saying, "I promise!"

"Fine," he snapped and then indicated the door with his hand. He flicked his wand to open the door and Ginny and Luna walked in, followed by Jenny, Janilynn, and Tinko. Tinko, who'd never been in the office before, stared wide-eyed at the portraits. "Miss Weasley," Severus said, glancing at her friends. "I want your oath no problems from you."

Ginny held up her hands in supplication. "Oh, no, sir! Shopping, lunch, and more shopping. I promise!"

Severus growled and followed the girls out of his office. On the stairs, Hermione felt the sharp stinging sensation when her necklace vibrated, nearly making Hermione gag and her eyes water. She'd forgotten how much it hurt when he activated it. She bit her lip in anticipation when he grabbed her wrist in the corridor, pushed her sleeve up, and aimed his wand at the bracelet. The stinging vibration in her wrist under the bracelet made her hand spasm, and she gritted her teeth to keep from making a sound and alarming her friends.

"A precaution," he said softly.

Hermione nodded to let him know she understood, even though she resented having them activated.

On the way to the gates, Ginny quietly asked, "What's with the bracelet?"

"Necklace and bracelet," she said, pulling her collar aside to show Ginny. "So I can't Apparate away."

Ginny's expression became thoughtful. "It's familiar the shell, like Oh my gosh! Blast-Ended Skrewts!"

Severus smirked at her, and Ginny quickly glanced from Severus, back to Hermione. "They were wicked ugly, but their shells they repel spells, don't they?"

"Very good, Miss Weasley," Severus said smoothly.

Hermione saw Luna at the gate and waved at her. Luna stopped, seemingly interested in something on the wall, until they approached. "Hello, Headmaster, Mr. Gwynek," she said politely. "I hope it doesn't rain today. The leaves on the almanden vines are curling."

Jenny and Janilynn both laughed, but Tinko looked at the vine growing on the wall with concern.

"Thank you for the weather report, Miss Lovegood," Severus said drolly, urging the girls on. "Shall we?"

Luna turned and took Hermione's hand, then glanced down at her wrist. "Strong protections," she said softly. "I hope you don't need them."

"Me too," Hermione said, amazed at the girl's perceptiveness. Looking down the street, she saw four wizards talking to VanHalal, immediately recognizing Avery, Rosier, Nott, and Rabastan Lestrange and wondering why they were here at Hogsmeade.

"I want to visit Viviane's Woman's boutique, the robes shop, the secondhand shop, and Magical Pastiche and Potpourri," Ginny said, her eyes shining and smiling in a girlish way. Hermione wanted to laugh at Ginny's playacting.

Jenny, Janilynn, and Tinko all smiled, delighted at the suggestion. "Oh, yes! I heard that Gladrags is having a sale," Jenny said enthusiastically.

Severus rolled his eyes and indicated for them to lead the way. The Death Eaters glared at the girls as they walked by, but thankfully didn't make any comments that Hermione overheard.

Avery opened the door for the girls to Honeydukes, openly staring at Hermione's chest and lower as she walked by. "You got a minute, Headmaster?" he asked before Severus could follow them in.

"I'll be in shortly," Severus said curtly, adding, "Do not cause trouble".

"What trouble can we get into in a candy shop?" she asked with a warm smile and walked in, apparently oblivious to Severus' scowl as she waved at two Ravenclaw girls across the shop.

Lestrangle stopped Cillian, asking for a word. Cillian surveyed the shop and then let the door close. Hermione eyed the confections, her finger tracing the bins of her favorite sweets as her friends picked out their purchases.

"So, which shall it be? Cockroach Clusters? Fudge Flies?" Severus asked from behind Hermione.

"Oh! You scared me!" she exclaimed, turning around to face him. "No, those are gross! I like flossing mints and Cocoballs!"

"Of course you do," he said softly. He bought Hermione two tins of her favorites, plus some squeaking sugar mice, sugar quills, and several chocolate frogs.

The girls decided to go to Gladrags next. Two wizards in black robes lingered outside the clothiers, watching Hermione and Ginny enter the store, one with a look of revulsion and the other clearly with aversion, although both offered Severus and Cillian polite greetings.

Hermione strolled through the robe shop, browsing at the contents of the counters and shelves as the girls searched for new scarves, gloves, and various frills. One witch in the shop glared at Hermione as if disgusted and dropped the wrap she'd been examining on the counter and left. Hermione glanced up at Ginny, across the shop, but Ginny shook her head and then became interested in something on display. Severus watched Hermione as she glanced nonchalantly through a rack of robes, smiling at a nice peach one and another in dark blue.

"Didn't see anything," Ginny whispered as she passed behind Hermione.

Hermione returned the robe to the rack. "I saw one," she replied, adding softly, "but it's charmed. Maybe the next shop." She turned away, caught Severus' eye and blushed.

In the Magical Pastiche and Potpourri, there was an impeccable selection of jewelry, gifts, china, crystal, and silver, but the only mirrors there were magical ones and unsuitable. Rosier and Nott entered the shop, snarling at the girls as they made their way over to talk to Severus. Hermione diverted her friends so that they could slip out and miraculously avoided the two men.

Once out on the street, Severus grabbed Hermione's arm. "I told you that you were not to ditch me," he hissed accusingly.

"You're hurting me!" Hermione pried his hand off her arm, but held onto it. "I was trying to avoid them," she said with a jerk of her head at the two wizards exiting the lady's shop. "I wasn't trying to sneak out on you. Besides, Cillian was still with us, Severus."

His eyes narrowed dangerously, but he relaxed slightly and nodded once, keeping a grip on her hand.

"Do keep better control of your pet," Rosier sneered in passing, and he and Nott laughed as they walked away.

Severus expression turned even darker as he steered Hermione forcibly in the opposite direction.

They stocked up on their Potions supplies in the apothecary, bought new quills in Scrivenshaft's, and Jenny and Tinko bought some sachets in Viviane's Woman's boutique. The boutique also had mirrors, but only magical ones that told Hermione that she had a lovely smile and beautiful eyes.

Ginny pulled Hermione into the secondhand shop, and the girls had fun combing through the shelves and bins. Janilynn bought a mortar and pestle, and Luna found a large selection of bangles, which she divided between each girl. Severus paid for Hermione's, smirking when she'd put them on. However, Hermione had no luck finding suitable mirrors since the only ones available were large framed ones.

Out on the street, Ginny pointed to Avery and Lestrangle, who were talking outside Honeydukes. VanHalal and Travers were checking the students' purchases from the joke shop, and Rosier and Nott were lingering outside Scrivenshaft's. "I think we should... go to the bookshop," she suggested, indicating the opposite way on the street, and Jenny readily agreed.

Janilynn checked her watch. "For an hour then lunch," she suggested and smirked at Hermione's wistful look at the books displayed in the window. "Don't you have tea at two?"

Hermione turned, her eyebrows rising at Severus' questioning look. "Yes, at Willow House on North Street."

"With whom?" Severus asked, his tone low and smooth, which meant he was not happy at the sudden revelation.

"Hermione's Slytherin friends," Ginny stated as Janilynn clasped her hands, exclaiming, "I love that place, so... wait what?"

Hermione turned to face Severus and Cillian, both who sported identical scowls. "Glenwynn, Felicia, and Adriana... or should I use their last names?" she asked, glancing at Cillian, then recovered, "invited Ginny, Luna, and me to tea at two."

Severus exhaled slowly and then glanced down the street. Avery and Lestrangle were still outside Honeydukes, and VanHalal and Travers were still inspecting purchases from the joke shop, but Rosier and Nott were nowhere to be seen.

Cillian looked at the other girls and then turned to Severus. "Seems you and I are chaperoning tea at the Willow."

Severus closed his eyes then opened the door to the bookshop. "Apparently," he said coolly. He followed Hermione to the Arithmancy section. "And when were you *Miss Weasley* and *Miss Lovegood* invited to this tea?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but Cillian cut her off, asking, "Why were Miss Weasley and Miss Lovegood included?"

Hermione explained what had happened in the library.

"That is not the proper way to invite a friend," Cillian said as Severus handed her a book from the top shelf she couldn't reach.

"What was I supposed to do?" Hermione asked, crossing her arms to clutch *Geometrical Arithmancy for Spatial Distances* to her chest, "decline?"

"You forced their hand. It's not done." Cillian leaned his shoulder against bookshelf. "Do you know nothing about pure-blood etiquette? You'll alienate these girls."

"I know about etiquette," Hermione snapped, dropping her hands while still clutching her book. "It's rude to invite someone to tea in front of their friends as if they are not even there! You draw the person aside or wait for a more opportune time. Or isn't *that* proper pure-blood etiquette?" She turned, leaving the aisle to join Luna and Ginny in the Charms section.

"Look what I found," Ginny said, slipping a book into Hermione's hand. "It's on charming things to speak and it has charms for cups, mirrors, and how to make toys talk."



Hermione's brow furrowed as she opened the book and Ginny urged her to turn to page twenty-six. Ginny leaned in closer and whispered, "This one tells you how to make a foe glass on page forty-three, it shows how to make a Sneakers orb."

Hermione hugged her. "Thanks," she whispered.

The girls queued up at the counter. Severus cocked an eyebrow at Cillian when he dropped *Politesse du Grande Monde: Essential Etiquette* by John Louys de Bret and *Etiquette for the Debutante Witch* by Fleur Britten on top of the books Severus was paying for. "Not for you for her," Cillian snapped, tossing two Galleons and twelve Sickles on the counter.

Hermione bristled at the not at all subtle allegation the books implied.

Severus didn't react at all to the book Ginny had added to their pile, requesting the books be delivered to the Headmaster's office.

"Okay, the joke shop," Jenny said, crossing the street with Janilynn and Tinko.

Severus put out his hand, blocking Hermione from following. "No."

Across the street, VanHalal leaned against the window, leering at the students entering the shop as he spoke to Lestrangle. Hermione inhaled as two third-years were stopped so VanHalal could inspect his bag.

"Maybe you're right, not a good idea," Ginny said, turning to Hermione. "We could head for the Willow House."

"I've never been in there, but I've heard it's really nice," Luna said, watching two women leaving one of the shops with their heads down and avoiding eye contact with anyone.

As Ginny, Luna, and Hermione, followed by Cillian and Severus, turned from High street onto North Street, they saw Crabbe, Goyle, and Zabini bullying several fourth-years from entering Dervish and Banges. Severus stopped, glared darkly at the Slytherins, and Crabbe and Goyle moved away, but Zabini simply leaned against the wall of the shop with his arms crossed. However, the fourth-year boys ran away.

"Not very good for business, are they?" Luna commented dreamily.

The Willow House was a green cottage with white trim and shutters beside a large willow tree. "If you're going to include your friends, make a formal introduction. But you are playing with fire," Severus warned Hermione as he opened the door.

Inside the house was a traditional English tearoom and shop with very tasteful décor. Felicia, Tracy, and Adriana were sitting in the lounge area across from three girls Hermione didn't know. Glenwynn stood and turned to the hostess' desk.

The Slytherin girls rose as Daphne and her sister, who were closest to the door, greeted Severus, Hermione, and Cillian when they entered. "Glenwynn has reserved the garden room," Daphne said, looking at Luna and Ginny with curious glances.

"Thank you, Miss Greengrass, Astoria," Severus said, giving Hermione a gentle nudge in the small of her back.

Hermione quickly introduced Ginny and Luna to the girls, and Daphne introduced Catherine Hamilton, Amanda Bergental and Jean Pendergast.

The room was quaint, with huge windows that overlooked the back garden. Four wrought iron pillars supported a wrought iron and cut-glass ceiling that resembled a Regent Scroll design gazebo. Each pillar had several hanging baskets of flowers. However, what surprised Hermione were the few small tables situated around the room that only seated four each instead of one long table. The Hostess showed the girls to three of the tables.

Glenwynn, Felicia, and Tracy surrounded one table, indicating for Hermione to join them, as Daphne, Astoria, and Adriana chose another, urging Ginny to sit with them. Ginny sat in the chair that still allowed her to partially face Hermione, and Luna sat at the third table with Catherine, Amanda, and Jean, taking the seat that allowed her to still face Ginny. Severus and Cillian took seats at another table beside the windows, so that neither had their back to the door and they could observe the entire room.

The room had the fragrance of hot scones and fresh roses, while soft music from a bygone era played in the background.

At first the conversation was awkward, but polite, mostly centered on where the girls had gone shopping, the new arrivals at Gladrags Fine Clothiers, Viviane's Woman's Boutique and the Magical Pastiche and Potpourri. Hermione stifled a chuckle when she overheard Luna mention the bangles they'd all bought at the secondhand shop, making hers jingle on her wrist.

Felicia asked Hermione how she was holding up to the torment in Professors Carrows' lessons, and Hermione answered with a noncommittal, "Well enough."

"It's horrible how Professor Carrow singles you out," Glenwynn said softly as she poured more tea for everyone.

Behind her, Hermione heard Astoria ask after Ginny's father. "His department, the Office for the Detection and Confiscations of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects, is under review by the Wizengamot for reallocation of resources," Ginny replied calmly. "His office is now responsible for tracking down illegal wands."

"But still, he has a particular hatred toward the Gryffindors," Felicia stated, drawing Hermione's attention back to their table.

"Severus warned me that they would single me out," Hermione said, wishing they'd change the subject, "since I'm Muggle-born, and all."

At Luna's table, Jean was asking Luna to clarify the difference between an Erumpent and a Crumple Snorthack. "It's a Crumple-Horned Snorkack, but people do get it confused..." Luna replied sweetly.

The food was delicious, finger sandwiches, imported and domestic cheeses, fresh fruit, and freshly baked scones with lashings of Devon cream and delicious preserves all served on fine Royal Doulton Bone China. Their waiter set a three-tiered serving tray of little cakes decorated to look like tiny presents, tiny tarts, and sweet shortbread on the tables and refilled the teapots.

"I wish Professor Carrow would move on with the subject though," Tracy said, taking a sip of tea. "I'm so tired of reading about the inquisitions." She turned to Glenwynn. "Your father was in the paper this morning. I do hope that was nothing but a false alarm."

Hermione noticed that a few of the girls at the other tables had stopped talking.

"The premise was to inspect our plumbing, saying it was too modern. How plumbing in a five hundred-year-old house can be too modern is beside me. Father said they were only interested in inspecting the basement."

Adriana turned around, her face pale, and Catherine dropped her teacup, her hands shaking.

"Of course they didn't find anything untoward," Glenwynn said with a nod to Catherine, but she lowered her voice slightly. The other two tables became very quiet. "I mean, why would they? The basement has nothing but old furnishings and boxes, hardly of any significance."

"Your wine cellar holds the finest collection of elf-made vintages," Amanda said with slightly cocked eyebrows and bit her lip.

"Father assured me that they didn't bother with our collection," Glenwynn said with a sly smile, her voice slightly louder. "All our valuables are still safe." She turned to

Hermione. "Have you heard from your parents?"

"Not since summer," Hermione said, looking away. "But I know they're fine."

"Oh?" Felicia asked as Glenwynn touched Hermione's hand, saying, "I'm sure they are. You'd have taken precautions, since you and your friends well, you knew before any of us." She turned to look Severus and Cillian. "I hope they know you're all right."

Hermione looked at Ginny, catching her friend's eye. Ginny was toying with her cheeses as if pretending to be uninvolved with the conversation. The sound of clinking bone china cups and saucers filled the gap in conversation. Finally, Felicia turned to Hermione. "Would you be interested in joining us tomorrow for Quidditch practice? It might be nice to get outside for while."

Now Hermione was feeling as if she were being set up or something. "I'm sorry but I'll have to decline." She added, "I've so much revision to catch up on, and Severus has made the entire student body write out all those curses for Dark Arts," when Felicia frowned in disappointment.

"Maybe another day," she offered, still looking disappointed.

When the plates cleared, Severus approached the table. "Ladies, if you'll please excuse my wife, I do need to return to my office."

"Of course, Headmaster," Glenwynn said, the first to stand, and all the Slytherins followed suit. "Thank you so much for allowing Hermione to attend." She turned to Hermione and held out her hand. "Hermione, thank you so much for coming. We will have to do this again soon."

"It would be my pleasure," Hermione replied, taking the offered hand.

The Slytherin girls bid Hermione, Ginny, and Luna goodbye, and Cillian ushered them out the door as the Slytherin girls stayed to look over the items in the shop. Out on the street, Severus ushered them to walk straight to the school gates.

Jenny, Janilynn, Tinko, Ofelia Tredwell, Jack Sloper and Ernie Coppersmith came running up just as they were passing the Three Broomsticks. Severus cocked an eyebrow at them as they fell in step with the girls. "Those men wouldn't let us in Zonko's," Jenny complained.

"Confiscated half my stuff," Jack snarled as Ernie glanced at Severus.

"Are you surprised?" Luna asked, turning to face the others. "They're prohibited. They don't want joke items in the school." She turned back around, looking skyward.

"Oh, a thestral," Ofelia said, pointing up at the sky.

Hermione gasped at the sight of the large, black, skeletal horses with dragonish faces and necks, and reptilian wings. One beast dove after some prey, followed by the others, and Hermione cringed at the sight of its white shining eyes.

Back at the castle, Ginny waited with Hermione in the Headmaster's office while Severus and Cillian sought out the school security officers.

Ginny paced the office, looking at the portraits while Hermione sat comfortably in one of the chairs. "They really are impressive," Ginny said, walking along the bookshelf behind Severus' desk. She lifted down Gryffindor's Sword and inspected the craftsmanship, reading the name engraved on it by holding the hilt with one hand and the blade on her other forearm. "Godric Gryffindor. This is Goblin made!"

"So?" Hermione said, toying with her bangles, enjoying the rhythmic jingle.

Ginny turned to face Hermione, still holding the sword in front of her. "Goblin-made steel will imbibe things that make it stronger." She looked closer at the blade. "Harry killed the Basilisk with this."

"As Godric Gryffindor commanded when he placed me in the Headmaster's service," the Sorting Hat spoke softly, then said in its sing-song voice, "if ever the brave at heart have need, I trust you, my dear friend, give my sword to them."

Ginny smiled and sliced the air with the sword. "Do you think that it might have absorbed any of the Basilisk venom?"

"Probably, why?" Hermione asked, her curiosity now piqued.

"Just thinking that if..." The girls both turned their heads toward the door at the sound of stone grating against stone.

Ginny quickly put the sword back on its mount and stood with her hands behind her back as Severus opened his door. He narrowed his eyes at the girls.

"Ginny was admiring the sword," Hermione confessed. "It's famous among us Gryffindors, you know."

"Out," Severus snapped, glaring at Hermione. Hermione rose to go, indicating for Ginny to follow her, but Severus turned his attention to Ginny. "Miss Weasley, Hermione has revision to do. She may see you tomorrow."

Ginny shrugged and walked over and hugged Hermione. "I'll send a letter to George by Floo; he knows London better," she whispered in her ear.

A chill ran down Hermione's spine. "Which Floo they're watched, aren't they?" Hermione asked, worried.

"Slughorn's isn't," Ginny said and turned to leave. "Headmaster, thank you. I did have a good time today."

Severus' eyebrows rose as he watched her leave the office.

Hermione was halfway up the stairs herself when she heard Dumbledore's portrait say, "You know what you must do, my boy. Now is the time, before it's too late. Hermione turned and sneaked back just in time to watch Severus remove the sword from its mount and examine the blade. He turned and set a strong locking spell on the door then disappeared in the Floo.

Hermione gasped, realizing he'd taken the sword with him.

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Author's notes:

I'm so sorry I've been gone for so long. I'm back and happily typing away. Thank you to everyone who is sticking this out with me, I appreciate the support. As before, the Carrows are getting ugly, so I think it safe to say there is some abuse happening.

Moonlitjune, aka ViloletViridian, drew me an incredible picture for my story as incentive to update, so Moonlitjune, thank you and I hope this one suffices. For those who want to see her lovely drawing, here is the link: <http://violetviridian.deviantart.com/art/Heart-s-Desire-181076429> I hope you like it as much as I do.

The Latin I used comes from Norte Dame's site: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

Retexere: means to unravel, undo, reverse; to cancel, annul; to retract; to revise.

# Progressing

Chapter 27 of 43

Hermione makes another effort to help Draco see how things are in their world, tries to help once again with Ginny's transformation with little luck, and makes a discovery about Slytherin House. Plus we find out what Severus did with the Sword of Gryffindor.

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood for reading this over for me and to the doughy matron, Dandru, and Writermerrin for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to DuchessOfArcadia for my lovely banner! I really love it, doll.

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Progressing

Severus appeared between a large oak and an old rusty gate. He touched the bell and pushed open the gate, smirking when the rusty hinges made no sound at all. He walked confidently up the garden path, taking the fork that led to what appeared to be the stables, and knocked on the door.

A very short, stocky wizard with an overly large head and prominent pointed, cauliflower ears opened the door and ushered him inside. "Come in," he said in a gruff voice.

Severus looked around the workroom at the anvil, grinding stones, worktables, and the forge, thankful that the craftsman was alone.

"Is this what you want copied?" the craftsman asked, indicating the long wooden box Severus was holding with one hand.

"Yes. I want an exact duplicate, every detail, even the gems," Severus said.

"Well, let me see it," the old wizard said as he wiped his hands on his apron.

Severus laid the box on a worktable. He handed the craftsman a pouch. "These should suffice; the gems are a close match. No one will know the difference."

The craftsman opened the box, picked up the sword and slowly examined the details and workmanship. "I don't do goblin-wrought narthil," he said, squinting at the engraving.

"Nor do I require it to actually be made of narthil, only finest wrought goblin-made silver to appear like narthil to the eye," Severus said smoothly as he watched the wizard examine the sword. The wizard looked up at him with a calculating gleam, which was answered with a stern gaze. "I expect a perfect sheen, the lettering to be exact, and the replica to be indistinguishable even to the average dealer. Besides, few have even seen the true sword – so your finest work should suffice."

The wizard set the sword down and narrowed his eyes. "It will cost you."

Severus unbuttoned his left cuff and pulled up his sleeve. "I was already informed of what your price would be," he stated through clenched teeth as the man stared bug-eyed at the Dark Mark on his forearm.

The craftsman's face blanched as his gaze flickered from the Dark Mark to Severus' face. "He told me I could trust you!"

"He said this would be enough," Severus sneered, tossing a coin bag on the workbench. "Generous, even." Severus pulled down his sleeve and buttoned his cuff. "I swore to him to keep your secret, Arthur Thorn, so you, in turn, will keep mine. No one is to know of this arrangement. You will do your finest work and not procrastinate. I need it in a week, less if you can."

Arthur nodded and wiped his hands on his black apron. "I shall send a letter by owl the moment it's done."

"Send your owl at night," Severus instructed the wizard. "However, I will be back in an hour to collect the original. No one must know it's missing for obvious reasons. After today, we should have as little contact as possible – for your own safety."

The wizard nodded and pulled out a long piece of parchment and began to trace the sword with a charcoal drawing stick. Severus turned, satisfied that the craftsman would not procrastinate on his commission. He turned, left the premises, and Disapparated next to the old oak.

He arrived at his destination and checked his pocket watch and his lips curved slightly *Right at the appointed time*. The huge wrought-iron gates contorted into a gruesome

face. "State your purpose."

"I've been summoned," Severus said curtly, and the gates opened to admit him. He used the time it took to approach the front doors of the impressive mansion estate to repress his emotions and choose which memories he'd show the Dark Lord.

A young wizard wearing a recruit's mask admitted him into the foyer. "Down the hallway, sir," the boy said, pointing the way before he closed the door.

The eyes of the ancestral relatives' portraits lining the long, candle lit hallway followed him as he walked by. The heavy, wooden door to the drawing room stood open, and several people moved to admit the newest arrival. Severus barely had time to let his eyes adjust to the faint light before a high, clear voice spoke up from the place of honor at the head of the highly polished, ornate table. "Severus, come forth."

As always, the backlight of the roaring fire beneath the handsome marble mantelpiece made the speaker difficult to see. Only when Severus moved closer to him did the facial features belonging to the dark, smooth-headed silhouette slowly morph into view; first, the gleaming glow of the red eyes appeared in the dark form of the wizard's head as they gazed upon Severus' every move. Then, the pale, snake-like skin began to emanate through the gloom, and finally, he could distinguish the slits of the flattened nose and the broad, nearly lipless mouth.

"My Lord, you requested my presence," Severus said smoothly, bowing to the Dark Lord. All along the table, every head had turned to look at him, the members of the inner circle, those still in the Dark Lord's good graces. Severus smirked that Lucius and Narcissa were seated near the end of the table, between the thugs, Yaxley and Thortenson.

"What news of the school?" the Dark Lord asked in a bored tone. "I grow weary of hearing Alecto complain of all your shortcomings."

"There has been some rebellion, but we keep abreast of the situation the best we can and discipline the offenders appropriately," Severus admitted as he straightened. "These children are used to Dumbledore's lenient ways and as such are not adjusting to the more stringent rules."

"And discipline – how is that handled?" the Dark Lord asked, his long fingers steepled in front of him.

Severus inhaled and mentally braced himself. "I allow the teachers to discipline infractions in their classrooms as they see fit as long as the child does not become harmed beyond our Healer's abilities. As for the other incidents, I decide on the appropriate action."

"I see." The Dark Lord was quiet for a few seconds. Only the crackle of the fire, the soft scuffle of feet from those standing and a clearing of a throat beside him broke the silence. "I was pleased with your decision regarding the trick treats. However, Amycus is unhappy about losing his weekends."

Severus exhaled and repressed his smirk at the comment. "He hasn't had to repeat any of his lessons so far. He simply has the students write one foot of parchment on each spell with the means of reversing the effects for the lesson that was missed. As far as I know, he still enjoys the horned noghound races every Saturday." A soft snicker elicited by his relation was quickly covered over by a few coughs. "Alecto, on the other hand, enjoys repeating her lessons on a weekly basis."

"I see," the Dark Lord replied, his tone neutral. "And young Malfoy?"

"Doing well in his lessons and following your orders," Severus replied. From the corner of his eye, he noticed Narcissa lean forward slightly in her chair. "Hermione is resigned to his attention and is actually becoming social with the boy. Even her friends in Gryffindor are becoming accustomed to seeing them together." Several of the others at the table made condescending chuckles. "She has also made friends with several of the Slytherin girls."

The Dark Lord rested his hands on the table in front of him. "So I have heard. Very well." He held one hand to the side, palm up. "Wormtail." Peter Pettigrew approached the table and handed the Dark Lord a scroll. He snatched it, without giving the Rat a glance. "I have reviewed the amendments and bylaw changes proposed by the governors. Some I approve – most I do not." He opened his hand, and the scroll floated down the table to Severus, who caught it easily and pocketed it. "I also would like you to assist the Lestranges in a small project for me. I will require the School Registry. Belinda will be by to retrieve it tomorrow. I've granted her request to spend time with her brother."

"Yes, my Lord. She will be an honored guest," Severus replied with a bow, hiding his displeasure of her impending visit behind the veil of his hair. "However, it will be difficult to give her the actual book. The School Register is enchanted and will not allow its removal from the Deputy Headmistress' office. However, Madam Pince can replicate the book quite easily. I can have a replica made available for Belinda by the next weekend, if that is acceptable to you, my Lord?" He waited for the strike, bracing for the onslaught of pain he knew would come.

It didn't.

"That is what Alecto has informed me – that your Deputy Headmistress told her it was impossible to remove the current book from her office." The Dark Lord pressed his fingertips together as he contemplated.

Severus waited, ignoring the shifting of those around him.

"Very well, a copy, an *exact* copy, but only current generations, Severus. I have no need for records of ancient enrollment, and I want all the names of the newly listed, all eleven year olds, every name, and every address. This Madam Pince will not like my displeasure if the book has erroneous information. Belinda will be at the school to pick it up on Friday. Now, take your place among my followers, Severus," the Dark Lord instructed, rising to his feet even as the table vanished.

The members of the inner circle rose and took a step back, widening the space before the Dark Lord, creating a wide aisle as once again those standing near the doorway moved. Runcorn entered, followed closely by three boys, no older than eighteen or nineteen, wearing black, hooded robes and recruit masks. Three Death Eaters, the boys' sponsors, followed next. Runcorn and the masked sponsors bowed as the boys all knelt before the Dark Lord. The four Death Eaters stood proudly as each boy was greeted by name and allowed to kiss the Dark Lord's hand in turn.

Severus recognized each of them. Jared Yaxley, Yaxley's youngest, had left Hogwarts two years ago. Clayton McFaul, he'd been a bully in school. His sister Elizabeth was a seventh-year Slytherin and very much like her mother, although he expected to see her kneeling before the Dark Lord at the end of the school year. And Trenton Gerund, a less than average student who had received only a few Acceptables and Poors. Severus had more hopes for his sister, fifth-year Ravenclaw, Antonia Gerund, an intelligent and capable student. Except she tended to hang around only the pure-blood students and spent most of her efforts on her appearance rather than academics.

The Dark Lord then faced those in the room imperiously. "We have here today, three young men who have demonstrated themselves worthy of consideration to our ranks," he said and then turned to stare down at the three expectant boys. "You will leave the circle of youth and join my circle of noble wizards, the elite, to stand by me as we take back that which is our divine right. If you obey me, you will succeed. If you are useful, you will earn favor. If you are strong, you will gain much. If you learn from me, you will gain knowledge. If you listen to me, you will be powerful. If you are weak, you will fail. Swear to me your life; body, blood, heart, and soul that you will serve me. That you shall render unconditional obedience to me, as your Lord, and promise to aid my brethren, to respect your fellow Death Eaters, and any who serve me. As a brave soldier of our cause, you shall at all times be prepared to give everything I ask of you."

All three said, "Yes, my Lord," without hesitation. "I freely set upon this course, binding myself to you, my Lord, to ever be a good and true knight."

"Do you swear to obey me in all things as your Lord and Master?" the Dark Lord stated rather than asked, already knowing what they would say. "When I command you, or allow a command to be given, will you obey it absolutely, without reservation or hesitation?"

All three said, "I swear, my Lord," in voices that were clear and resonate in the quiet room.

"Know that to wear the Dark Mark of a knight is to hold a sacred trust, that the obligations of knighthood will demand your efforts every moment of your life. Do you accept

my Mark as a symbol of your loyalty?" the Dark Lord asked.

In unison they all replied, "I will render myself to you, to be yours to command, committed unconditionally in my obedience to you, my Lord and Master, to be ready at the wand, as a brave knight to you, to risk my life at any time you have need of me for the greater good of the magical nobility."

Severus stood tall and rigid, watching in disgust while the Dark Lord branded his Dark Mark into the young flesh, and each boy tried vainly to keep from screaming out as his skin burned and hissed from the spell. As the boys regained their composure, the Dark Lord asked for their masks, exchanging the recruits' mask for one representing the Knights of Walpurgis, the original half skull mask instead of the ornate silver ones presently worn by the Death Eaters. As the boys accepted their masks, looking at them in awe, the Dark Lord backed up and relaxed into his seat. "Rise and greet your brethren."

When it was his turn, Severus shook hands with all three boys.

"Severus, Thaddeus, Lucius, Moncrieff, I believe you four have another appointment to attend. You may go," the Dark Lord said dismissively, turning his attention to Mr. Bulstrode.

Severus bowed and left, grateful to be given leave. He overheard Lucius telling Thaddeus Nott and Moncrieff Macnair about the reinstatement of the Knights of Walpurgis as the men walked down the hallway ahead of him. "The youngsters start like we did, proving their mettle before being accepted into the rank of the Death Eaters," Lucius stated.

Macnair nodded in agreement. "Three more Knights of Walpurgis. Runcorn intends to secure their position in the hit squads and then use them to silence the Dark Lord's political opponents, those antiquated, Muggle-loving liberals who are still being obstinate."

"Once the Knights of Walpurgis are established, we can eliminate those Aurors who are not with us; they can be sent to Azkaban," Macnair commented.

"It's time they were enlightened to the realities of the might of power," Nott stated. "Of course, the first thing we need is to get our hands on the School Registry and ferret out the undesirables early before they are told they are equal to us."

Severus swore under his breath before entering the Floo for the Ministry.

The meeting with the school governors was drawn out. Umbridge was furious that her proposals were rejected, especially her favorite, utilizing the Blood-Oath quill in detentions when students 'lie about Potter or mention Potter's name in school.' She even went as far as to demand an explanation, which none of the other Death Eaters assigned to the board would expound upon. In the end, the Death Eater majority won out. The new scroll was signed by all thirteen members, and Severus signed his name as Headmaster.

On his way out, Severus debated taking the chance to seek out Kingsley and spotted Tonks in the corridor near the lifts. He maneuvered over to her and drew her aside. "I have to talk to you."

She glared at him. "This is not the place—"

"Now, woman," he growled and pulled her into the first open lift. "Get out," he snarled at the clerk who was about to enter. "I have some questions to ask you." As the lift doors closed, he released her arm and turned to face her. "The Dark Lord wants the School Registry and the Magical Birth Registry. Runcorn has been given three more recruits today, and he will be tied up with their indoctrination, so that doesn't leave you much time. As soon as the new recruits have their assignments, he will be coming for the Magical Birth Registry. I'd say Tuesday afternoon – Wednesday at the latest. I wouldn't count on waiting until Tuesday though. You must see he doesn't get the current book or every Muggle-born from birth to eleven years old will be in jeopardy. I will take care of the School Registry." The door opened, and he stepped out of the lift before Tonks could reply.

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"Please tell me why I cannot go to the library?" Hermione tried to moderate her tone, but he was not exactly being forthright with her. 'Because I said so' was not an answer. Well it was, if she were five. "You wouldn't let me go last night after dinner or let me go this morning, and you're refusing to let me go down to the Great Hall for lunch."

Cillian stared out of the window with his arms crossed, not even bothering to turn around and address her properly. "Hermione, he was summoned. Your friends have been causing too much trouble. Alecto complained, *again*, and he had to go see our master. Draco will be by with all the necessary books for your essays, but today, you are staying here." He turned and faced her, his expression hard and set. "Now stop complaining. I'm tired of it."

Hermione stormed up to the sitting room to get away from him. She was sitting in one of the chairs by the windows, reading a history book, when Draco walked in. He walked over next to her, dropped a bag laden with books on the floor and sat in the seat Severus favored.

"You're wrong."

She looked up. "Pardon me?"

"The Death Eaters are trying to bring us out from under the shadows. We're doing what must be done to bring about change," he stated, his arms crossed defiantly as he stared at her.

"You're right, people hate change," she said, checking out which books he'd brought her.

"Right, so they resist," he said curtly. "It is not the same thing as before when that Muggle, Hitler, tried to take over the Muggles in Germany."

"He tried to conquer most of Europe and Northern Africa." She set one of the books from the bag on the small table next to her. "But it's what the Dark Lord and his followers *are* doing that's wrong, Draco." She looked up at him. "The primary task of the school is the education of the youth, right? To teach us how to perform magic properly."

"You know it is," he snapped. "Otherwise you Muggle-borns would be doing random acts of uncontrolled magic all over the place."

She chose to ignore his barb. "This year, Muggle Studies has been added to everyone's schedule in order to enlighten us to the evils of Muggles. Isn't that what Alecto is doing, telling all of us how evil they are? And Amycus teaching us the Dark Arts – your Dark Lord's idea of what's best for all of us – to know how to hurt people the right way."

"We have to know how to defend ourselves from our enemies," he stated, "and to do that we have to understand them, the Muggles, and know the spells necessary to combat their influence."

"I see. And all this is to prepare us for the service of the Dark Lord and his new world order, to help us know about our place in the world, right? Did you read any of the history books I suggested on the Muggle World War II?" she asked.

His gaze flickered to the book she'd been reading when he'd come in, and he inhaled before he turned to look out of the window. "Yeah, I did. That was Muggles; we're wizards. It's different."

Hermione smiled. She'd been waiting for him to bring this up and had memorized a few things she thought would make him see a correlation. "Germany had National

Socialist teachers of questionable ability take over the classrooms in order to shape and influence the young minds of the students into accepting and believing the Party motto. During a cabinet meeting in December 1941, Hans Frank, Gauleiter of Poland, stated that they needed to rid themselves of all feelings of pity for the Jews. He stated that they had to annihilate the Jews wherever they found them and wherever it was possible in order to maintain their ideal structure of the Reich as a whole. By July of 1942, Himmler visited Auschwitz-Birkenau for two days, inspecting all ongoing construction and expansion of the death camps and personally oversaw the extermination process from start to finish of two trainloads of Jews that had arrived from Holland. Kommandant Höss, I think it was, was in charge of the construction of the camp, which included four large gas chambers and crematories. You do remember reading about the crematories, right? He was then promoted as head of the camps—

"Yeah, but we're not doing anything like that," Draco interrupted, scowling at her. "That was the Muggle Germans doing that to those Jews people."

"Don't think so? Okay." She got up and crossed the room to where Severus kept the *Daily Prophets*. Selecting a few, she returned to her chair. "The Muggle-born registration is backed by your guys – the Death Eaters. The purpose is to find and register all Muggle-borns, segregate them, and cull them from society. Those found to be half-blood or have Muggle grandparents are tried and taken to Azkaban." She handed him a recent publication. "Two hundred ninety-four Azkaban inmates were found floating in the ocean off the shore of the Isle of Marwolaeth – where Azkaban stands. The report shows that they had all been Kissed and then dumped into the sea to drown. According to Wendell Mulciber, head of the Muggle-born internment at Azkaban, the bodies were cremated."

"That's different; it was an accident," he said, holding the paper out to her to take back.

"An accident that *all* two hundred and ninety-four were Muggle-born or had Muggle grandparents? Is it also a coincidence that your Dark Lord wanted three hundred new Inferi protecting the waters around Azkaban?" she asked, ignoring the paper in his hand. "I overheard Rowle tell MacCavish about it in the Great Hall the day this article came out." She pointed at the paper in his hand. "No? Okay, how about the reports that Muggle-born witches are being fed potions to make them sterile? Or that all pure-blood wizards are to marry and start families? Here is an article by Barcus Mordaunt, assistant head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission," she said as she handed him another paper, folded to the article, "stating that women – witches – should be required to register a verification of their fertility and submit to a formal physical check up with Ministry approved Healers? To *improve* the wizarding race. Aren't Mulciber and Mordaunt two of your Death Eater mates?"

"Yeah, people are getting married, so what?" Draco took the paper and glanced at the article. "There is no proof that this sterilization has happened."

"Okay, it's only the women's words against the Ministry and the Healers at St Mungo's, but even you have to see the correlation between this one. During World War II, all the Jews that the Nazi's *could* find were rounded up, put on trains and sent to concentration camps – much like the Muggle-born Registration Commission is doing to all the Muggle-borns and half-bloods. The Nazi's called this the final solution. Your Muggle-born Registration Commission is calling it the relocation of undesirables and the opponents of the restoration of pure-blood rule over the wizarding community. There is even an article encouraging all 'rightful members of proper wizarding society to denounce undesirables' from their families, and rewards are being given for those willing to 'submit names for segregation.' Here, it's on page three." She dropped the paper on his lap. "There's a quote by your Aunt Bellatrix that the Dark Lord wants members of his own followers to trim out the undesirable branches that are infesting their family trees – to kill them, Draco. She used the word 'elimination.'"

Draco's expression became hard. "I know what my aunt said, and that was taken out of context," he snapped, tossing the papers on the floor. "You don't know anything! Fine. You have the books you need. Bye." He stood up and stormed out of the room.

Hermione sighed and picked up the book she'd been reading, wondering if he'd ever truly see the truth. She stared at the page, visualizing all the students she knew with Muggle relatives and wondering how any of them were faring, or if any of them had been arrested.

At noon, a house-elf popped into the room, quickly placed Hermione's lunch on the coffee table and vanished. Half an hour later, another house-elf appeared to collect her dishes and vanished. Hermione sighed as she stared out of the window, trying not to cry.

"You have visitors," Cillian stated from the doorway.

Hermione looked up from her book, still miffed with him that he'd refused to allow her to go to the library. She saw no reason why she couldn't go, even if Severus wasn't in the castle. He was, and so was Draco. Except that Draco was mad at her now. "Who is it? Ginny?"

"Yes, and us," Neville replied with a huge grin as he squeezed by Cillian to enter the room, followed by Terry, Charlene, and Ginny.

Hermione jumped to her feet, surprised by their visit. "Hi. I wanted to ask you..." Charlene started to say, then blushed when she glanced at Cillian and realized that he wasn't leaving.

"Come in, come in!" Hermione waved her friends over to her by the window.

The shy girl hurried across the room and sat in the chair by the window that Draco had abandoned. "Could you help me with my Transfiguration? Brenna and I are having a hard time. I keep getting Seamus' feet wrong."

"Trying to make him into a small mammal? Sure," Hermione replied. "But why ask me? Lavender is really good at Transfiguration."

"She's in hospital again, as is Parvati. They were hexed by Travers yesterday in the corridor by the Ravenclaw common room," Ginny said, then added softly, "We heard from my brothers."

Terry and Neville pulled the other two chairs over to the window as Ginny plopped down on the floor, holding a cushion.

"Which ones? You have several?" Hermione asked, watching Cillian from the corner of her eye.

"You know, Fred and George. They said to tell you hello," Ginny said with a big smile. "They sent me this." She handed her a slightly singed envelope from George.

Hermione extracted the letter. It was written on the back of a piece of parchment that had a picture of the twins in their magenta robes, holding bright yellow boxes with a wide blue stripes, that had been taken inside the shop. The letter was written in bright green letters at the bottom of the page. Hermione read the letter, smiling at the comments about Fred and Angelina becoming engaged, and the assurances that the family was well. Mrs. Weasley was worried about Ginny because of all the missives she'd received from school. She turned the parchment over and continued reading. No word yet from Ron, but that was expected. Lee was now a full time employee. Remus and Tonks were expecting, as was Fleur. George promised to get Ginny a pair of compacts and helpful hints on secret passages... "Gin, be careful – someone could read this," she whispered, handing back the letter.

"Won't do them any good. Watch," Ginny said with a mischievous smirk and drew her wand. "Missive received," she whispered while tapping the parchment. The writing changed to that of an advertisement for Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes' newest Wonderwizard products. "It's a bunch of things like Anti-Shaving Foam, Nose-Hair and Ear-Hair Chews, Hairy-Body Wash, Love n' Lucky Deodorant, Stand-on-end Shampoo, and Smoking Cigars and such." She folded it up and slipped it into her pocket.

"So, are you going to help me?" Charlene asked.

Hermione shrugged. "All right, show me."

Terry looked like he was going to be sick, but he stood up and faced Charlene with a determined stance. She took aim and said *Creofficere cuniculus*, with a wide jerky wand movement. Terry shrunk in size, grew whiskers, his nose and ears changed into that of a rabbit's, and he had fur, but the rest remained the same. He opened his mouth in protest and emitted a high-pitched squeak.

Ginny fell over laughing.

"I'm pitiful," Charlene moaned while Hermione reversed the peculiar transformation.

Terry swung his arms behind him to stretch and then rolled his head side to side. "I hate that feeling!"

"Too bad you lose your mind when you transform, otherwise it'd be right helpful," Neville whispered, and Ginny gave him swat on his leg to be quiet.

"It's your pronunciation and your wand movement," Hermione said. Hermione repeated the proper pronunciation until Charlene got it right, as Ginny, Terry, and Neville practiced it too. "Good, now the wand movement is a sharp, round flick of the wrist that makes a wide oval."

"Here," Ginny said, holding out her wand to Hermione, as both Terry and Neville tried the wand movement.

Cillian glowered at her as Hermione demonstrated the proper sweep of the wand.

"Hermione," Cillian growled a warning from across the room.

"Relax. It's not as if I'm going to turn you into a rodent," she said to Cillian, then demonstrated the movement again for Charlene. It took several demonstrations for Charlene to get the wrist movement down. Terry was still flipping his wrist too much, but Neville finally caught on.

"Now, when you say the words, you have to have the image of the mammal, in this case a rabbit, in your mind, all of it, anatomical parts as well as the external ones. Like this." Hermione took aim and made the movement, careful to keep her magic reined in. Ginny's wand seemed to hum slightly as the core reabsorbed the magical energy of the spell. "Now you try."

Terry squared his shoulders as Charlene stood up and had another go. This time he shrunk half his height, his eyes, nose, ears, and hands changed, was covered with fur, and he actually grew a tail.

"I'm hopeless," Charlene groaned as Hermione turned Terry back into his human form.

"You're flourishing your wand too much," Ginny pointed out, trying to hold back a smile, watching Terry stretching his neck and jaw.

"You almost had him that time," Hermione said encouragingly.

Charlene then tried the spell again, this time with little more success. "I did it! But he looks like a rat!"

"Well, he looks more like a deformed opossum," Ginny pointed out as Hermione reversed the spell. "I think you should know that we are still recruiting," Ginny whispered to Hermione. "Neville and I sneaked down to a room near the kitchens to meet up with some of the Hufflepuff DA recruits. Unfortunately, we got caught by Amcyus sneaking back to the dorm, but it wasn't too bad."

Neville simply shrugged as if it hadn't been anything at all. "Yeah, Seamus and Janilynn meet with Luna and Michael and the new Ravenclaw DA members in a classroom near the Ravenclaw tower. Seamus covered for Janilynn so she could get away when they were stopped by Alecto. He was given a detention with Filch. Seamus told me all the Ravenclaw members still have their DA Galleons."

Charlene tried transfiguring Terry again. This time with better results, except that he was three feet tall.

"You need to watch yourselves, especially now with all the Death Eaters in the castle. You know it's not safe, right?" Hermione warned them as she reversed the spell.

"Neville has been making sure all members still have their DA Galleons, and I've been making more for the new members," Ginny said softly.

Suddenly, from down below in the Headmaster's office, Alecto's shrill voice could be heard. "They're sneaking out at lunch and at night, leaving their graffiti on the walls. There was more contraband smuggled into the castle, and we still don't know how they did that! You are not preventing the defacement of the walls, and the students are still skiving my classes."

Neville leaned toward Hermione. "People are still having outbreaks of fevers, boils, nose bleeds, and various hexes. The hospital is overflowing."

Hermione was shocked as her friends moved closer to the stairs. "They're still skiving class? Even after Severus' warnings?"

"Of course, wouldn't you, if you didn't have to answer to Professor Snape?" Terry asked, straining to hear what was being said in the office below.

"Hardly anyone was in Muggle Studies or Dark Arts yesterday. I forecast it will be the same Monday," Ginny said with a smirk.

Down in the office, Alecto was starting to sputter as she continued to rant. "Enough of this, Alecto," Severus shouted. "I've had enough of your tantrum. If you are not able to conduct your classes, I'm sure that a replacement can be found." There was a pause before he added, "Students with Skiving Snackbox symptoms or caught in open defiance or defacing property will be given detention with Filch."

"He'll be delighted," Hermione heard Cillian sneer.

"He has better means of discipline. Using the chains and shackles for gross insubordination—" Amcyus started to say, but Severus cut him off.

"That is pending approval by the school governors and the Dark Lord." His voice grew softer. Hermione sucked in her breath. She knew about the rumors of those chains, everyone did. She strained to hear, but Severus had a tendency to lower his voice when really angry, and his voice wasn't carrying well to where they stood.

"I know it's that Longbottom boy – he's their leader," Amcyus snarled, stammering a bit in anger. "It's on the walls – it's him doin' it."

"How do you know it's him?" Cillian asked.

"Of course it's him!" Alecto snapped. "Those words were just put up – the paint, or whatever they are using, is still fresh!"

"Not today he didn't," Cillian answered calmly. "Besides, MacCavish took charge today. I can't say when the vandalism was done, but Longbottom and his friends were being watched, and you know MacCavish, Rowle, and Travers were tailing them."

Hermione turned to glance at her friends. *That's why he kept me here.*

Alecto protested, "He defaced the walls with those—"

"Couldn't have. He's here," Cillian stated, and Hermione sucked in her breath.

She'd hoped to get her friends out without any confrontation.

Severus stern response of, "Here?" made her swallow with nervousness.

"He's been here with Hermione all afternoon, ever since lunch. Mr. Boot, Miss Weston, and Miss Weasley, too," Cillian said. "MacCavish escorted them here himself."

The sound of Severus' boots on the stairs made her grab Ginny's and Terry's arms to draw them away before they were caught eavesdropping.

Severus entered the room and glared at her and her friends. "You, Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Boot, you will both report to Mr. Filch's office. Mr. Gwynek, make sure they get there."

Cillian nodded and motioned the boys leave with him.

Severus turned his attention to the girls. "Miss Weston, I suggest you leave."

Charlene rushed past Severus and down the stairs as Severus blocked Ginny from doing the same. "Miss Weasley, you'll wait in my office for my return. Do not leave," he said with a deadly cool tone.

Ginny nodded, quietly followed him down the stairs, and she waited with Hermione in the Headmaster's office while Severus followed the Carrows out. When the door closed, she turned to face Hermione and pulled her close to whisper in her ear. "George told me how to get out of the castle. With all the Death Eater's in Hogsmeade, the one-eyed witch passage is out, as is the one under the Whomping Willow to the Shrieking Shack, but just down the corridor from Binns' old office is a staircase that has a large crack in the wall near the base of the stairs. That's why Charlene and Seamus have been practicing turning me into a rat. If either of them gets it right, I should fit through just fine, and they will turn me back."

Hermione was alarmed by Ginny's determination to leave the school, and she didn't understand why Charlene and Seamus were helping Ginny and not Lavender. Hermione leaned close to Ginny and whispered, "But I know Lavender can do the spell, why won't she—"

Ginny turned her head. "Lavender's in a bad way. She'll be in the hospital at least two weeks if not longer," Ginny whispered back.

"So, wait!" Hermione touched Ginny's arm in alarm and leaned close to her ear. "Neither Seamus nor Charlene can do it, Gin!"

Ginny shrugged nonchalantly and turned her head so she could answer in a whisper. "Then I'll ask Claudia Ramirez to do it or see if Della Maggiora or Immodine Clearwater can... They're in your class right? Anyway, the plan is for Terry, Michael, and Ernie to cause a diversion elsewhere, and Neville is going to stand watch..."

"Gin, just don't get caught, all right?" Hermione whispered in Ginny's ear.

"Oh, right, like we won't be careful." Ginny paced the office, looking at the portraits while Hermione sat comfortably in one of the chairs. "So, do you think they're really asleep?" she asked, walking along the bookshelf behind Severus' desk.

Hermione looked up at the sleeping portraits. "I suppose so, they are normally like that."

She lifted down Gryffindor's Sword and admired the engraving on it again. "This really is beautiful. Imagine, all these years, and it looks like new."

"I'm sure it's been well cared for," Hermione said, pointedly ignoring Professor Black's grumble about impertinent students taking such liberties with the Headmaster's artifacts. Hermione pointed at his picture as she placed a finger on her lips.

Ginny turned to face Hermione, still holding the sword in front of her. "I checked in the library, and I was right; goblin-made steel will imbibe things that make it stronger." She looked closer at the blade, and Hermione hoped she wouldn't cut herself. "So, since Harry killed the Basilisk with this, it must have absorbed some of the Basilisk venom!"

"You and I know he did," Hermione said, wondering why Ginny was so curious about whether the sword had imbibed the venom.

"Harry used a fang to kill the thing in the diary..." The girls both turned their heads toward the door at the sound of stone grating against stone. Ginny quickly put the sword back on its mount and stood with her hands behind her back as Severus opened his door.

Severus narrowed his eyes at Ginny standing behind his desk.

"Ginny was admiring the sword again," Hermione confessed. "It really is an amazing artifact."

"Yes, it is. Miss Weasley, how are your brothers' products getting into the castle? Never mind," he said, holding up his hand when Ginny opened her mouth to protest. "I'm certain you'll only tell me you have no idea. Tell them this from me: *If* I find out – so will the Dark Lord. He is already aware of their extensive inventory, and the shop is being watched. Just because they're being allowed to remain open, doesn't mean that they're not above suspicion – none of your family is. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," Ginny replied, trying to look sincere.

"You may go," Severus stated.

Ginny waved good-bye to Hermione and let herself out. Severus sighed and turned to leave.

Hermione rose to follow him. "Severus, it isn't fair to punish Neville and Terry. They didn't do anything," Hermione stated, but he was already at the stairs.

"Leave it, Hermione; I'm tired," he said as he mounted the first step.

She placed a hand on his arm. "The Carrows – they blame everything on Neville, and it's not—"

He turned around. "It's insubordination, Hermione, and I cannot simply allow the students to skive off lessons without there being consequences..."

"I know that," she admitted.

"... and I certainly can't allow them to deface school property. If you defy authority, there are consequences. If you break the rules, destroy, or deface school property, you are punished for it. Your friends are the ones causing trouble."

"But they—"

"And if I can't get control of them, things can and will get ugly. Do you want that, Hermione? Because *can* get ugly," he sneered, turned, and bounded up the stairs for the sitting room.

"What about the chains and shackles?" Hermione asked as she followed after him. "You can't mean to allow Filch to use them on students? Severus, you can't!"

He turned when he realized she was standing behind him. "Of course, he could. So far I've been lenient, but that can't last for long unless your friends – this Dumbledore's Army – cease their shenanigans and—"

"But you didn't even try to single out who did it," she said, inadvertently interrupting him. "The Carrows—"

"Want to control the punishments. Who else would write Dumbledore's Army on the wall other than those in the group? The Dark Lord wants me to get control of the school, and the students that are rebelling," he stated flatly.

"But those chains – they're barbaric!" she pleaded.

"Give me a little credit, Hermione. He isn't using them on your friends today – they are cleaning the graffiti off the walls instead. But believe me, Filch has much worse than

mere shackles and chains. Now drop it," he snarled, turned and disappeared up the stairs to the bedroom.

Hermione watched him go in surprise. *So that's why he escorted them down to Filch's office, so Filch wouldn't put Neville and Terry in chains?* If she didn't know better, she'd swear he was showing his protective side again. She hurried up stairs to ask him, realizing he had stripped on the way to the bathroom, and heard the water in the shower running.

She quickly stripped her robes and entered the shower.

Severus had his head bowed as he let the water pour over his back, his hands on the wall. She pulled the flannel off the towel bar and picked up the soap. He turned his head, straightening up when he realized she was behind him. "What do you want?" he asked, turning to face her.

"Hands up," she said, holding the flannel in one hand and his soap in the other.

"This isn't going to change my mind." He raised one eyebrow as he placed one hand up on either side of the shower, watching her as she lathered up the flannel then started to wash his front.

"What would?"

"Hermione."

Looking up at him, she made slow circles with the flannel on his stomach. "I remember when you barked at me to do this for you," she said.

His stomach muscles tightened when she ran her finger over the scar. "I was hurt and needed your assistance."

She stood on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I know. It terrified me to see you hurt."

He smirked as she worked her way down, avoiding his groin, and washed his legs. "So, if not to use your wiles on me to change my mind, why the special treatment?"

"I wanted to," she said softly, looking up at him from a crouched position. His penis twitched as Hermione slowly worked her way up, swirling her fingers on his skin until she stood in front of him again. "Okay, turn around – backside." With a slight narrowing of his eyes, he complied, placing his hands on the wall ahead of him. A low moan escaped his throat as Hermione washed his back, dragging her nails on his skin softly with the soap. Hermione grinned mischievously as she secured his hands to the tiles with a wandless charm and continued to wash him.

Severus' eyes closed in pleasure as her hand slid around to his groin, and she gently caressed his length. A small laugh escaped as he turned his head, trying to look at her. "You aren't going to break it."

"I didn't want to hurt you," she said, standing slightly behind him to his right as she started rubbing her soapy hand between his legs and fondling his balls from behind. Reaching around with her other hand, she stroked his penis.

"Stop," he said, trying to move his hands. "No. Hermione, release me," he demanded, trying to pull his hands free. The warning tone, almost a growl, would have normally frightened her, but she felt empowered knowing that he was helpless under her hands.

"I don't think so," she replied, smirking as she slid her hand between his legs again, stroking his balls as her other hand caressed his length. His sharp intake of breath thrilled her. "You really want me to stop this?" she asked, giving him a slight squeeze.

He growled, although his penis jerked in her hand, and his eyes were clouded with lust. "No. Don't do that," he said throatily.

"Don't do what, this?" she asked, withdrawing her hand slowly, palm first, gliding her fingers over his balls. "Or this," sliding her fingers forward until she could grasp the base of his penis.

"Merlin's balls," he growled throatily, his eyes closing slightly, and his head rolled back.

"No, your balls, actually," she purred. She kept repeating the action several times, watching him to ensure he liked what she was doing in spite of his demands to cease. His knees bent as his hands pressed more firmly against the wall, and his sac in her hand seemed to tighten up. He made a deep, feral growl as he came in her hand, shooting against the shower wall. She released her charm as his seed washed away down the drain.

He grabbed her around her waist and pulled her onto his lap as he said, "Tease."

"But you looked like you liked it!" she exclaimed, her voice rising a bit when his fingers stroked her side.

"Oh, I liked it; but why did you?" He was grinning contentedly, but the lust in his eyes was making her squirm.

"Payback, I suppose," she replied, brushing a strand of hair from his face.

His mouth descended to her breast. "For?"

"How you make me feel; what you do to me," she replied. He moved her legs, turning her back to him, and making her straddle him with one leg on either side of his.

"Hmm," he purred against her ear as his hand slid to her groin. "My turn." Hermione closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulder as his fingers found her clit, and he kissed her neck.

~oOo~

Because of Ginny's plan of having either Seamus or Charlene help her sneak out of the castle to get the mirrors, Hermione spent as many evenings as she could in the common room, helping them practice transforming each other into squirrels. Hermione thought that being a squirrel would be better for Ginny in case she needed to climb over anything, and the form would suffice for when Professor McGonagall switched to rodents next week. That, and Charlene liked squirrels much better than rats.

Seamus was doing much better, even if he didn't get the size quite right, but he had a hard time reversing the spell. Charlene was trying, and definitely understood the concept and theory, but she had trouble with the spell.

Unfortunately, Ginny was stuck mid-transformation, again, and Cillian had to carry her to the hospital wing to have her sorted out. However, Ginny already had to go to the hospital wing the day before to have Madam Pomfrey sort her out, as well as two days before that, so today's accident really upset the Healer. "Mrs. Snape, you may go," the Healer snapped.

Hermione nodded, turned on her heel, and slowly walked out of the room. Cillian caught up to her by the time she'd slipped out the door. "Leaving without me?" he snarled.

She turned her head to look at him. "I was walking slowly, and you heard Madam Pomfrey, she dismissed me."

"There is no real application for that spell except to get rid of someone. It's not at all like Animagus transformation," he said.

Hermione had no intention of telling him why it was so important.

She'd been reading a lot about Animagus transformation, the spell, and the forms one could assume. There was a lot of speculation regarding how one could predetermine their animal form. Some said it would be the same as their Patronus, others said it was one's animal spirit manifesting itself in the transformation, and some used tealeaves. If it was the same as their Patronuses, she'd be an otter, but Ginny would be a horse. *Definitely too large to fit through a crack in a wall* Hermione had frequently wondered when James, Peter, and Sirius had learned how to transform into their Animagi forms. She looked up at Cillian and shrugged. "No, there isn't, it's like turning someone you hate into a toad."

"Precisely," he growled, "so why do it? You manage it well enough in class, but other than that – I didn't think you were the type, and certainly not the kids you hang around with. They are all the..." He paused as if searching for the word he wanted. "Nice kids. Sure they do a few defacements and are somewhat defiant, but they're do-gooders."

Hermione pretended to think on what he said before saying, "It's taught in class, and it's fun doing spell work with my friends."

He frowned, dragged her back to the Headmaster's office, and told Severus that he needed some time to himself; then he turned and slammed the door closed.

"Do you mind telling me what you did to anger him?" Severus asked.

"Ginny got hurt, and he carried her to the hospital." Hermione shrugged. "We were practicing a Transfiguration Charm in the small classroom on the fourth floor. I think he was annoyed about it."

Severus' dark eyes narrowed as he studied her face. "Go up stairs and read something. I'll ask Cillian later."

Hermione turned on her heel slowly and walked as casually as she could across the office, knowing he was still glaring at her behind her back. She knew that he'd find out what happened from Madam Pomfrey, but at least *she* hadn't lied to him.

Friday in Transfiguration, they had to demonstrate changing each other into mammals again for Professor McGonagall. Draco easily did the spell, changed her into a ferret again, but Hermione wished he hadn't turned her back into herself so quickly. She found she really enjoyed the feeling of being a ferret, even more than Draco hated it. Lavender was still in the hospital, but Hermione knew she'd be able to do it once she was out. Seamus and Parvati were doing much better, both doing the transformation well enough, and Charlene even managed the spell, even if Parvati looked more like a large possum with a snub tail than a rabbit. Hermione noticed that some of the students couldn't do the reversal right. Hermione helped Isabel reverse the spell on her twin sister, Morag MacDougal, before it was their turn to demonstrate it, and then helped Daphne Greengrass turn Adriana Whitehall back into herself, even complimenting Daphne on how well she managed the transformation.

"What, didn't you think a pure-blood could do it, Mudblood?" Blaise Zabini asked, and Pansy snickered.

"Nah, Daphne is just slumming, hoping that the Mudblood could become acceptable just because she's hand-fastened to the Headmaster."

"She's now his wife," Adriana stated, and Daphne touched her arm in warning. Adriana turned to look at Daphne. "He was Head of our house for fifteen years, and regardless of her status, she would've been accepted as a Slytherin consort if it weren't for this war."

"She will never be acceptable," Pansy sneered at Daphne.

"Pansy, you and I both know that the Dark Lord walked her down the aisle. He gave her away to Professor Snape," Daphne said her tone cool and aloof. *Our code* dedicates that we accept her if only for that one reason, never mind that she *is* hand-fastened to our ex-Head of House."

"Well, I don't! And you're a fool if you believe that the Dark Lord approves of her. He gave her to Professor Snape as a toy – an amusement," Pansy sneered. "And nothing else."

"Is there a problem, girls?" Professor McGonagall asked, walking over to them.

"No, Professor," Daphne and Adriana said as Pansy turned and walked away.

When the bell rang, Hermione collected her things and followed Cillian from the classroom. Theodore Nott and Glenwynn caught up to them before they reached the stairs. "Mrs. Snape, thank you for helping them," he said politely.

"Daphne and Adriana?" Hermione asked, surprised and confused by his gratitude. It was the first time he'd ever spoken to her.

"Yeah," he said.

Hermione shrugged. *No, Daphne usually wasn't; but then the Slytherin girls had always been rude to me – except this year. Glenwynne's friends are much nicer... friendly...* "No problem, I was glad to help," Hermione said.

"Not all of us in Slytherin think like Pansy does," Glenwynn stated, getting a warning glance from Nott. "In fact, Daphne shouldn't have said what she did, but it's true. Well, it was before this war. You understand, right?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, well, I suppose I do. I mean, you Slytherins are more formal about traditions than the other houses," she said as she started walking up the stairs.

Glenwynn fell into step with her, and Nott and Cillian followed.

"Severus and Cillian have tried to tell me about some of the formalities, but I don't know all of them very well," Hermione admitted, remembering Cillian's reaction about her extending the invitations to the tea to include her friends.

Glenwynn smiled. "Don't worry, Hermione, I'll guide you when necessary. But do be careful around Pansy; she's still jealous that Malfoy spends his time with you. In fact, they're not together this year, and she's unhappy about it. I think Zabini is trying to woo her. Are you headed to the library? I'm supposed to meet my friends; you can join us if you'd like?"

Hermione shrugged and joined Glenwynn, Felicia, and Daphne at one of the large tables in the library. When Glenwynn and Felicia got up to retrieve books, Hermione asked Daphne why she was being friendly with her this year. "I thought you were friends with Pansy and Millicent? You always snubbed me before, and now it's like you're completely different."

"Parkinson and Bulstrode are keeping company with Zabini and Crabbe these days. I'm afraid I'm a gooseberry," Daphne stated. "Besides, I'm not on good terms with Crabbe anymore."

"But Crabbe and Goyle are Draco's mates, aren't they?" Hermione asked, curious.

Daphne shook her head. "No, well, Goyle occasionally hangs around Malfoy, but Crabbe is now mates with Zabini, and Mr. Bulstrode and Crabbe's father are in negotiations for Crabbe to marry Millicent when they leave Hogwarts in June."

Hermione turned around to glance at the Slytherins, turning back quickly when Crabbe glared at her. "So that's why Goyle looks lost half the time," she remarked.

Felicia set down an armload of books as Daphne said, "Yep, so you have noticed."

"Yeah, I've noticed," Hermione said.

"So has Theodore," Daphne said with a smirk.

Hermione didn't know why Nott wouldn't, he was in Slytherin, but what confused her was why Daphne mentioned it. She drew her book closer to read the text, her mind pondering the implications of Daphne's words. *Nott noticed a rift between Draco and Goyle. Why would he care? He wasn't mates with either bloke as far as I could tell. And why isn't Daphne on good terms with Pansy or Crabbe anymore? Is it because she was now friends with Glenwynn, Felicia, Tracey, and Adriana? She used to be friends with Pansy, McFaul, and Millicent. Just like the sixth-year girls: Astoria, Catherine, Amanda, and Jean are friends, where as Baddock, Pritchard, and Cavish are... Slytherin is divided! This war has divided Slytherin!*

She looked up and saw Ravenclaws Isabel and Morag MacDougal talking to Glenwynn. They were leaning forward, heads slightly drawn together as if whispering. *Interesting.*

When the bell tolled for the end of the last class period, Cillian got up from his chair by the door and walked over to stand behind Hermione. "Time to go," he stated.

Hermione was already packing up her things. Glenwynn, Felicia, and Daphne packed up as well, walking with Hermione as they left the library, chatting about the next phase of the animal transformations – human to medium-sized mammal transformation. "I hope she lets us do cats," Felicia stated. "I love cats."

"Tried that – the hairballs are horrible. I may opt for a dog," Hermione stated, getting a sudden shiver down her spine as she recalled her Polyjuice mishap five years ago.

"You did it already?! When?" Daphne asked, clearly shocked by the pronouncement. The other two girls looked just as astounded.

"In my second year..." Hermione didn't really want to explain how she changed into a cat, but she couldn't have them just believe that she'd mastered the complicated transformation either.

"You can show us how to do the transformation," Daphne suggested, clearly eager to give the spell a go.

Hermione blushed, unable to meet the girl's eyes. "It wasn't the spell – it was Polyjuice... I mistook cat hairs for human and turned into a huge cat."

To her surprise, Daphne smiled, amused, but didn't laugh at her. "An honest mistake, I'm sure... Wait!" she exclaimed, stopping suddenly and looking at her in shock. "You brewed Polyjuice Potion – in your second year?"

Hermione was certain that her face was glowing red; her cheeks felt like they were flaming hot. "Well, yes..." She was just about to explain when she heard a loud shriek of, "Cillian!" from the bottom to the stairs that led to the second floor.

"Shite," he swore and quickly drew Glenwynn aside. "Take Hermione back to the library. Don't let any of the security officers or the Carrows see her. I'll be there shortly – and run," he ordered the stunned girl. Glenwynn nodded and grasped Hermione's arm to draw her away, Felicia and Daphne closing in behind them.

"But why?" Hermione asked Cillian over her shoulder.

"If my sister is here on the second floor, that can only mean trouble. Let me see what she wants and warn Severus," he replied and hurried down the steps as the girls pulled Hermione away with them.

*

Cillian raced down the stairs as quickly as he could. He had known that Belinda was supposed to come to Hogwarts that afternoon; he'd even tried to avoid her. He didn't want to be reminded of the matchmaking she was doing for him, well, to him. She was still hell bent on him marrying the Roquewood chit.

She supposedly came to pick up some parchments from Severus for the Dark Lord, and he'd hoped that she'd just leave after. In fact, Severus had arranged a meeting with the security officers that afternoon and then one with Filch afterwards so he wouldn't have to entertain her.

However, there she was, lurking on the second floor landing, not a stone's throw from the stone gargoyle to Severus' office. "Bell," he said in greeting. "I thought you'd gone."

"Not a chance, I wasn't going to miss seeing my baby brother. It's been ages!" she exclaimed.

"It's been two weeks, Bell," he reminded her. "You insisted that I come down to have drinks with you at the Three Broomsticks, remember?"

"Oh, and we must do that again real soon," she purred, looping her arm with his and trying to steer him toward the gargoyle. "How about tomorrow?"

"I am busy, Bell," he stated as he, instead, steered her toward the stairs. He managed to overpower her enough to make her walk down the stairs with him, ignoring her petulant pout. "And I'm pretty sure that Severus is otherwise occupied."

"I was thinking that we could do lunch: you, me, Larissa Roquewood, and maybe Severus," she said coyly with a girlish smile.

He snorted, sneering at her tactics. They never had the effect on him she thought they did. "As you know, Severus is running a school and has his ~~wife~~ wife residing with him in his tower. And I have to be in the castle, not out entertaining some girl," he stated firmly as he escorted her to the Entrance Hall.

"Oh, don't be silly, Larissa Roquewood's a lovely young woman. Why just the other day she mentioned that Sylvester Rosier, Junior had shown an interest in her."

Good! He can have her. "I will try to make arrangements with Severus, but don't count on my attending unless I send you word that I can. I mean it, Bell," he warned her sternly. Not that it ever did any good. "Don't drag the girl here if I tell you I can't go."

Belinda stopped and turned to face him, her expression now angry. "If you don't make an effort she's going to chose someone else. The girl is pretty, wealthy, well connected, and wants to be married. What is your problem? You can't do better."

I have done better. "I'll think about it, Bell."

"Now, how about I join you and Severus for dinner?" she asked in her going-to-pretend-to-be-pleasant voice.

Cillian laughed at her. "Sure, only Severus will be seated in the center of the staff table in the Headmaster's chair. I'm sure Professor Hagrid would love to have you sit on the end by him, or you could sit next to Professor Hooch – unless you want to sit with Hermione and me at the Gryffindor table."

Her smile instantly faded. "Fine," she snapped and turned to leave. "I will expect you next Saturday, then."

"Don't count on it," he grumbled as he watched her exit the castle, her shoulders back and her back rigid. Smirking, he ran up to the library, taking the stairs two at a time to retrieve Hermione.

Author's notes:

The bits about the Holocaust were from a discussion my beta, EverMystic, and I had, quoting stuff from several places on the internet we were using while deciding which points Hermione might use. Unfortunately, I didn't keep all my references.

The Latin used, Creofficere cuniculus, comes from the Norte Dame English to Latin translator that I always use:

creo: to make, create, produce; to elect to an office

fficere: to do, produce, effect, make; of results, [to bring about, cause

cuniculus: a rabbit, cony

Swords and Books

Chapter 28 of 43

Alecto and Amycus are as horrible as ever, Hermione manages a wondrous feat, Ginny and Luna take a huge risk, and Severus does something unexpected.

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood and Dungeon_Butterfly, for reading this over for me and to thedoughmatron and Dandru, for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to DuchessOfArcadia for my lovely banner! I really love it, doll.

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### Swords and Books

Cillian had been in a bad mood all weekend. He'd been gone for a long time on Saturday, which had meant that Hermione had been trapped in the sitting room with Draco all afternoon. Apparently, Draco was still angry with her, but they'd worked on their essays at opposite ends of the enlarged coffee table in relatively amicable silence.

On Wednesday, several owls carrying the monthly delivery of *The Quibbler* swooped into the Great Hall with the morning post owls, dropping one in front of Ginny, Jenny, and Neville. Hermione looked around, noticing that nearly every member of the DA had received a copy. The headline on the front page read, '*You-Know-Who is using Hogwarts to recruit our children.*'

Jenny showed the article to Janilynn, and Ginny angled the tabloid so that Hermione could read it as well. Hermione made a quick glance at Cillian, but he was eating his eggs, apparently unconcerned about what Mr. Lovegood may have printed in *The Quibbler*. The article stated that the Carrows were posing as teachers, and the four Death Eaters at the school were really there to entice the students to join You-Know-Who's youth league of Death Eaters called the Dark Lord's Knights.

Ginny turned the page when Hermione nodded to her that she'd reached the bottom. 'Support Harry Potter' was printed boldly on the top of the next page, and the next. "He also lists those who have gone missing from their homes and businesses," Jenny pointed out. "*Let's Not Forget Our Families, Friends, and Neighbors* column it's on page seven."

An article on the fifth page stated that the Ministry of Magic Public Relations and Communications Office had banned all wireless broadcasts and shut down all publications until further notice, '*or until suitable replacements of staff can be found.*' Mr. Lovegood called the *Daily Prophet*, '*a publication of inane propaganda that gives its readers a steady diet of outlandish assertions, falsifications, and distortions which over time can make a certain impression on one's mind and often misleads.*'

Listen to this," Ginny said, reading, "'Morgund Runcorn, acting on behalf of Minister Pius Thicknesse, has demanded the removal of hundreds of Ministry officials, those who are 'of impure blood,' to be replaced by 'approved members of wizarding society.'

"Oh, no! Listen. 'Minister Thicknesse urged the newly appointed Aurors 'to make decisive actions' and warned that those who didn't would be severely punished.' The Aurors are now authorized to use the Imperius and Cruciatu... They can't be serious?" Jenny asked, dropping her hands and looking at Hermione and Ginny over her copy of the paper. "They're using Unforgivables! You've got to be kidding me!"

"Of course they are, You-Know-Who is in charge of the Ministry now," Stephanie stated from beside Jenny.

"Her dad is going to get into loads of trouble over this," Hermione whispered, glancing up at the Carrows at the staff table.

"Right, except it's crammed between the article of a Kelpie sighting in the River Thames and a hag's claim that her sister is responsible for causing the northern lights."

Hermione turned to glance at Severus, but his attention was directed toward Alecto. The stocky, little witch was brandishing a copy of *The Quibbler* at him, and he, in turn, looked murderous. "They may be in charge, but I bet he doesn't want his activities exposed this way," Hermione said.

"He'll be fine. You-Know-Who doesn't take Luna's father seriously," Stephanie said as Ginny put her copy of the publication into her bag.

\*

Alecto's lecture that morning actually included some factual information: she talked about Pope Innocent VIII and his Papal bull, *Summis desiderantes affectibus*. The papal bull had been the cause of a long period of witchcraft suspicions, persecutions, and witch trials which had led to the arrests and inhumane torture of anyone suspected of using 'the black arts,' who demonstrated odd behaviors, or was merely well versed in healing herbs and poultices, whether they had true abilities or not. So, naturally, real witches and wizards, everyone with true magical abilities, went into hiding and formed their own culture underground. This, of course, formed the foundation for the current wizarding world.

She handed out a pamphlet that had obviously been penned by someone else since the penmanship was neat and precise. "Now, finally, we can reestablish the natural order of how it should be," Alecto announced proudly. "Mrs. Snape no comment or inspiring opinions?" Alecto teased her as she walked over and stopped directly facing her.

Hermione looked up from the pamphlet and shook her head.

"Answer me, girl," Alecto sneered.

Hermione swallowed nervously. "Actually, I think this pamphlet expresses the truth about the bull and its effects on wizarding society very nicely." She hoped that was a safe enough answer.

Alecto leaned down to glare at Hermione almost nose to nose. Her breath reeked of onions and garlic. "I'm aware that the pamphlet is 'true.' What I asked is how you feel about Wizardkind reestablishing the natural order of things and assuming our rightful place as the nobility of humankind."

"I'm told that's what the Dark Lord is striving for, Professor," she said softly.

Alecto straightened and smiled, although her eyes were calculating and cold. "You are bloody right he is," she stated. "But what I asked you is... What do you think about his idea of the natural order for Wizardkind?"

"That I have no place in his world," Hermione said softly with her head bowed.

"No, you don't. You are an affront to us all," Alecto sneered as she flicked her wand, and Hermione's hand shot forward and stuck to her desk. "And so you don't forget it," she said, pulling her ruler from her pocket.

Alecto brought the ruler down hard on the back of her hand so the metal edge cut a slash into her skin. Hermione bit the inside of her cheek to keep from crying out as Alecto hit her again. From the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Cillian jump to his feet when the ruler struck her a third time.

"Alecto, *enough*," Cillian growled, looming over her threateningly as he grabbed her wrist, his brown eyes narrowed dangerously. He turned to face the class. "All of you. Get. Out. Now!" he snarled each word, so much like Severus when really angry that no one faltered, grabbing their things quickly to leave. "Malfoy stay put."

Draco froze and sat back down.

"You cannot dismiss my class!" Alecto shouted. The students stopped and stood, waiting.

"Perhaps. But, I just did," he snapped at her. His brown eyes darkened in fury, and his jaw clenched as if his temper was barely controlled. "The rest of you *OUT. NOW!*" Cillian snarled dangerously, and the rest of the class hurried out of the classroom.

Hermione clutched her bleeding hand to her chest, trying to compress the cut with her other hand, fighting back the tears that threatened to fall.

Draco placed an enlarged handkerchief onto Hermione's lap.

Cillian rounded on Alecto. "You've gone too far, witch."

Alecto recoiled in shock, stammering, "I-I'm allowed to pun-nish her for her her in-insubordination," as she stammered as she struggled against Cillian's grip, but she was unable to free her wrist. "You're hurting me!"

"And you are overstepping your authority," he in a scathing tone, although he didn't remove the vice grip on her wrist. "This will be shown to the Dark Lord, Alecto *na Pensieve*." He looked down at Draco, still seated next to Hermione. "Mr. Malfoy, you will go inform Headmaster Snape, then meet us at the hospital."

Draco rose quickly and left.

"She was insubordinate!" Alecto snarled, trying to maintain her dignity.

"She all but admitted that she will be eliminated after Severus' year with her is up," he snarled and leaned in toward her, stopping only when their faces were a few inches apart, his eyes glaring warningly at her. Hermione could feel the animosity radiating off him and could see the fear in Alecto's eyes even as she struggled to fight back. "So, until the Dark Lord doesn't see any further reason to tolerate her anymore and kills her, we'll have to tolerate her presence. Won't we?"

"He said that I can punish her if she's insolent..." Alecto whimpered, struggling to free her wrist from his grip.

"She was acquiescent and respectful," Cillian snapped at her. His lips curled into a sardonic grin, and he yanked on Alecto's wrist, making her look at him. "She is here only because the Dark Lord wants her under his thumb, thus the reason *I'm* here to watch her," he said with a cruel smirk. "I'm *her gaoler*." He released Alecto's wrist with a forceful shove, which made her stumble and fall. "Hermione, get up," Cillian said, flicking his wand a few times to make her things pack into her bag.

Hermione silently rose to go with him, and he clasped her by the scruff of her robes and propelled her ahead of him. "Ow!"

"Hush!" he hissed.

She glanced over her shoulder, flinching when she saw Alecto behind them. "She's following us," she whispered.

"I know. Keep walking and look dejected," he whispered, grasping her elbow as he propelled Hermione down the corridor toward the hospital wing. Alecto stopped at the bottom of the stairs on the fourth floor. "I'll have to show the Dark Lord what happened," he said softly, loosening his grip. "I'm hoping he will be pleased that you kept your head and didn't talk back. I know I am."

"I suppose I'm just used to her berating me," she replied, tears escaping and sliding down her cheek.

Cillian led Hermione to the nearest empty cot, and Madam Pomfrey hurried over. The kindly matron handed Hermione a dose of Blood-Replenishing Potion and laid a gauze sponge soaked in Dittany on the cuts. She swished her wand over Hermione's hand, making the bleeding slow, clot, and then stop, leaving a long thin scar. "At least the lines will fade in time," she said with a sad smile.

Cillian looked away, his arms crossed and his back rigid.

"Thank you," Hermione said as she wiped her tears away on her sleeve.

"You may wait here until your next lesson, so lie back and rest for a bit," the Healer instructed. "Mr. Gwyneck can go inform the Headmaster and get you a clean robe, and I'll inform Professor McGonagall about the incident."

Cillian's head turned sharply in the direction of the Healer. "He is informed; I sent Mr. Malfoy." The Healer nodded and walked away.

Hermione was feeling better by the time Severus showed up with a fresh set of school robes. Severus asked Cillian what happened as Hermione changed, and she was pleased that Cillian told him the truth. Severus examined her hand when she stepped around the curtain, his thumb gently stroking the thin red scar. "Watch over her," he said to Cillian, still holding onto her hand.

"Count on it," Cillian replied. As she expected, Severus told her to watch herself and to be polite to Amycus when they parted in the corridor.

When Hermione and Cillian entered Defense Against the Dark Arts, Cillian pulled Hermione aside and handed over her wand but didn't release the grip. "Watch yourself. Stay alert, and don't let your guard down." Hermione nodded, and he let go.

Draco looked at her, his eyes actually showing a flicker of concern before he walked to his seat.

Amycus Carrow stood boldly in front of the class. "The Dark Arts ain't different from any other kind of magic, except tha' you have to mean them to make 'em work. The intent is what's important, and you have to be determined just like when you cast other spells, but what you intend is what counts. Say, you wan' to break someone's ankle so tha' the bone snaps, or say you wan' to make someone's hair fall out... Gettin' even is easy, if you know how."

"Which is his way of saying that it's all right to hurt someone if it's for revenge," Neville hissed.

After a quick demonstration with Crabbe, Amycus called Hermione to the front of the room. "Okay, girl, you give it a try."

Hermione's hand still throbbed from Muggle Studies, so it hurt to hold her wand, but she held her wand ready, repeating the incantation in her mind. She barely managed to deflect Crabbe's Whiplash Curse but successfully deflected his Jelly-Legs Jinx; however, his third curse hit her full in the chest. The second time that he attacked her, she couldn't hold her wand firmly enough, and she fell to her knees, retching from the effects of the Furunculous Jinx and Stinging Hex.

"Pitiful," Amycus snarled, reversing the Furunculous Jinx. "You, girl," he said, pointing at Lavender, "git up 'ere and do it."

Lavender reluctantly walked around the desks and approached Hermione's side. "Are you all right?" she asked.

"Watch it; he's not going to hold back on you," Hermione hissed, trying to stand ready despite feeling a bit woozy from the residual stabbing sensations of the Stinging Hex.

Lavender missed Crabbe's modified Tripping Hex, managing to sidestep it instead, but the second hit her squarely, knocking her to her knees. Amycus took his time explaining what she did wrong before reversing the hex. Lavender's ankle made a soft cracking sound as Crabbe's third hex made her stumble. Even before Lavender could stand up, Crabbe fired two more hexes in quick succession: one at Lavender and the other at Hermione, catching Hermione off guard and knocking her across the room.

Hermione fell hard, hitting her head on the bookshelf, feeling like a truck had hit her. The impact knocked several items off the shelves that fell on top of her, including something that contained some type of foul smelling liquid. She slumped to the floor, the room spinning, and fighting the feeling she was going to hurl. Cillian rushed to her from the back of the room at the same time Seamus and Neville jumped from their seats with Neville reaching Hermione a moment before Cillian did, and Seamus rushing over to help Lavender.

"Sure, coddle the chits," Amycus sneered at Cillian. "Longbottom, Finnigan, git back to your seats, now!"

"She's hurt," Neville snapped, holding one of Hermione's arms as Cillian gripped her other to help her sit up.

"You'll be too, if you don't git back to your seat!" Amycus snarled at him.

Neville stood and faced Amycus, his wand held ready. *Fine.*

Amycus' eyes narrowed, and he flicked his wand, sending a nasty curse at Neville. However, Neville had been practicing Shield Charms, and just as quickly, he raised a shield to defend himself, Hermione, and Cillian. Amycus scowled darkly at the tactic.

"Deflection spells, Longbottom, not shields. Fifty points from Gryffindor," he growled, aiming another hex at Neville.

Neville ducked, sweeping his wand to try the Wimbling Deflecting block, so that the hex barely grazed his leg, but the spell hit the wall near Cillian's head. Amycus fired another one, which rebounded off Neville and hit Hermione.

"Enough!" Cillian snapped now brandishing his own wand. "Mr. Longbottom, stop disrupting class and take your seat!" Cillian reversed the hex, motioning Neville to move with his head.

"How is you supposed to know how to block the spell if you cannot do it in me classroom," sneered Amycus as Neville limped to his desk, which made all the Gryffindors angry and several of the Slytherins snicker.

Hermione felt like she was sitting on a boat instead of a stone floor. She was dizzy, and the conversation around her sounded as if she were hearing it through a tin can on a string.

"I'm taking Mrs. Snape to the hospital wing," Cillian announced, scooping Hermione up in his arms. "Mr. Finnigan, you'll bring Miss Brown."

"You'll do no such thing," Amycus snarled.

"Then you would prefer to deal with the Dark Lord?" Cillian retorted with his own sneer.

Amycus glared darkly at him. "The Dark Lord is the one who told me what to teach them."

"Did the instructions include killing or maiming the students?" Cillian snarled angrily.

Amycus simply glared back.

"I didn't think so," Cillian snapped. He turned to leave the classroom, making Hermione's head spin again, causing everything to sway and fade to black.

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The bell on Severus' desk chimed for the third time that hour. "Enter," he barked.

Draco entered the office, still slightly breathless. "You asked me to let you know if Amycus retaliated for what happened in Muggle Studies. Well, he did. Hermione was hurt. She was standing next to Brown when she was hit intentionally—it wasn't an accident," the boy said quickly, then added, "Not that I care, but Amycus dragged Longbottom down to Filch's office, and he has him hung up in Filch's chains," as Severus jumped to his feet, heading for the door.

Severus was not surprised; it was only a matter of time before those inbred half-wits encouraged Filch use his medieval devices. "I asked you to inform me because I knew that if Amycus did that the other members of Dumbledore's Army will retaliate." Severus said as he hurried out and down the stairs with Draco behind him. "I have enough to do without rooting out insurgents!" He turned to go to the hospital to check on Hermione.

"Where are we going? I thought we were going to go rescue Longbottom?" Draco asked.

"To check on Hermione first. Filch knows better than to actually maim him," Severus said, his voice steady to conceal his concern. It was the second time today she'd landed in the hospital, and he wanted to assure himself that she'd be all right. "Besides, the delay might get Longbottom to behave." He doubted it, but he was more concerned for Hermione than for Longbottom. "And I want to escort him out of the dungeons to his next class when his little friends might see him."

Draco laughed at the ploy. "Not that it will do any good."

When Severus entered the corridor on the fourth floor, two witches whose portraits hung in the adjoining corridor were huddled around a tree, trying to avoid the Erumpents in the frame. "Headmaster! Oh, Headmaster, help us!" the women in the painting called out to him.

Severus stopped, intrigued. "What in blazes are you doing in there?" he asked, slightly amused by the painted ladies' predicament. The self-healing tree in the frame looked as if the Erumpents had battered it badly because of the witches' intrusion.

A witch in bright yellow robes popped up from behind a sponge moss covered rock. "She's insane, Headmaster; help us! Please," the witch pleaded, making Draco chuckle.

"She's soaking two students against Eledora's portrait," said a witch in a pointed black hat with a wreath of thistles, leaning around the well-battered tree. The Erumpents tossed their heads at the witches in annoyance, and while they weren't attacking at the moment, they looked ready to stampede.

The third witch in lime green robes, Healer Eledora Bittlestrom, leaned around the other side of the same tree. "She's going to make my paints run," Eledora whimpered.

Severus hurried down the corridor, ignoring Draco's inappropriate snickering. Miss Weasley and Miss Wang were both pinned to the wall as Alecto blasted each girl in the face for a few seconds with water jetting from her wand. "Alecto, you cannot use the Aguamenti spell as water torture," Severus said with a sneer, moving closer to the squat witch. "Cease immediately."

"They're lying to me," Alecto snarled, water still gushing from her wand and hitting the girls in the face and chest.

"Not, spft, just, spft, seeing Herm..." Miss Weasley spit out a mouthful of water only to gag on another. Alecto ended the spell. "Tinko and I were coming to see Hermione and Luna in the hospital when..."

"They hung this on the bathroom wall," Alecto snarled, brandishing a wet piece of parchment at Severus.

He snatched it; his eyes narrowed as he recognized it as a copy of the latest DA flyer. He glanced at Draco. "Mr. Malfoy, you may go," he said as he walked over and grabbed Miss Weasley's chin, making her look up at him. Draco hesitated a moment, but Severus glared sidewise at him, and he walked away.

"Did you do this?" Severus asked, adding a softly uttered, *Legilimens*, and quickly grazing her mind as she replied, "No sir," but he saw an image of her handing them out to several people.

"Detention every night this week, Miss Weasley, and fifty points from Gryffindor for lying," he snapped and let go of her chin, ignoring Miss Weasley's angry glare. "Miss Wang, the same goes for you, too. Fifty points will be deducted from Ravenclaw. I suggest you both go to your lessons or your common rooms, and tell your friends that they have detention tonight. Now go." Miss Weasley and Miss Wang took off running as he turned to Alecto. "Alecto, search every bathroom and notice board. I want every one of these flyers in my office."

Alecto squared her shoulders and glared at him. "Of course, Headmaster. But those girls..."

"Will be scrubbing floors all week as will their friends responsible for those flyers," he said. He'd inform Filius about Miss Wang and which of his other charges would be scrubbing floors. He stormed down to Professor McGonagall's classroom, startling the sixth-years. "A word, Professor," he snapped.

"Certainly, Headmaster," she replied curtly, clearly affronted by his interruption. "I expect all of you to review the theory on the board. Quietly," she told her class as she followed Severus out into the corridor.

Severus turned to face Professor McGonagall. "Miss Weasley and Miss Wang were caught by Alecto hanging flyers in the loos," he said, holding up his hand up to stop Professor McGonagall from talking. "Professor, I would like you to oversee the girls' detention every night this week. If you are unavailable, then send them to Hagrid."

Professor McGonagall nodded, but her eyes narrowed, and her lips pursed into a thin line. "Of course, Headmaster. Is that all?" she asked, her tone curt.

Severus paused as Alecto stormed passed them on her way back to her own classroom. "Yes. There will be seven other students as well. I'll give you the list later." He stepped closer to the angry teacher and lowered his voice. "Do not allow *any* of them, under *any* circumstances, to be supervised by Mr. Filch until I'm able to discuss his current use of his shackles and chains with the Heads of Houses."

Professor McGonagall's eyes widened slightly before she regained her composure. "Of course, Headmaster," she said, this time without the sarcasm she'd used before. "I will oversee them myself, as you requested."

He nodded curtly, turned on his heel, and hurried to the hospital to check on Hermione.

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When Hermione woke up, she was lying on a bed with Severus sitting in a chair by her side. He leaned over her, lifted her head, and tilted a cup to her lips. "No... sick to my stomach... my head..." she managed to tell him as she turned her head to avoid drinking anything she knew she'd vomit right back up.

"It's a potion for the nausea, Hermione. Drink it," he said softly, coaxing her to drink.

She looked at him and then took a small sip.

There was a slight twitch of his lips before he said, "More."

She lifted a hand to the cup and drank the potion in small gulps. He filled the cup with another potion. He continued to support her head as she sipped it down as well, then drank the third potion he gave her, finally feeling a bit better. "You have got to watch yourself in the Carrow's classes," he said with a sigh, watching her intently.

"I do!" Hermione gasped, closing her eyes at the pain in her head. "I didn't talk back to Alecto. I was only answering her questions, but she cut my hand anyway..." she tried to say then fell silent. Talking made the throbbing in her head worse. She could tell by his body language that he was furious but she thought she could see concern

in his eyes. "And Amycus, he was letting Crabbe use me as target practice again and he wasn't holding back at all! Then Amycus had Crabbe duel Lavender, but Crabbe was firing his spells too fast and missed hitting me!" She tried to sit up, but the movement made her too lightheaded, and she lay back down. "He caught me off guard! How is that my fault?"

He reached out, using his thumb gently to wipe a drop of potion off her bottom lip. "Do you think I'm uninformed? Draco told me what happened in both classes. You have to know you must hold your tongue and be respectful to the Carrows at all times!" He placed the cup on the table beside her bed.

Hermione closed her eyes, still feeling dizzy. She heard the chair scrape as he moved it.

"Just so you know, MacCavish and Travers are standing guard outside the hospital wing, but Cillian will be here as well. Draco will be here tonight after dinner until curfew. I can't give you a Sleeping Draught because I don't want you so drugged that you can't be woken. But, if either MacCavish or Travers bothers you call Peren. Do you understand me? I can't stay here there is another matter I must attend to."

Hermione opened her eyes. "I'm in danger here in the hospital? They wouldn't dare!"

"Oh, you don't know them like I do," he said quietly. "Rest. Poppy insists on keeping you overnight. I'll be by to collect you tomorrow and take you back to our room. Peren can care for you there." He leaned forward, his elbows on his legs, and laced his fingers together.

Hermione watched him from the corner of her eye. His expression had softened somewhat as he sat with her. "You don't really blame me, then, do you?" she asked.

His expression softened, and he shook his head. "No, I don't think you intentionally provoke them. It's more like someone who hasn't shown a hippogriff the proper respect before approaching it; only you haven't learned what that is yet."

"But, I was only answering her..."

"They are anticipating for you to react, just waiting until you give them even the slightest provocation. It's not easy living under that kind of scrutiny, but you have to try harder." He filled her cup with water and leaned forward to help her drink. "Just play her game, agree with her."

Hermione nodded and closed her eyes. He was only warning her again. He was right; she had to learn to play their game, agree with Alecto, and hold her tongue. "I have a feeling that no matter what I say she'll twist my words around and use them against me," she said with a sigh.

"Most likely, but Cillian and Draco have already been to the manor to speak to the Dark Lord. Hermione, close your eyes and rest. I'll be here for a while," he said as he leaned forward, brushed her hair aside, and kissed her forehead. She watched him thoughtfully as he sat in the chair and crossed his ankles.

His presence was soothing. She closed her eyes and tried to relax. She still felt disorientated, as if the room was moving slowly or being on a boat, but in a calming way. She fell asleep unaware that he'd sat with her until Draco showed up after his last class.

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Severus met with Madam Pomfrey after lunch to discuss the unprofessional disciplinary actions of the Carrows. Her concerns were valid, and he assured her that he'd do what he could to prevent any discipline that might truly harm the students, but she hadn't been placated.

When he returned to his office, after checking on Hermione, an owl pecked at the window. Severus opened the window wide enough to retrieve the letter and cringed at the flourished handwriting of Professor Trelawney that asked to see him immediately. He sent a reply informing the witch that he'd try to visit her that night after curfew, only to appease her, and went to sit with Hermione.

Cillian relieved him so he could make his appearance at dinner; however, Trelawney sent another letter to him at dinner, much to his annoyance. He summoned a house-elf as soon as he returned to his office, and asked the elf, Dobby, to take his reply to her saying that he would come up to see her that night.

When Severus left his office intending to keep his promise to visit the loony Seer, he saw flyers tacked up on the notice boards with large, bold letters that read:

### ***Voldemort and his Muggle Infiltration Defense = Pope Innocent VIII and his Papal bull!***

*Pope Innocent VIII's Summis desiderantes affectibus, was meant to systemize the persecution of witches! It's the same as the decrees sent out by the Muggle Born Registration Committee against Muggle-borns. Pope Innocent VIII authorized two High Inquisitors, Kramer and Sprenger, to carry out the death penalty for those who were presumed to be witches **And Umbridge and Runcorn are Voldemort's High Inquisitors!** Voldemort's issuance of the Muggle Infiltration Defense **legalizes the activities of the Death Eaters and systemizes the capture, persecution, and killing of our families and friends!***

*Learn the truth. Stand up for what's right!*

*Join the cause for fair treatment for all wizardkind!*

### ***Join Dumbledore's Army Now!***

Scowling, he tore the flyer from the wall and incinerated it, then checked the nearest loos, finding the same flyer posted there. And the graffiti was back again on the walls by the main staircases.

*If you don't believe in Witch-hunts, join us! Dumbledore's Army Now Recruiting*

The DA had retaliated. Severus hung his head for a moment, counting mutely to ten, then summoned Mispy, ordering her to tell all the house-elves to remove all the flyers from the walls, and turned on his heel to go visit Hagrid about the detentions.

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Severus went to retrieve Hermione from the hospital at dawn. Even though the house-elves had brought him all the flyers they'd collected last night, and the known members of the DA had spent their evening cleaning all the graffiti off the walls, it was immediately apparent that the DA had retaliated against the Carrow's abuse sometime in the early morning before dawn. The graffiti was back again, and Filch was already collecting the flyers from the loos. He was infuriated by the insubordination and the defacement of the school property, but he understood it as well. Not that he'd ever condone it, but no matter what he tried, he couldn't stop it from happening. And the Dark Lord was unhappy about it, too.

He entered the hospital and stood by Hermione's bed as he watched her sleep. He berated himself for being so harsh with her earlier. He was worried. He knew that Hermione was being as respectful as she could be to the Carrows, but he was concerned because the animosity Alecto had was escalating. Amycus, the brainless, inbred git, followed his sister's example, but no doubt enjoyed taking sport out on her. There was very little Severus could do about the situation. The Dark Lord allowed him to protect her the best he could, but he couldn't show any outward sign of just how much Hermione meant to him.

Her head turned in his direction, the same way she did when they slept together. Then she rolled slightly, seeking him out. She was only restful when she had contact with him or was in his arms. It had disturbed him at first, but now he enjoyed the silent affirmation, even though he wasn't sure if he was ready to believe that she could actually care for him in return. He'd read about Stockholm syndrome and was concerned that she would develop that sort of infatuation, so he kept trying to let her have a normal school year, or as much as he dared under the current situation. She existed in an extreme state of dependence, stripped of nearly all forms of independence. Her affections toward him were only because she was his hostage, totally dependent on him. Their bond only occurring because he was the one who showed her kindness,



and her emotional attachment was only to maximize her need to have him protect her. He silently wished that it could be more, but it was too much to hope that she could actually love him.

It was the same with Cillian; Hermione needed his friendship, an assurance that he'd protect her, and therefore, she followed his rules without complaint. Most of the time anyway. She did on occasion push the limits and test his boundaries, but not too much. The Dark Lord was quite pleased by Hermione's submission to her situation.

Madam Pomfrey carried over a few cards and flowers from Hermione's schoolmates. As was the custom, Poppy had opened all the cards so that no unanticipated trick would be played on her patients. Severus looked at Hermione's cards, frowning at the sentiment Mr. Longbottom had written, then at the remarks written by Mr. Finnigan, Mr. Macmillan, and Mr. Corner. Half her cards were from boys. He had no idea that his wife was so popular with the boys of the school; she certainly hadn't been when she'd been in the hospital her previous years.

He called for a house-elf to collect the tokens from Hermione's friends and lifted her easily into his arms. One of her arms wrapped around his neck, and her head rolled as she buried her face more comfortably on his shoulder. He noticed as he carried her to their room that she'd lost some weight; something he'd have to have rectified. She needed to keep her strength up, and he didn't want her to get ill.

She whimpered sorrowfully as he laid her on their bed in their room and drew away. "Sleep, Hermione," he said softly. "I'll be right here, reading."

She murmured, "All right," and relaxed as she drifted back to sleep. Once again, he was amazed at the trust she had in him.

He picked up a Chocolate Frog and wondered if Hermione would begrudge his eating the candy. It was one of his favorites, although he no longer bothered with the cards. Hermione turned toward him, and he smiled, leaning over her to roll her gently onto her back. "I'm here, Hermione," he said softly, brushing her cheek. "Sleep."

Her lips and head moved slightly as if to say 'yes' again, and her body relaxed. Severus sat in the chair by the bed and watched her sleep. She looked so young and fragile in her sleep, which belied the strong witch she truly was. Her silky curls fanned out on the pillow. He liked the way his shampoo made her hair softer, and the way the bath oils made her skin like satin.

He sat back and shook his head. She was only his until the end of August when he'd have to let her go. Unless this war came to a head before that, then he'd most likely lose her earlier. No, he wouldn't think about that now. He stood to go down stairs to retrieve a book from the shelves.

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Hermione was sitting up in bed, reading her Herbology book, when the door opened, and she saw Jenny, Tinko, and Luna walking in with Cillian.

"Hermione!" Jenny squealed rushing over to the bed. "They said you had a concussion! Are you all right?"

"Ladies."

The girls turned to stare at Severus as he rose to allow her friend to use the chair. "Hermione, I'll be in the sitting room," he said and walked over to Cillian. "Care for a drink?"

"As long as it's not tea or pumpkin juice," Cillian replied, walking out after Severus.

Jenny glanced speculatively at the doorway, as her sister, Tinko, moved aside to let the men leave. "I'm not sure that this is the time, but Ginny wanted me to tell you that she has them."

"Has what?" Hermione asked, setting her book aside.

Luna was watching something out the window. "She slipped out to go see her brothers. I like George; he's nicer than Fred." She turned to look at Hermione. "Oh, I'm not saying Fred is mean to me or anything, but George always said hello."

"The mirrors," Jenny stated softly, barely a whisper. "She slipped out of the castle to see her brothers after lunch to go buy mirrors in London."

"She what?" Hermione hissed and sat up straighter.

"She snuck out. Someone named Avery a Death Eater almost caught her in Hogsmeade. They're all over Hogsmeade now. Anyway, she said that she was Angelina Johnson," Jenny explained, "and Ambrosius Flume helped Ginny escape the Death Eaters by hiding her in his cellar. However, Ginny was caught out in the corridors after hours by Filch, so she has detention, or she'd be here, too."

"Nearly everyone is scrubbing floors now," Luna said, turning to face Hermione. "I like the blue damask bed hangings; they're like the ones on my bed only darker."

"Oh, Luna." Jenny shook her head as she chuckled softly. "Ginny, Seamus, Neville everyone on the DA list has detention every night. Everywhere you go after dinner, the people on Alecto's list are scrubbing floors under the watchful eyes of either the Carrows or one of the Death Eaters," she stated, then leaned closer to Hermione. "Ginny gave a report on the radio! The Potterwatch broadcast. Even though she tried to disguise her voice so no one knew it was her, I could tell."

"What?" Hermione gasped. She glanced at the door, worried that Severus might overhear her.

Tinko turned to look as well.

"Does she still have the mirrors?" Hermione asked. She'd ask Ginny later about the radio broadcast.

"She gave them to me," Jenny said, nodding. "Alecto demanded to know what they were when the Headmaster made me turn out my pockets, but I told her they were just compacts for putting on makeup. Alecto didn't even know what a compact was; she assumed they were Muggle shells and tried to take them away from me. Except Janilynn pulled out *her* magical compact from her bag, and the mirror told her that the shade of lipstick she had on was the perfect shade for her. You should've seen Alecto's face she turned purple with rage."

"The Headmaster, well, he handed them back to Jenny," Luna stated. "He said they were apparently a novelty item, mirrors that don't talk back at you. I didn't know that it bothered you, mirrors that talk. Don't you know the spell that makes them only give compliments? If you don't, I could tell you how to do it."

"Er, yes, I do. I used it on the mirrors in... Harry's house when I stayed there," Hermione admitted, remembering how the Black family mirror in her room used to insult her. "But, that's not what Ginny meant."

"No, I know. Anyway, here they are." Jenny handed Hermione the twin compacts. "So, do you want my wand? Ginny said you'd need to use it."

Hermione couldn't believe she was actually holding two identical compacts. She looked up at her friends. "Do you mind me using your wand?"

"Nope," Jenny stated, handing Hermione her wand with a hopeful smile.

Hermione asked Peren to bring her the notebook with her Charms notes. She flipped to the back pages and read her notes on the research she'd done. She aimed Jenny's wand at one mirror and said, "*Interbipatentis*," with a flick and jab at the reflective surface. Even though Jenny's wand seemed different to her, it responded well enough, but nothing happened. Disappointed, she tried again and again. Sighing, she handed Jenny back her wand. "It's not working. I think I'll have to ask Professor Flitwick about them."

"Well, any time you need it, you may use my wand, too," Luna replied.

That evening, when Peren took Hermione's dinner tray away, Severus tried to give her another Occlumency lesson. Hermione was thrilled that Severus only saw what she wanted him to, but he was furious that he could still see events from her daily activities and said she wasn't even trying.

Monday, Severus kept Hermione out of Muggle Studies, but he allowed her to attend Potions. Draco asked Hermione how she was feeling when she sat down at the worktable.

"I'm fine, Draco," she replied, wondering if he was going to start talking to her again.

After class, he walked beside Hermione and Cillian to the Transfiguration classroom and even opened the door for her. When Professor McGonagall dismissed the class, Draco walked with Cillian and Hermione to her Wizard Language and Literature lessons. "You have revision next, so I'll meet you in the Revision Hall, okay?" he asked.

Hermione merely nodded, silently cursing that she couldn't go up to her room to work on the mirror.

"That's okay, isn't it, or would you prefer the library?" he asked, titling his head slightly to catch her eye.

"No it's fine," she sighed. He shrugged his shoulders and ran away to attend his own lesson.

Hermione watched him go, then smiled wanly to Cillian and entered the classroom. It occurred to her by his actions that Draco might've felt bad about not protecting her from the Carrows. It hadn't been his fault; she fully blamed Alecto's and Amycus' hatred for her, but knew that nothing was going to stop them from torturing her further.

Tuesday before Charms, Hermione tried to talk to Professor Flitwick again, but Cillian followed her to Flitwick's desk and stood too close for her to ask without being overheard, so she asked for clarification on one of the Charms she'd missed because of her concussion.

She tried to talk to Professor Flitwick again after class, but Draco approached them before she had a chance to ask Professor Flitwick about the charms, so instead she asked him to explain a wand movement for the charm they'd done in class.

After Ancient Runes, Hermione spent her revision time in the Gryffindor Common room with Ginny until dinnertime, working on their respective essays while Cillian sat at the table making a paper bird fly about their heads, much to Hermione's annoyance.

That night in Charms Club, Cillian challenged Hermione to see how she would do against him. He was quick and agile, but unrelenting. Twice, when he gave her a break, she looked for Professor Flitwick, annoyed that he always seemed to be across the room from her. Afterwards, Cillian was again standing too close to ask her professor anything.

Ginny and Luna left Charms club with her, chatting about how well everyone was doing.

Cillian stopped behind them in the corridor just shy of the gargoyles. "Go on up," he said and waved her on. "I'll be by before breakfast."

"Do you want to come up?" Hermione asked her friends, pleased when they said yes. "Sphinx moth," she told the gargoyles and led her friends up stairs.

"What did you want to ask Professor Flitwick about?" Luna whispered to Hermione when they were alone on the stairs.

"Transaudient Charms, and if they can be combined with the Conjointment and Protean Charm," Hermione whispered back and sighed. "Damn, I wish I had that book. I'm certain it was in there."

"What book?" Ginny asked, now as curious as Luna.

Hermione shrugged. She led them up to the sitting room and plunked herself down on the sofa. *Transaudient Charms, Reaching Across Distances the Magical Way*. Harry bought it for me the day I disappeared. Oh, and there's one on Transilient Transfiguration, but that might not help much. The library here doesn't have a copy."

Ginny sat on the end of the sofa with one leg tucked under her bum and faced her. "Where are they?"

Hermione sighed. "The Black house, well, I suppose it's Harry's house now."

"Perfect! Luna and I can go get them," she said with a huge grin.

Hermione looked at her in shock. "Gin, it's too risky!"

"What's life without a little risk? You need those books, right? Once we have the mirrors, we can talk to Harry and my brother!" Ginny said excitedly, even though she did have the forethought to keep her voice low.

"But the Death Eaters!" Hermione exclaimed.

"The one-eyed witch passage to Honeydukes," Ginny countered. "I'll contact my brothers, they can meet me there, and we can slip out the back door and Apparate from behind the store."

"And Ginny can take me," Luna said, playing with the fringe on a throw cushion. "I'd like to see Harry's house."

Hermione knew better than to argue, and she really needed the books. "Fine, ask Kreacher for the two books *Transaudient Charms, Reaching Across Distances the Magical Way*, and one on *The Magic of Transilient Transfiguration*," she said, trying to remember the exact title of the book, "or some thing like that. They were on the desk the day I disappeared." Hermione rubbed her face with both hands. "Gods, I cannot believe I'm asking this of you!" She dropped her hands and stared at Ginny. "What if you get caught?"

"We won't. We'll be careful and quick. It'll be fine," Ginny stated with absolute confidence.

Hermione hoped so. They pulled out their books and read together until Severus came up and told the girls to go to their common rooms.

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Wednesday in Dark Arts class, Amycus continued teaching Dark Arts spells, only this time the Slytherins were handed rats to use, while all the Gryffindors were given cats to torment. Crabbe and Goyle had no problem using the Dark Arts on their rats, even laughing as the animals squealed in pain, and Amycus treated them as if they were the top of the class. Parvati didn't want to cast the curses on her cat, so Neville and Seamus tried to help her, and all three received detentions. Hermione didn't have the stomach to torture her terrified orange tabby, so Amycus hit her with a Stinging Hex before giving her detention as well. Lavender tried to curse her longhaired, white cat, but she couldn't put any determination behind the curse. She burst into tears when the cat cried out in pain, petting the feline and apologizing to it. Amycus snarled at her and gave her detention, too. Severus, who was standing at the back of the classroom, instructed all five of them to report to Hagrid after dinner.

In detention, Hagrid had them all revise in his greenhouse. Since she was caught up on all her essays, Hermione pulled out a book on animal transformations, reading about Animagi transformations and animal forms. At some point, Hagrid produced a huge teapot, several mugs, and a large plate of his rock cakes and some peanut brittle. Hermione accepted her mug, still repeating the Animagi spell over and over in her mind. It just seemed too easy. If her Animagi form was a ferret, she already knew what she should feel like...

Seamus smirked at her amusement. "We're all having tea, and you're revising? Take a break, Hermione, and try a rock cake. It'll chip your tooth."

Hagrid frowned at him, but Hermione ignored them, repeating the spell over and over in her mind while envisioning the transformation clearly. She knew what the transformation felt like, like melding into the familiar form, and she'd given herself into the spell, just as the book said, each time Draco had changed her.

"She's too preoccupied," Lavender stated and then screamed.

Hermione looked up and stood up, wondering why Lavender was upset, but for some reason, Lavender had grown at least five feet taller. "She's a-a ferret!" Parvati exclaimed, pointing at her.

"She turned herself into a ferret?" Hagrid asked, leaning over Lavender. "Blimey! Wha' she do tha' for?"

"Way to go, Hermione!" Seamus shouted, trying the reversal spell they'd used in class. It didn't work. He turned to Neville and the girls. "Whose wand did she use?"

"No one's!" Lavender said, squatting down to examine Hermione. "She isn't allowed a wand, remember?" She tried the reversal charm again, which only gave Hermione a tickling sensation at the roots of her fur.

Hermione looked up and squeaked.

"What was she...?" Neville picked up her book and examined the page. "Draco keeps turning her into a ferret but how...?"

"We'll have to take her to the hospital," Hagrid stated.

Neville handed the book to Seamus and picked Hermione up. "Nah, we can take her to Professor McGonagall," he said. "She'll know what to do."

"All righ', yer nearly done with yer detention anyway," Hagrid stated. "She's a righ' pretty ferret, isn' she?"

Neville carried Hermione to the castle quickly with their friends in tow, everyone chatting noisily. However, Professor McGonagall wasn't in her office.

Seamus patted Neville on his shoulder. "I'll try the staff room," he said, running off.

"I'll go to Professor McGonagall's classroom," Neville said and turned, taking the stairs two at a time with Lavender and Parvati right behind him. They bumped into Luna and Ginny just outside the classroom door. Neville held up Hermione. "Guess who this is?" he asked, grinning broadly.

Hermione thought he was having too much fun brandishing her around like a rag doll and really wanted to be set on her feet.

"I have no idea... wait!" Ginny placed her hand under Hermione's head and peered into her eyes. "It has amber eyes, and oh, my, Merlin's balls! Is this Hermione, isn't it?" Ginny asked, her eyes going wide. "I heard that Draco keeps turning her into a ferret, but he's her friend this year or at least he's been trying to be a friend. Professor McGonagall isn't here; I was looking for... never mind. We can try the Headmaster he might know how to turn her back." Ginny took off running, followed by Luna and Neville, who was still clutching Hermione in his hands, on her tail.

"Parvati and I will try the..." Lavender shouted after them, but she was drowned out as Neville, Ginny, and Luna up the stairs.

When the gargoyle allowed her friends to pass, they all hurried up the stairs to the office. Neville held Hermione out over Severus' desk with both hands, practically holding her in his face. "It's Hermione, Headmaster she changed herself."

"Did she by chance change her clothes in the transformation?" he asked smoothly as if this were an everyday occurrence.

"Sir?" Neville asked, apparently confused, and his arms lowered slightly.

Severus exhaled through his teeth. "Give her to me. All of you wait here until I come back," he said as he took Hermione and carried her upstairs.

Hermione squeaked in annoyance of the rough treatment, wishing they'd just let her walk on her own.

A soft cough from the painting in the sitting room made Severus turn. "Severus, my boy, she's aware."

"Aware of what?" he asked.

"Mrs. Snape turn her back, my boy. It will be fine," the ex-headmaster replied from the painting.

Severus put Hermione on a chair and drew his wand. Hermione stood up, anxious to be in her human form again.

"I'll be downstairs in my portrait. Congratulations, Mrs. Snape," Dumbledore said and left as Severus reversed the transformation.

Hermione clapped her hands together. "I was aware the whole time. I need to see Professor McGonagall!" she exclaimed, jumping up to go.

Severus grabbed her arm to stop her from leaving. "You are supposed to be in detention, as are your friends," he snapped and sighed at her exuberant expression. "I'll go get her, but you and your friends are to wait here until I get back."

Hermione followed Severus down into the office. When Severus left, Neville took Gryffindor's sword down from the case and wielded it. "I can't believe that Harry used this against a Basilisk! Imagine how tough that would be, trying to stab something you can't look at directly," he said, making a thrusting motion and then holding it up again. "I wonder how he knew where to aim?"

"I think we should find a way to give the sword to Harry," Ginny suggested, smiling at Neville. She turned to look at Hermione. "You know, for the cup and the 'L,'" she whispered softly, so that only Hermione heard her.

Luna was staring at Dumbledore's portrait and then glanced about the room with a hesitant expression. "I don't think that wise; they'd inform the Headmaster if we steal it. Put it back where it belongs," she said, urging Neville to put it back.

"We have no idea where he is, Gin," Hermione stated as Neville's arm relaxed by his side, his hand still grasping the hilt of the sword. "Harry, Ron, and I, well mostly Harry and I, were working on concealing, repelling, and disillusionment charms before I was caught. We were going into hiding. He could be anywhere. In fact, they could be right here on the school grounds, and you'd not be able to see or detect the tent..."

Luna smiled at her. "And knowing Harry, he'd want to move around a lot," Luna stated. "Hermione's right; they could be anywhere."

Neville was examining the rubies on the hilt when the door opened. "But if Harry needs it..." He jumped in alarm as Severus and Alecto entered, followed by Professor McGonagall, and quickly put the sword on Severus' desk.

"He's got a weapon!" Alecto screeched. "I demand to know why the portraits didn't come warn you, Headmaster. It's an outrage!"

"Mr. Longbottom is not about to attack me with the sword," Severus growled, although he had his wand in his hand.

"They should be put in the gibbet cage in the Entrance Hall for stealing!" Alecto screeched.

"That barbaric contraption will not be hung in the Entrance Hall!" McGonagall stated adamantly. "I warn you, Alecto, none of the teachers will stand for it."

Alecto rounded on Professor McGonagall. "Well, it's not up to them, is it?"

"Severus, she she can't you can't just stand there..."

"Enough!" Severus snapped.

"They have to be punished for this insolence!" Alecto shouted. "He was going to attack you!"

"He was *not* going to attack me! But, don't worry, Alecto, they *will* be punished and cruelly," he sneered, glaring down his nose at Neville, Ginny, and Luna. "You three will be denied permission to go to any more Hogsmeade weekends. Professor McGonagall, if you'll escort them back to Hagrid to finish their detention, I'd be grateful."

"The Dark Lord will hear of this," Alecto snarled as she turned to leave.

"No, doubt he will," Severus snarled after her. *'From both of us!'* He rounded on Professor McGonagall. "You will return after depositing your cubs with Hagrid. Hermione will wait for you here."

"Of course, Headmaster," Professor McGonagall said stiffly, waving Neville, Ginny, and Luna to go away with her.

When everyone had gone, Severus leaned against his desk with his hands clutching the edge on each side of his hip. "Go on, show me, Hermione," Severus said with a nod. "Do it again. I want to see you transform."

"All right," she replied, puzzled by his request. She concentrated on the transformation as she had before. Twice she opened her eyes to peek at him, but he was simply waiting, patiently, with his arms crossed, watching her. Finally, on the third try, she felt herself shift and shrink.

"Very good," he said, his lips curling slightly.

Hermione reveled in the seldom-received praise.

"Now up on the chair," he said, pointing his finger.

She tried to scramble up onto the seat of the chair, even tried jumping, finding it harder than she thought it should be.

He transformed her back. "Do it again. Concentrate."

"Okay," she replied, finding it a bit easier the second time.

Professor McGonagall walked in as Hermione literally gave herself into the sensation of the spell, melding into the now familiar form.

"Oh, goodness gracious!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed.

"My sentiments, exactly," Severus stated. "It seems, Professor McGonagall, that you have a student for private study to work into your schedule."

Professor McGonagall leaned down to look at Hermione. "Are you able to reverse the transformation?"

"Unfortunately, no," Severus stated as Hermione shook her head. "But I suspect that it won't take too much time before she's able."

Professor McGonagall straightened and returned Hermione to her human form. "Very well. You'll come see me tomorrow after dinner, Mrs. Snape, and we'll discuss when would be a good time for your lessons."

"Oh, and, Professor," Severus said smoothly. She and Hermione both turned to look at him. "I must insist that you tell no one of the lessons. As far as anyone is concerned, her friends included, it was an accidental transformation one that you reversed and Hermione is to serve detention with you for attempting it."

"Severus, surely!" Professor McGonagall exclaimed.

"Given the circumstances of her position here at the school it would be best if no one, and I mean *no one* but us is aware of her ability," he said smoothly with a hard edge to his voice. "She faces the Dark Lord soon, and I'd hate to have it known that she is an Animagus, don't you agree?"

Professor McGonagall inhaled sharply, and Hermione's elated feeling at her accomplishment turned into a cold lump in her gut. "Yes, I see. Of course." She turned to Hermione. "It's for your own good."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said, fully understanding Severus' concerns. She'd have to bury this memory deep in her mind behind her hidden doors.

"Tomorrow, then," Professor McGonagall said and turned to leave.

When the door closed behind her, Severus stood up and grasped Hermione's arms. "No one is to know. It was an accident, you understand me, a fluke."

"Yes, I understand," she replied. "I won't do it unless I'm in either her classroom or in the sitting room."

"You are not to do it *anywhere* other than in her classroom. Period. Especially not where you can be seen." Severus let go of her and ran his hands over his face. "Blimey, witch, but you are nothing but trouble." He reached out and pulled her into a hug, ignoring her downcast pout. "You really amaze me sometimes."

She looked up at him. "I do?"

"Bloody hell, yes," he said and kissed her. "Frequently." He kissed her again deeply, preventing her attempt to say anything.

~o0o~

Thursday evening, Neville, Ginny, and Luna had detention with Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest. Hermione knew that for them, the detention would be exciting, not the least bit of a punishment, but at least Alecto was satisfied with the arrangement.

While her friends were with Hagrid, Hermione had her first lesson on Animagus transformation in Professor McGonagall's office, after her Head of House admonished her severely for trying the spell without supervision, which was great because it would mean that it would be easier to hide the memory than if it had been in her classroom. They spent the rest of the hour discussing everything Hermione read about the spell. Hermione explained that during the times Draco transfigured her into a ferret that she'd been fully aware and cognizant, which hadn't surprised her professor.

"It's why I have the lessons, Mrs. Snape, to learn if any of my students have the natural ability for the Animagus transformation. Those that do remember far more than those who do not," she explained. Her next comment really shocked Hermione though. "Because of the war, and your particular situation, you will not be registered. Professor Snape is right; it's for your own safety. However, if we win this war, I will personally register you with the Ministry; if we lose, you will have an invaluable means of hiding yourself."

"Like Peter Pettigrew and Sirius Black; they used their Animagus forms to hide," she replied, fully understanding the implications.

Hermione agreed to meet with her professor Friday of the next week and one week from Monday, knowing that the irregular meetings could be considered detentions rather than extra lessons, for her protection.

When Hermione entered the Headmaster's office, Severus was facing Dumbledore's portrait, his hand resting near the side of his frame. She hadn't been sure, but it almost looked like he'd been stroking the frame, however, she was certain that she'd misjudged the action. She greeted him, and he turned with an annoyed expression that quickly softened when she told him that her lesson with Professor McGonagall was over and that her next lesson would be Friday after dinner.

However, at that moment, the door opened. Alec and Bellatrix stormed into the office. Bellatrix demanded to have Gryffindor's sword and claimed that the Dark Lord wanted her to have it. Hermione stared aghast as Severus simply acquiesced and calmly took down the sword from its mount. He smirked at Bellatrix as he handed it to her, his dark eyes intent on her face. Bellatrix examined the blade as if she held a holy relic, marveled at the beauty of the goblin-made silver and the quality of the gems, and then left the office with Alec following along in her wake. Hermione fumed as Bellatrix's cackle of joy echoed from the stairs before the door closed. She then stormed up to the bedroom to soak in the tub and tried not to sulk or cry at the loss of the only thing they had to destroy the Horcruxes.

~o0o~

The next morning, Hermione noticed that Filch had set up a pillory in the Entrance Hall and hung a gibbet cage from the ceiling, which gave Hermione the creeps when she walked passed them.

At breakfast, Ginny slid *Transaudient Charms, Reaching Across Distances the Magical Way* and *The Practical Magic of Transilient Transfiguration* onto her lap with a wink. "Thank you for lending these to me," she replied and reached for the eggs as if nothing was amiss, her comment thankfully missed by Cillian across the table from them.

Hermione shoved the books into her bag and resumed eating. She was suddenly too excited to eat, but she didn't have a free period to read the book until that night.

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## Puzzles and Mirrors

### Chapter 29 of 43

Severus makes a discovery about Hermione, something he was unable to see before, and poisons her for her protection. Ginny solves the puzzle on the mirrors and tries to get included in the hunt again.

Severus makes a discovery about Hermione, something he was unable to see before and one that, not surprisingly, angers him. Hermione finds out that she doesn't know everything and is poisoned for her protection. The puzzle regarding the mirrors is solved, the girls get to see their friends, and Ginny tries to get included in the hunt again...

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me and to thedoughmatron and Dandru for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to DuchessOfArcadia for my lovely banner! I really love it, doll.

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~o 29 o~

Puzzles and Mirrors

Hermione woke up, stretched, and looked for Severus. Apparently, he'd risen earlier, but had allowed her to lie in a bit. Taking advantage of the time alone, she turned to retrieve her book from the bedside table and was surprised that it was gone. She quickly reached into her pillowcase and pulled out Ginny's wand and the mirrors, feeling a sense of relief, then glanced around, wondering if Severus had moved her book. She'd read *Transaudient Charms, Reaching Across Distances the Magical Way* the day before during her revision time, comparing it to her notes on Conjointment and Protean Charms, and again before bed. Ginny and Jenny had come up to see her after

dinner Friday, and Ginny had lent Hermione her wand to try to link the mirrors. Try as she might, she hadn't been able figure out the right combination of the spells to make it work. Ginny had left her wand with Hermione when the girls had left at curfew, telling her to slip it to her at breakfast. She'd worked on the mirrors all evening, until she heard Severus coming up for bed, and had slipped the wand and mirrors into her pillowcase and deposited the book on the bedside table before he'd entered the room.

"Peren, where is the book I had on the bedside table?" she asked, turning to look at the house-elf.

Peren clutched her hands together and looked up at her as if she might have done something wrong. "I's puts it in your trunk, Mistress. On the shelves, Mistress."

"Thank you," Hermione said as she scrambled from the bed and knelt in front of the trunk.

The fourth latch clicked and opened at her touch. She pushed up the lid and peered inside. She knew that the fourth compartment was where Peren hid most of her things that didn't pertain to school. Under the old broom were her magical hats, some scraps of parchment, old *Daily Prophets*, and her things from Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes. She dug around, smiling at the Hand of Glory that had been hidden in a sock, the Decoy Detonators scurrying around, the two mini Swamp canisters, and Peruvian Darkness Powder capsules – everything that had been in her pockets the night she'd been captured. Peren had saved them all – or she'd retrieved them. That was possible as well. But everything was here. Even the magical parchment was tucked under one of the issues of *Gobstone Gazette*.

She fingered the parchment that had dumped her at Severus' feet and that was responsible for her current situation. She felt the slight tinge of magic and jerked her hand away. She didn't trust the magical parchment; there was nothing she'd found in any book she'd read in the library to explain it, and therefore, had no idea how the parchment actually worked, let alone the fact that it reminded her too much of the diary Ginny had, so she left it alone. Hermione closed the lid.

She opened the first latch and looked more carefully at the books on the shelves in the lid of the compartment. All of her schoolbooks from her first year to her current year were lined up by subject, alphabetically, just as her notebooks and magical composition books were. Her finger stopped on the old, outdated Charms book – the one with all the Dark Arts charms – then on Snape's old Charms book. Beside it was one of the books she wanted, *Transaudient Charms, Reaching Across Distances the Magical Way. The Practical Magic of Transilient Transfiguration* was with her Transfiguration books. She smiled. She still had them.

Hermione ran her finger along the bindings of the books in the third shelf, smiling when she realized that it held all her other books from her old school trunk on subjects that didn't pertain to her classes. Her finger stopped on the short, thin brown journal that she'd pulled down off Snape's bookshelves in his bedroom back at Spinner's End. *Eileen Prince's Journal!* Next to it was *The Rise of Darkness, Fastosus Opinio Praejudicata Defendo* by Myles Stanridge and the dark brown book that had fallen off the shelf when she'd tried to get Eileen Prince's journal down.

Hermione dropped her hand to her lap and stared out of the window. Slytherin was playing against Gryffindor that afternoon, and from the way the trees were waving, it was exceptionally windy, not the best weather for the Quidditch game. She finished dressing, carefully hiding Ginny's wand in her sleeve, and walked down to Severus' office. Severus set down the parchment he was reading and looked at her, his eyes narrowing as he stood. "Good morning. I'm ready. Are you?" she asked, her hands clasped together, casually.

"Yes," he replied. His gaze swept her appearance, stopped on her hands and then jumped to her face. "Do you have anything to say to me, this morning?" he asked casually, his stare boring into her as if about to perform Legilimency on her.

"Er, good morning?" she said uncertainly, calmly preparing for the invasion of his onslaught.

"You already said that." He moved gracefully around the desk, scowling, and he escorted her to the door.

He remained very quiet as they walked, and she wondered why. She didn't think it was the wand. *Surely, he would've taken it away from me if he realized I had it!* And she didn't think it was her books. *Although they're not Hogwarts library books, that didn't mean they came from Grimmauld Place... Besides, he couldn't know where I got them; I could've gotten them from anywhere – anyone. He doesn't care about my DA coin, not that I've used it recently...*

The students in the corridor parted, rushing past them as they made their way down to breakfast. "Am I in any way being unfair to you, Hermione?" he asked without looking at her.

"No," she replied as some third-years ran around her. *He's been quite fair. Why...?*

"Hermione!" Jenny shouted. She turned and smiled. Jenny, Charlene, and Janilynn hurried to catch up to her.

"Ginny is going to be late for breakfast. She wanted to talk to the team before the game. Are you going? I was hoping you'd be sitting with us," Janilynn said.

Severus' lips pulled back into a scowl, and he placed his hand on Hermione's lower back as he closed the gap between them. "She will be with me in the faculty stands, today."

His hand felt warm, even through her school robes. "But I'll be rooting for Gryffindor, of course," Hermione stated, ignoring Severus' apparent bad mood.

Severus glanced down at her, his face expressionless, and she shrugged slightly. As they made their way to the Gryffindor table, the girls chatted happily, excitedly about the game. Hermione sat next to Jenny and watched Severus walk away, his robes billowing behind him and his back rigid.

Jenny leaned close to Hermione as she reached for the pumpkin juice and whispered, "Ginny asked me to get her wand from you... Do you have it?"

Hermione slipped Ginny's wand from her sleeve under the table and passed it to her quietly as Cillian sat down across the table from her.

"Any luck?" Jenny asked casually as she poured some pumpkin juice in Hermione's goblet.

"Thank you. No," Hermione replied, helping herself to the toast and bacon. She had managed to connect them with the Protean Charm, and then with Conjointment Charm, but the second charm just canceled out the first one. She'd then tried binding the Conjointment Charm with the Protean Charm again, but the Protean Charm canceled out the other, instead of the spells binding.

The owls flew in with the post, and Hermione glanced over at the paper Jenny received. "Here," she said, holding the *Daily Prophet* so she could see it, too. Hermione chuckled softly at the weather report on the bottom of the front page:

A strong cold front from Siberia is upon us, (brrr!), and has attacked the British Isles, ironically dumping snow in the South of England but not in the Scottish Highlands. So, although the Muggles are trudging through the snow, our kiddies up at Hogwarts are all safe from being snowed in, thankfully, and Amanda Coontz, owner of Flowers For All Occasions, said her blooms are doing fine. But for those of you caught in the early snowfall, let me give you some helpful hints to beat back the cold: warming spells and turning ordinary firewood into ever-burn logs: see page two.

Tildon Toots offers some helpful hints for defrosting your geraniums and preparing your Flutterby bushes for the cold: see page four.

After breakfast, Hermione begged Cillian to let her go to the library before the game. He relented and sat at the tables as she browsed through the books for an hour. She looked up references on binding charms together, hoping to find out why she'd had problems on the mirrors. Since casting one charm immediately after the other while still holding the magical flow of the first charm hadn't worked at all, the only other solution she could find was the probability that she'd need to use two or more wands

simultaneously to make the charms bind. Giving up, she went back to the tower to change for the game.

That afternoon, Hermione sat in the stands between Severus and Cillian with Professors Vector and McGonagall separating them from the Carrows. The security wizards were stationed across the field, each seated with the house they were assigned to, and there were five other men in the stands. Hermione tried not to stare, but the men, they looked familiar to her, only she couldn't place where she'd seen them before.

When Madam Hooch released the Quaffle, her attention turned to the game. It was freezing in the stands, even bundled up as Hermione was in her warmest jumper under her robes. But even though she was freezing cold during the whole game, she had refrained from cheering too much for her friends because each time she did, the Carrows glared menacingly at her.

The Slytherin-Gryffindor game was, in Hermione's opinion, the most brutal game she'd ever witnessed. Goyle hit Demelza Robins with a Bludger on her left arm, but she stayed in the game, even though it was apparent that she could barely use her arm. Crabbe smacked Gryffindor Chaser Andrew Kirke with his bat as he flew too close to him, which made Kirke's face swell up nastily. Jimmy Peaks managed to hit the Bludger back at Crabbe, catching him in the shoulder blades. But Aston Bole, one of Slytherin's Chasers, body slammed Peaks into the side of the pitch and punched him in the face, which gave Peaks a bloody nose and almost made him fall off his broom. Ginny was knocked off her broom by Crabbe ramming into her, even swatting her arms with his bat, and she was out for a while, but returned to the game a short while later. Andrew and Urquhart, one of Slytherin's Chasers, was in a rough tangle for half the pitch, fighting over the Quaffle, shoving and slamming into each other really hard, and both crashed into the goal posts.

The Slytherin's Keeper, Malcolm Baddock, flew down to get the Quaffle and kicked Andrew, but Andrew managed to get the Quaffle back, rolling around Slytherin to score. Baddock tossed the Quaffle to Urquhart, but he was hit with a Bludger Goyle had aimed at Andrew. Demelza nabbed the Quaffle, flew back to the goal hoops, and was kicked in the face by Baddock when she tried to score. Later, when Demelza had the Quaffle again and was heading for the goal posts, Aston and Merkle both body-slammed her with full force as Bole flew off with the Quaffle, scoring for Slytherin. Keith Kleith managed to hit Goyle with the Bludger, knocking him squarely on his shoulder, but he was immediately winded when Bole slammed into him with his broom handle, which made the Gryffindor Beater fall off his broom. Professor Hooch gave Bole a foul, and Demelza made the free shot, but Slytherin still led Gryffindor by one hundred and twenty points. Bole scored two more times, giving Slytherin a lead of two hundred seventy points.

Ginny was knocked off her broom again when Malburke, another of Slytherin's Chasers, intentionally collided with her and smacked her injured wrist, but she got back on and continued to play anyway. Finally, Ginny managed to catch the Snitch just after Jack Sloper, the team Keeper, was hit with the Bludger and knocked unconscious. Gryffindor won, two hundred and eighty to Slytherin's two hundred and seventy. However, the entire Gryffindor team had to go to the hospital. Crabbe and Urquhart were also escorted to the hospital by their teammates. Since Ginny only had a fractured wrist and multiple bruises, some the size of Hagrid's hands, she was released after Madam Pomfrey healed her wrist as long as Ginny promised to use the Bruise Paste again before bed.

Cillian reluctantly allowed Hermione to go up to Ginny's room in Gryffindor tower until dinnertime.

"So, did you manage to connect the mirrors?" Ginny asked as Hermione sat beside Ginny on her bed.

"No, I apparently can't do it by myself," Hermione said with a sigh. "Either that, or it's too complicated to do with your wand, but I doubt that, since your wand seems to work all right on everything else I've tried with it."

Ginny smirked at her. "Okay then, so, we need another wand." Ginny pulled her Galleon out from her pocket and with a few flicks of her wand, sent out a few messages.

Moments later, Janilynn and Jenny came running into the room. "What's up?" Jenny asked.

"I need your wand," Ginny told her friends.

Jenny shrugged and handed her wand to Hermione.

"So, what do we do?" Ginny asked.

Hermione called for Peren. The elf appeared instantly, bowing with her nose to the floor. "Peren, I want my Charms composition book, the books on the bedside table, and the one I have under my pillow." The elf was gone and back in under a minute. She thanked Peren and showed Ginny all her notes. "The Conjointment Charm is Interbipatentis, which opens the mirror in *two* directions. The Transaudient Charm I found in *Transaudient Charms, Reaching Across Distances the Magical Ways* Interbivium bipertito, which creates an audible link, but a reciprocal charm has to be added to allow someone to talk to each other through the mirrors. I think the Conjointment Charm will work. Possibly. The Protean Charm on the DA coins seems to reach Harry all right, but I think the Extending Distances Charm should be added because I have no idea where Harry is or how far the Conjointment or Transaudient Charms will reach. The only thing is, I don't know the order," Hermione admitted. "I think the Protean and Conjointment Charms have to be done at the same time because they keep canceling each other out when I use them separately."

Ginny rubbed her thumb on her lip, staring at the mirrors in her hand. "I remember Dad showing a new order member a Transaudient Charm when he was teaching her how to use her Patronus to send messages the summer before last," Ginny stated and looked up. "She had to bind her voice to her Patronus as soon as it appeared, and he said that the Extending Distance Charm is done after, when she told the Patronus where to go."

"I can do the Protean Charm – I've done it with you, and Ginny has been practicing the Conjointment Charm for weeks now," Jenny said with a huge smile.

Hermione smiled at the younger girls. "Binding Transaudient, Protean, and Conjointment Charms by casting them at the same time... Yes, this might work!"

"So, if Jenny does the Protean Charm, and I'm doing the Conjointment Charm, and you do the Transaudient Charm, who does the Extension Charm?" Ginny asked Hermione.

"Gin, the Extension Charm has to not only hit both mirrors simultaneously, it has to be really strong; so, you do that one," Hermione suggested, knowing that since she couldn't use her own wand her spells weren't full strength. She looked over at Jenny.

Jenny held up her hand and smiled. "I've seen her Bat-Bogey Hex and her Reductor Curse – she's much stronger than me."

Hermione stared at Jenny's wand a moment before reluctantly handing it back to her. "You'll need this, which still leaves me—"

"Try mine," Janilynn suggested, handing Hermione hers.

Janilynn's wand felt foreign in her hand, too light and wispy, and somewhat listless. She also had to tighten her control on her wrist movement because it was swishier than her own. Hermione did manage to turn a book into a boot, a shoe into a vase, then a quill into a fork, and then turned everything back. But she couldn't do them easily and they were easy, OWL-level spells. She looked around the room, frowning. She needed to do some complicated magic to be sure that Janilynn's wand would work all right for her before she tried the Transaudient Charm.

"What?" Janilynn asked. "Is there something wrong with my wand?"

"No, I just need to..." Hermione looked at Ginny. "Do you mind if I try changing you into something?"

"Sure," Ginny replied, smiling. "Do a squirrel. I like being a squirrel."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at the comment, but let it pass. The first time the wand didn't respond well, and Hermione couldn't do it. It didn't the second time, either; Ginny didn't change. The third time she did the spell, it worked; Ginny was now a squirrel, happily climbing up her bedpost, but it took tremendous effort and concentration. She had to concentrate even harder to do the spell to return Ginny to her human form after failing the counter spell the first time.

"Merlin, that is fun!" Ginny exclaimed as she scrambled to sit crossed-legged on the bed. "So, you can use hers, right?"

"No, something's off," Hermione said, looking at the wand. "I don't know what's wrong?" She turned to look at Jenny and Janilynn. "Janilynn, I'm sorry, but your wand feels off to me. I don't know why, but it's..."

"No problem, use mine," Jenny said, handing hers to Hermione. "I'll use Janilynn's. I had to once, and it works fine for me."

Hermione gave Jenny Janilynn's wand. Jenny's did feel better, and she knew she'd had no problems with it before.

Jenny levitated her trunk over between the beds as Ginny opened the compacts and then set them down side by side on her trunk. The first time, Jenny had hesitated and it didn't work. The second time the girls cast the charms, the mirrors glowed, but the reflective surface didn't shimmer as Hermione had expected them to. "It got canceled out," Hermione said as she examined one of the mirrors. "I had that problem before."

Ginny picked up Hermione's book. "You said that the Protean Charm cancels out the Conjointment Charm. Which reciprocal charm were you considering?" Hermione showed her. "Let's try this, I'll cast the Conjointment Charm when you cast the Transaudial, then you bind it with the Reciprocal Charm before the glow starts to fade. Both pairs of charms should bind to the Transaudial Charm, and then I'll cast the Extension Charm."

Hermione shrugged as she set down her Charms composition book. "Ready?" Hermione asked, and Ginny nodded. They cast their spells, making the reflective surface of the mirrors blaze as if reflecting the sun, and Hermione immediately added the Reciprocal Charm as Ginny cast the Extension Charm. This time when the light faded, the reflective surface shimmered, and the images seemed to undulate once; then the reflective surfaces became still. Both mirrors now looked completely normal.

Ginny picked one up, and Jenny grabbed the other. "How does it work?" Ginny asked the same time Jenny asked, "Did it work?"

"I thought I was supposed to see you," Jenny said and then gasped. "I do! I see you, not me!"

"Go down to the common room," Ginny suggested.

Jenny scrambled off the bed and ran out of the room.

"It's working – I see the stairs. Can you hear me?" Ginny asked the same time Jenny's voice came from the compact, "It's working! I still see and hear you!" Janilynn reached for the mirror.

Ginny looked up at Hermione, beaming with excitement as she handed the mirror to Janilynn. "So, now how do we get it to Harry?"

Hermione let her lower lip slide out from under her front teeth as she contemplated the question of how. "We have no idea where he is, and it's too dangerous to ask him through the coin... Peren!" Hermione exclaimed with an exuberant smile. "She can hear me—"

"Mistress calls Peren?" the house-elf asked, bowing low, holding a dusting cloth in her hands.

"Er, no, but," Hermione stammered, surprised by the elf's appearance, as Jenny's voice said, "No, we're just playing around," through the mirror.

"Peren, how is it possible that you heard me?" Hermione asked.

"Peren listens for her mistress," she replied, smiling proudly. "I's hears you alls the time."

"All the time?" Ginny asked, her brow creased in confusion.

"Oh, yes, Miss, alls the time," Peren affirmed.

"You can hear her from anywhere in the castle?" Ginny asked.

Peren cocked her head to the side. "From anywheres, Miss," she said, her ears drooping a little.

"Anywhere?" Hermione asked. "How far away? I mean, is there a specific extent to how far?"

"I's do nots knows." Peren started to twist the dusting cloth in her hands as she stared at the bed hangings. "Peren listens to you when Mistress rides in the magic car to go to school. I's hads to; Peren had to waits until you gets to school to follows you. Peren did not knows where to go until the stern professor who teaches changing asks Master Snape where my Mistress would be sleeping."

"If Peren can hear you, do you think Kreacher can hear Harry?" Ginny asked as Jenny bounded into the room.

Hermione turned to Ginny. "I've one better," Hermione said. "Dobby, will you please come here?"

Dobby arrived with a loud pop. "Miss, Harry Potter's friend, call Dobby, so Dobby comes," he said, bowing before the girls.

"Dobby, if Harry were to call you, would you be able to hear him?" Hermione asked, crossing her fingers.

"Yes, Miss," Dobby said as he stood up. "Dobby hears Harry Potter alls the times, Miss."

"And can you go to him?" Ginny asked excitedly, crossing fingers as Hermione asked, "Dobby, can you leave the castle like you left the Malfoy's five years ago?"

"Dobby is a free house-elf. If Dobby knows wheres to go to, yes, Misses, Dobby can," he said proudly.

"Right, all Harry has to do is call for Dobby! Brilliant!" Ginny said, and she grabbed her DA coin. Ginny tried twice to connect the coin and then smiled.

Dobby's ears perked up the same time Ginny looked up at Hermione. "Did it," Ginny said the same time Dobby said, "Harry Potter calls for Dobby! Dobby can goes to Harry Potter!"

"Dobby, take this mirror to Harry. He really needs it," Ginny said as Jenny handed her mirror to the house-elf.

Dobby swelled with pride. "I can do this for miss! Harry Potter is calling for Dobby so Dobby can goes to him!" As soon as he had the mirror firmly in his hand, he disappeared.

Ginny asked Janilynn for the other mirror.

They waited.

Ginny didn't tear her gaze from the mirror. It seemed to take a very long time, and Hermione was worried that either Dobby wouldn't get there or that Cillian would send for her before she knew if Harry got the mirror or not.

"It's Harry!" Ginny exclaimed after the longest wait. "It's really him!"

Harry's voice rose from the mirror. "Ginny?"

"Yeah, it's me," she said as Ron's voice could be heard from the mirror, "Ginny, is that you? Are you all right? How is—"

"I'm fine. Things are all right. How are you?" Ginny said, tears welling in her eyes as Hermione scooted over closer and looked at the mirror, too.

"Hermione! You're all right!" Harry exclaimed, the relief in his green eyes almost palpable. "Ron, it's Hermione! I can see Hermione and Ginny!"

"Yeah, Harry, I'm all right," she said with total relief. He looked shaggy, his hair was longer, his glasses had been broken and poorly repaired, and he looked thinner than normal, but he'd never looked better to her. Tears welled in her eyes as Ron's face appeared when he held his head close to Harry's to see them in the mirror, too.

"Ah, 'Mione, don't cry," Ron said.

She laughed, wiping a tear away as Harry added, "Yeah, Hermione, we're okay, really."

"So, the locket?" she asked.

"Have it, but can't destroy it," Harry said as Ron blurted, "Umbridge had it."

"Yeah, we had to break into the Ministry to get it, and almost got caught," Ron said and explained what they did.

Hermione was impressed. "Ron, that's great—"

"The locket, it's wonky and downright evil, makes us think all sorts of things," Harry stated. He explained how it affected them.

"That's how the diary was, this constant whisper in my head, these suggestions that I didn't really want to do, but I was compelled to... it was horrible," Ginny said, her voice solemn. "You have to fight it, Harry, Ron. Don't listen to him, don't believe what he says."

Stephanie Adams, the girls' other dorm mate, entered the room. "Hermione, Mr. Gwynke says you have to come down," she said from the doorway.

Hermione had looked up, and she nodded in understanding. "Gin, give me the mirror at dinner. Harry, I'll try to find what I can about how to destroy a, er, the you-know-what."

"Hermione?" she heard Harry say as she walked away. She heard Ginny tell him that she was under certain restrictions as she left the room. She fervently hoped that Ginny would be discreet about her living arrangement. Harry and Ron wouldn't understand, and they might try to rescue her.

"Everything all right?" Cillian asked when Hermione walked up to him.

She forced herself to smile. "Yes, of course it is."

He nodded, but he was scrutinizing her. "Aren't your friends coming to dinner?" he asked when they were in the corridor.

"Ginny has to finish something first." Hermione said with a shrug, hoping she was convincing, but Cillian's eyes narrowed, and he frowned at her.

"What were you doing in Miss Weasley's room?" he asked, his eyes cold as he glared at her.

"Talking," she stated, keeping her gaze forward as she headed for the Great Hall.

His face twisted into a sneer. "Talking," he repeated. "You look like you've been crying."

"It's nothing. Something Ginny said," she said, and he grabbed her arm. "Ouch!" she exclaimed, trying to yank her arm free. "You're hurting me."

His hand tightened, and his expression became even darker. "And you're lying to me," he growled at her.

"Am not!" Hermione protested.

He stopped and made her face him. "Then what were you doing in Miss Weasley's room?" he asked, his brown eyes glaring at her with obvious fury. "Who were you talking to? Why are your eyelashes clumpy, like you've been crying?"

"Sometimes my eyes tear up when I laugh... I wasn't crying," she said, and Cillian's expression darkened dangerously.

"You're lying; I know you've been crying," he snapped in a less than scathing tone. He dragged her all the way to the Headmaster's tower, Hermione struggling to keep up with his longer stride. "Here," he snapped, shoving Hermione into Severus' office as soon as the door opened, and Severus rose to his feet. "Put your things away. You'll be staying here tonight," he snarled at her and then turned to Severus. "She's up to something, her and her little friends."

Hermione backed up, afraid. "I am not!" she implored.

"What happened?" Severus asked Cillian, coming around the desk.

Cillian glared at Hermione. "Ask her," he snapped as Hermione ran across the office. "Maybe she'll tell you the truth," he yelled after her as she ran up the stairs.

Severus was standing at the window when Hermione came down for dinner. He turned around slowly and looked down at her, his dark eyes boring into hers dangerously. "Cillian said that Miss Wang was talking to Miss Weasley and then to Miss Waithe through a mirror. He described one of the compacts that I saw in Miss Wang's possession," he said, his tone sharp.

She couldn't lie to him, he'd know, but she couldn't tell him the truth either; he'd take away her mirror and then she'd not be able to help Harry. "Might've been, I was helping Jenny with a project for—"

"Do not lie to me!" he snapped, his eyes narrowed into a scowl as he loomed over her threateningly. "Do you honestly think I didn't know about Potter's and Black's little mirrors?"

"How?" she asked, taking a step backwards.

His expression became even darker. "I saw them using them; how do you think I know?" He stepped forward, and she backed up, finding herself trapped against his desk. "You will show me. *Legilimens.*"

The attack was brutal. He searched randomly through her memories, flashes of images, moments of her day and week. "How...?" he snarled and pushed harder. Hermione couldn't control the onslaught, the images from the morning coming and changing so quickly that she was getting nauseous: asking Peren for her book, searching through her trunk, the view out of the window at the trees waving in the wind, Jenny pouring her pumpkin juice, the owls delivering the post, browsing through the books in the library, seeing Cillian across the table from her, meeting Severus in the Entrance Hall, the huge oak doors that led outside... then nothing, just the clear blue sky.

"The game, the Quidditch game," he snarled and pushed. He paused at the memory of the doors opening, the bright blue sky, and... nothing. Sky. Bright, clear December sky. "Show me the game."

Hermione blinked. *Where did I put the Quidditch game? Which door?* She'd been practicing her memory palace every night, carefully putting every memory into place, concealing the ones she wanted hidden, until it became a habit, as natural to her as placing memories in books had been.

"You were at the game; show me it," he growled, his voice echoing in her mind. He pushed again, so hard it hurt. She focused on the game, and finally the images came forth: the release of the Quaffle, the Chasers racing for the goal with the other team's Chasers right behind them, beside them, ramming into them, Kirke's face swelling up nastily; Crabbe ramming into Ginny, even swatting her arms with his bat, making her falter and fall. Andrew getting the Quaffle back from Baddock, rolling around the Slytherin to score; Ginny was knocked off her broom by Malburke, and Ginny finally catching the Snitch...

When he broke contact, Hermione nearly lost her balance. "So, why wasn't I able to see that before?"

"I-I don't know. I may have – I put it behind the wrong door," she managed to say, clutching the edge of the desk behind her.

Severus' expression relaxed somewhat, but he was still staring intently, his eyes boring into hers. "Door? What doors?" he asked.

"My memory palace, the castle in my mind," she replied, gasping for breath. "I can't empty my mind like you can, so I have been placing... things... behind – what?"

Severus looked down at her curiously, his eyes moving side-to-side as he studied her face. "Show me," he said softly.

Hermione braced herself for the onslaught of his invasion.

"No, Hermione," he said softly, a strange glint in his eye. "Show me *Legilimens*." He slipped into her mind.

This time she felt a light headiness, so different from his usual invasions. She let him look, taking him along corridors, past doors, tapestries, paintings, and even into a few of her rooms.

"The private stuff, how do you hide it?" he asked, his words a soft echo in her mind.

"I have smaller doors, hidden ones," she replied, feeling him mentally running a hand on the walls she showed him, sending shivers coursing through her.

This time when the contact broke, Hermione missed his presence.

He was standing before her, arms crossed, his eyes narrowed, and frowning. "We're doing this again after dinner," he said and pulled her out of the room with him.

Hermione didn't understand. *I've blocked him, and he's angry about it? Isn't that what all these lessons were for – to block stuff so he – the Dark Lord, won't see it?* Severus maintained his grip on her arm all the way to the Great Hall, depositing her at her usual place at the Gryffindor table.

Neville moved a book off the bench as she sat down. "You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine... *Oh, my God!*" Hermione exclaimed as she turned to look at him and gasped at the bruise on his face. "What happened to you?"

"VanHalal slammed me into a wall because I was caught loitering in the dungeons." He leaned closer to her and whispered in her ear, "Filch had some kids in those chains of his. Seamus, Ernie, and the kids got away, but I was lookout and got caught. Filch was furious 'cause he knew why I was there and called for VanHalal. But, by the time VanHalal arrived, of course, everyone was already gone – the office was empty. VanHalal tried the rough approach to get me to say who freed them, but I kept saying that that's why I was there – to save them. Never knew the guy was so strong."

"Neville, you have to be more careful!" Hermione hissed back.

He shook his head. "You should have seen them, Hermione. Victoria Frobisher and Ritchie Cootie, you know them, right, they're in third year? Cootie had wet himself and his face was all messed up, and Frobisher, her were robes torn, and she had bruises and a cut lip. Melissa Waithe, Janilyn's little sister, she was chained to the wall, crying," he said and reached for the roast beef. "Janilyn is in the hospital with her now. And there were three Hufflepuff fourth-years down there, too: Owen Cauldwell, Kevin Whitby, and Laura Medley."

Hermione looked up at the staff table and saw Severus watching her as he ate. His dark eyes met and held hers. She looked away, realizing that Cillian hadn't arrived for dinner. She glanced up at Severus again; he was still staring at her, his expression unreadable. Nervously, Hermione turned to her friends as she ate.

~*~

Severus stood watching Hermione with his back rigid and his arms crossed as he regarded her. He had known for a while now that she was trying to create a façade to block her memories, misleading him, but nothing had prepared him for what he'd discovered before they'd gone down to dinner. But she had blocked him from seeing what he'd wanted, even the entire Quidditch game that had happened just that afternoon.

She stood by the bed waiting, worrying her bottom lip. He hadn't understood why she'd been having such a hard time controlling her feelings, and it exasperated him. She still wore her heart on her sleeve like any Gryffindor, and her emotions played out in her expressions completely unguarded as if she hadn't been trying to learn Occlumency at all. Considering what a swot she was, her lack of trying and her ineptitude had infuriated him. However, the only reason he'd continued with their lessons was because of what was at stake. So, today's lessons really threw him, something very few people could do.

He hadn't found anything in her memories that he didn't already know about, and nothing that hadn't been reported to the Dark Lord. He'd tried to find the memories of her times in Miss Weasley's dorm room, but none of them were there. There were no memories of her activities with Dumbledore's Army, either from the past or present, except for Charms Club. All her memories were those of a studious young student trying to achieve good marks.

He'd wondered before if he wasn't missing the truth behind the façade, and had assumed she was doing something few who tried to learn Occlumency could do – mislead. But that had its weaknesses, weaknesses the Dark Lord could penetrate. Even those who tried using a shield like a placid lake or a blank wall could only block a mediocre or average Legilimens. But rooms, hidden doors within the castle, that even he hadn't been able to see, that took an amazing amount of organization and concentration to achieve. "Hermione, come here."

He watched her expression change from satisfaction to confusion as she made the tentative steps toward him. He reached out, grasped her head, tangling his fingers in her hair and kissed her savagely. He leaned forward slightly to unbalance her, smiling as her hands grasped the front of his robes as she struggled to maintain her footing. She moaned, her hands gripping onto him tightly as she pushed back, and her tongue tried to tantalize his. Oh yes, he liked how responsive she could be, but this was not one of those times to give in. He let go of her, making her sway on her feet. He only allowed her a second to stand before he entered her mind again.

She'd reacted immediately; the walls of the castle, the stone corridors, even the paned glass windows were locked in place. He withdrew, and entered again, delving hard, searching specifically for any connection in her memories with Longbottom. What he saw were flashes of routine events: meals in the Great Hall, Herbology, Muggle Studies, and Defense lessons, moments talking in the library or waving at him from across the corridor, the Gryffindor common room... all innocuous. Benign. Safe. Expected.

He pulled back and tried again, this time he tried to see any memory of their Occlumency lessons. Nothing. He saw Hermione reading in bed, himself changing clothes, which gave him a view of his own body as he stripped in front of the wardrobe, sensing her feelings of fascination and curiosity, and he tried to read any other emotion in her but only felt her amazement and lust. With a smirk, he tried once again to push her, seeing some of their intimate moments, and a few of his sexual advances, but none of the incriminating activities. It was as if she tried to hold onto her memories of their intimate times, or hadn't tried to suppress them, which amused him. He found one rather enjoyable evening when she'd... He wasn't looking for images of their sex life.

"You're allowing me to see this," he snarled without any of the vinegar it should have, trying to find anything specific and saw a view of his body, semi erect, silhouetted by the light from the bathroom door.

He withdrew and now understood. She was suppressing what she didn't want him or the Dark Lord to see. Somehow, the chit managed to Occlude most of her memories. It was a huge risk, but if he kept at her, he wondered if he'd break through. "How long?"

"I don't know, months now," she admitted.

Every time he'd probed for the events that he knew happened in the bedroom, she'd shown him their sexual encounters; he knew that would irritate the Dark Lord and keep him from seeing anything else of import. His lips twitched, but the next instant he was smiling. He couldn't help himself; she'd done it her way and it worked. A deep chuckle escaped his throat. "So, you managed to do it."

"Yes," she said. "You told me that if I could Occlude you, you would tell me everything."

Severus' smile faded, and he raised an eyebrow. "No," he said and then grasped her chin gently when she frowned. "I don't know what you expect to know, Hermione, but some things are still too dangerous for me to tell you." He looked at her thoughtfully and then amended his statement, "However, I will not have to be as careful around you. Tell me how you did this."

Hermione collapsed onto the edge of the bed, and he sat down next to her as she began to outline exactly how she learned about memory palaces.

~*~

Hermione woke slowly, stretching her arms up and her left arm accidentally bumped something above her. Her eyes snapped open as a firm hand grasped her wrist. "Oh my gods! I'm sorry; I didn't mean—"

"I know you didn't," Severus said with a smirk as he pinned her hand down firmly on the pillows and leaned down to kiss her. His free hand slid up her side, holding her as his mouth did tantalizing things with hers.

She wrapped her free arm around him, holding him close, savoring the rare morning intimacy. "You're usually gone when I wake up," she said when he pulled back to look at her.

"Yes," he said, his hair falling into his face and concealing his eyes from her. She reached up and brushed one side away, and he moved his head before she could tuck it behind his ear. "No, don't."

"Why?" she asked, lowering her hand.

"I don't like it," he said.

She reached up again, saying, "I just wanted to see your eyes," as she ran her fingers through his hair, brushing it back again. "I can't see them when your hair hangs in your face like this."

"Don't," he said, well growled at her as he pulled back. "I hate my ears."

"You hate your ears? There's nothing wrong with your ears." Her hand stilled, holding his hair back so she could look him in the eye. "At least be honest about this," she snapped.

"Lily used to tuck my hair behind my ears," he snapped angrily and sat up, turning away.

Hermione sat up quickly, saying, "I'm not Lily," as she grabbed his arm. He turned to look at her. "I know about you and Harry's mom. Well, some of it. Harry said she stood up for you in the memory he saw. You were friends, right? I mean, you knew her. Slughorn told me about your friendship during one of his parties."

"That bloated braggart," he snarled.

"He's not," she started to say then amended by saying, "I like your eyes."

He turned to face her. "Hermione, I have to ask you. Do you know where Potter is?"

She shook her head.

"But you've spoken to him, haven't you?"

She wanted to deny it, but knew she was a horrible liar and that he was expert at reading people.

"So you have," he said and she hung her head. "I wouldn't put it past you to find a way to communicate with him." She looked up at him through her sleep-messed fringe. "Bloody hell, witch, trust works both ways. How can I trust you, if you don't trust me?"

"I really don't know where he is. Honestly," she said, crossing her legs under the blankets. "He's in hiding. We were going to hide until he could – until he was ready to face Vol-er, the Dark Lord."

He sat still for a long time, and she waited. "What did he ask you?"

"If Ginny and I were all right," she answered him.

"What else have you been hiding from me? How much of what's going on with the DA are you involved in?" he asked, staring at her intently.

She shook her head, saying, "I'm not," and then shrugged. "I'm not doing any of the defacements, vandalism or hanging any of the flyers."

He sighed. "I already know that." He looked at the door to the loo for a few heartbeats and then back at her. "What about the meetings? Do you know when they plan things or who is involved? Who is doing these things?"

"I don't know for sure." She shook her head again. "I mean, I could guess, but I'd have no proof of anything. I know they are meeting. I don't know when or where. What are you going to do?"

"Whatever I can," he said and rose. "Get dressed; I'll take you to breakfast."

~o0o~

Severus didn't question her again about the DA, but he watched her constantly. He attended both Muggle Studies and Defense, and stared at her during meals, but he was very quiet when they were alone in the sitting room together. She could feel him watching her as she worked on her class assignments, even though he gave all outward appearances of reading the book in his hands.

Alecto and Amycus stormed over to Hermione and Severus in the Entrance Hall Wednesday morning, just as they were exiting the stairs on their way to breakfast. For

some reason, the Carrows looked slovenly this morning: their robes were stained a muddy grey-brown on the lower half and hung on them as if they'd been wet and they'd tried to dry them with their wands. Alecto's hair was plastered to her head, and there was a twig stuck under her collar as if she'd slept outside all night in her robes.

"There is a swamp in the corridor!" Amycus snarled at Severus in way of greeting. Amycus, never one to look well groomed, did look like he'd used the swamp water for his bath.

"Yes, there is one under a window on the fifth floor of the east wing," Severus stated as if bored.

"No, it's on the first floor outside of Alecto's classroom!" growled Amycus, glaring at Hermione. "She can't get her classroom."

"It fills the entire corridor," Alecto snarled. "And there is a tree – a tree – in my office!"

Hermione tried extremely hard to hold back the chuckle that threatened to erupt. She knew about Fred and George's instant Beech tree; one only made a hole in whatever place you wanted the tree to grow, put in the pill-sized canister and added water, or urine if you wanted the tree to smell, which was too gross to think about. The 'seedling' grew into a fully-grown tree in five minutes with huge roots and wide spread branches.

"It takes up the entire room!" Amycus added, holding his arms out wide as if to demonstrate the effect.

"He planted it in the very center of my office!" Alecto snarled, and a bit of spittle landed on her chin. "I had to climb over the roots to get out of my office this morning, and my desk is stuck between the roots, my chair is demolished, and the branches have broken all the windows."

"He?" Severus asked, crossing his arms. "He whom?"

"Longbottom, that's who!" the Carrows both shouted.

"Not possible," Severus said coolly. "Mr. Longbottom was escorted to Gryffindor tower by Professor McGonagall after his detention last night before curfew. After the students were all accounted for, the entrance to the Gryffindor common room was sealed closed by Professor McGonagall, and it couldn't be opened until morning by except by Professor McGonagall or myself, unless there was a dire emergency. Mr. Longbottom's name is on MacCavish's list. Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw common rooms were sealed closed as well after a similar check had been made."

"Well, then that Weasley girl got out and did this, and her two dorm mates," Amycus stated, crossing his arms. "They weren't in the common room at curfew, I checked. They aren't on the list."

"Not possible. Miss Weasley, Miss Wang, and Miss Waithe spent the night in the hospital after they had been questioned by MacCavish, Rowle, and Travers yesterday for an infraction," Severus stated, staring down his nose at him.

Hermione inhaled in shock.

"Madam Pomfrey assured me they would be locked in for the night," Severus added smoothly.

"It was one of them," Alecto shouted, stamping her foot, and then pointed at Hermione. "Or she did it!"

"Don't be absurd. I'm tired of your insinuations and your ineptitude, Alecto. Either ask Professor Flitwick or Professor McGonagall to remove the swamp for you or remove it yourself." Severus placed his hand on Hermione's elbow to steer her away. "Otherwise, request Mr. Filch to punt the students across the swamp to your classroom." His grip tightened as he led her away. "Damn."

Hermione looked over her shoulder at the Carrows. By the way the Carrows were glaring at her, she dreaded being in Muggle Studies and Defense classes today. Then she caught his softly grumbled, "—plausible excuse from class."

"Excuse me?" she asked. The students were parting to allow them through the doors, more afraid of Severus' dark scowl than anything else.

"I need a plausible excuse to keep you out of your classes today." His voice was so low, as his eyes scanned the Great Hall, that she barely heard him. Hermione followed gaze to where Professor Slughorn was sitting beside Professor Sprout. "I'm afraid, my dear, you will be in the hospital with food poisoning this morning," he mumbled softly as he guided her to her usual place at the Gryffindor table.

She stopped short, exclaiming, "I'll what?" but he yanked on her arm, forcing her to walk with him.

"Hermione, please trust me. It will be mild, a few moments of discomfort, but you'll be in the hospital today," he said softly so that only she could hear.

She looked up at him, and even though he was scowling, she could see the concern in his eyes. She swallowed nervously, turning her head to look at the Carrows as they stormed in. "Okay," she replied nervously, seeing both of them glaring daggers at her as they strode down the center of the hall.

The corner of his mouth pulled back into a smile. "I'll be watching," he said and walked away, grumbling to himself.

She looked down the length of the table, noticing that there were more gaps at the table than normal. Parvati Patil and Breanna Enfield sat together as usual, but today, fifth years, Ofelia Tredwell and Andy Flockhurst, sat next to them with sixth years, Wilberforce Wodehale and Ernie Coppersmith sitting next to Neville and Seamus on the other side of the table. Hermione ignored the looks as she sat down next to Parvati and helped herself to some toast and bacon as Cillian got up and changed seats. She turned to face the guys. "Where is everyone?"

"Ginny, Jenny, Janilynn, Ritchie Coote, Brianna and Henry Hamleton, Andrew Kirke, Euan Abercrombie, and Jimmy Peaks were all playing on the Quidditch pitch yesterday after dinner, and they were all hexed off their brooms," Neville said and stared at Cillian as he sat down next to him. "I think they're still in the hospital."

"All of them? Hexed off their brooms?" Hermione asked gobsmacked, almost choking on her bacon. "By whom?"

"MacCavish, Travers, and Rowle, who else?" Breanna sneered as Hermione picked up the pitcher of pumpkin juice to fill her goblet and found it already full.

She glanced quickly at Severus, wondering if he was really going to poison her. He was talking to Professor McGonagall but Hermione had the distinct feeling that he was watching her intently.

"Something wrong?" Parvati asked, taking the pitcher from her.

"No. I'm fine," she replied, sipping her juice. It tasted normal. She drank a little bit and set the goblet down.

"Apparently, we aren't allowed to play Quidditch anymore," Seamus sneered, ignoring the glare he received from MacCavish from down the table.

Hermione ate her bacon and her toast as Seamus leaned forward and lowered his voice. "Jonathan Walsingham, Demelza Robins, and Jimmy Peaks were hexed leaving the changing room after their last practice, so Ginny had arranged for a pickup game with the younger years to give them some practice and evaluate their techniques in case she needed back-up players. But MacCavish, Travers, and Rowle had broken up the game by hexing them off their brooms. No one was too badly hurt that Madam Pomfrey can't sort them out, but Jimmy, Jenny, and Janilynn had confronted them about it and had been forcibly dragged to the dungeons."

"So, now it's against the rules to question the Death Eaters about attacking your friends," Parvati sneered softly behind her goblet. "Not only that, but they were all given detention with Filch when they get out."

Hermione started to feel queasy. She looked into her goblet at her juice. She glanced up at Severus again, and their eyes met. His dark eyes, even from halfway across the Great Hall seemed to bore into hers.

"Hermione, are you all right?" Parvati asked

"I'm fine," she replied, sipping her juice again. It tasted normal, but her stomach felt like it was knotting up, and she felt like she was gasping for air. Hermione set her goblet on the table, making some of the juice splash a bit, her stomach feeling queasy, and she felt dizzy. The shadows on the table seemed to be moving... stretching... Suddenly she threw up on her plate.

"Oh, my god!" Parvati screeched as Cillian jumped up and actually jumped onto the table to get to her.

"She's been poisoned!" Neville cried out, on his feet, looming over the table.

"Hermione," Cillian cried out, grasping her as her body began to convulse.

People were milling around her, pressing in on her and Cillian like huge, black bats, even though someone was yelling for everyone to get back.

"Move aside, you imbeciles," Severus snarled as he shoved his way through and knelt down by her.

"I didn't poison the chit!" Hermione heard Amycus snarl as Severus examined Hermione's face, his eyes staring at hers intently. She stared at him; he had a halo around his head like an angel. He shoved something hard into her mouth and clamped his hand over it.

"Don't swallow it, Hermione," he was saying but he sounded so far away even though he was leaning over her.

She relaxed, leaned back, cradled in Cillian's arms. *The wrong arms! I shouldn't be in Cillian's arms!* "Let me go!" Hermione struggled to sit up, but he held her firmly as Severus tilted up her head as he looked in her eyes, about to kiss her. *Why is he?*

"Hermione, hold still."

"Will you all back up, please," Professor McGonagall shouted as Amycus snarled, "I wasn't me! I didn't poison the chit!"

Severus reached out and scooped Hermione up into his arms. "Cillian, with me. Professor McGonagall, get everyone off to class," he demanded as he carried Hermione out of the Great Hall. His movements made her vision blurry.

"All of you either go back into the Great Hall and finish eating or go to your classrooms. Now," Cillian shouted, sounding far away.

Although Hermione felt really weak, she was already feeling better by the time they reached the fourth floor, and she rolled the hard stone in her mouth with her tongue as she snuggled into Severus' embrace.

"Keep the Bezoar in your mouth and don't swallow it," Severus instructed as he hitched her up to adjust her in his arms. "And stop squirming," he admonished her, although his tone was soft, velvety, not curt as if he was angry.

"Good thing you keep a Bezoar in your pocket," Cillian said, falling into step as they climbed the stairs. "I have her plate and cup."

Severus smirked. "Sixteen years of teaching dunderheads; I've learned to anticipate anything. It was in her cup," he stated.

"How do you know it was in her cup?" Cillian asked. "I didn't see anyone slip anything into her cup."

Several of her friends sat up as Severus carried her to an available cot. "Her goblet was switched when she sat down," he stated, pushing her fringe up and placing a hand on her forehead as he stared into her eyes. "You'll be fine," he told Hermione softly, stroking her cheek. He stood and turned to face Madam Pomfrey as she approached. "She's fine now, just a mild poisoning. She has a Bezoar, but she'll need some of the Fox-Crane antidote."

"Fox-Crane?" Cillian asked as the Healer hurried to her stores. "You know what she was poisoned with?"

Severus nodded. "Crane's foxglove and horse chestnut concoction," he said, leaning down and cupping her face with his hand. Hermione looked up at him, lost in his dark eyes. "You'll be here for the day. I'll come get you tonight."

"All right," Hermione said, lying back against the pillows when he let go of her face.

Cillian glared at Severus and forcefully drew the curtain around her bed, adding a spell on them for privacy. "Crane's Concoction – how in the blazes did ~~that~~ get into her goblet?"

Severus stood and crossed his arms. "I put it in a goblet and told the house-elves to switch it."

"*You?*" Cillian gasped and then glowered. "*Why? Why poison her?*"

"Alecto and Amycus," Severus snarled back and uncrossed his arms. "They will take their anger over the swamp and tree out on her, and I won't have it. So, I wanted her here, but I needed an excuse. Besides, I know that Amycus has some vials of Crane's Concoction in his office among his more interesting poisons."

"So, that's why he's denying poisoning her? You took one," Cillian said and then started to laugh. "Oh, man, he'll be in trouble if the Dark Lord hears."

"Oh, he'll hear about it," Severus said with a smirk. "MacCavish, Travers, Rowle, or VanHalal will inform him, if I don't. The Dark Lord is getting pretty fed up with her frequent visits to the hospital, considering orders are she isn't to be harmed. How can he convince Potter that she's abandoned him, switched sides if only to get her education, if she's always being beaten and tortured?"

"He cannot really believe that I've abandoned him or that I've switched sides!" Hermione exclaimed, sitting up.

Severus' eyebrow arched up, and he smirked at her. "No?" he asked. "Pray tell what have you done to help your friend? Hermione, you're being here is part of his plan, away from Potter, unable to help him, unable to think for the boy."

"Harry can think for himself," she snapped back.

"Hardly," he said as Madam Pomfrey entered to give her the antidote. Severus turned to Cillian and said, "Go finish your breakfast. I'll wait till you return." Cillian nodded and left. Severus sat down next to her bed when the Healer left. "Exactly how much help have you been to your friends, huh? What have you been able to do for Potter – nothing. You don't even know where he is."

She crossed her arms and looked away from him. Lowering his voice and leaning slightly forward, Severus murmured, "You really think that you'll be able to help him through the mirrors?"

She refused to answer him.

"I know about them, so you might as well tell me," he insisted, staring at her intently. "Don't lie to me. Do you know where he is?"

She shook her head, not trusting her voice.

He looked at her thoughtfully, and then he leaned back slightly. "So far he's been lucky. He's avoided capture, but he was nearly apprehended in the Ministry of Magic, recklessly trying to rescue about two dozen Muggle-borns facing trial. He was seen in London, twice, apparently searching for something, and he was nearly captured in Cotswold. The Dark Lord knew that he'd go to the place where he was born and had someone watching."

Hermione gasped. *Cotswold?* "He's – the orphanage."

Severus raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched. "So, do you know what he's looking for?"

"Of course," she said softly.

"And how many of them has he found?" Severus asked, his dark eyes narrowing. "No one can hear you, and I know about the quest."

"Do you?" she asked, narrowing her eyes at him, not sure whether to believe him or not.

Severus' face relaxed and he snorted. "The Dark Lord's book, Hufflepuff's cup, Merope Gaunt's ring and her locket – that may have belonged to Salazar Slytherin – possibly Nagini, and another one, but Dumbledore had been unsure as to what it might be," he said, and then his lip curled up slightly. "I know that the book and ring were destroyed. Which leaves Ravenclaw's brooch, circlet or coronet as a possibility, or items rumored to have belonged to Godric Gryffindor: a tankard, his vambrace, a buckler, stirrups, even a belt buckle or a plate – there are a number of items said to have belonged to the founders."

"The brooch isn't, it was found to have been made in the thirteenth century. The buckle and buckler turned out to be from the twelfth century, according to Adolph Francis Foucher and Charles Thurstan Hirschfeld, curators of the wizarding museum in London," she said. "The plate and the tankard came from Hogwarts, and looked like the early pewter trenchers and tankards used by the students in the twelfth century, except that the coat of arms on the tankard had the mantling and supporters that were added in the mid-thirteenth century. We went to see them after the funeral."

A deep chuckle escaped his throat. "I know; I was there," he said, and she gasped at his statement. He let out a sharp bark of laughter. "They were on loan to the museum so I went to look at them. But they are not what you seek. I know that the only true artifacts of Gryffindor's are the Sorting Hat and the sword."

"You were there? But you didn't stop us?" she asked, surprised, and he shook his head. "Why?"

He rose to leave just as Cillian parted the curtain. "Think about it. Why would I have wanted to?"

~~oOo~~

Author's Notes:

Any mistakes in my Latin are entirely my own. I used an online translator from Notre Dame: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

Interbipatentis- Inter: to open it. Inter + bipatens –entis: doubly open, open in two directions

Interbivium bipertito: again using Inter with bivium:

bivium: having two ways or passages

bipartito or bipertito: in two parts, in two ways

Transitions and Standstills

Chapter 30 of 43

First term comes to an end. All of Hermione's friends leave to go home for the holidays, or to stay with friends. Harry's making no leeway on the locket or in finding the cup. Draco goes home for the holiday and discovers that things are not what he expected. And Ginny has some bad news.

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, ArabelleBloodgood for reading this over for me and to EverMystique and Dandru for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to DuchessOfArcadia for my lovely banner! I really love it, doll.

~~~~~



~o 30 o~

#### Transitions and Standstills

Severus woke up before the dawn just as he had ever since he was a little boy. It was rare that he could lie in. He turned his head and smiled. Hermione was curled up next to him, her head practically on the same pillow. He brushed a strand of hair from her face, and she stirred slightly, snuggling in closer. Her movement stirred the ginger-haired fur ball at her feet. The cat uncurled itself, stretched, gave him a rueful glance, and then jumped off the foot of the bed onto her trunk, then to the floor. Severus was convinced that the bloody cat could do magic; no matter what he tried to keep the cat out, the cat always managed to creep in at night and curl up at Hermione's feet. At least he kept to her side of the bed, and thankfully, he was not the mewling kind.

He turned to look at his witch again and recalled their conversation from the previous morning. He'd all but told her which side he was on, and he hoped she'd conceal it behind one of her hidden doors. If not, he'd simply tell the Dark Lord that he was trying to sway her into revealing what she knew about the DA or Potter's whereabouts. It had infuriated him when he'd realized that she was hiding things from him, especially activities that he knew about, and it made him constantly wonder what else she kept from him. Not knowing could cost him if the Dark Lord could break through her defenses. But he'd not seen any of her hidden doors in the castle in her mind, nor felt them when he'd mentally swept the castle walls. She was good; it was strong, and it irritated him. He didn't like it at all that she was keeping secrets from him.

He lay on his back and tried to think about how to get her to confide in him. The first time she'd blatantly lied to him was when she'd disappeared for an entire morning in November. She'd told him that she'd been in her house-elf's bedroom. The house-elves didn't have bedrooms; there was a dormitory for them off the kitchen with fifty twin-sized three-tiered bunk beds lined up in a row, each bunk had its own individual curtain and a small trunk on the foot of each bed. The Hogwarts house-elves all thought it was the most luxurious living situation in the entire world. Some of them even had hat boxes, small crates, or cigar boxes to hold personal items in their bunks. Quite a few of them even had pets, obtained by a myriad of means.

Undoubtedly, Peren had been given a bunk, and she was as content as any of the house-elves. So, that meant Hermione had either been in the house-elf dormitory, which was strictly forbidden, or had been wandering somewhere in the castle unescorted. He'd been furious with her it still irritated him when he thought about it.

And now, she had mirrors two way mirrors. Just like the ones Potter and Black had when they were students. He wondered who had the twin *Ginevra*? That was the most likely person, unless she'd figured out a way to get one to Potter. Which meant Hermione knew where he was, or how to reach the boy. Severus could feel his blood pressure rise at the thought.

Dumbledore's portrait wanted him to give the sword to Potter insisted more like. He knew that Potter had the cursed locket, possibly the cup. Hermione hadn't said so, but her expression when they talked about the Dark Lord's artifacts indicated that the boy might have the cursed cup. Potter needed the sword. The objects had to be destroyed before the curses on them damaged the boy as the ring had Dumbledore's hand. They had no idea what curses the Dark Lord knew or what depravity the Dark Lord could conceive. But Severus did; he knew it well. He'd seen the Dark Lord's creative side numerous times. And, if the boy had the cursed items and the curses were anything like the ones on the ring... He shuddered at the thought.

Severus turned his head to look at Hermione again.

Somehow, he was going to have to get her to tell him Potter's whereabouts, or trick her into taking him to the boy. No, he wanted her trust and to get her to open up to him. Only he was horribly out of practice with being open to someone with whom he had a relationship. The only open, well open-ish relationship he'd had with *anyone* ended with her throwing him over for his most hated nemesis.

He turned his head and stared up at the canopy of the bed again.

He needed to talk to Cillian about how to gain Hermione's trust and her confidence so she'd tell him how to find Potter. But until Cillian finally came around, that was next to impossible. He couldn't tip his hand to his best friend yet. *Damn*. It was one thing to talk about the girls several of their brethren kept undesirable girls as playthings but it was another matter altogether to even hint that he wanted to help Potter.

Not only that, but he needed Cillian's help in protecting the students on the bloody list. Dumbledore's Army. The rebellious students who were only standing up for what they thought was right. Severus secretly agreed, punishments were one thing, discipline a necessity, adherence to the rules... but torturing kids? That was wrong. So far he'd been able to keep the Carrows and Filch in line, but they were finding ways to bend his rules regarding discipline and that irked him. He needed someone on the inside of Longbottom's group. He knew that Hermione could gain their trust, but with Cillian following her all the time, Longbottom, Finnigan and Ginevra would never trust him unless he could prove to be on their side.

So, he needed to get Cillian to change sides, needed find out how to get Hermione to confide in him, and needed get Potter the sword before the curses on the locket or the cup destroyed the boy. It was imperative, and time was of the essence. And it felt like time was running out.

He had some planning to do.

As he did most mornings, Severus levitated Hermione to her side of the bed and put his pillow under her arm. She pulled the pillow tightly to her and settled without waking.

He rolled out of bed, dressed, enjoyed a cup of breakfast tea in his sitting room while watching the sun rise, and then went to his office.

No sooner had he begun to organize the numerous amounts of parchmentwork involved with running the school, including the requests and demands of the school governors and pacifying the same numerous complaints of the angry parents, than the bell on his desk tolled. "Enter," he barked, and Cillian opened the door.

"I had to warn you as soon as I heard. You had best be ready for some backlash," he said as he walked to Severus' desk. "Nearly every raid on the Muggle-born homes in the last few days has proven disastrous." He placed his fists on the desk and leaned on them. "He's furious. Most of the homes were empty. Many of the neighbors when questioned said that the families were on holiday or traveling. Only three of the residences raided were successful; the Muggle-born targets were at home, and the families eliminated."

"That's not uncommon. Muggles like to vacation over the holidays," Severus said, trying to appear unperturbed by the news as he set the latest parchments from the governors to the side to deal with later. "Welcome back."

"Thanks. The Dark Lord wants another copy of the School Registry, just the kids from age two to ten. No point giving him the list of the current students," Cillian stated, his brow furrowed obviously perplexed, and sat in the chair in front of the desk. "He doesn't seem to blame you, or the librarian, but he wants current copies of the pages so he knows where the kids are now. However, he's in a rage over this. Runcorn was tortured severely with the Cruciatus, and he killed Adolph Blackalter because he thought he gave Runcorn the wrong entries of the Magical Birth Registry."

"Thank you for the warning," Severus said and leaned back in his chair. "The copies won't update the child's location like the School Registry does. It's possible that they were visiting relatives, at some vacation spot, moved, traveling or whatever Muggle families do this time of year."

"Bellatrix is screaming for your hide," Cillian warned him.

"I'm quaking in my boots," Severus sneered, then smirked. "She cannot possibly blame her failures on me. Muggles are notorious for going places and moving about. Most of those children are in Muggle schools. I have no idea when Muggle schools have their Christmas holidays." Severus looked at Cillian soberly. "So how are things at home? Did you have a nice visit?"

"Mum and Dad are practically comatose. They're all right, nothing that they can't recover from with a good Healer, but Belinda keeps them under the Imperious. Justin's livid about it, but Marc says it's for their own good. I hate it, but at least they're alive. How are things here?" Cillian answered with a smirk.

"The same as most mornings, the usual complaints to deal with and numerous demands on my time," Severus stated with a sweep of his hand over his correspondences, "including recopying the School Registry. Hermione is still asleep. Would you like some coffee?"

"I'd love a cup," Cillian said, turning quickly when they heard a soft pop over in the corner of the office. His shoulders relaxed when he realized that they were alone. "Peren?"

"Yes. She's a very efficient house-elf," Severus said as Peren reappeared carrying a tray with coffee service for two.

"And how is Hermione?" Cillian asked. "You've been angry at her about something for a while now."

"Resolved," Severus said, then scowled at Cillian's smug quirk of his eyebrow. "She's hiding things from me, and I don't like it."

"Can't be much, I'm watching her all the time," Cillian stated, adding half a spoon of sugar to his coffee and stirring it once. "Trust me; she's not involved in any of the mischief."

"That's a relief," Severus said and sipped his coffee. "But I still have to get her to confide in me."

Cillian smirked at him over the rim of his mug. "With witches, it's a two-way street. If you don't confide in her, she won't confide in you."

Severus merely grunted.

"Sorry ol' bat, that's the way they are," Cillian said smugly. "I'm afraid you'll have to make her believe that you are confiding in her to gain that trust."

*Which I can't do, can I?* Severus thought. "There are things she can't know."

"Yes, but there are things you can tell her," Cillian said and then paused, his head tilting as sounds came from upstairs. "Speaking of the witch, it must be time for breakfast."

"Apparently," Severus said as Hermione entered his office in her school clothes and greeted them politely.

~\*~

*The Quibbler* arrived with the morning post on Thursday and was dropped like pamphlets on each of the House tables. The front of *The Quibbler* had several pictures, much like the *Daily Prophet* usually did these days, of Harry, Ron, Dean, and now Colin and Dennis Creevey. However, on the *Daily Prophet*, Harry's and Ron's pictures were more prominently placed than the others were. Harry's picture was emblazoned with a banner that read: *Undesirable Number One*. On the bottom of Ron's picture, it read: *Undesirable Number Two*. Below the pictures, pulsating letters read: *Armed, demented, and dangerous fugitives reward offered for any information leading to the capture of these criminal wizards*.

~H~

Hermione exited the bathroom after her Herbology lesson at the end of the day, wrapped in a towel with the corner tucked in tightly to keep it in place and her hair still damp. She looked up in surprise upon seeing Severus sitting on the bed, waiting for her. "Oh, you startled me," she said, then smiled as she clasped the towel to make sure the twist stayed firmly in place.

"How was your lesson?" he asked as she walked confidently to the wardrobe.

"It was fun," Hermione said as she pulled out some clean clothes. "We were..."

"No, don't tell me; hide it," he replied. "I want to see if I can find the memory."

Hermione nodded as she pulled her knickers up under the towel, trying to decide how best to sort the memory. She hadn't needed to create a hidden greenhouse or a hidden door for her Herbology memories because nothing that went on in her lessons needed hiding. Neville, Hannah, and Ernie never talked about anything of import in class because Draco, Crabbe, Goyle, and Parkinson were always at the next workbench, watching and trying to listen in on their conversations. She looked up at Severus and frowned; he was smirking at her as she pulled on her jeans. "What?"

"Your modesty amuses me," he said, reaching out and pulling her towel off her.

She immediately turned her back on him to hide her embarrassment and then scoffed at herself for doing so. "Really?" she replied as she fastened her zip. She put on her bra, then pulled on her blouse and faced him.

He watched her with his intense stare as his eyes scrutinized her movements. "Are you ready?" he asked when she finished fastening the buttons.

"No," she admitted and swallowed, trying to sort her thoughts for the inevitable invasion. "I don't have a hidden part for what happens in Herbology."

"All right then," he said, standing up to face her. *Legilimens*.

She barely had time to brace herself. He pushed, searching her mind. She had no idea what he was looking for, so she simply maintained the castle she'd constructed in her mind, allowing him to traverse corridors. Memories flashed quickly, images of Ginny, Harry, and Ron. Although most of the memories of Ginny were current, those of Harry and Ron were not. There was a picture of Harry in the newspaper, a flash of Harry disheveled from a flight, another of him after the fight in the Ministry of Magic her fifth year, then a quick one of him with broken glasses and his hair in his eyes, and then the article in *The Quibbler*. She slammed the door closed and swayed on her feet. He hadn't looked for anything related to Herbology at all.

"Again," he said and entered her mind without warning. This time his focus seemed to be on her interactions with Ginny and Jenny. Thankfully, all the important memories



were hidden carefully behind her tiny house-elf door to the common room and the imagined tiny door to their dorm room so he didn't find anything she didn't want him to know about. When he broke contact, he crossed his arms, frowning at her, standing there staring at her, waiting, and a tic flicking in his cheek from clenching and grinding his teeth.

"What?" she finally asked, breaking the silence.

He looked at her thoughtfully through narrow, penetrating eyes. "There are no memories of you with Miss Weasley up in her dorm room," he stated.

She gaped at him. "So?"

He lips stretched into an exasperated grimace. "I know you go up there; Cillian knows you go up there. What if the Dark Lord has been told you have?"

Her mouth dropped open, and then snapped closed. She hadn't thought of that.

His raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched. "How will it look if the Dark Lord searches for those memories and doesn't find any?"

He entered her mind before she could say, 'I'll show him memories from my sixth year.' As if thinking it had opened the memories, various conversations with Ginny from her previous years were rolling through her mind: Ginny fuming over Dean's attitude, how Harry would never treat her as if she was delicate, conversations about how much a prat Ron was, Ginny elated that Harry had finally kissed her, and sitting by the fire talking about tattoos... before she slammed the door closed and pushed him out.

He just smirked cruelly, and condescendingly sneered, "Those could get your friend killed! If the Dark Lord thought for even one minute Ginevra and Potter had a romantic attachment that he might care for her she'd instantly become a target."

"That's why I hide all my memories of my conversations with Ginny!" she snapped back, her head pounding and reeling from his last onslaught.

Severus raised his eyebrow, and his mouth twitched. "So what do you girls talk about when you're up in her rooms?"

"Spells, boys, you, how cruel the Carrows are, how much things have changed, things in the paper, and Draco," Hermione rambled off, realizing she'd have to move some of the more benign memories around a bit. *Maybe I should sort out some memories from my fifth and fourth year? Gin wasn't obsessing about Harry then, well, not really. Oh, bugger.*

His face twisted into a sneer. "Draco?" he asked, with delicately intoned sarcasm. "What is her interest in Draco?"

"This year he follows me around all the time; he's been nice and, at times, protective," she stated. "Almost like a friend. It's weird. He's hated me for six years, and suddenly *now*, he wants to be friends. But, I hear him at times; he still hates Muggle-borns, and he's in league with the Dark Lord."

Severus relaxed a fraction. "Yes, he is," he said before he schooled his features into a neutral expression. "But like I told you, he's doing so under the Dark Lord's wishes. However, you're having more of an effect on him than you think."

She shook her head. "Hardly. He's too set in his ways too blind to the truth."

He grabbed her robes off the bed. "If you think so," he said, holding out her robes for her. "It's time for dinner. We can discuss this later."

Talk in the Great Hall was greatly subdued at the Gryffindor table because MacCavish chose to sit right next to Seamus and listen in on the conversations of Hermione and her friends. Hermione stood to leave before pudding was served, saying she had too much homework. Cillian escorted her to the tower and waited for Severus in his office.

Hermione had all her books out on the coffee table, busily trying to catch up on all her homework when Ginny walked into the room and sat down next to her. "Hi. I brought you some brownies," she said, placing a plate of brownies on an empty spot.

"Thanks," Hermione replied, setting down her quill. "Sorry about dinner, they think you and I are conspiring or something."

"Aren't we?" Ginny asked as she started pulling out her things from her bag.

Hermione thought about it. *Yes, they did, frequently.* That didn't lend well to sorting out memories that she could show Severus or the Dark Lord. Which reminded her... "Do you have the mirror?" Hermione asked, biting her lip.

"Sure," she said, handing the compact to Hermione.

Hermione listened carefully to the sounds coming from Severus' office; she knew Severus and Cillian were discussing what they should do with her over Christmas holiday.

"I wish you could come home with me," Ginny said wistfully.

"Oh, sure," Hermione said sarcastically as she opened the compact. "I'll just go ask Severus for permission." Both girls laughed at the suggestion.

"He's really protective of you," Ginny stated as she opened her Transfiguration book.

"As much as he can be, I suppose," Hermione said as she angled the mirror, but all she could see was darkness. "How does it..."

"If his is closed you have to make it vibrate to get his attention," Ginny said as she tapped it twice with her wand.

After a few seconds, part of Harry's face appeared. "Hermione!"

"Shh, I have to be quiet; Severus is downstairs. What have you been up to?" Hermione asked, dying to hear good news.

Harry's one eye narrowed at the mention of Severus' name but he recovered quickly. "Ron, Dean, and I went back to the museum," Harry said, and Hermione shook her head in disbelief, "to look at the Gryffindor artifacts again and all the portraits of him, but we ran into some trouble. I've looked in the books you had on the founders, but just like in the museum, Godric Gryffindor is rarely painted with anything other than his sword, vambraces, and the brown hat he turned into the Sorting Hat. Sometimes he's wearing a chain, but not all the time."

"Harry, I don't think that anything of Gryffindor's survived other than the sword and his hat. Gryffindor's tankard, his vambraces, stirrups, and the buckler in the Walsingham's collection in the museum are probably not they won't be one. I still think one of the old pewter plates or the old pewter mugs from the school is a possibility, but the ones on display from the Mordaunts' collection won't be."

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I thought..."

"We thought wrong, and stay away from the artifacts and portraits in the museum. I know the Mordaunts and Walsingham are Death Eaters, but if they had one of his artifacts... I doubt seriously that the Dark Lord would keep his artifacts in the museum he'd want them someplace safer, secret," she warned him. "Severus was sent there by Dumbledore, or he went there with him... He said they are not what we seek."

"And you trust him?"

Hermione wanted to strangle him sometimes. "Harry, he was *there*. He *saw* us and let us go. He knows about the cup, locket, book, and ring, and he confirmed to me that he thinks Nagini is one."

"I don't trust him," Harry whispered. At least he wasn't getting excited or raising his voice.

"I do," Hermione said, echoed by Ginny.

"Ginny? Is that you? Are you there, too?"

Ginny scooted closer so that she could see Harry, too. "Yes, Harry, I do; I trust him. He's really strict about the rules, and he's tough, but he's doing things to protect us. The Carrows are horrible they've let Filch use the chains in his office, but Snape keeps interfering. He keeps sending us to Hagrid's for detention a lot, and he's been trying to have the other professors handle their own detentions. Filch even set up a pillory in the Entrance Hall and hung three gibbets from the ceiling, but so far, no one's been put in them."

"So," Harry said, obviously not wanting to see any good in Severus.

"Snape changes the punishments, Harry. I know he's been doing it! He's protecting Hermione, too, him and his friend. He has this guy, Cillian, here as Hermione's personal bodyguard. It's odd, but I think Snape likes her," Ginny said, but Harry still looked skeptical. "Look, I know about these things you're looking for, like the cup and that locket. There's another one, isn't there? Why won't you fill me in so I can help?"

"It's too dangerous, Gin," Harry said. "Don't pester me *or Hermione* about them."

Ginny opened her mouth but Hermione cut her off. "Have you destroyed the locket, yet?" Hermione asked. "No point being evasive, Ginny already knows about the locket anyway."

Harry scowled and then sighed. "No, we've tried, but we can't," he said and looked away for a moment. "It's wonky; I hear whispers. It tells me all sorts of things and tries to make me believe that Ron isn't my friend, that I can't trust him. Dean can't stand the thing, and Ron is really a prat when he wears it; he keeps saying the oddest things."

Ginny grabbed Hermione's hand so she could look directly into the mirror. "Don't let it touch your skin, Harry. Cover it with a sock or put it in a leather pouch, or both, but *don't wear it*," she implored. "The diary not only affected me when I was writing in it but when I was holding it or touching it. I even heard it whisper to me when I had it with me in my bag. I had it under my pillow for a while, but the dreams I'd have... Trust me on this, okay? Please, Harry, limit your contact with the thing until you can destroy it!"

"Yeah, all right. I'll try. I just don't want it lying around or getting lost." The image in the mirror bobbed as if he was distracted by something. They could hear voices from somewhere behind him. "It's what if someone picked it up and didn't know what it was? They might it's too risky to leave lying around."

"Harry, do you have the cup? Do you know where you're going to look next?" Ginny asked.

Harry's face appeared in the mirror again. "Leave it, Gin; it's too dangerous! Don't ask me again," he growled angrily, and the mirror went dark again.

"I hate it when he does that," Ginny grumbled.

Hermione shrugged and picked up her quill. Wondering if maybe, just maybe, she should trust Ginny, then dismissed the idea. Harry would be angry with her if she did.

~o0o~

Hermione stood at the window of the sitting room, one hand clutching the drapes as she watched the students board the school carriages. She felt abandoned. She let out a deep sigh, and her breath fogged the window momentarily.

At breakfast Ginny told her that she, Neville, and Seamus had made arrangements so that all of the Gryffindors siding with the DA who would normally be staying at the castle over the Christmas holiday would instead be staying with either Neville's or Seamus' family, and that Hannah, Susan, Gerald, and Ernie had done the same in Hufflepuff. In Ravenclaw, Terry, Michael, Stephen, Claudia, and Geraldine had also ensured that anyone siding with the DA who wanted to leave the school had a place to go.

Hermione didn't blame them, considering how horrible things had been for her friends, but that meant that she'd be alone in the castle with Severus and Cillian. She hung her head as she let the drape fall back into place. Even Draco was leaving, but then, he hadn't been speaking to her all that much since their last argument. Apparently, the Carrows were staying in the castle, as were MacCavish, Rowle, and Travers.

"What are your plans today?" Severus asked. Hermione turned sharply, startled; she thought he was downstairs talking to Cillian and hadn't heard him come in.

"I didn't make any. I thought I'd work on my homework, maybe do some research in the library..." Her voice trailed off as he nodded, his back rigid and his hands clasped behind his back. Cillian leaned casually against the doorway to the stairs, watching them.

"You and I have been requested to attend a party," he said smoothly, his face impassive, but his tone told her either he hated parties, or this one wasn't one he particularly wanted to attend.

"A party?" she asked, tilting her head. "Where?"

"Malfoy Manor," he said, his tone even and controlled. She tried to read his expression, but his face gave nothing away, although he was watching her intently. "It's the night of the Winter Solstice. It's formal."

Hermione nodded. *Formal. The Malfoys the Death Eaters. Voldemort.* She swallowed nervously. "I see." *Formal, as in robes? Shopping?* She gasped at the possibility of going shopping. *Leave the castle?* "I would like that. I haven't been allowed to leave the castle or get anything for my friends for Christmas."

He let out a bark of laughter. "You do understand that I cannot risk taking you to Hogsmeade. The Death Eaters have taken over the village and made it their personal headquarters," he stated, unmoving. "Even the standing order of the Dark Lord that you are not to be touched won't necessarily guarantee your safety; there are still those who take it upon themselves to try and *earn* his favor with unauthorized initiatives. The number of times I've seen the Dark Lord punish a follower for his or her *initiative* attests to that alone."

Hermione inhaled sharply. She knew he was right; she'd seen the Dark Lord's anger and his treatment of Pettigrew for harming her.

His lip curled up slightly in a cool smile that didn't resemble humor. "However, I'd gladly allow you to send your friends presents if you can tell me where they are?"

Hermione pursed her lips, knowing which friends he meant, but decided to answer him anyway. "Ginny's at the Burrow, and Luna went home as did Charlene, Neville, and Seamus. I have Jenny's and Janilynn's addresses." She wondered if she should get something for Glenwynn, Felicia, and Adrianna. *They've been very nice to me this year, even protecting me once...*

Severus moved closer. "And Potter and Weasley, what of them?"

Hermione lowered her head and shook it, looking up at him through her fringe. He wouldn't let it go she didn't know where Harry and Ron were, but even if she did, she wouldn't tell him. It was too risky. "I don't know where they are, but if I did, I have no way of getting hold of them," she lied with a shrug, staring at the floor in what she

hoped was a look of total dejection. Severus stared at her, unmoving and stiff, and she hoped he wouldn't use Legilimency on her. Not that she had ever been good at deception.

"I can always get the girl appropriate robes," Cillian said, and Hermione was grateful for the interruption, even if his suggestion meant that she'd not be able to get anything for her friends.

"I understand that you chose her wedding robe," Severus said with a smirk.

"And she looked amazing in it," Cillian retorted.

Sighing, Hermione walked across the room to go up to the bedroom.

"Hermione?" Severus said as she passed him.

"No, it's fine. I want my Transfiguration notes," she replied before ascending the stairs. *It isn't fair. I'm behaving. I'm trying so hard.* She knelt in front of her trunk and wiped a tear on the sleeve of her robes, which only allowed more tears to follow. A hand holding a handkerchief touched her shoulder. She turned and saw Severus standing behind her.

"Who did you want to send gifts to?"

"I told you," she replied, ignoring the handkerchief. She lowered her eyes and turned back to her trunk.

"There are other things you can send your friends," he said softly, touching her hair with his fingertips. "Personal things. Something made, perhaps."

"Perhaps," she replied. *He's right.* She was very good at potions, and she knew that he maintained a personal supply of ingredients *I could transfigure something. I'm very good at changing pebbles into crystals. I did that sixth year. Black Panyas or Pangra Pods worked really well, too, and the crystals became an iridescent black...but then what?* She didn't know how to make jewelry with them. *Eucalyptus pods with their star made pretty buttons. But everyone learned that in class.*

"If you put your mind to it, you'll think of something," Severus said softly. "If you want to use the potions lab, let me know."

"I will. Thank you," she said and resumed digging in her trunk for the things she wanted and putting them in her bag.

He remained behind her, silent. She inhaled; his presence was a comfort, soothing. She could feel his strength. She clasped the handles of her bag and rose, facing him. "Is it all right if I go to the library?"

His lips curved into a semblance of a smile. "I think it can be managed."

She smiled in return and headed for the door.

"Hermione."

She turned.

"I will have to be with you as well as Cillian. The Carrows are remaining in the castle," he said softly.

"I heard. So are the security wizards," she replied. "My friends mentioned it at breakfast."

He nodded once. "I will allow you to bring any books you need here, as many as you like, even those from the Restricted Section," he said.

She looked up at him in shock that he'd allow her to do so.

"But I advise you to revise here. The Carrows and Death Eaters will not be allowed in the Headmaster's tower."

She nodded in understanding and turned to go. The castle was eerie with so few people around, the corridors practically empty, but the huge library seemed to welcome her like an old friend. She considered searching through the history section, but she'd read every book in the library written about the founders ever since Harry had told her about the Horcruxes. Severus and Cillian stayed near the tables in the middle of the great room; Severus facing her, his gaze following her every move as Cillian stood facing the doors, while Hermione collected all the books she wanted to take up to the sitting room.

~D~

The train had been stopped just north of Hadrian's Wall and was searched. Fifteen wizards in black, some wearing Death Eater's masks, others wearing a skull and snake badge on their robes, quickly secured the train and searched all the compartments. It was chaos. Shouts. Screams. Even the sounds of windows breaking. Uncle Rodolphus told Draco to remain put and keep an eye on the prefects. Draco locked the door of the prefect compartment and then stared out of the window as he waited.

Antonin Dolohov entered several minutes later, checked the names of the students to that on a list while Franklin Avery and Sylvester Rosier stood behind him with their wands in their hands. Apparently, no one in their compartment was a target; the men closed the door and walked to the next one. Several prefects asked Draco what was happening, as if he'd known about the raid, but he just told them to shut it and sit down.

When Draco exited the train at King's Cross, he was surprised to see his Aunt Bellatrix there to greet him. She fussed over him, asking him how things were at school. When they arrived home, Draco immediately realized that something was amiss. Both parents greeted him, but reservedly, and without the normal shows of affection he'd expected, especially from his mother.

His father stood back, giving Draco a cool hello with a nod of his head and inquiring about his last term. He had stubble on his face, something Draco had never seen before, as if he hadn't shaved in days. His normal long, lush locks were unwashed, lanky, and dull, and his robes were creased as if he'd worn them the day before or the house-elves hadn't cleaned and ironed them. Even his shoes didn't have the normal high gloss polish.

For the first time that he could ever recall, his mother looked... unreachable, unsure, and demure. She hugged him, briefly but stiffly as if embarrassed to be seen showing any motherly affection. She wore high-collared, long-sleeved, closefitting robes cut on the bias with her hair braided and no jewelry at all save her wedding ring. Draco stared at her for a moment until his Uncle Rodolphus came in to welcome him home. He greeted his uncle with the same ease he'd always shown the man, while still slyly assessing his mother's strange demeanor.

His mother tried to bustle Draco up to his rooms but his Aunt Bella insisted Draco greet their Lord, and his mother softly acquiesced. His Uncle Rodolphus remanded Draco's father to remain behind, and Lucius, although apparently affronted by the order, simply stayed where he stood, staring at a spot on the wall, unmoving.

Draco followed his aunt and uncle obediently, his mother walking slowly beside him. His mother, who usually appeared calm and serene in any situation, seemed wary as they were led to the drawing room. Walking beside her, he had a better opportunity to observe her close up. She looked haggard, her eyes haunted, and even though her face was coated with heavy makeup, Draco could detect the presence of Concealing Charms. If he didn't know better, there were bruises on her cheeks and neck, and he suspected that she had deep circles under her shallow-looking eyes.

When they entered the drawing room it was immediately obvious that the Dark Lord was in a rage. Apparently, several students had escaped the raid on the train. Draco asked his mother which ones, but she'd hushed him.

He had to stand and watch as the Dark Lord severely punished Dolohov, Avery, and Rosier for the responsibility of the failed raid. "Rodolphus, how did the children get off the train if all exits were secured by my followers?" the Dark Lord snarled at the three writhing bodies on the drawing room floor.

"They simply vanished, my Lord," his Uncle Rodolphus said, from where he knelt with his head bowed. "They were on the list of those who boarded the train, but when we came on board, they were simply not there."

"But how did they escape!" the Dark Lord snarled, turning his wand on Draco's uncle. Uncle Rodolphus fell to the ground screaming. "It is impossible to Apparate from the train!"

"My Lord, they could have used Portkeys," Draco's aunt implored. She was on her knees, arms stretched out to the Dark Lord and gazing at him with a mixture of fear and lust in her eyes, practically fawning over the wizard. It appalled Draco to have to watch his Aunt debase herself so.

"That's easy enough to check," the Dark Lord said, turning. "Where is Runcorn? Someone fetch him for me."

Westmore came forward, bending his knee to his master. "I can go check the Portkey Registration Office to see if there was any unauthorized Portkey activity in the area, my Lord."

"Then go. And be quick about it," the Dark Lord snarled.

Cillian's oldest brother, Marc Gwynnek, entered the room and knelt before the Dark Lord. "Master, all the prisoners are secured as you instructed. Bole is requesting that he be given the Weston girl."

"Very, good. I'll deal with Bole's request later," the Dark Lord said as he lowered his wand and held it casually in his fingers. "At least one of you is capable of following directions." He looked up, and Draco froze as their gazes met. "Draco, come here."

Draco walked forward and knelt, saying, "My Lord," with as serene a tone as he could muster, trying desperately to appear composed.

"Welcome home. I hear that you, at least, followed directions given to you by your brethren."

The Dark Lord's tone was surprisingly calm, his normalcy unnerving Draco slightly. "I did as I was told, Master," Draco said, forcibly keeping his voice as even as possible. "Had I known who you sought, my Lord, I might have been of some assistance."

"We caught three of the most important ones," the Dark Lord said. "Take your place with your brethren."

Draco stood and backed up until he was level with his mother.

"No, Draco, here, beside your aunt."

Draco crossed the room and stood behind his aunt. She smiled at him, then turned her attention to the Dark Lord, genuflecting at his every move. He carefully hid his disgust as he watched the rest of the display, as one after another Death Eater came forward to make his report.

Afterwards, Draco quickly learned that Lord Voldemort, the Dark Lord, his master, had completely taken over his home and now resided in the master suite as Lord of the manor. Several Death Eaters, those who usually lived in squalor and poverty, had moved into the guest rooms, thrilled to be living in such luxurious surroundings and being waited on hand and foot. Even the werewolf, Greyback, was residing in one of the guest rooms, as was the rat, Wormtail.

Draco still had his own rooms, but his parents had been moved to one of the lesser rooms in the family wing of the manor, and his Aunt Bellatrix now used the rooms adjacent to the Dark Lord. Belinda Morederk, Cillian's sister, and Belladonna Rosier were frequently hanging around the manor, playing court to the Dark Lord, vying for his attentions with as much flaunting and flirtations as his aunt.

His father, once the self-assured master of his domain, a proud aristocrat of the wizarding elite, was quiet and passive and kept to the back of the room or in the corners, unless the Dark Lord called him forward. The Dark Lord frequently taunted his father, making demands as if he were little more than a servant. And his father complied, bowing low like a house-elf, and all the while, looked as if he was only hanging on to sanity by a very thin thread that could break at any moment. It appalled Draco, to watch, but he grit his teeth and forced himself to hide his emotions lest he be questioned about his loyalty.

Everywhere around the house, especially in the wing where the grand ballroom was, preparations were being made for a party. Draco sighed and went to his room, taking the stairs two at a time to avoid being summoned. Once in his room, he collapsed on the bed.

He stared out of the window and wondered what Hermione was up to, then shook his head. She'd be reading or revising. But, it didn't matter. He'd see her at the party on the Winter Solstice.

~H~

Hermione felt the coin in her pocket vibrate. She couldn't use it as Severus and Cillian were both sitting in front of her. After awhile she excused herself to the loo and tried to make her coin work.

Dobby slipped into the loo. "Miss, Dobby was called to Miss Wheezy. Dobby is to give you this," he said and handed her a silver compact. It wasn't like the one she used to talk to Harry; this one had a ring of twelve rhinestones around the edge and several small, silver flowers inset on the cover.

She opened it and was amazed to see Ginny's face in the mirror opposite some Muggle facial powder. "What?" she whispered. "What happened?"

"It's horrible, Hermione," Ginny said, nearly hysterical. "They abducted students from the train! They took them, Susan, and Luna, and Charlene..."

"Ginny, calm down and..."

"They stopped the train somewhere just north of Hadrian's Wall. Six men came on board and forced Luna, Charlene Weston, Susan Bones, Terry Boot, Duane Saunders, Wilberforce Wodehale, oh, and Zane Seymour and Farrah Chambers from the train they took them!"

Hermione couldn't believe what she was hearing. "What do you mean they took them?" She fought back the panic and fear that threatened, and forced herself to remain calm. She couldn't do anything for them.

"Abducted, kidnapped, absconded..."

"Okay, I get the picture," Hermione whispered, forcing herself to remain calm and keep her wits about her. "Took them where? Why?"

"Neither Neville nor Seamus know! But their parents aren't exactly coming in line with the Death Eaters and the occupation of the Ministry, are they? It could be a tactic to make the parents comply with oh, gods, Hermione! They... what do you think they will do with them?"

"Hold them; put them in a... cell, a basement somewhere," Hermione guessed but wasn't sure. "They won't be sent to Azkaban it will be some place private, secret. If they were taken to Azkaban word would get out."

"Hermione, Luna is missing," Ginny reiterated, now close to tears. "She, Jenny and Tinko were going to come stay with me and we have no idea where to look!"

Hermione gasped and felt her fears for her friend escalate. "What, did they get Jenny and Tinko too?" she exclaimed a bit too loudly, and she looked up at the lloo door, hoping that neither Severus nor Cillian would get suspicious and come find her.

"No, Jenny and Tinko, they're with me they got away. I got hold of Seamus but he said that Charlene wasn't corralled off to the side with the others. He said he thinks she was singled out. But no one knows what happened to her, either."

"But then where is she? Did she Apparate?" Hermione asked and then mentally berated herself. *She couldn't have; it's impossible.*

"No, there are Anti-Apparation spells in placed on the train you know that. You can't Apparate to or from the train it's too dangerous. We had Portkeys, and well, some of us didn't show up where we were supposed to."

Hermione was shocked. "Portkeys? How'd you get them?"

"Tonks, who else?" Ginny admitted with a frown. "She sent us nine of them; Neville, Seamus and me, we each had one. Hannah, Gerald, and Ernie did, too, as did Michael, Stephen, and Claudia. Michael is missing, too! No one can reach him."

Hermione thought she heard someone moving around in the bedroom. "Gin, I have to go... I think I hear Severus. If you hear anything, let me know, okay?"

"Of course," Ginny promised. "Too bad you can't weasel it out of Snape."

Hermione chose not to chide her friend as she closed the compact and slipped it in her pocket. She looked around the room, feeling utterly helpless. Her friends were missing, but she couldn't do anything. She was a prisoner here, and at the mercy of the Dark Lord. She couldn't ask anyone for help, not really. *Possibly Professor McGonagall except she is going to be away from the castle for a few days.* Hermione had heard Severus give his consent for a brief family leave since so few students were remaining in the castle. As far as Hermione knew, there were only six students remaining. She didn't know if any of the other professors were in the Order, but if they were then they were most likely already doing what they could.

She forced herself to calm down again. It wouldn't do for Severus to know that Hermione knew about the abductions. He'd only ask her how she'd known, and that would mean ratting out Ginny and admitting to having used the mirrors. She involuntarily put her fingers over the compact, feeling a sense of comfort from the hard surface in her pocket. *No, I have to keep it to myself and wait for news from Ginny. There's nothing to be done but wait and try not to worry. Yeah, right. Don't worry. Homework. Revision, that's what I'll do.* She'd bury herself in her homework and hope to keep distracted.

The bedroom was empty when she entered. Taking a deep breath to suppress her concerns for her friends, she walked downstairs to finish working on her essays.

~~oOo~~

Author's Notes:

I chose Hadrian's Wall as the site for the raid because it's real: 'it was a defensive fortification dividing northern Britannia [Scotland] from the Roman Empire or Roman Britain. Begun in AD 122, during the rule of emperor Hadrian, it was the first of two fortifications built across Great Britain, the second being the Antonine Wall, lesser known of the two because its physical remains are less evident today. A significant portion of the wall still exists, particularly the mid-section, and for much of its length the wall can be followed on foot. Hadrian's Wall extended west from Segedunum at Wallsend on the River Tyne to the shore of the Solway Firth, ending a short but unknown distance west of the village of Bowness-on-Solway.' [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadrian%27s\\_Wall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hadrian%27s_Wall)

## Winter Solstice

Chapter 31 of 43

The winter solstice occurs exactly when the northern axial tilt of a planet is farthest away from the sun, but this one also happens during an unusual astrological event, one that could prove an omen of the fates for the wizarding world. However, it's not only the world that's tilted; for Hermione, Severus, Draco, Cillian and Belinda, perceptions, tolerances, prejudices, and fears are as well. It's the discoveries found, the choices made that determine the fates of those wrapped up in troubling times.

*In order to have the dates fit with my plans for the Christmas holiday events, winter solstice is the twenty-second thru the twenty-third of December.*

**Warning:** *There are some disturbing things mentioned in this chapter and some things implied that have gone on behind the scenes that may be a bit difficult for some readers. However, nothing that is implied is shown or described in full gory details, or will be.*

*A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me and to EverMystique and Dandru for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.*

*Also, smooches and a big thank you to DuchessOfArcadia for my lovely banner! I really love it, doll.*

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~o 31 o~

Winter Solstice

Cillian walked over to the windows and sat in the chair facing Severus. "So, have you decided yet, what are you doing with Hermione over Christmas?"

Both wizards looked up as Hermione entered the room. "Muffliato," Severus murmured with a discreet wave of his hand.

Severus couldn't help watching as Hermione plonked down on the floor by the coffee table and began busily writing on one of her essay assignments, surrounded by several piles of books. "Keeping her here is not the best option," he replied softly, even though his spell wouldn't have allowed her to overhear them. "I thought of taking her home with me, unless Pettigrew decides to spy on me again." He turned to look at his friend. "I'll find out where the Rat is residing at the winter solstice party tonight."

Cillian slouched in his chair and crossed his ankles. "I'd prefer to forget that party. Bell is undoubtedly going to force me to entertain Larissa Roquewood all evening." He jerked his head to indicate the girl revising quietly. "I brought her some robes. The elf put them in her wardrobe."

"Am I to assume they are appropriate?" Severus asked with a quirk of his eyebrow.

"They looked nice on the shop girl," Cillian stated, with a quirk of his eyebrows.

Severus smirked. "I'm sure they did. I'd thought I'd take her to my house for a few days, a break, but I have to justify removing her from *h**est**r**on**ghold*," he sneered the last word.

Cillian moved the drapes back to gaze out of the window. "If you do go to your house, I want to go see Dianne."

Severus wasn't the least bit surprised. He turned to look at Hermione. She was resting her head in her hand as she read from a thick book, stopping occasionally to write something down. She was so much like him when he was young. When her head turned, he noticed a smudge of ink on her pert little nose, and he forced himself not to smile. He turned his attention back to his friend. "It would be risky. Your absence might be more noticeable now that there are fewer distractions for our fellow Death Eaters."

"Life is full of risks, some more dangerous than others." Cillian glanced at him sideways. "I'll be careful."

Severus wondered if he was finally ready to admit his true loyalties. "Why are you putting yourself in such danger for a girl you cannot have?"

"You know why," Cillian growled.

Severus smirked at him. "Love. For a Muggle-born typical Romeo and Juliet scenario from wrong families, you cannot be together except through deceit."

"You're one to talk," Cillian snapped back, glancing quickly at Hermione.

"But, you know me so well. You and I are both breaking the rules for love," Severus stated. He saw the flicker of sadness in his friend's eyes, but he recovered quickly. "They're to be purged from society, or did you miss that meeting?"

Cillian's expression turned stony. "If I didn't know you better I'd say you were on the opposing side," he hissed, his tone sharp.

"I tried that once." Severus prodded. He had to pull back; he'd gone too far. "No one can lie to the Dark Lord, *unless you can anticipating or outwitting him by using beguile and misdirection*, he finished silently.

"I'm not I'm loyal," Cillian quickly denied, albeit too quickly. Cillian smirked at Severus' silence. "Severus, I thought Dumbledore was dead. You're not secretly hiding him anywhere, are you?"

"Naturally," Severus said sarcastically with a sneer, "in a frame on the wall in my office, so I can keep him close to me, always."

Cillian chuckled. "Still enamored of the old man?"

"He was every bit as manipulative as the Dark Lord only he didn't Crucio those who displeased him." Severus watched his friend with feigned nonchalance. "Thinking about asking him for advice? I can make the arrangements."

"No thanks," Cillian said, turning to stare out of the window again.

"Pity, he's enlightening," Severus said.

Cillian head snapped in his direction. "Pardon me?"

He restrained from driving it home. He wasn't ready. "I'm sure that you can take a few days to see your witch, three possibly more. Tell her I said hello."

Cillian nodded as he resumed his gaze out of the window. "Is there anything to worry about here," he asked, "besides the obvious."

"So far, no," Severus said, turning to watch Hermione. So far, she'd done exactly as he'd asked. She'd selected about a dozen or more books on each of her subjects, and they'd used a book trolley to bring all of them to the sitting room. "She's behaving, although she hadn't been as friendly with Draco as *He'd* like."

"They had a fight," Cillian stated, and Severus turned to him. "Hermione's been comparing the Dark Lord to some Hitler, no, Hitler." He turned to look at Severus. "Her comparisons are... disturbing sometimes. It will not help our position if the students are tortured."

"No, it will not," Severus agreed, pleased to hear that Hermione was getting to him as well, how much influence her presence was having. "But every time I reign in the Carrows, they go whine to our Master."

A tic showed in Cillian's cheek.

"You disagree with me?"

"I hate seeing kids hurt unnecessarily."

Severus agreed. He'd been harsh as a teacher, to keep a tight control on his students and to prevent them from doing any antics that could result in fatal accidents. Fear kept people in line; the Dark Lord taught him that. But, he'd always stuck to cauldron cleaning or some disgusting ingredient preparation as a punishment. He didn't approve of Filch's recent use of shackles, chains, and iron cages, and it was all he could do to keep the rebellious teens from ending up tortured in Filch's more medieval devices.

He turned to watch Hermione, carefully keeping his face expressionless. Yes, he'd find a way to get her out of here, just the two of them. It was foolish, but he was tired of the constant strain.

~D~

Ever since Draco had come home, he'd known that things were amiss. The atmosphere was definitely strained around the manor. People stood aside, holding quiet conversations, or moved about with their heads lowered or angled slightly to avoid eye contact whenever possible. Well, except for those held in good favor with the Dark Lord. Aunt Bella never bothered to cower or whisper.

Among the whispers he did overhear, Draco heard that the Dark Lord had a dungeon magically constructed under the house, which was accessed by the manor's cellars.

Draco had tried to ask his mother about it, but she'd adamantly warned him to stay away from the cellars and not to ask anyone about them or what transpired down there. This of course, only piqued his curiosity, but he still kept his distance from the cellars, just in case.

Draco headed for the family library to try to avoid some of the houseguests with a good book. *Or six, should keep me sufficiently occupied* He shook his head. *Good grief, I'm turning into Hermione*, he grumbled to himself at the thought.

As he rounded the corner, he spotted four Death eaters, his Uncle Rodolphus, Macnair, Mengele, and one he didn't see the face of, exit the door to the cellars.

"Them transfusion tests are a waste if you ask me." Rodolphus said, wiping his knife off on a rag. "Does no good mixing it if they react like that," he sneered.

"Yeah, like exchanging the dirty blood for good blood would make a difference," Macnair sneered. "She's still a Mudblood."

That rang a bell and gave Draco a horrible feeling in his gut. He plastered himself to the wall, hoping to be unseen.

"They die anyway," Mengele said with a shrug. "I'm still waiting on the results of the surrogate pregnancies from Vorster and Rosenberg. That may be promising. Send the samples and tissues to Vorster. Let him study it," he added with a malicious laugh their voices faded as the men walked away.

Draco turned, walking cautiously to the door that led to the cellars, staying close to the wall as he made his way silently down the stairs. A large iron door stood in the wall across from the wine cellar where his family kept the everyday wines and the hidden doorway that led to the rooms where his father kept the more questionable artifacts. He smirked; the wine cellar where the good stuff was housed and the one with the expensive collection were farther down the hall. At the end of the hall were the house vaults, although Draco had learned that those vaults had been given over to the Dark Lord.

He reached out his hand and grasped the latch of the iron door, jerking back as a strong stinging sensation shot into his arm and throughout his body. However, he did notice that his left hand was unaffected by the curse on the door. Using his left hand, he tired the latch again. The stinging sensation as he turned the latch and pushed open the door was painful, however bearable, and stopped at his Dark Mark, not affecting the rest of him as it had before.

He slipped into the dark tunnel that stretched into the darkness in front of him, and he was barely able see to the end. The tunnel was round and high enough for a tall wizard to walk down the center. Heavy iron doors with small windows sat in deep depressions in the curved walls, and candle wall sconces provided some illumination. Draco stopped to look though one window and could barely make out anything in the dark room. He tried the next one.

"*Lumos*," Draco said softly with a flick of his wand to illuminate the tip, giving him just enough light to see by, but hopefully not enough to alert anyone in the hall to his presence. He pressed the lighted tip to the window and cupped his eyes with his other hand. The center of the room held a metal chair, with thick leather straps for the chest, wrists, lap, and ankles. A metal cap with straps was attached to a device obviously meant to hold a head in place, and various steel tables with wheels lined the wall to his left. He extinguished his wand.

Following the tunnel, he stopped at the next door. In the dim light from inside the room, he could see what looked like a steel table with four leather shackles. Above it was an odd light fixture, and a second table stood near the back of the room with bins of instruments. Behind it was a metal cupboard with glass front cabinets containing all sorts of canisters and jars. He tried the latch, not surprised to find it locked.

Crossing the hall, he peered into the next room. It was too dark really to see anything through the small, dingy window. Draco tired the latch and smirked to discover it too was locked. Using a simple, Unlocking Charm he pushed the door open. "*Lumos*," Draco said softly with a flick of his wand again, careful to keep the illumination just bright enough to see by, but soft enough so it didn't extend outside the room.

In the center of the room stood what looked like two Muggle surgical tables with stirrups at one end, very similar to the ones that Alecto had shown them in class. Beside each stood a steel table on wheels with trays of odd instruments and gadgets. All along the back wall was a similar multi-drawer cupboard with glass front cabinets full of similar canisters and jars, but also had familiarly shaped potion bottles, jars, and tins.

Draco walked to the back of the room and looked at the cabinet attached to the wall, over a sturdy steel counter. In the one glass front cabinet and on the counter sat a series of small vials and small bottles. He increased the light of his wand slightly. Several vials contained some swirling silvery-white, iridescent substance; others held a similar looking substance that seemed to be much more opaque or that had the appearance of swirling liquid opals with shimmering golds, greens, reds, and blues. Others were darker; a swirling, dark bluish-black iridescent substance that reminded him of the insides of abalone shells. Each was labeled with a small tag.

Are they memories? He'd only ever seen the silvery threadlike substance that was viewed in Pensives.

He checked a few of the labels. HBI d. 2/11/97, JEK d. 5/11/97, SHR d. 12/12/97, SAN d. 26/11/97...

Draco took a step back away from the counter. The last one, one of the dark blueish-black ones, had felt cold and menacing in his hand. He picked up a chart and noticed that the columns on the page on the right almost matched the labels: Initials, Date of Death, Age, Sex, Color of Magical Essence...? He lifted the page on the left and gasped. The messy scrawl was difficult to decipher, but by concentrating very hard on the script he was able to make out: ... *can siphon a person's magical essence while they die? ... help create a method or means to siphon their magical essence ... like the memory extraction of the Pensieve ... would then be able to use to enhance his own powers. Testing the method on the prisoners at Azkaban.* Written on the page in thick letters in someone else's hand was: *Unsuccessful.* "Then what are all these...?" he asked in a hushed voice.

Draco replaced the chart and left the room, carefully locking the door behind him. It was surreal. He had to be mistaken in his assumptions; he had to be missing something.

Draco stopped at the first door and unlocked it. Inside was an office of sorts. On the top shelf of the low bookshelf sat jars of various organs and a few that held what looked like... fetuses, some that were grossly malformed in his opinion. Draco picked up a chart on the desk and swallowed back the bile in his throat as he read the neat, precise handwriting. It was a detailed description of someone's anatomy and measurements. Whoever 'Linda, age nineteen' was, she had been carefully examined, measured, and deemed 'unacceptable' for something. He picked up the next one that had been lying underneath. It was a similar report on a 'Wendy, age twenty,' who was 'acceptable.'

He thumbed through the stack of files. There were several such reports. The bottom of some of the reports was a summary of what the examiner had considered to be 'deemed to be hereditary' as opposed to what was 'deemed to be the result of environmental influences.' Several of the young girls examined were determined to be of 'significant magical ability and physical health, with good breeding, significant heritage, appearance and behavior to be placed in proper homes for proper upbringing.' The last few were stamped 'unworthy' in red. He put the charts back with a shaky hand. "She's right," he hissed, looking around, "about all of it."

Feeling a sense of sick curiosity, he moved to the next door. Even in the dim light, he could make out several forms either sitting or lying along the wall in the large room. He opened the door and drew his wand, igniting the wand tip with a soft glow. The stench of sweat, urine, excrement, and vomit hit him immediately. The bodies were slumped as if drugged and barely moved or acknowledged his presence, each bound in chains and shackles. He held his wand tip closer to the first person and was shocked to see Ollivander, the wandmaker. Next to him was a boy Draco remembered from three years ago, a Hufflepuff who played Chaser for two years. Howard Fortescue, son of the guy who ran the ice cream parlor. Wilberforce Wodehalle and Joaquin Schmidt, both sixth-year Gryffindors, Duane Saunders, a sixth-year Ravenclaw. Terry Boot and Stephen Cornfoot, both seventh-year Ravenclaws... and a few young boys he didn't know.

Draco stood, staring. He looked at the putrid water in the buckets and grimaced. *If that is their drinking water, it's disgusting* He cast *Evanescio* and *Scourgify* on the buckets and filled them with fresh water from his wand. He left the room before he felt the need to hurl from the stench.

Dreading what he'd find in the next room, he was relieved to find it empty. However, behind the last door he saw several girls, likewise chained to the walls. Unlike the guys, the girls were sitting and talking, apparently unaware that he was watching them. Luna Lovegood, the sixth-year he frequently saw with Weasley and Wang, and a pretty girl with a long dark braid who looked to be about fifteen, were facing Megan Jones and Mandy Brocklehurst in the cell. Sidney Whitman, a half-blood who had a

crush on Pucey in school, Sandra Netley, whose father Draco was sure worked for the Obliviator's office, Marietta Edgecombe, the girl who'd had SNEAK broken out on her face his fifth year, and Stephanie Bradley, whose mother worked in the International Magical Cooperation Office sat huddled with Hopkirk's daughter, what's her name... He couldn't remember her, but she was several years older than he was.

He stepped back, looking down the tunnel nervously. He wondered why they were all down here. He hoped that the girls were not being examined and measured in the room down the tunnel for their acceptability. *But if not, why are they here? Prisoners? Surely that's all they are* That theory made sense since there was a cell of sorts for the guys. However, the girls didn't look to be any better off than the guys did, only they, at least, had plain, grey flannel robes and socks to wear.

Draco turned to leave, distressed by what he saw. *It isn't right. What are they doing here? And why here?* he asked himself, unable to find any plausible answer that wasn't horrific or unconscionable. First things first, he'd find out why they were not fed properly and given fresh water. He'd ask the house-elves and see to it that they were treated better. Then he'd find his mother and ask her what was going on... and why.

~S~

The dark outlines of the forest and the mountains stood dark and rugged in contrast to the subtle changes of the sky: as the dark night sky faded, the bluish pearl-grey diffused with soft peaches on the horizon gave way slowly to the rich blues infused with warm yellows of predawn. It was still his favorite time of the day, always had been. The castle was quiet, the air crisp and clean with the scent of the trees wafting on the breeze. It had snowed again last night, a fresh powdery blanket that frosted everything. Eaves, rooflines, wrought iron handrails, and arches were decorated with icicles. The real ones, not the kind magic produced.

Severus stood by the window, gazing out at the snow-covered grounds, finishing his breakfast tea. Normally he enjoyed winter at the castle, warm beds, good food, and the castle was kept at a comfortable temperature. But, Severus was not looking forward to the festivities arranged for this year, especially the party this evening. Not that he'd ever particularly enjoyed Christmas, but Christmas in the castle had always been preferable to Christmas at home. He hoped that the Rat would stay at the Manor, but he doubted it, since the Rat liked spying on him. Not that it had done Pettigrew any good to try; Severus could outwit the dunderhead, drunk, exhausted, and wandless. Still, Hermione needed a break from the stress of the castle as much as he did. *She has been taking so much abuse and torment from the Carrows, tolerating her restrictions without complaint, and bearing it all so well.*

Cillian had offered to have him bring Hermione to his cottage. The *cottage*, his grandfather's house, stood on an island in the Derwentwater Lake east of Catsbells surrounded by native oaks and tall pines. Besides the Fidelius Charm, multiple concealment spells and every known Muggle repelling and avoidance spell protected and shielded the island from Muggle invasion for generations, which kept the island off any known map of the area, whether Muggle or magical. Even the ferry drivers and tourists who traveled between Lodore to High Brandelhow across the lake had no idea that the island existed. It really was the perfect hideaway for a few days.

He just hoped that the Dark Lord would be fooled by his reasoning and that Hermione, in fact, would try to escape and meet up with Potter. That was necessary as well. He'd already placed a tracing spell on her shoes and the Skrewt bracelet she wore, although he didn't know if he'd been able to improve the range of the spells yet. So far he'd only been able to test it up to one kilometer, the furthestmost distance she'd traversed away from him within the castle or on the grounds.

The sky was brighter now, bluer. It would be a full Moon tonight, one that brought with it an unusual occurrence: not only would there be a lunar eclipse as the Moon passed through the Earth's shadow; it would happen in the dark rift of the Milky Way, throwing the snowy landscapes into an unusual state of ruddy shadows. The Dark Lord was particularly looking forward to the event, which would start at midnight, considering it an important omen of his full rise to power. However, Severus was unnerved by the portents.

Sybill had stopped Severus on the seventh floor corridor the day after the students had departed, asking him if the castle would be unoccupied so that she might wander more freely. He'd warned her that she'd still be in danger, that the Carrows and the Death Eaters, with only shanty homes to return to, had opted to remain in the castle. But, before he could urge her to return to her rooms, she seemed to go into a fit. What she said next had plagued Severus ever since.

For seventy-two minutes, the earth shall be cast in ruddy shadow... For seventy-two days the Dark Lord will reign... Blood, sorrow, and pain, the innocent slain, the weak af-ah-chew betrayal of the discontented... But the ides of March shall cast light in the darkness... and in seventy-two ha-kack more the one who wins will die by the wand of the one he defeated... for seventy-two days the earth shall be in shad-o kach-ah-chew...

"Oh, my goodness! Excuse me, Headmaster," Sybill apologized, covering her mouth with her hand.

That one bloody vague word 'more' irritated him. Dumbledore's portrait felt the prophecy was in increments of days; Severus felt certain that was merely hopeful thinking, convinced that the 'seventy-two more' to be weeks, since he was certain that Potter was nowhere close to destroying the locket, let alone finding and destroying any of the Dark Lord's other cursed objects. By his calculations, Severus was certain that the final battle would be the twenty-fourth of May, but Dumbledore's portrait disagreed, claiming that the event would fall on the fifteenth or eighteenth of March.

However, Sybill had made a sick, hacking sound, which obscured part of the prophecy's third and fifth lines, then coughed out of the trance near the end, taking up her pleading as if no time had passed at all. Yes, Sybill had a bad cold, and, of course, she had no idea what bodement she'd given, but it didn't help him decipher the new prophecy. When he'd asked her what she'd just said, she'd meekly repeated, "The cards tell me I can come forth. That the castle shall be empty and the corridors clear of impediments..."

Regardless of who was right, him or the painting, the final battle would be fought next year in the spring. He was certain of that; and depending on who won...

Severus felt a presence behind him, breaking him from his reverie. With a quick glance down, he could see Peren reflected in the glass, looking hopefully up at him, and one side of his lips curved into sly half smile at the house-elf.

"The house is all cleans and prepared for you, master, sir, as you asks Peren to do," she stated. "Does master needs anything else from Peren?"

He turned slightly so he could look directly at her. "Not at present. Just the two bags packed as I requested," he said kindly, and she nodded, bowing to him before leaving. "Peren," he said softly and smirked as she made a little hop, eagerly anticipating his request. "Hermione has a stack of library books on her bedside table as well as the books here on the coffee table. Please see that they are returned to the library for her."

"Yes, Master, right away, sir," Peren said and then tugged on her ear.

He knew the gesture and what it meant. "We will not be needing you for the next few days, Peren. However, if anything should come up, either Hermione or I will call for you. After the party, Hermione and I will go to visit Cillian. You know the place the house on the island that others can't see." *The sizable country house Cillian called a cottage.*

"To the lady that Dobby goes to?" Peren asked.

Severus nodded. "Yes, Dianne Henley, to the place she is hidden." *Cravenweld House.* He couldn't say the location or name of the house, but that rascal Dobby had been able to go there for Cillian when he'd been unable to send things to Dianne by owl. "If anything goes afoul at the castle, come find me and let me know immediately. If you cannot find me, go to Nymphadora Tonks."

"The lady with the hair that changes?" Peren asked, nodding that she did in fact understand.

Severus smiled and laced his hands together. "Yes, the woman who changes her hair color. Do not divulge my association with her to anyone." Why she trusted him when few of the others did, especially her husband, Lupin, baffled him, but at least Tonks agreed to allow Hermione to remain at Hogwarts. The rest of them hated accepting Hermione's imprisonment at the castle; although, Kingsley, Minerva and Pomona did support the idea of her finishing her education. And the Weasleys, of course. Their

reasoning was that if the castle was safe enough for their daughter, then it was safe enough for Hermione. However, they didn't approve of their hand-fastened bonding.

"Oh, no, sir," Peren said, shaking her head. "I keeps your secrets, Master."

Severus reached out and stroked her head. "I know you will. You are a good house-elf."

Peren smiled and ran from the room to collect Hermione's books. It was a huge risk he was taking, but if all went well, he'd find Potter and finally give him the bloody sword.

He walked down the stairs to his desk and drafted a letter to Nymphadora, *Tonks*, he reminded himself, updating her briefly and giving assurance that Hermione was well. He was still angry about the raid on the train, but at least, he'd known about the possibility beforehand. Tonks had sent him a list of those missing, and many of the names matched the one he had from Barcus Mordaunt, the assistant head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission. He just wished that he knew where the students had been taken. According to Tonks, no one in the Order knew, and no one in the Aurory knew for sure either. And *he* was responsible for explaining things to the irate and frightened parents of the missing students, as well as those who had received the letter stating that withdrawal from Hogwarts would not be allowed and that attendance for the rest of the students was compulsory. It was a bloody mess and added to his already enormous parchment load.

He chose not to tell Tonks that he was taking Hermione from the castle because he couldn't tell her where they'd be. It was better this way. He picked up a stack of parchments, the replicated pages of the School Registry that Minerva had given him. The Order already had the list, several days before the Dark Lord would. He'd sent a message to Bellatrix, telling her that he would make a copy of the Registry when Minerva left for her requested days off 'so the old bat can't manipulate the entries and then warn the Order,' (which was exactly what Minerva had done both times), and he'd have the copy for her as a Christmas gift. The barking witch had actually been pleased.

Severus knew that this was the real reason that Minerva, Pomona, and Hooch had asked for a few days off, to help the Order hide those families.

He folded the letter, shrunk it to the size to fit inside one of the empty matchboxes he kept in his pocket, and walked over to Aetos' perch. The matchbox from a Muggle pub would alert the woman to the urgency of the message.

His owl hooted softly as he woke from Severus' soft touch on his feathers. "I have a delivery I need you to make tonight. Hide in the upper perches of the owlery until dusk and then fly from there. Go to her home, late, after dark. Do not be seen." He secured the matchbox gently to the bird's leg. "I will be at Cillian's grandfather's house, the house on the island that is hidden, if she replies. If not, wait in the owlery until I come get you. If you are hurt or hungry, seek Hagrid."

Aetos hooted in response, indicating that he understood. Severus carried him to the window and stroked his feathers again. "I'll have the house-elves save you some chicken parts from dinner. I know how much you like the heart and liver." Aetos hooted again in appreciation and spread his wings. "Safe flight, my friend."

~o0o~

Hermione stared at the small, black clutch in her hands. On the outside it looked small, just the size of her hand, barely enough to hold a few credit cards, driver's license and possibly a compact and lipstick. However, when Hermione had opened it and dropped her magical compact into the purse, the one that Dobby had brought her two days ago, it seemed to vanish, as if the clutch had been magically expanded inside. She slipped her hand in and tried to reach the bottom, finding that her arm disappeared into the bag, all the way up past her elbow.

She withdrew her arm and picked up the card; it read: *Happy Winter Solstice from your friends in Slytherin*, and was signed by Glenwynn, Felicia, and Adriana. *Now I will have to get them something*, she sighed, wondering what would be suitable. Still, the purse would easily fit into her pockets. Hermione retrieved her DA coin and the twin to the mirror Harry and Ron had, and placed them as well as a few books and some personal items in her new clutch.

The second present was from Draco, a scarf. It was soft like angora and smelled of jasmine. It went into her clutch as well.

The other package contained a lovely pair of chinchilla lined gloves made from a greyish-purple skin that felt very tough even though it was tanned to be rather supple. There was a small slip of parchment tucked into one of the gloves under the tag that read: *fine-grained graphorn hide*.

Graphorn hide is stronger than dragon hide and also repels spells! Hermione unfolded the parchment and smiled, then frowned.

Hermione,

This is a thank you for all the extra help you've given me this year as well as a Winter Solstice present. Apparently, it was decided that everyone in the wizarding society, at least in England, will celebrate Winter Solstice instead of Christmas, (since Christmas is a Muggle holiday) so I sent these to you early. I sincerely hope you have a happy Christmas. I'll see you at the Malfoys' party. Unfortunately, I'll be meeting my fiancé that night, so please don't be offended if I don't (which was crossed out) if I seem aloof that night.

Breanna

She tried on the gloves and they fit her perfectly. She sighed as she slipped them off and held them on her lap. She had nothing to give Breanna in return.

Peren had her robes for the party laid out on the bed. Hermione rose to inspect them. There were two to choose from: one, a strapless, white dress robe with multiple layers of a sheer filmy fabric that would float and sway as she moved. The other was a rich, emerald green taffeta and organza with long sleeves and a wide neckline that left her shoulders bare. She didn't want to wear either; she didn't want to wear Slytherin green, but the white one reminded her of a wedding gown and was exactly the sort of gown she'd have select for herself if her wedding had been *her* choice and not something that had been planned for her by Narcissa Malfoy on the Dark Lord's orders.

Not that she was complaining, Severus was a very attentive husband and an amazing lover, but at times, he seemed so aloof, distant and closed off. Of course that could only be because of the trouble he had with her friends' rebelliousness, his position with the Dark Lord, or even just his tendency to be private but it irked her nonetheless.

She turned to look at her red wedding robes hanging on the wardrobe door. She was certain that she would have to wear the Skrewt jewelry, not that it would actually go with any of the three gowns. The scarlet crimson gown tastefully adorned with tiny crystals on the lace sleeves and bodice had looked wonderful on her. And it was red. Not exactly Christmas red, but a perfect shade for her skin and hair. Besides, she'd read about an old tradition: in the Victorian era, a woman of society was expected to wear her wedding dress for her first presentation after marriage, usually altered slightly such as shortening or removing the sleeves or making the neckline lower to serve as an evening gown for the first year. Not that she wanted to shorten or remove the lace sleeves, and she certainly didn't want to lower the neckline; it was already low enough. Any lower and she'd be exposing her breasts indecently.

Then there was the fact that Cillian still had her wand, or possibly Severus did, but she wasn't allowed to use it outside of class. She doubted that Severus would make the exception for her to alter her wedding robes. However, Hermione knew that it had been considered a compliment to the hostess of the event, party, whatever, for the bride to appear in her remade gown during the first year after the wedding. If she chose to wear her wedding robes, even unaltered, she'd actually be complimenting the Dark Lord and Narcissa Malfoy in a way, by showing her acceptance of her marriage. It was a custom, albeit an antiquated one, but the wizarding world liked all the old customs.

Decision made, she called for Peren.

~D~

Draco excused himself to change for the party. Not that he needed over two hours, but he wanted to be alone for a while before having to put on his party smile and fake being cheerful around all the household *guests*. He told his mother that he wanted to take a bath and rest for a bit, but she only nodded at him knowingly with haunted,

disheartened eyes and maintained her self-assured pose.

He hated that look, hated the way his father looked at her for reassurance all the time. He hated the way the Dark Lord sneered and demeaned his father at every opportunity. He hated sitting across from that werewolf at meals, and hated seeing Pettigrew helping himself to his father's expensive cigars and liquors. And he hated watching his aunt debase herself, fawning and groveling at the Dark Lord all the time.

Up in his rooms, Draco showered, more to scrub away the dirty feeling that felt as if it had permeated his very skin than because he actually needed a shower. He closed his eyes, wishing he was back in the hovel of a house Severus called home. Right now, the place seemed like a heavenly refuge with its shelves of books, old cracking paint, and dusty beams. The house-elf had tried to make the home spotless, but after so many years of neglect, even ten house-elves wouldn't have been able to improve the place. But right now, this instant, there was nowhere he'd rather be. *Maybe the ol' bat will sell it to me*, he thought ruefully.

After washing his hair and wiping himself down three times with the loofa sponge and soap, he turned off the water. He dried himself off, wrapped the towel around his hips, and walked back into his bedroom. A house-elf appeared instantly. "No, come back in an hour," he said, falling onto the bed and placing an arm across his eyes, not caring that the towel gaped open, exposing his leg to his groin.

"Yes, master Draco," the house-elf replied and popped out.

He'd been delusional about the Dark Lord. All his life his father had told Draco what a powerful and dynamic wizard the Dark Lord was; how cunning, how brilliant, how right he had been about the true nature of Muggle-borns; and how he intended to bring the wizards, true wizards the pure-blood elite to their rightful places as magical nobility, even ensuring that wizards would stand beside the Queen of England herself as her counsel and right hand. His father had even implied that the Dark Lord himself promised him the honor.

However, nothing was as it should be. The Dark Lord was a self-edifying, narcissistic megalomaniac, a raging psychopath, who greatly enjoyed the sound of his own voice, and a sadist, who liked to torture people, using curses to control his followers, completely devoid of any normal human emotions. Instead of devotion, he used fear and pain to demand loyalty, doling out punishments or even death for disloyalty or merely disappointing him. Everyone tried to worm their way into his good graces by backstabbing each other, groveling, and pleading promises at the Dark Lord's feet and he loved every minute of the display. Everyone was terrified of him, most distrusted him, well except for a raving few like his Aunt Bella, Belinda Morederk, and Belladonna Rosier.

Half of the pure-bloods elevated as favorites in the Dark Lord's eyes were nothing but pikey bogs, thugs and maniacs. Sure there were some who were of the better class: the Lestranges, Morederks, Gwyneks, Lockhavens, Roisers, Notts, Warringtons, Puceys, and many others. Draco had grown up socializing with many of them. But then there were the Mordaunts, Carrows, Yaxleys, Rowles, Jugsons, Baddocks, Huhs, Thortensons, VanHalals and Pettigrew. Or that creep Macnair and idiot McFaul. *Low class gutter tripe, thugs, and all maniacs.*

And the Mulcibers, Crabbes, Wroithesleys, deFays although Courtney deFay was an all right witch produced offspring that were complete idiots. Some like the McFaul's brood, Trenton Gerund, Henry Malburke, and Ashton Bole could barely do magic better than Longbottom. Even the Roqueewood girls were twits, and Travers' kids were hardly better than Squibs. How McDougal managed to produce two decent daughters was purely a miracle because his two boys were morons. Gregory Goyle would never win any scholastic trophies either. Except Vincent Crabbe was proving to be very good at Dark Arts, although he was as inept as Carrow in reversing or controlling what spells he cast.

And those dungeons off the cellar! Home was supposed to be a safe place, and it wasn't: the dungeons were just like a Death Camp secreted away under his house.

There was a soft knock at his door. "What," he called out, not bothering to rise or adjust his towel.

His Aunt Bella entered the room and sauntered over to his bed. "The Dark Lord oh my, Draco. Impressive."

Draco moved his arm and glared at his aunt.

"You're wanted in the drawing room," she said, her gaze raking over his prone form. "Shall I tell him you'll be down in five minutes?"

"I'll need ten at least," he said coolly, tugging his towel over his nudity as he sat up.

"I'll walk slowly," she purred, smirking at him, then turning to go. "I'll have a house-elf up here to help you dress."

Gods, even the impending, extremely rare astrological event wasn't enough to lift his spirits. His life was already in a state of ruddy shadow and misery.

~S~

Hermione was in the bathroom when Severus came up to put on his dress robes. Although he hated wearing color, any color other than black, Narcissa had insisted that he wear something 'festive.' He'd opted for a rich, dark navy blue tuxedo-styled frockcoat and blue-lined black robes with his best black trousers. Since he and Hermione had enjoyed a long leisurely bath that morning, (well it started that way), he assumed that his hair was clean enough. He'd just finished putting on his highly polished boots when Hermione entered the room looking positively stunning in her wedding robes. Peren had pulled her hair up into a cascade of curls, and her makeup was dramatic, making her eyes look sultry. He'd forgotten how alluring the drop of the neckline was, how the corset emphasized her perfect breasts, but he well remembered that the dress left her entire back bare. It was sexy too sexy.

He also recalled the looks the other men had given her on their wedding day, and he didn't particularly want to have to hex anyone tonight for ogling her. "What was wrong with the robes Cillian bought you?" he asked sharply and then scolded himself. "You do look lovely," he amended before she could answer, "but why are you wearing that?" She was also wearing his Blast-Ended Skrewt jewelry, which amused him. They didn't go with the robes; but his fellow Death Eaters knew about the charms, so that would make a statement.

She stood proudly in front of him, maintaining perfect posture with her shoulders back, which only emphasized her breasts to their full advantage. "I thought it was tradition for wives to wear their wedding robes for their presentation after marriage," she said defiantly.

He smirked at her gumption. "You were *presented* at the Halloween gala, if you recall," he replied smoothly.

She maintained her poise and her determination. "I thought it would be considered a compliment to the Dark Lord; show him that I have taken my role seriously and accepted my place as your wife."

Okay. "Very well," he said, indicating the door. "Shall we?" She walked ahead of him.

"Wait," he said, stopping when they reached his office and crossing to his desk. *If she's going to wear them I might as well make two more...* He pulled out a drawer, looking for the extra disks of the shell he had thrown in there. *The little extra protection won't hurt...* He finally found them buried in the back under some parchments. His gaze sought out two of the shiniest pieces of the creature's shell for his purpose. Looking at Hermione appraisingly, he used his wand to make the pieces of shell smaller, smirking when they bowed slightly. Grabbing a parchmentclip, he created posts for her ears and held the earrings out to her.

She accepted one, examining it and then looked up at him, saying, "The posts are too thick for my ears, and I'll need backs to keep them in place," with a smirk.

"Backs?" he asked, wondering, *What in the world are backs?* But apparently, she didn't expect him to know because she called for Peren.

The elf popped in and bowed. "Yes, Mistress. What does mistress need of Peren?"

She smiled at the house-elf. "I'd like my pink earrings, please, the ones that look like tiny flowers."

Peren disappeared, then returned in a few seconds and handed the two tiny flowers to Hermione. "Thank you, Peren." The elf bowed and vanished as Hermione took the earring apart and handed a small curled piece of metal to Severus. "Are you able to make the posts fit in this?"

Is she kidding? "I'll need to see the other half," he replied, and she passed the flower part to him. He slid the back onto the post and understood, especially noting the tiny notch that held the back in place. *I can do this, sure*

After he made a few adjustments to make the posts fit into the backs of her earrings, Hermione put the Skrewt earrings on. "How do they look?"

"Fishing for compliments?" he asked, collecting their cloaks.

"Not really," she said with a smirk, turning as he moved to drape hers on her shoulders. "They don't really go with my dress."

"I am aware of that," he said, putting his cloak on, "but I appreciate that you are wearing them."

"Because they know I can't Apparate with them on," she replied as he opened the door.

"Because they will protect you," he replied, following her down the stairs.

She turned to face him as he exited into the corridor. "But they don't! Not at all! The Carrows' spells..."

"Amcyus is in close range when he hexes or curses you," Severus said softly enough so that only she could hear him in the empty corridor. He knew that his voice was deep enough to carry well, especially in stone corridors. "Although he's an idiot, he is sufficiently determined in his intent when casting spells to cause harm, and he's using his full strength on you, no holds barred. So, imagine just how much damage he'd do if you were not wearing them?"

Hermione considered what he said and finally nodded in understanding. "But Harry had to get by one in the third task; he said that his spells just rebounded off the shell."

"Potter doesn't kill or like causing harm to others. His spells of choice are to disarm, stun, or immobilize his opponents," Severus pointed out, annoyed that she didn't understand the difference. "Amcyus' favorites are the ones that kill or maim. But I might have been wrong about the extent of the coverage the necklace and bracelet provide you. When school resumes, you'll be wearing a belt as well."

She smiled up at him. "I thank you."

They left the castle, taking a school carriage to the gate, and he Apparated them on the gravel path in front of the wrought iron gates at Malfoy Manor. Severus smirked when Macnair, Jugson, and Thortenson, who were apparently standing sentry, all jumped when they arrived.

"Bout time you arrived," Thortenson grumbled as Severus raised his left arm to the gate. They must have done something to warrant being given the task of standing in the cold, checking the guests as they arrived.

"I'm right on time," Severus said as a quick, irritating shiver ran down his forearm, much like ice-cold fingers, and the grotesque face on the gate shimmered. He placed Hermione's hand on the crook of his arm, and walked through the gate as if it was only smoke, smirking as he led her away from the men.

The fact that Severus and Hermione arrived together at the manor alone, caused a bit of a stir among those loitering about the main entry, as well as the sight of seeing her in her wedding robes. Severus ignored them as he handed their cloaks to one of the Squibs serving as a butler, and he and Hermione walked toward the smaller drawing rooms that led to the Malfoys' ballroom.

"Oh, Severus, there you are," a feminine voice called out.

He turned to face the owner of the voice, and he resisted the urge to scowl at Belladonna Rosier and Bellatrix Lestrangle.

"He has been awaiting your arrival," Belladonna said, indicating the large drawing room with a delicate flick of her hand.

Severus ignored Hermione's sharp inhalation or the stiffening of her body and led her confidently into the drawing room where the Dark Lord was obviously still holding court. Beside his ornate high-backed silver armchair was the huge reptile stand for Nagini; however, the huge snake appeared to be elsewhere. Severus waited until he was summoned, then led Hermione to the middle of the room and knelt. Hermione knelt down beside him, her head bowed low.

"Severus, Hermione, come," the Dark Lord called, issuing them closer.

Hermione's posture relaxed and her head remained bowed slightly. Murmurs and a few hisses could be heard from around the room as they both rose and moved closer. "Master," he said as reverently as he could, noting that Hermione literally lowered herself, kneeling in full supplication, shivering slightly.

"Severus, rise and tell me of the school," the Dark Lord demanded.

"There is not much to report; most of the students returned home for the holidays," he replied and gave what information he could. "As I wrote to Bellatrix, Professor McGonagall left the castle for a few days on personal leave. I'll be able to replicate the School Registry in her absence, and Bellatrix shall have the copies before Christmas."

"Excellent," the Dark Lord said and turned to Hermione. "And how is my Gryffindor doing?"

Severus was about to answer, but the Dark Lord stepped down from the dais and approached her. Hermione stiffened, her body still shivering and her lip trembled. "Rise, Hermione."

Hermione wavered slightly as she complied, rising slowly to her feet. "Have you been a good girl?" the Dark Lord asked.

"Yes, my Lord," she said with a soft tremble in her voice. "I've tried."

"But you are afraid," the Dark Lord stated, gripping her chin. "Look at me." Hermione glanced up, looked down, and then looked up at the Dark Lord, her bottom lip quivering slightly. They stood there, staring at each other, and Severus knew that her mind was being searched. "Why haven't you followed my wishes?" he asked, his fingers tightening on her chin. "Why do you resist Draco's friendship?"

"We argued, my Lord," she replied, lowering her gaze, the quiver in her voice relaying regret. "I don't think he's forgiven me... I haven't asked begged him to forgive me, my Lord. I had hoped to do so tonight."

"I see," the Dark Lord said, letting go of her chin.

Hermione raised her gaze to meet the Dark Lord's red eyes. "The fault is mine; I angered him. It is I who owes him the apology."

"Very well," the Dark Lord said, smiling, holding out his right hand, and Hermione stared at it as he added, "I'm sure you'll have the opportunity this evening. Give me your hand."

She slowly raised her right hand, and he laughed at her. "I don't want to see your bracelet, girl. Give me your left hand."

Hermione placed her left hand in his, swallowing nervously, her gaze on their joined hands. "Have you decided, my dear?" the Dark Lord asked as he rolled her hand over, exposing her wrist.

She looked up at him as he stroked her palm with his thumb, her expression one of confusion, her eyes questioning.

"*To be mine.* Have you decided to accept your fate?"

"Yes, my Lord," she said softly, the confusion never leaving her face.

"Kneel," he demanded, and Severus' gut clenched, a lump dropped into his throat as he forced himself to remain poised, his face an inscrutable mask of indifference.

Hermione complied. As she lowered demurely to the floor, the Dark Lord made a languid sweep of his wand over their joined hands, watching her with a smug satisfaction at her acquiescence, both their actions making her sleeve fall back, exposing her forearm. "Then accept the Mark I've designed especially for you." With that, the Dark Lord pressed his wand tip into her flesh, and Hermione screamed in pain. Her cries grew louder as the Dark Lord continued hissing his curse, the spells that would bind her to him.

I'll kill him! If Potter doesn't, I will! Severus felt ill as he watched the Dark Lord brand her, fighting back the nausea that threatened, forcing himself to swallow, and feeling a sense of revulsion the likes of which he'd never felt before even more than the act of killing Dumbledore to fulfill the old man's vow. *He will die for this, I swear.* How he maintained his rigid posture, his carefully controlled mask was beyond him, but he managed, even as Hermione's screams grew louder and echoed off the walls. *Potter will win, so help me God.*

"There," the Dark Lord said finally, releasing his hold. He faced those in the room, ignoring Hermione's sobbing whimpers. "She is *mine*. I have marked her as *mine mine* to do with as I desire. No one is to question her place among you or my intentions for this girl ever again." He turned to look at Narcissa, who was standing beside Draco, both of them shocked and pale from the event that just unfolded. "Narcissa, take Hermione and get her cleaned up and fix her face. I would hate to have her look like this at my party."

"Of course, my Lord," she said and rushed forward, clasping Hermione's shoulders and Apparating her away.

"Severus, I believe this will give you some time to converse with your brethren," the Dark Lord said smoothly. "Or you may wait for your wife in the foyer."

Accepting the dismissal, Severus bowed, grateful that his hair hid the anger and animosity he felt inside. "As you wish, my Lord." He inhaled deeply, forcing his mask in place and stood, then exited the room with all the control he could muster to appear unmoved.

He walked slowly to the foyer, his back straight, his hair hanging down slightly obscuring his eyes, forcing his raging anger under control. He remembered that the day after their wedding Hermione had mentioned that the Dark Lord threatened to mark her, but he'd never believed that he would. He didn't dare go up to the family wing to search for her. He was furious, but only because he'd practiced controlling his emotions since he was *seven*, only because he could push his anger away, to keep every muscle in his face relaxed to hide any evidence of his true feelings, did he manage to maintain an outward appearance of indifference. He didn't turn or acknowledge those who whispered as they passed him, nodding or speaking only to those who greeted him. He didn't face the stairs, seemingly to watch the guests as they moved from the large drawing room to the smaller ones to his left. But he could see the stairs in his peripheral vision.

So he waited. He'd see the Mark soon enough. Not that he could do anything about it.

~~oOo~~

Author's Notes:

I found this on the internet and thought that it was pretty amazing and would have loved to have seen it. This actually happened in 2010, and was seen in North America, not England, but I thought it would be a cool portents for the story. The luster will be a bit 'off' on the twenty-second of Dec. the first day of northern winter, when the full moon passes almost dead-center through Earth's shadow in the Dark Rift of the Milky Way. For seventy-two minutes of eerie totality, an amber light will play across the snows of some parts of North America, throwing landscapes into an unusual state of ruddy shadow.

Opportunities and Inceptions

Chapter 32 of 43

What a party! Hermione is now marked, branded, and her friends may not understand and turn away from her. Narcissa and Lucius get an earful from a little know-it-all, and Draco and Severus are dealing with the turn of events, but Belinda wants Hermione out of the picture – for good!

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me and to EverMystique and Dandru for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, a big thank you to Jay for my lovely banner! I really love it.

Please note: in regards to Hermione's mark when the person speaking believes or perceives that Hermione's mark is like the Dark Mark, 'Mark' is capitalized; however, if the person speaking believes it to be just a brand, a magical tattoo, I have written 'mark' in lowercase. In the narrative, Hermione's mark is in lowercase. That way you know how it's perceived, although later it will be more clearly clarified as to the true nature of the mark.

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## Opportunities and Inceptions

Draco entered the drawing room when Hermione said that she felt obligated to apologize to him, although he had no idea what for. Sure they'd disagreed a few times at school, but then he expected her to strongly opposing opinions, but so much of what she'd said seemed to be true. Not that he liked that fact; it unnerved him.

He stared in shock as Hermione calmly answered, "Yes, my Lord." He could tell she was nervous, terrified even, but she complied when the Dark Lord ordered Hermione to kneel, kneeling smoothly like a well-practiced sycophant.

He could hardly believe what was happening as the sleeve of her robe slid down her arm and exposed her flesh. *No! He wouldn't*, Draco thought, staring as the Dark Lord pressed his wand into her skin. *It has to be a mistake some other intention of punishing her or chastising her.* When she screamed, Draco literally felt the blood leave his face, heck it left his head, and a huge stone dropped in his stomach. He felt like retching and screaming at the same time. *The Dark Lord is a hypocrite! A Mark he designed especially for HER? She's a Mudblood!*

Hermione's screams grew louder as the Mark burned into her flesh. He felt cold; only the firm grip of his mother's hand, her nails digging into his arm near his own Dark Mark held him in place. He could feel Hermione's pain and had never felt angrier, more repulsed by anything he'd ever witnessed.

"There," the Dark Lord said as he released her, but Draco was staring at Hermione sobbing on the floor.

"She is *mine*. I have marked her as *mine mine* to do with as I desire. No one is to question her place among you or my intentions for this girl ever again."

"Narcissa, take Hermione and get her cleaned up and fix her face. I would hate to have her look like this at my party."

His mother released her grip. "Of course, my Lord," she said as she hurried over to Hermione.

Draco eased back to the wall, watching as his mother and Hermione vanished. When he heard the dark Lord dismiss Snape, he hurried from the room to the nearest loo. He retched, not that he had much in his stomach.

He needed to find Hermione, to see if she was all right, to look at her Mark and to see if it was real. Draco left the loo and ran to his mother's room. His mother had apparently calmed the girl down, and a house-elf was holding a wet cloth to Hermione's arm. "Is it?"

His mother looked up. "It's different. A brand, yes, but not at all like ours," she replied, as Hermione dabbed at her face. She turned her attention to Hermione. "No. Wipe, Hermione, take it all off."

Draco walked over and said, "Let me see it, elf."

Hermione looked up, her makeup smeared, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Let me see it," he repeated softly, almost a plea.

She held up her arm, and he examined the 'mark.' It was different; instead of the skull, she had a lion's head with a snake protruding from its mouth. The snake twisted and knotted, then stretched down her arm, like his. He ran his thumb over it, then his fingers. It was slightly raised like his, but the snake didn't undulate, and the lion, a dark, golden brown not black, was soft to the touch, flesh-like, not hard like bone. "Does this hurt?" he asked, pressing his finger into the mark.

She hissed. "Its-it's still sore," she replied.

"No, a sharp pain. Does it feel like something searing into you, like it's hot?" he asked, and she shook her head. He pressed his index finger into it again, and she inhaled in pain. "Not a connection, like you can feel a presence in you through it?" he asked, and she tilted her head, her teary eyes showing only confusion.

He glanced at the door and waited. No one came. He jabbed his wand into it, making her cry out, then released the pressure, and waited.

Still no one came. "What about that time? Did it feel like a sharp pain?" he asked, but she simply shook her head, fresh tears rolling down her cheeks. "A burning sensation? An awareness? A connection to him any response at all?"

She shook her head with each question. "No, nothing like that, only a dull pain from the pressure."

He let go of her arm and knelt down. "I think it's a brand, a symbol. If it was like ours, someone would've come he'd have felt that you'd have felt him through the mark."

She nodded, a tear escaping down her cheek, and he wiped it away. "Pull yourself together," he said and smirked at her widened eyes and dumbfounded expression.

"*Draco!*" his mother admonished him.

"Not..." he started to say and looked Hermione in the eyes. "I meant, pull yourself together so you can face them. Hold your head up high and pretend that nothing is amiss. Show me that same brave face you use when facing the Carrows' mistreatment, and you might even garner a bit of respect tonight."

She nodded as if understanding and sniffed.

He smirked at her again. "Good. I'll be downstairs with Snape." He nodded to his mother and left the room to let Severus know that the mark was only a brand of some sort.

~S~

Severus saw Cillian enter the foyer and hand his cloak off to a waiting butler. Cillian smiled in a friendly manner to the ladies who greeted him and shook hands or nodded to the men as he approached. He looked up, spotted Severus, and walked determinedly toward him. "Good evening, you're alone? What happened to Hermione?"

"Narcissa took her upstairs to have her face cleaned up," Severus said softly, never shifting his position.

"And you trust her not to hex her? Brave man," Cillian said and stood companionably next to Severus so they could talk. "Why did she need to have her face cleaned up?"

"The Dark Lord marked her," Severus said, managing to control his tone so that the loathing sneer wasn't reflected in his voice.

Cillian turned and gasped, "He what?"

Maintaining his pose he said, "You heard me," without so much as flinching.

"And you're livid," Cillian stated, resuming his stance of easy companionability. "I can't believe he gave her the Dark Mark, what a hy...political thing to do."

"I agree." Severus tilted his head to the side, nearly imperceptibly, toward Draco as he exited the stairs.

Draco jutted his chin at Severus and Cillian and walked up to the two men. "It's only a mark a brand, it's not like ours. It's a snake, like ours, protruding from the mouth of a lion's head, and, although it's raised, the snake doesn't undulate or move. It's stationary, the lion's head is soft like flesh and is a dark brown not black."

"That doesn't mean anything. He said it's a Mark he designed especially for her," Severus said, hoping that Draco was right.

"I think the mark is a brand only," Draco said as he shook his head. "It's not a Dark Mark and doesn't connect her to him like the Dark Mark does. I tried pressing both my finger and my wand into it, and no one came up."

Severus was somewhat relieved, but he wouldn't know for sure until he saw the Mark. It was possible that the Dark Lord ignored the summoning, believing that Narcissa or Draco would test it. The Dark Lord hated being tested. "He knows that she's not conforming as he wants and suspects that she will run to Potter at some point."

"As if she could," Draco sneered.

"I don't think so. He's been pleased with her so far, hasn't he?" Cillian asked, ignoring Draco's outburst, as he watched a group of students pass them on their way to the drawing rooms. He didn't sound convinced.

"But if she does, not that I think she can, she's watched every second of the day, the brand will show Potter and her friends that she's changed sides, that she took his Mark, and that should unnerve Potter," Draco said, watching the Greengrass girls across the room. "It will cause her friends at school to distrust her."

"I'm not so sure," Cillian stated and leaned closer to Severus. "If that's the case, what his intent in marking her is, then he doesn't know her friends all that well, does he?"

Severus suppressed his smirk. *Cillian is right; the Dark Lord doesn't understand the loyalty of her friends. They will question her, sure, but Hermione is horrible at deception, and they know it.* He saw the Glenwrythes enter the foyer and nodded to Miss Glenwrythe. *Some of them might need convincing, but not all of them.* Miss Glenwrythe nodded politely in acknowledgement.

Belinda swooped down on Cillian and began gushing about his approved betrothal. From the look on his friend's face, Cillian fully dreaded the next few hours. Draco thankfully took that as his cue to leave.

"Bell, I'm not engaged to anyone," Cillian spat angrily in a low controlled voice. "I haven't consented to the match."

"It's approved," Belinda said, aghast at his reply, and Severus had to fight to control his smirk. "She's lovely girl."

"You marry her then," Cillian snapped at her. "I've discussed this with Marc and Justin, and they don't approve either."

Belinda placed her fists on her hips. "What do you mean *they don't approve*? It's arranged!"

Cillian turned toward his sister. "She's spoken for, Bell. Flint wants her," he said, no longer controlling his voice.

"That's not no... I was assured," she stammered, although she looked away for a moment.

"Sorry, sis, if Flint wants the girl for his oldest son, it's a better match than the youngest in our line," Cillian stated and walked away.

Belinda turned to Severus, and he dreaded what was to come out of her mouth now. "So, how about you and me, on the dance floor, for old times' sake?"

"I'm waiting for my wife, Belinda. Perhaps you should ask Horrace to dance," he said smoothly, watching the anger flash in her eyes. "Or if his gout is acting up, I'm sure one of his sons will be happy to oblige."

"OOOUGH, someday you'll see you'll want me, Severus Snape, and I won't be available!" she snarled at him, hands on her hips again.

"Promise?" he purred silkily.

She stormed away.

~H~

Once Draco left, Hermione felt better.

Now that they were alone, Hermione knew this might be the only opportunity she'd have to ask Mrs. Malfoy something that had been on her mind, ever since Severus hinted that Draco might be wavering. And if he was, she reasoned, his parents might be also. "Why do you put up with him? Why have you and your family joined him if this is how he treats you?"

Narcissa handed her a fresh flannel. "I don't know," she replied and then stiffened when Hermione said, "I've only been in the house a few times, and I know I can see what is going on. It's despicable how he treats you and your family."

"It was not like this before," Narcissa snapped, gripping Hermione's face so she could apply some more powder.

"It wasn't?" Hermione asked and sneezed, making Narcissa scowl at her. "Wasn't it better after he fell? You and your family were the top of wizarding society, pillars of propriety, respected, known for your philanthropy and generosity, and now your husband has spent a year in Azkaban, and your home is under the Dark Lord's control for what? To be treated like servants?"

Narcissa's eyes narrowed. "That's none of your business," she snapped, trying again to reapply Hermione's makeup. "Stop blubbering or I'll never get your face done."

Hermione tipped her head up and closed her eyes so Narcissa could add eyeliner. "I've heard rumors at school. MacCavish, Travers, and Rowle the Carrows, they all say you're in disfavor," she said, opening her eyes to look at the witch. "Did you know that the Dark Lord marked Harry, too? His scar; he marked him as an *equal* according to Dumbledore. Well, that's what Dumbledore said happened that night when he tried to kill Harry he marked him as an equal, made him the Chosen One. *The one with the powers* so to speak." Narcissa's eyes widened in shock, and Hermione pressed on, thankful that she was at least listening. "That's why luck always seems to be on Harry's side; the Fates have created a balance between them."

Narcissa's eyes narrowed again. "Close your eyes," she snapped.

"You know that Harry is a Parselmouth, right? Didn't Draco tell you? Except it doesn't run in Harry's family, his father wasn't a Parselmouth, and it's not a gift Muggle-borns get," Hermione said, her eyes closed, feeling a brush dab and sweep her lids as if Narcissa was painting her. She couldn't see Narcissa's face, but she hoped that her words were sinking in. "It will all come down to Harry and him, you know."

She opened her eyes and looked at Narcissa. "In the end, it will be just the two of them and Harry, so far, has always escaped; he's always come out unscathed. Can't say that the Dark Lord has managed that."

"*Unscathed*? From what I've been told, Potter's arm was mutilated in the graveyard, and the Dark Lord can touch him without consequences," Narcissa stated, and although there was annoyance in her tone, there was uncertainty as well. "Potter was sent to the hospital after the fiasco in the Ministry, and last summer when he turned seventeen, well, there were seven of them, so I'm not sure what Potter got, but one of them lost an ear, and another was knocked off his broom."

"That was George he lost his ear. Mundungus Fletcher Apparated away when Mad-Eye was hit by a curse he wasn't knocked off his broom. Harry made it past the Dark Lord unharmed," Hermione stated. She'd reached her, struck a nerve, and she knew it. The older witch's face was awash with emotions: she saw flickers of shock, anger,

and confusion, even fear. She turned to look the woman in the eyes. "What I don't understand is why someone like you, like your husband, who are so skilled at politics and finances have put all your Galleons in one pot. It's like putting all your eggs in one basket what if Harry wins? Then what?"

"Hold your mouth still," Narcissa demanded as she tried to apply lipstick to Hermione's lips. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Hermione waited until Narcissa withdrew the lipstick. "Believe me I *do* know what I'm talking about. All I'm saying is that opportunities arise, like this one, you being nice to me, they come along," she said. "And if they happen again, why not take them, find a neutral path. It's harder, being neutral, playing both sides. But then again, whom do you really want to win this? Which life is better which one would you choose if you had the choice?"

"Blot," Narcissa snapped as she handed Hermione a tissue. She was quiet after that, although she seemed to be deep in thought.

Hermione was going to try again, hoping that she'd see there was an option when there was a knock at the door. Narcissa walked over and yanked it open. "Yes?"

Hermione examined her face in the mirror. Narcissa had done a terrific job. Even though she still had the smoky, cat-eye effect, it was more artfully done than she'd managed at the castle. Narcissa had even added a bit of dark green to enhance the gold in her eyes and lengthened her lashes quite a bit.

Bellatrix stepped into the room. "Oh good, you're done." She turned to her sister. "The Dark Lord wanted to know what was taking so long."

"I had to get her to stop crying long enough to fix her makeup," Narcissa sneered. "She wouldn't stop blubbering."

"He *marked* her, gave her an honor that *no* Mudblood should be given! She should be *grateful*," Bellatrix sneered and then shrugged offhandedly. "I'll let our master know she'll be right down."

Bellatrix Apparated and Narcissa turned to Hermione. "Well, you heard her, let's go."

Unfortunately, they encountered Belinda in the hall on their way. "Did the Dark Lord send you?" Narcissa asked, and Hermione wondered briefly if Draco might have been wrong.

Belinda waved her hand dismissively. "No, nothing like that. I wanted to see how Severus' Mudblood was holding up."

Hermione lifted her chin slightly, rolling her shoulders back and resumed her perfect posture. "I'm fine now."

She turned to Narcissa, her haughtiness fading instantly. "Thank you, Mrs. Malfoy, your artistry is truly amazing, and I'm sincerely grateful that you were willing to help me. I could never have gotten my makeup as perfect as you've done." She meant every word. Narcissa had actually been kind to her, soothing her, and giving her cooling Dittany compresses for her arm.

"The Dark Lord wanted you cleaned up and presentable," Narcissa replied coolly.

"So, now what shall we do with the Mudblood?" Belinda asked, grasping Hermione's arm. Hermione recoiled and tried to loosen the woman's hold.

"Suffice to say, I think she's expected at the party," Narcissa stated coolly. "He did make quite a spectacle of her a few minutes ago."

"*He marked her!* As one of us!" Belinda sneered, aiming her wand at Hermione's throat.

Hermione could only gasp in fear; her voice was gone.

"This insolent twit is *now* one of us!"

"Take a good look!" Narcissa smirked, grabbed hold of Hermione's left wrist and exposed her mark, and Hermione silently yelped in pain. "Yes, he marked her *as is*, but it's *not* like ours it's different," Narcissa sneered haughtily. "If *he had* given her the Dark Mark, he'd be showing himself a hypocrite. He's *not* that stupid."

A tall, lovely, dark-haired woman approached. "Oh good, she's presentable," she said, stopping next to Belinda. "The Dark Lord is asking what is taking so long."

"She's being difficult, Belladonna," Belinda replied with a sneer as Narcissa let go of Hermione's wrist. "And filth like her *will never* be presentable."

Hermione rubbed her wrist, fighting back the tears that threatened to fall.

"Nevertheless, the Dark Lord wants to see her dance with her husband," Belladonna said and grasped Hermione's right wrist. "So, come along and stop being difficult, Mudblood."

Hermione nodded and allowed the woman to lead her away. Severus, Lucius, Draco, and Rosier were waiting for them at the foot of the stairs. Severus appeared much calmer than when she'd last seen him.

"What took so long, sis?" Mr. Rosier asked.

Belladonna propelled Hermione toward Severus. "Apparently she was giving Narcissa a hard time."

Hermione opened her mouth to retort, but nothing came out.

Narcissa sauntered over to Lucius and took his arm. "Not me; Belinda."

Severus shot Hermione a questioning scowl, but she shook her head. Suddenly her voice came back. "I wasn't! I she wanted to see the Mark."

Severus nodded and grasped her elbow gently, but firmly. "Come. We're expected to dance." He led her through the drawing rooms to the grand ballroom.

Hermione saw Elisabeth McFaul, Millicent Bulstrode, and Pansy Parkinson together in a drawing room, sipping on champagne and gossiping. The girls all gaped at her and then turned away, as if avoiding her, which was fine by Hermione. As she and Severus walked into the grand ballroom, Hermione tried not to stare at any one person, however, everywhere she looked she saw familiar faces. They walked near seventh-year Ravenclaw, Kenneth Huh, who was standing next to Antonia Gerund and her parents. Huh bowed sharply to Mr. Gerund as they passed, and then he escorted Antonia to the dance floor.

Severus led Hermione to the center of the floor. Like before, she followed Severus' lead, keeping her eyes on his face, but he was looking ahead, his eyes smoldering behind his cool exterior. Maybe because she knew him so well, she could see that he wasn't angry at her, just angry about what had happened.

"Are you all right?" he asked, finally.

"I'm fine," she replied. She saw Felicia Lockhaven dancing with a wizard who looked like he might be her father. Felicia looked at her with an expression of regret, then turned to smile at her father, and Hermione felt like she'd been snubbed. She turned her attention to Severus. "It hurts, but not as bad as before," she said softly.

"I'll give you a salve when we return to the castle," he said smoothly.

Hermione nodded, trying to keep her forearm from pressing on his arm as they danced. They danced to several numbers before he led her to the refreshments tables.

Hermione saw Breanna Enfield on the arm of a wizard with dark hair, as he conversed with several wizards. She had the look of someone who was trying very hard not to look bored. Hermione tried to catch Breanna's gaze, hoping to say hello, but although she glanced in Hermione's direction, she quickly looked away.

"Do you see the wizard in black dancing with his daughter the one in silver?" Severus asked, drawing her attention.

Turning, she followed where Severus indicated and spotted the couple, recognizing Eugene Roqueewood dancing with a blonde witch maybe five or six years older than she was in age. "That's Larissa Roqueewood," he said smoothly. "The one Belinda wants Cillian to marry."

She watched them for a bit, and couldn't really envision Cillian and the girl as a couple. "He doesn't like her?"

"She's a twit," Severus whispered in her ear. "And he's in love with someone else, a Muggle-born, much like yourself."

Hermione stopped moving and nearly tripped him. "He's indicated he did, but a Mug...like me?"

"Keep dancing or we'll draw attention," Severus reprimanded her softly, and they resumed dancing. He lowered his voice so she could barely hear him over the music, "I told you; he's wavering, and that is one of the reasons why."

She nodded and glanced at Larissa and her father. She was pretty: long, blonde hair, thin yet quite busty. She moved with well-practiced grace and reminded her of Fleur Weasley in a way, although she looked like the type to be snooty, much like Pansy.

Hermione looked for Cillian and spotted him edging his way across the room. As she watched, the music changed, and Roqueewood looked up, drawing his daughter to the side, having apparently spotted Cillian. Severus led Hermione from the dance floor, and Cillian moved to intercept them.

"Having a good time?" Hermione asked when they all were standing close enough to talk.

"Not particularly," he replied. Roqueewood jutted his chin up in their direction as if in acknowledgement, and Cillian turned so he was facing her while giving the impression that he hadn't seen the father-daughter couple. "You?"

"Well enough I suppose, considering the majority of the company," she replied, seeing Roqueewood and the smiling girl on his arm headed their way. "They're walking over here."

"Time to make an escape," Severus said with a smirk.

"Damn. Do you mind?" Cillian growled as he grasped Hermione's elbow and led her to the dance floor.

Mr. Roqueewood stopped next to Severus and glared at Hermione and Cillian as they started to dance. "You're going to get me in trouble, aren't you?" she asked, noting the ice-cold glare from Larissa.

"No," Cillian stated, drawing her further out onto the floor. "I don't want to..." He sighed. "I'd prefer to dance with a mooncalf."

Hermione laughed when she'd immediately thought of him dancing in a cornfield with the mooncalves, helping them produce a crop circle. "I think tonight, I'd prefer that, too," she said and laughed at his incredulous stare. "Dancing with you and the mooncalves in a cornfield rather than here surrounded by Death Eaters who'd like nothing better than... who knows what? Kill me? Torture me to insanity?"

"They wouldn't dare do that here tonight," he said, lightening up again. "You've been marked, and he'd torture them for trying."

She smiled at him and then saw Mr. Roqueewood and his daughter on the dance floor making their way to them. His gaze caught hers, and Hermione felt a chill from the odd look in his eyes. It wasn't kindly, not that she expected it to be, but a lewd, calculating gaze that bore into her. "He's coming this way," she warned Cillian, then realized they were in the middle of the dance floor. *Protocol for exchanging partners meant...* "I don't want to be stuck with him," she pleaded, trying to force down the panic rising in her chest. As Roqueewood approached, his brown eyes riveted on her, sneering at her with a knowing leer, something clicked. The scar that cut through his eyebrow and the crooked teeth...

*A wizard grabbed her roughly by her hair, jerking her head back as he leaned over her. He had a scar that cut through his eyebrow and crooked teeth in a crooked smile. 'Oh let the rest of us have a go at her, my Lord. Or at least offer us some sport before you kill her. I know Dolohov and Jugson would like to exact a little pay-back from the wench...' His breath smelled like he'd eaten a dead rat.*

"You won't."

*'What makes you think you deserve her, Roqueewood?' Voldemort sneered, circling her.*

*'What wouldn't a wizard like to do to a pretty little tramp that fights against her betters,' Roqueewood said with a sneer.*

*'As long as she is not killed or maimed,' Voldemort said offhandedly. 'That I reserve for my pleasure.'*

*'Oh, we know not to break our toys, don't we Dolohov?' Roqueewood asked, removing his robe and smiling at Dolohov.*

*Dolohov's smirk turned into a cold smile. 'Speak for yourself; I have a few things in mind for this one. If you'll allow the indulgence, Master. This one owes me,' he sneered, grasping his crotch as Malfoy moved closer...*

"Hermione," Cillian said, snapping her out of her anamnesis.

"Er, what?" she asked, stumbling slightly.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Please, let me go," she started to say, turning away, and her knees gave. She immediately grasped his robes as his arm tightened around her, holding her up.

"Let's get you to the drawing rooms," he suggested, leading her from the dance floor.

Both Roqueewoods glared at her: Mr. Roqueewood sneering at her with a knowing leer, and Larissa with loathing as she and Cillian walked by.

Hermione felt nauseous. Somehow she knew that he was one of the men who'd raped her, or worse, but she was certain he was one of them.

Cillian dropped her onto a settee and thrust a cup into her hand. "Ice water," he said. "Drink."

She glanced up as she sipped the water and saw Severus watching her. "What happened?" he asked.

"Started to faint, I think?" Cillian replied, more like a question than a statement.

"Roqueewood," Hermione gasped between sips. "I recognized him."



"From...?" Severus prompted.

She shook her head. "I'd rather forget," she replied as a house-elf handed her a cold flannel. She dabbed at her neck and chest with the cloth, and it felt good on her skin. "I'm sorry to have caused a scene," she finally said as the wooziness went away.

Severus sat down next to her. "Hermione, I removed what I could," he said softly. "But those that were ~~there~~, they *are* here tonight. You have to pull yourself together."

She looked up at him, realizing he'd looked, and sighed. "I know, I recognize so many of them. I fact, I recognize nearly all of them, seem to remember all their names. But... it was the way he was leering at me." She lowered her head as she clasped the glass and flannel in her lap. "It just came over me." She looked up at Cillian. "I could feel the malice radiating from him and knew that he was going to maneuver it so Cillian was dancing with his daughter and that I'd be stuck with him."

"Not if I can help it," Cillian stated. "I can politely decline, Hermione. It's rude, but not socially unacceptable."

"But if you are supposed to be engaged to her," Hermione said softly.

"That's not going to happen either," Cillian said, his posture becoming rigid.

"Drink some more water," Severus suggested. "When you're collected, we'll go back out there."

Hermione nodded, and he stood so he could talk quietly with Cillian.

When they returned to the ballroom, Severus danced with her again. Afterward, several men came to speak to Severus, although most only wanted the excuse to see her new Mark.

Belladonna Rosier and her father ended up standing close to Severus and Hermione as the music changed. Belladonna made a subtle tilt of her head toward them, and Mr. Rosier Sr. asked Severus to dance with her. Unfortunately, that left Hermione stuck dancing with Mr. Rosier. However, after only a few steps, Hermione saw Lucius Malfoy step up behind him. "May I cut in?" he asked in a bored drawl. "I think Runcorn was looking for you."

Mr. Rosier stepped back. "Certainly. Lucius, Mrs. Snape," he said with cool politeness inclining his head to them in turn and left.

"Having a good time?" Lucius asked as Hermione placed her right hand in his and laid her left on his shoulder, careful to keep her mark from actually touching him. He was dressed impeccably, his hair washed and combed, but it didn't have the luster it had before, and his eyes... his eyes looked haunted, weary, and they showed worry lines.

She saw Bellatrix and her husband dancing close by. "It's a lovely party," she replied, since she knew that Bellatrix was straining to hear her every word.

"That means no," Lucius said smoothly. "I haven't seen you dancing with Draco."

"He hasn't asked me to," she admitted, wishing the Lestranges would back away.

"How are you getting on?" Lucius asked, drawing her attention to him, again.

"Well enough," she replied and winced.

"Not so," he said with a scowl. "I heard what you said earlier about needing to apologize to Draco. You haven't made any overtures at all."

*Of course, he heard my confession* "I didn't want the Dark Lord to punish him for anything I might've said or done to upset him at school," she said, staring at his shoulder as they danced. "I've not been a very good friend this last month." She looked up at him, meeting his gaze. "We are getting along better than we ever have before," she stated, hoping that an opportunity to talk to him might open up as it did with Narcissa.

"The Dark Lord was unhappy," he said, meeting her gaze with a hard stare.

She missed her footing as she realized what he meant. "Did he punish Draco?"

But Lucius tightened his lead and flawlessly covered her misstep. "So you do care?"

"I'd hate for him to be punished on my account, so yes," she admitted, blushing when she saw Bellatrix laughing at her. "Thank you," she replied, realizing he'd stopped when the music did. She mentally kicked herself for the lost opportunity as he led her from the dance floor and over to Severus.

"Do try harder," Lucius said as he walked away.

Cillian joined her and Severus minutes later, escorting Larissa Roquewood. Larissa smiled politely to Severus, greeting him as "Headmaster," and looked down her pointy nose at Hermione, saying simply, "Charmed." Larissa had a rather high-pitched voice. Hermione tried not to smile each time Cillian or Severus winced at Larissa's crackling laugh or the slight twitch of Cillian's lips when she spoke. Cillian asked Hermione to dance, and when they were on the dance floor, Hermione saw Larissa flounce off angrily, possibly because Severus hadn't offered to dance with her.

After two rounds on the dance floor, Cillian returned her to the side. "Thank you for the reprieve," he replied.

"Too bad your sister is convinced that you're going to marry her," Severus said with a smirk.

"Low blow," Cillian stated, snatching a drink from a roaming waiter. "We still on for tomorrow?"

"Yes," Severus said, nodding to a passing couple as Draco approached.

"Mind if I dance with her?" Draco asked Severus instead of Hermione, which rankled considering they were supposed to be friends.

Severus held his glass out indicating the couples dancing. "By all means."

Hermione placed her hand in his and allowed him to lead her to the floor. "How does it feel?" Draco asked, once they were moving to the music.

"It hurts when it rubs on the sleeves of my partners," she admitted, and Draco lowered his elbow a bit. "Thank you."

"No problem," he replied. "I've been watching you. You seem to be holding up better than you did at our Halloween party, except for that moment when you were dancing with Cillian a while back. What happened?"

"I suppose I lost my footing, or something," she replied, and he smirked. "I needed to rest my ankle."

"That's why you were given a cold flannel for your neck because of your ankle?"

"All right, I may have had too much champagne." Hermione saw Narcissa standing with Constance Mulciber, Estrith Rosier and another woman with her grey hair piled on top of her head watching them. "Draco, who is that witch with your mum? I recognize Mrs. Rosier from my wedding, I think."

Draco turned so them so he could have a better look. "The older witch is Estienne Runcorn. The dark-haired lady is Constance Mulciber, one of Mother's friends, and the

one joining them in the blue robes is Laurana Westmore."

She was surprised by his cool tone. "You don't care for them," she said, blushing when Narcissa looked at her.

"They are all right, society ladies, involved in various charities. Estienne Runcorn is on the Morals and Ethics Committee and the Magical Preservation Society, and Mrs. Westmore is on the School Scholarship Fund Committee." He turned to look at Hermione. "I'm sorry about what he did. I never thought he would, you know."

"He threatened to before," she replied. "When he I asked you to show me yours, the day after my wedding, at Severus' house, remember?"

Draco looked surprised as if she'd just reminded him of the incident. "I remember that; you actually wanted to touch it," he said. The music stopped. "Another?" She nodded, and he started to lead as soon as the music resumed. "I thought you were barking. I hate letting people touch it. I don't know why I let you."

"You told me he never would, that it would make him a hypocrite. But he told me, insinuated he would, twice. The first time was when I was taken to him after my splinching. He actually offered to mark me then, and he jabbed his wand into my arm. Then later, he came to me at my wedding in the bridal suite, just after Severus left when I was dressing. He told me then that I was his, that as a Death Eater's wife, I was bound to him by Severus' oath. That was the second time he insinuated he'd mark me." She looked at her arm. "I suppose you and Severus were both wrong."

Draco stiffened and stopped dancing. "I..." He took a step back. "I have to go."

Hermione nodded and watched him leave, wondering what happened. She walked off the dance floor and saw Glenwynn Glenwrythe standing with Theodore Nott and his younger brother, Walter, and Astoria Greengrass. She waved discreetly to Glenwynn; however, Glenwynn gave her a sad smile and turned to face Theodore.

"So, what did you say to my son this time?" Lucius Malfoy asked, and she turned, surprised to see him behind her.

"I'm not sure, one minute we're talking about my Mark and the next minute he said he had to go," she explained, still not quite sure of the reason herself.

"Shall we?" he asked, grasping her elbow.

She allowed him to guide her to the floor, and he led her smoothly to the measured waltz. "Draco told me what you said at school," Lucius stated. "You should keep your opinions to yourself." The music changed. "Is it so hard to try and appease the Dark Lord's wishes?"

"You should know, you're living with him, aren't you?" she asked and lowered her voice. She hadn't thought she'd have another opportunity to speak to him that evening and was going to take advantage of it now. "How are things? Are you happy? Are you doing all right? Because from what I've heard, life isn't all he promised it would be this time around in fact things are worse."

His jaw clenched. "You should watch what you say and to whom," he spat through his clenched teeth while maintaining a polite, albeit forced smile.

Hermione thought that even if he didn't want to hear it, this would be her only opportunity to be frank with him. "All I'm saying is that you've put everything on the line for him, put your family in jeopardy and for what? You're a smart businessman and brilliant politician, and you've put your lot in with the Dark Lord. That doesn't even make sense from a financial point of view, putting all your Galleons on one stock and hoping for the best."

He looked down at her. "What do you know about it?"

"My father invests in stocks, and he generally *diversifies*," she replied, trying to look innocent. "They have quite the nest egg er, savings. They could they have retired and are living quite comfortably, I assure you. He always told me not to put everything in one basket so to speak and yet that's exactly what you've done."

"The Dark Lord is winning," Lucius stated.

That was what she hoped he'd say. "It will all come down to Harry and *Him* in the end it will be the two of them Harry, the Chosen One, and the Dark Lord, as equals. At least that's what Dumbledore told us, that it's their destiny, enacted by the Fates, to face each other in the end, one killing the other in the final battle. Doesn't he always insist that Harry is *His* that no one must harm Harry except him? Why do you think that is, huh?"

His smile faltered, and he scowled, but she pressed on. "And so far, Harry has always escaped; he's always come out unscathed." It was what she told his wife, what she'd practiced in her head to say to them if given a chance. "All I'm saying is that opportunities arise, they come along. It's harder, being neutral, playing both sides. But then again, whom do you really want to win this? Which life was better this one under the Dark Lord's thumb or the one without the Dark Lord ruling over you? Which one would you choose if you had the choice?"

The music stopped. "Life is not that simple. Keep your opinions to yourself, especially here. You don't want to be overheard saying these things." As he led her toward Severus, she saw two students from her own house, sixth-year, Garrett Shadwell, and Jonathan Walsingham, one of the team Chasers talking with Zacharias Smith and seventh-year Hufflepuff, Della Maggiora, all looking at her. They quickly turned away, and she knew they were talking about her.

"Thank you for the dances," she said, turning back to Lucius.

Lucius nodded stiffly. "Hermione. Severus, you might want to mind your wife," he growled and walked away.

Hermione recognized Ryan Maggiora standing amongst a few of the fifth-year Slytherin boys, but he looked like he'd rather be any place else than standing around talking to his housemates at the Malfoys' party. When Walter Nott and Astoria Greengrass walked off the dance floor, Maggiora excused himself and made a beeline for them. The three walked to the refreshment table, and it was obvious that Maggiora was hissing something to Nott.

"Okay, what was that all about?" Severus asked.

It took her a second to realize what he meant. "Doing what you've hinted I should," she replied. "Maybe we should talk about it in private later?"

"All right," he said in a low hiss. "But behave yourself."

~B~

Belinda wanted to rid herself of Hermione's hindrance once and for all. She'd tried twice now to get Severus to dance with her, and he'd refused both times, taking his Mudblood wife out to the dance floor instead. The indignity of it rankled with her. In fact, that intrusive little Mudblood had even preoccupied her little brother's attention for half the night. It was a bloody outrage!

She decided to make her play again. She wandered casually around the ballroom, using a spell on some of the men, an Inception Spell, one not unlike the Imperius but without the annoying lightheadedness feeling to give it away. Plus the spell only worked on simple suggestions, things that the unaware victim would or might do. She simply planted a suggestion or an idea in the mind of her target, and the idea or suggestion took hold, becoming a thought that grew into a little nagging compulsion. It was ingenious really, and one that she could use quite effectively. And she could do it wandless and almost nonverbally, except she still moved her lips when she did the incantation.

Lucius was the easiest. He'd been showing too much interest in the Mudblood's relationship with his son, or the lack thereof, he needed to be out of the picture. He was sent to his cellars to check on his private reserve wine collection and his humidors.

Making Barcus Mordaunt, assistant head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission, Alecto Carrow and MacCavish each think that Severus should help round up the

Mudblood kids on his holiday was easily handled. She also implanted the idea in their heads that the girl could just as easily be held in the Malfoy dungeons until the start of term. MacCavish didn't respond as quickly to the spell, but Barcus Mordaunt and Alecko Carrow did. The three of them walked over to corner Severus to get him to agree. And when Severus would predictably refuse, Belinda already implanted the notion to Alecko that she should insist that he go with them to speak to the Dark Lord about it. *Get out of that one quickly*, she smirked to herself as she walked away.

Roquewood and his daughter Larissa were easily persuaded to corner Cillian in regards to her little brother's intentions regarding his betrothal. *That was two snitches for the grasping.*

Draco was more difficult; he was standing with masters Goyle and Schlinder, but watching Hermione dance with Mr. Enfield as the young men talked. So, Belinda gave Amycus the suggestion that Draco needed to invest in the horned noggound races. That idiotic man would hassle Draco for days about investing and the importance of the sport. At least the boy would be sufficiently distracted for a little while.

That only left the Mudblood to contend with. However, once the music stopped the girl would be alone. A simple suggestion of fear should get her acting impulsively or at the least, make her want to seek refuge.

The house-elves started handing out the guests' cloaks so that they could all go outside and witness the magical astrological event. This worked well in Belinda's plans. *"Inceptionus,"* she mumbled quietly, aiming her spell at the back of the Mudblood's head. *Run. Get away. Severus isn't here to protect you, and you're in danger.'*

Bellatrix turned from her husband, Rodolphus, and her brother-in-law, Rabastan, and walked up to her. "Playing nice with our new Mudblood pet?" Bellatrix asked snidely.

"Not if I have any say in the matter," Belinda replied softly. "I should get the girl to slip out onto the terrace for some air."

Bellatrix tilted her head with the little pout she used when wanting something. "What if you get caught?"

Belinda smirked. "Then we simply wait for another day."

"Pity," Bellatrix growled, tilting her head the other way and staring at the Mudblood. "I hate that wench."

The Mudblood's head turned, and her eyes widened in fear when she saw Belinda and Bellatrix standing behind her.

*Good.* Belinda reinforced the spell, mouthing, *"Inceptionus,"* as she pointed her finger at the girl, and silently added, *'Be afraid be very afraid.'*

The girl sucked in her breath and turned around.

"Feel like a walk in the gardens?" Belinda asked, never taking her eyes off the Mudblood.

Bellatrix turned to look at the Mudblood and smiled maliciously as Mr. Enfield guided the Mudblood off the dance floor, only a few paces from where she stood.

*Perfect.*

"She'll go searching for Severus," Bellatrix said, her eyes widening in glee as Hermione was handed her cloak and was being swept along with all the guests to the terrace.

"Let's go, we don't want to miss the Dark Lord's astrological omen," Belinda said with a smirk. *Oh yes, it was just too easy to plant the inception of fear in the girl!* And she could tell that it was already growing into a compulsion. *Lovely.*

The girl began to move, to try to worm her way to the edges of the terrace. She turned and saw Belinda and Bellatrix following her with Rodolphus and Rabastan right behind them. It was perfect.

Rommald Jugson, Antonin Dolohov, and Thorfinn Rowle three wizards Belinda knew hated the Mudblood were moving to intercept her, and the Mudblood's eyes widened in fear. *Oh yes, even better!* And Belinda hadn't needed to use her Inception spell on them; they'd be the perfect scapegoats. The Mudblood turned and fled down the steps toward the gardens.

~H~

Mr. Enfield had asked why Hermione had accepted the Dark Lord's Mark. "I didn't know what the Dark Lord intended to do," she'd explained, feeling as if she was being watched. "He asked me if I'd accepted my fate, and I simply answered him as honestly as I could, then he grabbed my arm and told me to kneel. I was so frightened. I didn't know what to do. So, I knelt, thinking he was going to punish me for arguing with Draco, for not trying harder. The next minute, before I could react, the Mark was being burned into my skin... right down to... my bones..." She faltered, suddenly feeling like she was in danger and needed to get away.

She looked around and saw Belinda and Bellatrix staring at her with matching malicious grins. She looked away immediately, staring at Mr. Enfield's chest, wondering what they could be up to now. Whatever it was, she was in danger and had to escape somehow as soon as possible.

Hermione thanked Mr. Enfield when the music stopped. *Oh my god, what do they want now?* She looked around quickly and didn't see Severus anywhere. *Severus, where are you? Why aren't you here to protect me?*

The guests' cloaks were being handed out by the house-elves so that the guests could go outside and witness the full moon pass through the Earth's shadow in the dark rift of the Milky Way. Hermione knew that this was a very rare phenomenon and was looking forward to seeing it, but right now, it was the furthest thing from her mind. *I'm in danger. Please, Severus, where are you?*

As a house-elf handed Hermione her cloak, she found herself being pulled along with the rest of the guests out onto the terrace. She tried to hang back, frantically looking for Severus, Cillian, or even Draco, and ended up cornered by Belinda and Bellatrix with the LeStrange brothers closing in behind the women. *Shite, oh, shite. Not now! Gods, please, where is he?*

"So there you are, Mudblood. Going somewhere?" Belinda taunted her, her wand in her hand and pointed in Hermione's direction.

"No, I just wanted some air," Hermione stammered, trying to see an escape. "Everyone is coming outside to see the astrological phenomenon."

"You want to leave?" Belinda sneered. "Is that it? Go ahead, I'm not stopping you."

*Severus where are you? Why aren't you here to protect me!* Hermione eased away from them, hoping to get to the other set of doors, and she saw Antonin Dolohov and Thorfinn Rowle moving toward her with identical scowls. *Run. Get away.* She hurried toward the steps of the terrace that led to the gardens. *I'm in danger, and I don't even have a wand!* Belinda and the LeStranges chased after her. She saw Antonin Dolohov and Thorfinn Rowle closing in on her left and Jugson coming on her right, followed by Narcissa Malfoy. *Severus, please, where are you?*

"What? Did you think Bellatrix or Narcissa was here to protect you?" Belinda sneered and laughed a cold merciless laugh. She raised her wand, aiming for Hermione. *"Crucio,"* she snarled, and Hermione felt an intense stabbing almost intolerable pain throughout her body. She grasped onto a light post to keep from collapsing and screamed, but no sounds emitted from her throat.

~S~

Severus knew something was wrong when the Skrewt shell in his pocket vibrated. *Hermione is in trouble; someone has used the Cruciatus on her!* He excused himself quickly, not at all concerned with politeness or insulting Barcus Mordaunt, and completely ignoring Alecto's protests, as he turned and ran for the ballroom. He scanned the room for Hermione, moving between the guests that were on their way outside to watch the lunar eclipse.

He could not see her.

He turned, absentmindedly accepting his cloak from a house-elf as he looked for any sign of her.

He spotted Draco approaching, alone. *So he wasn't watching her.* Not that he'd expected him to be, but Cillian...

No, he's been dodging his sister all evening and from being cornered into escorting Larissa Roquewood, he reminded himself *Damn, how the bloody blazes did I get distracted?* Too late, he realized he'd simply walked away when she'd begun to dance with Mr. Enfield. All because Mordaunt insisted that I should help round up the Mudblood kids on my holiday and place Hermione in the Malfoy dungeons... Preposterous, I'd never have... But it was as if he'd been hit with an Imperius! Except he knew the signs of the Imperius curse all too well and was always able to fight it off.

He reached out an arm to catch Draco's when the boy came close enough. "Have you seen Hermione?" he asked, still scanning the room instead of look at him.

"I thought she was with Cillian," Draco said. "I saw her standing near him before Amycus cornered me about investing in noghound racing."

And then Severus saw Cillian running across the terrace with a murderous look on his face. "Excuse me," Severus said hurriedly to Draco as he left to follow Cillian.

Draco was running after Severus to see what the problem was, hoping it wasn't Hermione.

~H~

Hermione was cornered. The break in the hedges was her only hope, but then the Dark Lord would think she was running away. Which was exactly what she really wanted to do at that moment *run. Run. Get away. Severus isn't here to protect me, and I'm in danger.*

Bellatrix raised her wand, aiming for Hermione. "*Stupefy,*" she screeched as Belinda aimed again, shouting "*Imperio,*" but Hermione turned quickly, and the spells collided, somehow missing her.

"Stop her!" the crazed witches screamed.

Hermione ran down a garden path and found herself trapped by two more men, Coughtery deFay and Swithin Wroithesley, she instantly recognized as faces from her nightmares of the night she'd been trapped into all this. She backed up and quickly ducked behind some ornamental shrubbery. She peered around the bush and realized that Dolohov, Rowle, and Jugson were creating large holes in the hedge across the garden from her to force their way through. Wroithesley and deFay, having spotting them, were approaching, asking at the same time, "What's going on?"

"Why is the Mudblood here and where is Snape?"

And in the other direction, Bellatrix, Belinda, and Narcissa were now on the path from the direction she'd come.

*Think Hermione, calm down and think...*

Knowing that she had nowhere else to go, knowing that these wizards wanted her dead and could probably explain her death as an accident, she had to get way somewhere *and fast.* The Burrow... would be the first place Bellatrix would go; the castle was out she couldn't go there without Severus...

"Severus is otherwise occupied as is my little brother," Belinda cooed. "Come out, come out, wherever you are, little Mudblood. Be a good little girl."

Hermione knew if she Disappeared for the ball room if she could Apparate into the room she'd face the same problem, and the Dark Lord's wrath. She had to appear where Severus was to explain... and she didn't know where he was. She knew she couldn't go to her parent's house because they all knew where it was...

*Without Severus to protect me, they can do whatever they want... the Dark Lord will certainly kill me now, and the Death Eaters are getting closer!*

Hermione stood and Disappeared to the next place she thought of.

## In The Dark Rift

Chapter 33 of 43

Hermione, fearing for her life thanks to Belinda's planted suggestion with her Inception Spell, is on the run, and Severus, Cillian, and Draco have to find her.

*A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me and to EverMystique, DuchessOfArcadia and Dandru for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.*

*Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.*

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In The Dark Rift

Why he'd allowed Eugene Roquewood to corner him, Cillian had no idea, but the man had demanded to know when he'd announce his engagement to his bloody daughter. From across the room, Cillian watched as both Belinda and Bellatrix moved in on Hermione, and he wondered why the girl was standing all alone. If he'd known that Severus would be pulled away from her, he wouldn't have allowed himself to be lured away.

Neither Belinda nor Bellatrix had any compunction about taking initiatives where Muggle-borns were concerned, nor feared receiving punishments for their actions, and both carried deep animosity toward Hermione. Bellatrix was a pure-blood extremist, a bloody zealot sycophant, and Bell was really good at making accidents happen; just like her late husband, Leland Penhallow, or her first husband Armon Kirschner. Cillian suspected that only the fact that Horrance's will left everything to be divided up between his sons had kept him alive thus far. Unless they remained married for the required twenty years for the spousal rights laws to take effect, and Belinda had sixteen years to go for that to happen.

Where the bloody hell is Severus? he thought as he made a half-hearted excuse to Roquewood to get to Hermione. But the throngs of guests were moving in the direction of the doors and sweeping Hermione out with them. *Damn, that's not good.* He could see Rodolphus and Rabastan following Belinda, Bellatrix and Hermione, but even if Rodolphus wasn't going to harm Hermione himself, he had little or no control of his wife's actions, and Rabastan harbored resentment for his arrest following the Department of Mysteries fiasco. Marked or no, Rabastan, Bellatrix and Belinda hated Hermione, and at the very least, they would take their sport out on her for revenge, just as long as they didn't actually kill the girl.

Once on the terrace, Cillian saw Rodolphus and Rabastan heading down the steps that led to the gardens. Cillian ran across the terrace, shoving his way through the guests, not caring if he knocked anyone down. As he neared the steps, he saw his sister and Bellatrix, with the LeStrange brothers, heading for the break in the six-foot hedges that separated the formal garden from the family's gardens. Dolohov, Rowle, and Jugson were slashing large holes in the hedge as well, trying to force their way through.

Unbeknownst to him, Severus and Draco were behind him as Cillian raced down the stairs. He just reached the break in the hedge when Hermione stood and Disapparated.

"Fuck," Severus swore behind him.

~S~

"I didn't think that the Dark Lord's courtesans would chase her off the grounds," Severus snarled and ushered Cillian aside with Draco following right behind him.

"I'll kill her!" Draco snarled, running his hand through his hair in agitation as he turned slightly, and then dropped his hand as he faced the men.

Cillian turned on Draco. "Who, Hermione, your aunt, or my sister?" he demanded, apparently furious with all three.

"Stop it we have damage control to do," Severus snapped, gaining control of the situation. "Draco, check my house; she might have tried to go there, hoping that is where I'd go. If she's not at my house, go to the castle in case she goes there. Tell Dumbledore's portrait what happened he'll alert the other portraits. Wait there until the Dark Lord or I contact you."

"You're kidding me, right?" Draco asked incredulously, drawing his wand. "She won't go there."

"She's a Gryffindor, not a Slytherin they don't think when they're upset or panicking." Severus stated.

"Good point," Draco admitted, Disapparating.

"You don't really think she'll go there, do you?" Cillian asked.

Now that he only had Cillian to deal with, things it would be much easier. "Of course not, unless she feels there is nowhere else to turn. My best guess is that she'll go somewhere she'll feel safe or she'll go to one of her friend's houses," he said. The truth was that he had no idea where she'd go. "When she'd Splinched, she went the house on Grimmauld Place; but Dolohov, Rowle and Jugson will go there, and the Dark Lord will send Yaxley if they need to get in." *But Hermione knows this so it's possible she'll try the Burrow, except that...*

Cillian said, "Bellatrix will most likely go to the Burrow," as if reading his mind.

And if Hermione runs into her... No, Miss Weasley would have told Hermione that Bellatrix and Rodolphus had attacked the Burrow. She'd not go there... Or would she? Severus had no idea where Belinda would go. He saw Rodolphus and Rabastan heading over to talk to Wroithesley and deFay, so that would keep them busy for a while. *Bugger.*

"I have the list of people she knows, but I'm sure that many of the houses will be under the Fidelius," Cillian was saying.

"Most likely, but check whichever ones you can," Severus said, turning his attention to his friend. "If you use your piece of the Skrewt shell with the Archaic-Detection Charm to locate the Skrewt shells she wears, you should be able to tell if she's near. I'll go to the Burrow and Black's house; she might try to find some of the Order members." They both had a piece of Skrewt shell in their pocket, the ones with the runes and symbols. "I tried extending the range on them, but so far I've only been able to test it in the castle, and at best she had only been two hundred feet away."

"I understand. I'll do what I can," Cillian said, pulling the shell fragment from his pocket.

People hiding in Fidelius-protected homes would automatically be protected by the Charm because most specified who lived at the residence as well as the address, thus they'd be untraceable *if* the Fidelius Charm was strong enough. And the Fidelius Charm on residences where Hermione had stayed in the past had been done by Dumbledore. *He* was always quite thorough in his specifications. However, the Archaic-Detection Charm could be used to detect if a 'like object' was near, even if the object was in a Fidelius-protected residence; not all the time, but occasionally. It was worth a shot. "If you find her, take her to your island in fact, I'll meet you there, and we'll decide what to do next," Severus suggested. *Damn, what a mess.*

"Sounds good," Cillian replied and Disapparated the same time as Severus did.

~ meanwhile ~

Hermione Disapparated and quickly scanned all around her, taking in her surroundings. Her grandmother's house was dark, the heavy drapes in the windows were closed tightly, and there wasn't any smoke from either chimney. However, the back porch light was on, as well as the solar energized garden lighting, but the house had an abandoned feeling. Not that she expected anything different. She'd placed her grandmother in the Sunnyside Nursing Home, located in the village of Iver in Buckinghamshire, the same time she'd sent her parents to Australia.

Nevertheless, the serene garden, now coated in a layer of snow, gave her a sense of familiarity, even if her heart rate was thudding erratically in her chest, her breathing was so hard she was unable to catch her breath, and her nerves were on edge. She fought back the tears that filled her eyes, threatening to fall, and shook her hands to get them to stop trembling. *This is a mess.*

She was in grave danger, without her wand, and she had no way of contacting Severus. No safe way. Nor could she go back to the Manor, even if she knew where it was, because as Draco had told her, she didn't have the Dark Mark she was branded so she could not get in through the gates. *Well, there were those Death Eaters standing guard, but they wouldn't understand... They'd hex first and drag her to the Dark Lord... Nope, not an option. I need Severus.*

She looked at the back door and sighed. She couldn't get into her grandmother's house not without her wand to take down the protective spells she'd placed on the house and unlock the door.

She walked over to the garden swing under the vine-covered arbour, wiped off the seat, and sat down, forcing herself to relax enough to think. Ginny had told her that the Burrow had been attacked the day after her disappearance. But then that meant that the Death Eaters knew of its location, unless, of course, Mr. Weasley and Mr. Shacklebolt had repaired the house and re-established the protections on the property.

However, Ginny had mentioned that the family was spending Winter Solstice at her aunt's but not where she'd be for Christmas... So, they could return in the morning. Or not. Regardless, she did know how to get into the Burrow because Mr. Weasley had told her how to in case she, Ron or Harry needed to. She simply had to use the pair of charmed keys hidden in the shed. And she could Floo a message to Severus at the castle. It was also the most obvious place for her to go, and there was the possibility that Severus would go there looking for her.

It was also possible that because of her disappearance, well, unplanned escape, the Burrow could be surrounded by Death Eaters.

Deciding that was her best option anyway, she Apparated to the Burrow.

~ meanwhile ~

Draco entered Severus' house and immediately knew that Hermione was not there. The house was exactly the same as when he'd last been here. It was almost as welcoming as being home, an odd thought considering that Draco had spent the majority of his life living in large, opulent houses, and this one was a far cry from his normal standard. But for the first time since leaving Hogwarts for the holiday, Draco felt he could actually breathe.

Still he had a task to perform. "*Inhabitationem humanam*," he said with a swish of his wand to detect for any human life forms, but the light at the tip of his wand remained in place. Not that he expected anything else to happen. *Empty*, he scoffed to himself.

He didn't really want to see the upstairs, but he did open the bookshelf that led to the kitchen. Everything was put away: no dishes in the sink to be washed, the bread box was empty, as was the ice box. Even the kettle, pan, and skillet that normally sat on the burners had been tucked into a cupboard. *Well, what did you expect? For her to be sitting here waiting for you?*

He gazed out of the window at the back garden and smiled. The fanged ivy was spreading up one of the walls, and the roses had been pruned back and packed with mulch for the winter.

With a sigh, he walked back to the sitting room.

Taking one last look around, he slipped outside and locked the door.

Okay. Hogwarts.

~H~

Hermione Apparated under a large oak tree on the hill near the Burrow, to make her way down to the orchard, and what she saw made her blood run cold. From her vantage point, she could see that not much of the Burrow was still standing. She moved forward cautiously.

The house had been nearly burnt to the ground. The ground floor had been built out of stone, and most of it remained as well as most of the chimney and the stovepipe from Mrs. Weasley's kitchen. Well, where the kitchen had been. The windows and porch were gone, too. Some of the first and second floor framework still stood, burned, charred remnants of wood, but the magic that once held the place together was gone. Sections of the house looked as if they had literally fallen off and lay in crumpled, charred debris on the ground. She placed her hand over her mouth to keep herself from crying out.

She'd had no idea that the attack had been this brutal, but she was sure that none of the Weasleys had been burned in the fire; Ginny would have told her so. Although, why Ginny hadn't told her the house had been destroyed, she had no idea. Maybe she hadn't known, but this didn't look recent. There was a layer of snow over everything, giving it a hopeless feeling of desolation. *No hope of sending a note by Floo to Severus here.* She doubted that the Floo pot could have survived the fire even if the Floo could be activated.

Hermione looked around, wondering what to do next. She didn't know where Neville or Seamus lived. Tinko was going to stay with Ginny over the holiday, wherever that was, and Jannilyn and Jenny were staying with Seamus' family because Jenny loved Ireland so much and jumped at the chance for an Irish Christmas. Hermione hadn't been close enough to Neville or Seamus to exchange addresses, and she greatly regretted it now.

She couldn't return to school; Hogsmeade was full of Death Eaters, and she didn't know where Severus' house was, nor could she remember the back garden well enough to visualize it. Each time she'd tried, all she could remember were the bloodstained flagstones and the blood splattered fanged ivy.

Her only option was Grimmauld Place. Maybe she could contact someone from there.

~ meanwhile ~

Severus Apparated down the street from number twelve, Grimmauld Place and saw Dolohov, Rowle, and Jugson pacing in front of the house *I get my hands on Belinda, I'll strangle her*, he snarled venomously to himself.

Suddenly, the Death Eaters ran across the street as if chasing someone. Severus pulled out his wand and the piece of the shell, set them on his palm and muttered, "*Détegere accertener shells.*" He watched as his wand balanced on the shell, unmoving, just pointing down the street ahead of him. *Shite*, he cursed softly. *Maybe she Apparated directly into the house?* He shook his head. *No. That would wake Mrs. Black. Unless she used the front step? Would she be so bold?*

Severus snarled to himself as he Apparated for the top step of the house. He ignored the shouts of his fellow Death Eaters as he landed on the step and opened the door.

"We can hear you. Show yourself!" Jugson demanded.

"Get Yaxley," Dolohov demanded, as if in charge.

Severus used the Archaic-Detection Charm again to ascertain if she'd entered the house but his wand remained motionless, balanced on the disk of shell. *She is not in the house. Damn.*

He called for the house-elf, but as expected, the elf, Kreacher, did not answer him.

Mrs. Black woke and started screeching.

Then Yaxley entered the foyer, followed by Jugson. "She's not here," Severus stated. "She was here on the street, but I think she saw you and ran away."

"Yeah, blame us for losing the girl," Jugson snapped.

"I saw you on the street! Did it never occur to you to use a Disillusionment Charm?" Severus snapped back. "I have a few more places to check, so I will not report your incompetence."

Severus cast the same defensive spells and warning Klaxon used on the stairs of the girls' dormitories at school on the stairs to the upper floors of the house and bound the Klaxon spell to his piece of shell. *If she does get in, that will give her an escape from those thugs.*

"What are you doin'?" Yaxley demanded.

"Setting a trap for the girl, just in case," Severus said dismissively as he turned heel and left the house. He straightened his robes and Apparated to the Burrow.

~H~

Being extra cautious, she Apparated to the phone box at the corner of Grimmauld Place and Grimmauld Street and squatted down quickly, peering through the glass to see if she'd been noticed. Thankfully the sound of her Apparition seemed to go unnoticed, or possibly mistaken as the sound of a backfiring motor vehicle.

Hermione pulled her cloak about her. As she made her way down the peaceful street, avoiding the pair of Muggles that crossed her path, she saw two dark robed figures pacing around in the pavement in front of the house. She immediately ran up the steps of the nearest house and pressed her back to the door, hoping the four pillars supporting the overhang, potted plants and the topiaries, all decorated with plastic poinsettias, would hide her.

She knew that the Death Eaters could not actually see Harry's house, but if she were to Apparate to the top step in front of the door, although they might not see her, they'd definitely hear her. She wondered if she should try the small back garden, but shook her head and pressed herself back against the door of the house. *The back door is secured, and I'd need my wand to get in.* She could try Apparating directly into the foyer and risk waking Mrs. Black, but they'd definitely be able to hear the old hag's screeches.

She heard a car pass by, but the street was quiet, as expected considering the hour. She leaned forward and was shocked to see the dark robed figures were gone. She chose to take the risk, Disapparating into the house and set off the wailing image of Mrs. Black.

Kreacher appeared instantly and grabbed Hermione's wrist as he waved his hand at the portrait of Mrs. Black with his other hand. "Hush now, Mistress. Kreacher takes cares of this," he croaked, making the curtains close.

The next second, she felt the tug, much like a Portkey would, behind her navel and found herself tripping over the elf next to the pantry. At least Mrs. Black was now quiet.

"Squats down if you wants to lives," he snarled.

She squatted, and he shoved her through the wall into a dimly lit cramped space.

"Do nots move or speaks. Especially do nots speaks anything. Holds real still." Kreacher began to mumble something in a language she couldn't understand, low rumbling words, his hands held up toward her.

She heard sounds, shouts, crashing; all the while Kreacher kept mumbling the strange words. She concentrated on Kreacher to squelch her fears. He wore a new pillowcase tied around his hips and had on the locket that Harry had shown her at the end of their sixth year, but she forced herself not to ask why.

There was the loud pop of Apparition, followed by the heavy footfalls of someone in boots walking around upstairs and the wailing screeches of Mrs. Black. Hermione strained to listen for anything. If anyone found her she was helpless. No wand and only a few minor wandless spells that would not be helpful in any way if she were faced with an angry Death Eater. On the other hand, it could be Severus looking for her.

Sweat beaded on Kreacher's brow, and the voices above her indicated that the men, plural, were arguing. Hermione leaned back, her lower back pressed against the warm stone, and waited, trusting Kreacher.

~ meanwhile ~

Severus arrived at the Burrow, not really expecting to find Hermione, but it was one of the three places he knew that she'd felt safe in their world. He knew that she wouldn't just appear on the side of the old dirt driveway like he had, so he scanned the area for the most likely spot. Deciding that she might try the orchard gate or someplace up on the hill above the house, he tried both.

He knew that the Burrow had been attacked, and now there was little remaining of the place. He scanned the ground quickly by the orchard gate and even cast a few magic detection charms. The spell indicated that no one had been by there for months and there were no fresh footprints in the snow, save his own. *Not that Hermione couldn't have concealed her prints if she were thinking clearly,* he thought. He Apparated for the large oak tree on the hill the place that the Order members used when coming here.

He moved cautiously, searching the ground for clues. A few paces ahead, he saw fresh footprints of a ladies shoe in the snow, the prints approximately Hermione's in size. *So she was here, or had been.* Following the footprints, he saw the sure sign of Apparition the round indentation of a shoe pivoting in the snow, the swirl of cloak turning around, making a distinct pattern and exposing the grass and leaves. *Here and gone again.*

He considered where she'd go next. So far he knew that she'd avoided capture because he'd have been summoned if she had, and his Mark would have burned with the Dark Lord's fury. His Mark was irritating him, but only an irritatingly prickling itch. It was likely only transmitting the Dark Lord's displeasure that was if he'd already found out about Hermione's escape, which was quite likely.

But if there was the even the slightest possibility Hermione would use this opportunity to find Potter, he wanted to give her that chance. He could always go back to the school and activate the trace he'd put on her shoes. Besides, he wanted to check in with Cillian and see if he'd had any luck on tracking down Hermione through her friends or had any word from their brethren.

~H~

She heard the loud pop of Apparition again, muffled by the screeches of Mrs. Black's portrait, some cursing, followed by doors slamming, and heavy foot falls of men in boots walking around upstairs. Finally the footsteps faded, and all she could hear was Kreacher mumbling his incantation and her own breathing. Hermione tried to slow her breath rate, but all she managed to do was make her breathing laboured and irregular. Even her heart seemed to be thudding hard as if trying to escape her chest.

Her legs were cramped, and her back ached. She leaned against the wall, and Kreacher glared at her, but he didn't stop his chanting. Her legs were numb, she was sweating, but nowhere near what Kreacher was, and he smelled. Finally his ears twitched.

He turned his head slightly as his ears widened and stretched out. He dropped his hands. "Stays."

She only nodded and tried to move a little to ease the pain in her back and legs.

Thankfully Kreacher wasn't gone for very long. "They is gone. They did not knows you is here," he said as he pulled her out of her hiding place.

"How?" she asked softly, stretching to loosen up her aching limbs and back.

"I hides you," he croaked and smiled, not a reassuring sight, but somewhat friendly. "I hides your magic. I makes you a house-elf."

He didn't make any sense. "What?"

"To them, they sees only a house-elf," he said proudly. "Is you hungry? Kreacher will feeds the Mudblood friend of his master."

Somehow his use of the term Mudblood didn't sound as condescending as he used to say it, just factual. "Do you know where Harry is?" she asked him.

"Kreacher hears his master," he grumbled, walking to the cupboards.

"Can you take me to him?" she asked, though the thought of food was actually appealing.

"No, Master does not call for Kreacher," he said, pulling out a roasted turkey and carrots. "Kreacher can only goes to Master when he calls Kreacher." He placed a burly-looking red root and celery on the counter. "But Kreacher is ready to goes whenever master calls him." He bent to retrieve something from a low cupboard. "Bad mens comes into the house all the times. They tries to see if peoples come. Kreacher is to warn Master's friends to goes away. It's not safe for Master's friends."

"But you didn't send me away," she said, much more like a question than a statement.

"Kreacher is to feeds and hides Master's Mudblood friend," the old elf said, pulling out a pot.

She chose to ignore the use of the term considering he was being nice to her. "I need to change my clothes," she said, and he nodded.

"Your clothes," he said, putting the pot on the stove. "I cans do that."

"I'd prefer Muggle clothes," she suggested, since robes might be more encumbering for now.

"Yes, Mudblood wears Muggle clothes," he said and disappeared.

Hermione decided to go up stairs and use the loo. When she gazed at her appearance in the mirror, she noticed that one of her earrings was missing. *Damn.* Not that she liked them, but Severus had made them for her so they had special meaning to her. Still, she looked a fright. She pulled up her sleeve to wash her hands and nearly started crying, seeing the brand on her arm. Grabbing the soap, she tried to wash it off, then dropped the soap and gave in to her tears. It was hopeless; she was branded as His follower for life.

There was a soft pounding of a fist on the door. "Kreacher puts Muggle clothes in girls' room," he said, and she could hear him walk away.

Inhaling, she rinsed her forearm and hands, then left the loo to go change her clothes.

In the room she'd shared with Ginny, Hermione found not one but three pairs of Muggle jeans, two heavy jumpers, two long-sleeved t-shirts, and three blouses, none of them hers, and all approximately her size. There were also hiking boots, trainers and a package of socks and knickers. Wondering where Kreacher got them, but not turning down the gifts, she called for Kreacher to help her out of her robes.

He appeared instantly, shaking his head, and made a few flips of his hands over the fastenings before he Disappeared. "Thank you," she said, careful not to raise her voice but hoping he'd hear her anyway. She dressed quickly and dug her tiny purse out of the pocket of her cloak, wondering if the clothes would all fit inside, then cursed herself for being so stupid. Both compacts were tucked away somewhere deep inside the tiny purse.

~ meanwhile ~

Severus Apparated for the island and strode quickly up the path to the house. He knew that the spells on the island would alert Cillian to his presence. Within minutes, Cillian met him at the small wall that surrounded the little front garden. "I checked several of them no sign of her."

"The Burrow had been attacked, and she was not there or at the house on Grimmauld Place," he told Cillian.

"Where to now? The castle?" Cillian asked.

"I seriously doubt she'll go there," Severus said, looking around. "No, she'll either try to find one of her friends or Potter." He really didn't have too many options. He hoped she'd meet up with Potter; that was if none of his fellow brethren found her first. It was only a matter of time before the Dark Lord would summon him for news. At least he and Cillian would not be held accountable for her escape he'd see to that. It was time that Belinda faced some facts and punishments.

"So, back to my list?" Cillian asked, crossing his arms. "This could be a wild white hart hunt."

"I've got one or two more possibilities to check and then I'll come back here." Severus said. "If worst comes to worst, I have another option," he said. He hoped that Arthur would trust him, and that Ginevra had the mate to Hermione's mirror.

"What about Draco?" Cillian asked.

"I'll check on Draco," Severus said.

Cillian nodded. "And I'll check on the Wangs and Waithes, and maybe the Finnigan and Longbottoms again. I might get lucky," he said.

"I'm going to try the Order's old headquarters again," Severus stated.

Cillian nodded again and Disappeared.

And if she's not there, I'll go to my office and activate the trace on her shoes she thought.

~H~

Hermione pulled out the mirror, the match to Harry's mirror, from her tiny purse. She made the mirror vibrate easily enough and smiled when he opened his. "Harry! Oh, it's good to see you."

"Hermione, where are you you're in Grimmauld Place?"

She was surprised that he knew. "How did you..." She turned and smiled. "Oh, of course, the wall mirror you hated." It was huge, the frame was made up of undulating and slithering snakes and had three little cherubs on the top, holding small harps that they used to make the snakes back up by smacking them on their noses. She looked at his image in her compact mirror. "Is there any way I can find you? Maybe meet you someplace?"

"What about Snape?" Harry asked. Although she could only see the top half of his face, she could tell he wasn't smiling.

"He doesn't know that I'm here. Please, Harry." She desperately wanted to see him and Ron.

Harry's reflection showed a patch of hair and his ear, then his face again. "Sure, meet me on the bank of the River Thames next to the Surrey side of the Richmond Bridge."

"Right, I've been there," she said excitedly. His image vanished.

Dressing for the cold, she pulled on one of the heavy jumpers over a t-shirt and flannel shirt, packed the rest of the Muggle clothes in her purse and donned her cloak. When she entered the foyer cautiously, Kreacher handed her a large basket full to brimming with meat pies, apple tarts, a round of cheese, and biscuits. She was sure it wasn't all for her. "I'm going to where Harry is, if Severus Snape asks you," she told him. "The Surrey side of the Richmond Bridge. Tell only Severus Snape."

Kreacher nodded. "If the Dark Lord's spy asks, Kreacher will tell him."

"Thank you, Kreacher, for everything."

He just waved her off, turning to the kitchen, mumbling something she couldn't hear. Hermione took a deep breath to brace herself, stepped quickly out onto the top step and Apparated for the Richmond Bridge. She looked around at the unusual illumination of the familiar landscape. The colors were off: the snow on the ground had an amber hue, the foliage a ruddy hue, and the shadows were oddly colored as well. Everything seemed to be... duller, dim, as if... "Right the luster will be a bit off," she said. She looked up. The full moon was passing through Earth's shadow in the center of the dark rift of the Milky Way just like she'd read in the *Daily Prophet*.

"What are you on about?" Harry asked.

"The eclipse of the full moon, Harry. It's a huge astrological event a huge omen of great portents... 'For seventy-two minutes of eerie totality, an amber light will play across the snow, throwing the landscapes into an unusual state of ruddy shadow...' " she quoted the article she'd read in the *Daily Prophet*. She looked around again. "It's happening."

"Okay, it's happening," he said, looking around. "How long? Seventy-two that's just over an hour."

"Yes," she said, turning to him.

Harry aimed his wand at her. "What is the name of Ginny's pigmy puff?"

She looked at him in disbelief. "Arnold. Why, Harry?"

"What is Luna's or Tonk's Patronus?" he asked next.

"Luna's is a hare, and Tonk's is a wolf well, a werewolf for Remus," she said, putting one hand on her hip since the other still held the basket of food. "Where did you and I first meet?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "What?"

"Answer me; if we are going to do this, answer the question," she insisted. "Where did you and I first meet, and what did I ask you?"

"The train," he said and lowered his wand a little. "I don't remember what you asked me? You did ask Ron to show you his spell. What was the spell supposed to do?"

"Turn his rat yellow only his rat was actually Peter Pettigrew in his Animagus form. But we didn't know that until our third year in the Shrieking Shack. Satisfied?"

"Fine. Yes. We have to go," he said, lowering his wand. Dean Thomas and Oliver Wood removed Harry's invisibility cloak as they both stood up and stepped out from the shadows of the bridge. "My backup. Are you coming?"

~S~

Severus Apparated to Grimmauld Place again, certain that she'd eventually have to go there. He ignored the shouts of the four Death Eaters as he landed on the steps and quickly entered the house.

"We can hear you. Show yourself!" Macnair shouted as he closed the door.

Thugs. He tried the Archaic-Detection Charm to locate her Skrewt jewelry again to make certain. But his wand angled in the direction of the drawing room. He stepped into the doorway and looked around the empty room. *She's not here.* He tried again, wondering why the spell had indicated the drawing room, only his wand barely twitched. It remained pointed toward the window closest to him. He placed the shell fragment in his fist and aimed his wand at the room. "*Accio Skrewt shell,*" he said with a flick of his wrist. Nothing happened, well except for the slight tug on his hand.

Tightening his fingers around his wand, he turned. "*Inhabitationem human,*" he said with a swish of his wand to check the house. The light at the tip of his wand sailed toward the window closest to the front door. *The thugs outside, apparently.*

She is not in the house.

He tried calling the house-elf, but Kreacher didn't answer him, and Mrs. Black was screeching away at the top of her painted lungs. He cast the spell that allowed the male staff of Hogwarts to enter the female dormitories and went up stairs. Opening the door to what had once been a ladies' parlor, he saw Hermione's wedding robes hanging on a wardrobe. *Of course, the room she used when staying here. So you were here. Bugger, I missed her.* Then he noticed her shoes lying on the floor. *Damn it, no!* he swore again. *Well, no use activating the trace.*

He looked around the room and realized that there were two beds, two wardrobes with the chairs moved to the side of the room and the far wall by the windows *Miss Weasley.*

His Dark Mark burned slightly again, not a summons, just the Dark Lord's agitation. It hadn't really stopped all night; the sensation just changed from annoying irritation, to irritating itch, to aggravating burn and back. However, the Dark Lord still hadn't summoned him to explain. *I'm being given time. Thank, Merlin.*

Severus used the Floo to go to the Headmaster's suite and went up to their room to search through Hermione's trunk for any clues to where she might have gone. He tried one lock, pleased that she hadn't used any magic other than the simple Locking Charm to keep him from opening the locks. He found some of his books from his private collection in the compartment, but nothing useful in his search. Ignoring the books, he opened another compartment. But there was nothing among her things in it that could help him, so he opened the third compartment and was likewise disappointed. He opened the last one.

Scrounging around carefully through the old sheets of parchments, her magical hats, old papers and his old broom, he was displeased to see many of the Weasley's joke shop items he'd confiscated off her when she'd been remanded to his care: her Hand of Glory was in an old sock, about a half a dozen or so Decoy Detonators scurried about, the box of Peruvian Darkness Powder capsules, her two swamp canisters, and other items. *I thought I had Peren get rid of all this* he grumbled to himself, swearing, *Damn her,* as he picked up an old edition of the *Daily Prophet* that had the article about her disappearance and a very old *Gobstones Gazette*.

But at least she wasn't responsible for the swamp on the first floor corridor he thought. He was about to close the lid when he saw an expensive sheet of parchment lying in her trunk. He pulled it out and examined both sides, smiling. *It's the one from her memories.*

He found quill and ink easily enough in the second compartment and tried to use the parchment to find Hermione *Where is Hermione, my hand fasted wife?*

The ink absorbed into the parchment and words formed. *It's not your turn to know or see. You must wait two more times until she writes three, and only if I pass myself to thee.*

More than a little disappointed, and realizing it wouldn't cooperate with him, Severus placed everything in the compartment as it had been and slammed the lid closed.

He left the Headmaster's tower and ran all the way up to Gryffindor tower, barking a demand to the Fat Lady to let him in. He scrambled through the crawl space to enter the common room, swearing that he would enlarge the bloody opening to a more reasonable size before term resumed, and hurried over to the staircase to the girls' dormitories. With a flick of his wand and the right incantation, he took the stairs two at a time to the sixth years' dorm room. Since Jenny Wang, Janilynn Waithe, and Ginevra Weasley were all friendly with Hermione this year, he searched each girl's wardrobe and bed to look for clues about where Hermione may have gone. In one of the wardrobes, he found an old beat up envelope with the Granger's address. He smirked and rose to leave.

~ meanwhile ~

Draco knew this was a waste of time as he strolled the familiar stone corridors, heading for the Entrance Hall. He'd checked the library again, more for someplace to go than expecting anything, or anyone, and checked in with the gargoyle, ignoring that crazy knight Sir Cadogan's declaration that 'the fair maiden' was still missing. *Great.*

The six students who were staying in the castle over the holiday were up on the Astronomy tower with Professor Sinistra, watching the lunar event for extra credit. And the few staff members who were staying as well were either out on the grounds with Hagrid or up on the tower watching the astrological event through the telescopes. Even the merpeople had surfaced, and centaurs were wandering about the grounds. He divided his time between going outside, pretending to be enjoying the effects of the unusual lunar eclipse, and climbing his way up to the Astronomy tower to peer through one of the telescopes, but he was too concerned for Hermione to stay in one place for too long.

That and the centaurs' comments about the portents and omens, the passing of the full moon though the Earth's shadow in the middle of the Milky Way, unnerved him. They spoke of seventy-two days of turmoil and strife, of evil and despair... *Not that the Dark Lord's interpretations of the event were any better in comparison. His time. His dominance. His full rise to power... ya-da ya-da ya-da.*

The castle itself was quiet, and all the portraits were awake and on alert as were the ghosts. It was almost unnerving seeing all the painted faces smiling at him again. Every one of the portraits was on the lookout for one girl. Only one. Hermione. Even the painted animals seemed to be on the hunt for her, which was simply ridiculous.

They are just the magical imprint of a bloody animal, for Merlin's sake he thought as a lion roared at him from a painting of a carousel horse on which a young lady was usually perched, making Draco jump. "Bloody hell! Go to your own frame," he snarled at the beast as it raised a paw as if waving at him. He walked on.

It was like that one portrait, a woman, Violet, who sought Draco out every time he walked through the castle to let him know that Hermione hadn't appeared in front of the Fat Lady, and of course Sir Cadogan, who had situated himself in the painting closest to the Headmaster's tower, rushed into the painting of four famous Alchemists that hung next to the stairs whenever he saw Draco pass to give his reports.

Not that she's going to come here. She won't come because Severus and Cillian aren't here he thought as he crossed the landing for the next flight of stairs.

Still it was more peaceful and serene being in the castle than it would be if he was at the manor; more peaceful than the manor had been for the last year and a half, especially since the Dark Lord had commandeered his home.

Ever since his father had escaped from Azkaban, he hadn't been the same. That first summer after Draco's fourth year, his father had been fanatical about his own rise in the wizarding world, their coming into power now that the Dark Lord had returned; however, since the summer after his fifth year, home had never been the same. He refused to think on it.

His Dark Mark burned slightly, again. *Not a summons, but the Dark Lord is angry furious, but not at me. Thankfully.* Still it had been irritating him for nearly two hours now. Not surprisingly.

When he'd entered the Headmaster's tower earlier that evening, Draco had expected the portrait of Dumbledore to scoff at him, but the old wizard had surprised him yet again. That damned old, wizened, painted imprint with his twinkling blue eyes had calmly listened intently to what Draco said, asking questions every so often for clarification. When Draco had finished, several of the ex-headmaster's portraits had consented to the importance of watching out for Hermione, and then they had simply walked out of their frames, many of them to speak to the other painted imprints that hung on the castle's walls. Ex-Headmasters Everard Beasley, Johnathan Atterbury, and Phineas Black went to their other portraits wherever they were as did Dilyls Derwent, the famous Healer slash Headmistress, and Dexter Fortescue, the famous historian slash Headmaster.

So, St. Mungo's and the Newton-Cragg Magical Library in Birmingham have been searched, he thought ruefully. *Just in case Hermione wanted to check out a book at one in the morning or wished to visit Lockhart or...* *Damn!* He sighed and counted to ten. He wanted news, any news.

Draco opened the huge oak doors and stood outside on the top of the steps, surveying the grounds. The centaurs were still talking with Hagrid and Professor Lundergan, and the merpeople were still frolicking on the surface of the lake.

He stood there until his Dark Mark seared again, not a summons, just the Dark Lord's agitation. *Besides I'm cold again.* He turned to make his way back up to the Astronomy tower, by way of the Headmaster's tower and Gryffindor tower. *Maybe I'll go to the library again. Damn it, where is she?*

~H~

Harry Apparated Hermione to a place in the woods, a sort of clearing not too far from a stream, and both Dean and Oliver appeared directly after. She immediately recognized Mr. Weasley's canvas tent, which stood next to another Muggle dome tent and a four-man tent that had a stove pipe sticking out of the top. "You've got more than one?"

"Dennis and Colin Creevey's dad's tents the girls use that one," Harry said and gave her arm a slight tug. "C'mon."

"Girls?" she asked, not at all sure why he seemed angry with her.

"Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet, and Angelina Johnson," Wood replied. "Katie and Alicia were with me when we hooked up with Harry, Dean, and Ron."

At least Oliver was being amiable, but he still had his wand out. "So who is here?" she asked.

"Most of the DA. Well, those that are on the run at least," Dean said, ignoring Harry's pained look as he held open the tent flap for Hermione to enter. "Anthony Goldstein's here as you can see, and Michael Corner joined us yesterday." Dean entered the tent after her, followed by Harry. "He escaped the raid on the train."

Ron was kneeling next to a huge coffee table with several maps spread out on the surface and sheets of parchment scattered about. He looked up when Dean called out, "Wotcher, we're back." Dean's attention turned to Hermione again. "Turns out, Ron's quite the commander, it seems. He's our Field Marshal."

But Hermione was too happy to see the redhead to pay attention to what he'd said. "Ron!" she cried out, moving into the tent toward the table.

"Hermione!" Ron exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. Anthony turned around and smiled at her, one of his hands holding the maps in place.

"Wayne Hopkins and William Summers are at Justin Finch-Fletchley's place in the Lake District right now, but they will be back sometime tonight. It's under the Fidelius

now. We call it outpost two," Dean said to her as Ron walked around the table. "Along with Susan Bones, Karyn Rackley, Julene and Duane Drachenblut, Pamela Weathlow, and Denard Dromsk. They were all in Hufflepuff, a year above us, I think. Well, Julene left school the year before Umbridge was there. Christine Weston and Farrah Chambers are there, too. They're fifth years, I think."

"Christine Charlene's little sister?" Hermione asked, still shocked by the list Dean was rambling off so quickly.

"Yeah. However, Christine doesn't know what happened to Charlene, and she's really upset," Ron said with a lift of his shoulders. "Susan said she can help out if anyone gets hurt. We think that Megan Jones and Mandy Brocklehurst are hiding with their families."

"Sue Li and Lisa Turpin are missing. We think they were picked up by Snatchers. We don't think they were sent to Azkaban, but we're not sure. They aren't on the lists," Oliver stated.

Hermione turned to face him. "What lists?" she asked, looking from Oliver and Dean to Ron.

"In *The Quibbler*. Or the *Daily Prophet*, but the lists in the *Prophet* aren't accurate either." Ron said as he engulfed her in a hug. "Oh, it's good to have you back." Grateful for the acceptance, she hugged him back.

"Yeah, well, the *Prophet* said that Wood here was sent to Azkaban," Dean said, pointing over his shoulder with his thumb, indicating Wood. "So we don't know where Sue and Lisa are. We're hoping for the best."

Hermione pulled away to look at Dean and Wood. "Azkaban so it's not all true?"

"Nope, not all the time," Ron stated. "Sue Li and Lisa Turpin haven't used their coins since November." He looked up at Harry. "Got a message from Hopkins while you were out. Walter Fewkes and Roland Thaxter are back at outpost two. He's sending a message to Shifty Pink and Royal."

"Great," Harry grumbled and turned his head.

"Harry doesn't like being the Commander-in-Chief," Wood said with a smirk.

"Nah, he thinks we should all go hide in our tents until he saves the wizarding world," Colin said, walking up. "Dennis said that he and dad got a boar."

"Right, I'll have to go get them. Tell them to call me," Ron said and turned to Hermione again. "Don't go anywhere, we've got catching up to do," he added and walked out of the tent.

"The Creeveys are really good at camping, hunting, and trapping stuff," Alicia stated, and Colin's posture straightened, and his chest puffed slightly, clearly pleased by the praise. "We'd be starving if it weren't for the Creeveys."

Colin nodded, making his shaggy hair fall into his eyes. "Dad likes the wilderness and knows all sorts of things, like what's edible and what's not. He's taught me and Dennis how all our lives."

"That's great, Colin." Hermione looked around the tent. "It's bigger than I remember."

"Alicia did this. Harry, Ron and me use that room," Dean stated, pointing to an untied flap across the tent. "But they like to be by themselves sometimes." He pointed to a section where a flap was tied open, showing a few bunks and some clothes piled on a chair. "That one is for Oliver and Anthony. Michael Corner, Wayne Hopkins and William Summers use that one. The girls are in the yellow and green dome tent, and the Creeveys' use Mr. Creevey's tent. Apparently, Alicia knew the charms to transform a Muggle tent into a fairly spacious space."

"My dad makes magical tents, and I help in the shop over the summers," Alicia said casually. "Mostly I helped with the sewing and cutting. But even before I passed my O.W.L.s, Dad and Brian taught me the spells. I just wasn't supposed to use them on the bigger tent projects until I'd finished fifth-year. The Creevey's tents, they are Muggle, so adding a bathroom was hard, and adding a potbelly stove to the frame tent was a challenge; I had to modify the poles to take the added weight, but it's really nice now. Making this one enlarge was easier."

"We have two rooms now, and a kitchen, and a sitting room, too," Colin stated with his normal exuberance. "It's really cool what magic can do, huh?"

Ron came back followed by little Dennis Creevey. "Dad is outside cleaning the boar," he said enthusiastically, carrying a bucket of something to the kitchen area. "And I found some sweet potato roots, truffles, and mushrooms!"

Ron turned to look at Angelina. "Whose night is it to cook?"

"Wayne's" she said, rising up from her seat. "But I'll get it started for him."

~C~

Cillian crossed Waithe off the list and Apparated to the next address on his list. There was nothing there but an old car parked next to a snow capped stone wall surrounding an empty field covered in snow. The unusual event of the lunar eclipse cast everything in an amber hue and gave all the shadows a ruddy color. If he wasn't trying to hunt down an elusive girl, he'd have enjoyed the sight. However, he was too worried to really take notice.

He balanced his wand on the piece of shell Severus had given him, yet again, and said, *'Dētegere accertener shells'*, watching his wand for any movement whatsoever. *Nothing*. It rolled to the side of the shell, but other than that, it didn't even twitch. He'd invented the spell years ago, partially by accident. Well, he'd created it as a variation of the Direction-Compass Charm to locate his then girlfriend, and then showed it to Severus as a lark. It had come in handy several times since, but it was Severus who discovered that it could sometimes locate objects inside a house or dwelling under the Fidelius Charm.

Cillian looked at the list as he crossed off Cornfoot. Not because he could confirm or deny that Hermione *was* or *wasn't* there, or because the house wasn't, but because the Archaic-Detection Charm couldn't confirm that she was.

Thing was, it was a short list. He'd made note of who visited Hermione all last term and those she sought out on occasion. But the girl wasn't very popular, especially considering that many of her friends were popular. But then again, she liked the oddballs too, like Luna Lovegood, Tinko Wang and Amelia Halliburton. And, Hermione did have a number of friends in each house. He'd crossed out the Slytherin girls; many of them were at the party and had been avoiding Hermione all night. He knew it was because of the mark, er, brand. That also included the Enfields and McDougals they were at the party as well, so he'd crossed them out.

He'd crossed out Walsingham, not that the boy, Johathan, had been friendly with Hermione, but he was on the house Quidditch team, in addition to being a prefect. His older sister, Virginia, had been friends with several of the DA members in Gryffindor before leaving school last year, and he'd heard that she'd dated one of the Weasley boys for over a year, although he didn't know which one. Cillian's mate, Anthony Clearwater had four half-sisters, each several years apart, two still in school: fourth-year Gryffindor, Romanda Clearwater and seventh-year, Immodine Clearwater. But even though he'd seen the girls hanging around the students known to be in the DA, and they both attended Charms Club, both were shy around Hermione. Charlene Weston, Susan Bones, Luna Lovegood had been abducted off the train, so he'd crossed them off. Claudia Ramirez was in Spain...

That left four names on his list:

Lavender Brown

The Patil twins

Stephanie Adams

Hannah Abbott

Sighing, he Apparated to the street the Patils lived on, because apparently they lived in the neighboring county, and even though they were society pure-bloods and affluent, they were not at the party.

Author's Notes:

The event of great portents in the chapter refers to an astrological event that actually happened in 2010, and was seen in North America, not England, but I thought it would be a cool portent. According to the articles, on the twenty-second of Dec., the first day of northern winter, the full Moon passed almost dead-center through Earth's shadow in the Dark Rift of the Milky Way, causing the affect as mentioned in the story. (<http://spaceports.blogspot.com/2010/12/lunar-eclipse-comes-in-hours-now.html> or http://science.nasa.gov/science-news/science-at-nasa/2010/17dec_solsticeeclipse/)

But there are other sites as well, most comparing the event to the Mayan calendar and the 'end of the world.'

Since time immemorial, the white hart has been a creature surrounded by mystery, a beast whose very existence is suffused with myth and legend. To the ancient Britons, the white hart was a harbinger of doom - but to modern Britons it supposedly brings good luck. White stags, or white hart, were potent, magical figures, closely associated with unicorns. The Celts considered them to be messengers from the other world. In Arthurian legend, the stag is a creature that can never be caught. Holyrood in Edinburgh not to mention the White Hart pub in the capital, were named after a Scots legend. In 1128, David I, King of Scotland, saw a huge white hart while hunting, and The White Hart Inn in the Grassmarket, Edinburgh, reputedly the oldest pub in the city, took its name from the legend. A white stag, or white hart, is said to appear near Brodick Castle when one of the Hamilton chiefs dies, to herald him to the other side. In the 1960s there was a famous white stag on the island of Arran and a white hind was spotted a few years ago in Ross-shire. To know more:

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/environment/article3353380.ece> or <http://forums.canadiancontent.net/news/71378-how-magical-white-hart-inspires.html>

Prophecies and Theories

Chapter 34 of 43

Hermione spends the evening catching up with Ron and Harry, learning what the boys have been up to, only Harry is disgruntled by the topic of discussion. Meanwhile Severus and Cillian still continue the search for Hermione.

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick and for being my locations scout, and to EveryMystique, DuchessOfArcadia and Dandru, for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.

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~o 34 o~

Prophecies and Theories

"So, you, follow me," Ron said, indicating to Hermione that she follow him.

"But I want to know about Jenny!" Colin exclaimed.

"She's fine," Hermione stated, and Colin looked relieved. "She's spending her holiday with Seamus' family in Ireland." Colin looked aghast as if she'd just told him Jenny was seeing another bloke. "It's not like that, Colin," Hermione quickly explained. "Many of the DA members are staying at each other's houses – they thought it would be safer."

Colin nodded but he still looked dejected. "Seamus – she loves Ireland."

"C'mon, Hermione," Ron said, taking her arm and leading the way to his room in the tent. Once she entered, he dropped the sheet of canvas dividing his room from the rest of the tent and walked past her. "I've set up all sorts of spells on the walls in here so Harry and I can talk privately if we need to," he explained as he moved some clothes aside so she'd have a place to sit. "Oliver and Dean are on watch now so we can talk freely."

If Hermione had blinked she'd have missed seeing the faint blue glow that emanated briefly as Harry came in and closed the flap. "You've used the spells I placed on your bedroom door at the Burrow so we could avoid your mum?" she asked.

"Don't sound so surprised," Ron grumbled as he plopped down on his cot. "I watched you do them enough times to—"

Hermione quickly waved her hands as she said, "No, I didn't mean it that way! It's – that's really complicated magic. I'm really amazed – I mean, I'm impressed. It's great that you learned them." She sat down next to Ron as Harry sat on the nearest cot. "So how is it that you have so many people with you? I thought it was only going to be just the three of us."

"That was before you vanished," Harry said, and she cringed at the coolness of his tone.

"The coins," Ron said with a grin. "When you started contacting us, so did the others. We, Harry and me, met up with Dean first, as you know. He was hiding from the

Snatchers. The Creeveys found us next, then it snowballed, I suppose. Oliver brought the girls, and Angelina passes information and stuff between Fred and George for us. Well, that was before they had to go into hiding, too.” He pulled out the Deluminator that Dumbledore had bequeathed him. “I can use this to find people, too, but we have to be careful for traps. Harry and me are wanted men.”

“They just have to say Ron’s name and this ball of light takes him there,” Harry said.

Ron nodded, pocketing his Deluminator. “By the way, Justin told us that there is a jinx on people who speak Ol’ Snake-face’s name – you know the ‘V’ name – so that’s what we all call him now, You-Know-Who, Snake-face, or the Dark Lord. Harry calls him Tom like Dumbledore did.”

“I’ll remember, besides I’ve gotten used to calling him the Dark Lord now anyway,” Hermione said, and Harry scowled at her. “Okay, I want to know everything. How have you been? What have you been doing?”

“We’ve been trying to figure out the bloody Horcruxes, what else?” Harry snapped.

Hermione looked at her hands as she laced her fingers together. “I know, Harry, and I know it’s not easy. I wish I could be more help. That’s why I’ve been trying to make the mirrors all term.” She looked up, watching him relax. “That way I can look stuff up in the *Daily Prophet* archives and the old tomes on the founders at school.”

Ron put his hand over hers. “We know, Hermione. I was really proud of you for working them out.” He smiled slightly as he removed his hand, but Harry remained aloof, slouching, his forearms on his thighs with his hands clenched together. “Right after you disappeared, we met up with Remus. He and Tonks stayed with us at Grimmauld Place for a while. He knew that we had this task, offered to help, but he has his own task to do – you know – the werewolves. However, he and Tonks taught Harry and me how to Apparate, and Remus showed us how to do the Animagus transformations, because we convinced him we needed to know how. Harry’s a stag, like his dad, and I’m a Jack Russell terrier.”

“That’s great, Ron! So you both can do it!” Hermione exclaimed softly.

“It’s not so hard when you know the form you become,” Ron said, his ears turning pink. “Colin wanted to learn, he’s a raven. Dean is a huge, shaggy black dog; he said it’s a Bouvier des Flandres. None of the others can do it, though Dennis keeps trying. He almost did, I think. Well, he grew fur and shrunk. We think he’s a squirrel, maybe a small cat – hard to tell yet. Colin and Dennis can Apparate; those little guys are really good at anything you show him. They’re a lot like you, Hermione. They just get it on the first few tries.”

Hermione smiled, impressed. “He was always good in the DA. So, what about the search for the Horcruxes?”

Harry stared at his hands as he said, “So far we’re at a standstill. We have checked out any and every artifact thought or known to have belonged to Godric Gryffindor – and, yes, we’ve given up on the artifacts in the museum. So, we are assuming that the last one is something that belonged to Ravenclaw.”

“Only we don’t have much to go on with her stuff,” Ron said.

“And the cup?” Hermione asked, but she already knew the answer.

Harry shook his head. “Nope, no idea yet where it could be.”

“Dean and me, we’ve gone over every possibility,” Ron said. He slid off the cot to his knees, pulled out a rucksack and sat crossed-legged on the floor. He took a Muggle notebook out, setting it aside on the bed as he searched for something else, deep inside.

Hermione grinned as she watched his whole arm disappear into the bag. She looked at the notebook, idly opening the cover. “Where did you get this?”

“A Muggle was throwing it away. It’s right useful,” Ron said as he pulled out a promotional pen.

Hermione couldn’t help but notice that there were several tabs beside the four with the founders name on them: Places, Dumbledore, Harry Potter, Severus Snape, and Tom Voldemort Riddle. The last one was in Harry’s handwriting: Memories.

“It was full of this lined paper,” Ron said, catching her attention again. “Anyway, thanks to one of your books, I found a spell that will transfigure a leaf into another of these lined papers, if the leaf is big enough. That’s why I have a basket of them – in case I need more pages.”

She turned her head, spotting the basket leaves. “Impressive. Birch bark works, too,” Hermione said, turning each tab. “You’ve kept a lot of notes, Ron.”

“Yeah, you’ve finally rubbed off on me,” he said, his ears going pink again as he turned to the Tom Voldemort Riddle section. “I – it helps me keep everything straight. Anyway... I’ve written down everything we know about Ol’ Snake-face, and Harry wrote down everything remembered from the memories Dumbledore showed him. We searched London for the orphanage, and there were two possibilities: Wool’s Orphanage had been demolished to make way for an office block, and then there’s the Stockwell Orphanage on Vauxhal Road, but that one doesn’t fit the memories – that and it was bombed out in that World War II. So neither is there anymore.”

“And Dumbledore searched all the places he’d seen in the memories, I’m sure of that,” Harry stated.

“Yeah, he would have, but I wanted to check anyway,” Ron stated. “So, our list of possibilities isn’t very long.”

Hermione looked at the page on his lap; most of the possible sites had been crossed off, such as Little Hangleton and Borgin & Burkes. Hogwarts and Hogsmeade were apparently still an option as they hadn’t been, but... “Godric’s Hollow?” She looked up, confused. It was crossed off. “You went to Godric’s Hollow? I thought we’d agreed that was too risky,” she said, shocked that they’d go. “You know the Dark Lord would’ve had someone watching the place! What were you thinking—”

“I know you were against us going, but Harry really wanted to see the place, especially after reading the article in the paper about Rita’s book,” Ron said, cutting her off, and Harry scowled at him. “It was a fiasco,” he added, looking at Harry.

“I figured that if Tom had tried to make a Horcrux out of me, then he may have dropped it,” Harry said defensively, then mumbled, “It was a bad idea,” looking at his hands when one side of Ron’s mouth pulled back and his eyes narrowed.

Ron turned back to Hermione. “Well when her book came out, it made the best sellers list, and Rita was quoted all over the papers again, remember?” he asked, and Hermione nodded, encouraging him to go on. “Anyway, so we went, Harry, Dean and me, we went to Godric’s Hollow right after Halloween. There is a statue of Harry as a baby with his parents in the middle of town. We saw Harry’s parents’ graves and found the house.”

“I dunno how it was possible that I’d survived,” Harry said softly. “The roof was caved in and most of the upstairs was demolished.”

“This weird woman approached Harry, and he thought she was Bathilda Bagshot. You know the woman Rita quoted in the book?” Ron asked, but Hermione shook her head.

“I haven’t read the book,” she admitted.

“It’s all Jarvey insults and lies of a jobbernowl,” Harry sneered.

Ron gave Harry an odd look. “Anyway, Dean was suspicious of the wonky old woman. So was I, but we followed her to her house anyway. She didn’t say much, at least not to Dean and me, only whispered to Harry,” Ron said. “Dean and me, we were checking out the sitting room when Harry followed the woman toward the kitchen. Dean saw pictures of Gellert Grindelwald as a boy on her bookshelf, and he tried to ask the woman about him, but she only shook her head as if she didn’t know or something.”

"That's odd," Hermione said. "What happened next?"

"I had found Rita's book on her side table and turned to show it to Harry, but Harry was following the wonky woman upstairs. Dean and me, we followed them because, well, at that point I didn't trust the old hag – that's when I heard Harry speaking Parseltongue – on the stairs above us, so I knew something was wrong. And there was some sort of Tripping Hex on the step before the landing – you had to use Parseltongue to get past... Anyway, when Dean and me finally got to the bedroom, we found ourselves fighting against this giganormous snake."

"She wasn't Bathilda – she was Tom's snake, Nagini, in disguise. She just came out of the woman's mouth – peeling away her body and clothes like shedding skin. It was gross," Harry explained, and Hermione gasped. "Ron and Dean entered just as Nagini tried to bite me, and Ron tried to immobilize her, which, thankfully, made her miss me. We were firing spells at her, dodging her each time she lunged to strike back. I felt Tom's anger and knew he was coming, so I cut her with Snape's spell, the one I use on Draco, remember? Anyway, Ron and Dean blasted out the windows, so we jumped and Apparated. We barely made it out alive. Ron Splinched his shoulder."

"Ron!" Hermione asked, gaping at him as she reached out her hand to touch his arm. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, we had Dittany, remember, loads of it. Stopped the bleeding, but I've an indent where the scar is." He waved his hand as if it was nothing. "Don't feel it that much anymore. Oh, I had pocketed Rita's book when I went upstairs," Ron stated, then held up his hands. "It's not stealing – she was dead. Anyway..."

"No, I'm glad you did." Hermione wasn't going to argue, she'd have taken the book as well under the circumstances. Ron pulled out the book, *The Life and Lies of Albus Dumbledore* by Rita Skeeter, from under his mattress and handed it to her. It looked fairly well worn as if he'd read it a number of times. "It's all in there."

"Yeah, all her lies," Harry snapped.

Hermione glanced at Harry, wondering what was wrong with him. He'd been waspish ever since they met up.

"You just don't want to face the truth," Ron said to Harry, and Harry glared at Ron, but Ron turned to Hermione. "He's used Harry – Dumbledore did – from the beginning. The house in Godric's Hollow was *his* house. It's all in here," he said, indicating the book. "He didn't protect the Potters, he set them up – just waiting for Ol' Snake-face to find them. He needed Harry 'marked as an equal' – so he made the protections weak."

"What?" Hermione asked, her eyes wide, stunned that he'd accuse Dumbledore of such a thing. "You can't mean that!"

"That's his theory! He's angry at Dumbledore," Harry snapped back, "because he didn't know what all the Horcruxes were."

"And failed to tell us what we need to know to complete *his* quest: like how to destroy the bloody things, how to break down the defensive spells, about blood magic, how to detect Dark magic, or how to get the sword, or where the bloody things are," Ron said fiercely as if this had been a long, ongoing argument between them. He turned to face Hermione, ignoring Harry's scowl. "It's all in here. Did you know that Dumbledore was best mates with Grindelwald, and Dumbledore believed in the view that wizards should dominate and control Muggles for their own good! He's the one who coined the phrase, 'for the greater good!'"

"I've read every book in the library on Dumbledore, and none of them mentioned he was friends with Grindelwald," Hermione stated.

"Pulled them, then, I suppose," Harry said with a smirk at Ron.

"He pulled every book on Horcruxes too, remember?" Ron shot back.

"You don't mean that?" Hermione said, but it came out as a question. "He'd have them in his office..." She gasped, suddenly realizing something. "No, on the shelf in the sitting room! Severus doesn't like me to look through those." She'd always assumed – believed Severus when he'd told her that shelf was full of his dangerous and dark books.

"See, she knows where," Ron said, to which Harry immediately snapped, "He'd have told me if he'd had a book on them!"

"No, I don't," Hermione said with a shake of her head, but she'd find out. *That is if I return to school at some point.* "Not really. The sitting room is full of books, and I haven't really looked on those shelves..." Only now she knew she'd have to go back, even if just to check.

"See, I know that look – she does know," Ron repeated, and Hermione looked at them. Ron was smiling, and Harry was glaring at him.

She decided to change the subject. "Viktor told me that Gellert Grindelwald was really into the Dark Arts, even as a student at the Durmstrang Institute, and that he'd been expelled for his illicit experiments," Hermione said. "The stuff he was said to have done – and Dumbledore was friends with him?"

"Dean snatched a picture of Dumbledore and Grindelwald from Bagshot's sitting room; they're our age in the photo, same photo as in Rita's book. According to Rita's interview with the old hag, most likely just before Ol' Snake-face killed her, Dumbledore and his mate Grindelwald parted ways only because Dumbledore's sister died," Ron said. He told her what the book said about Dumbledore's family and his friendship with Grindelwald. "But that's not the worst of it." He reached up to turn to the section labeled prophecy in his notebook.

The first page of the section was blurred to the point of being unreadable. "What's written here?"

"Ron's theory," Harry mumbled, his tone harsh.

Hermione looked up. "What theory?" She thought that was what they'd been discussing.

"I think Dumbledore used the prophecy to create Harry," Ron said and tapped his wand on the page as he added, "Do a Weasley."

"What do you mean, Dumbledore created Harry?" The words on the page slowly became clearer, and she realized that she was looking at the prophecy.

"He has this crazy idea that Dumbledore set up my parents to be killed," Harry snapped.

"It's not crazy," Ron shot back.

"Is too," Harry retorted hotly.

"Not—"

"Guys!" Hermione interrupted. She turned to Ron, crossing her legs to get comfortable. "Why don't you tell me what your theory is?"

Harry ran his hand through his hair as Ron sighed heavily. "It's like this – the prophecy. With all the digging we've done trying to sort out this mess with the Horcruxes, the missing pieces, well, we ran into a few bits of information."

"You have; I still believe Dumbledore," Harry said angrily.

Ron ignored his outburst. "It's like this. From what we," Ron started to say but Harry huffed loudly, "okay, I've sorted out, the war was going really badly at the end of the seventies. You-Know-Who, and don't say his name, remember it has a tracking spell on it. Anyway, *He* was winning. Bill and Charlie remember hearing about it as kids, even though Mum tried to hush it up so that they wouldn't have nightmares. Percy says he remembers some of it too, but he was five when You-Know-Who attacked the

Potters.”

Hermione nodded, quickly adding things up. “Charlie was what, nine or ten? He’d left Hogwarts the year before we started. So, Bill would’ve been... ten – eleven?”

“Yep, eleven, his first year at Hogwarts,” Ron stated. “Dumbledore was losing people, Remus, my parents, even Sirius told us that, remember? Mum and Dad even explained it all to you when you had nightmares before our fifth year. Anyway, sometime before Harry was born, Rita thinks it was in 1979, suddenly Dumbledore gets this interview with Trelawney. Only she starts to go all wonky and tells him this prophecy.”

“Dumbledore told me he didn’t put much store in prophecies,” Harry blurted out.

“He also told you he liked getting socks for Christmas,” Ron countered, then turned and put his elbow on the cot so he could look at Hermione. “And this prophecy tells him that ‘the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord comes,’ and all, and Dumbledore gets some hope that there would be someone who could do it, take *Him* out. Kill him.”

Ron dug into a rucksack again and pulled out his old Divination book, then opened it to a marker. “It’s in here; prophecies are made up of four parts: they have Identifiers – who is the person or persons of the prophecy; Qualifiers – who or what meets the qualifications; the Conditions that have to happen in order to make them come true, and they tell you of the event that could or will happen if the Qualifiers and the Condition are met.” He handed her the book. “See. I know you think Divination is wonky, but it’s there. Trelawney’s prophecy has all the parts. The identified person is Ol’ Snake-face; he’s mentioned by name, the Dark Lord. The other person is the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord. Then she gives the Qualifiers; he’s born to parents who defied Ol’ Snake-face three times and is born as the seventh month dies.” He tapped the book. “Harry.”

“Or Neville,” Harry snapped.

Ron turned to look at him. “Not if you take it literally,” he said and turned back to Hermione. “It’s Harry, no question. If Neville was born on thirty-first of July, too, he’d have been an option, but he was born on the thirtieth of July, one day too early.”

“But he fits,” Hermione said, “the end of the month.”

“No, take it *literally*; his birthday would have to be the thirty-first, as the month*’s* dies. The last day. There is a spell that determines a witch’s due date, based upon the developing physical and magical changes – it’s really accurate. Right down to the hour labor will start. Mum uses it all the time when she’s helping a friend or neighbor; she was a Healer, you know, before Percy was born. Anyway, there is the condition: in order for the prophecy to come true, in order to magically enact the Fates to the events foretold in the prophecy, the Qualifiers and the Conditions have to be met. In this case, Ol’ Snake-face had to mark Harry as his equal – and he did.”

“But even though it all fits, it doesn’t mean Dumbledore set them up!” Hermione said, glancing at Harry who standing now with his arms crossed. He nodded at her with a satisfied smirk as she pointed out, “He captured Pettigrew and made him confess the location of the house. We know this, Ron, it’s not anything new.”

“I think that Dumbledore made sure that the prophecy came true. I think he did what he could to ensure it would,” Ron stated, and Hermione stared at him in shock. “Hear me out, okay?”

Hermione nodded and he continued, but Harry started pacing. “You-Know-Who was winning. The Ministry was about to fall, and the only thing really standing in his way was Dumbledore. That’s what all the books say. Only the Order of the Phoenix was losing loads of people, they were dying – killed by Death Eaters and You-Know-Who. Then Dumbledore hears this prophecy, and he decides to check. Since they were in the Order, he already knew that both Harry’s mum and Neville’s mum were pregnant. A witch’s Magic can go all wonky when she’s pregnant because of all the changes, hormones, not to mention morning sickness, fevers, bloating, breasts get tender and such. My mum knows how to do the Due-Date Charm, and she tells Dumbledore exactly when both witches will go into labor. Now here is where things get odd, Dumbledore hid Harry’s parents in Godric’s Hollow.”

“Okay,” she replied, only meaning that she was following along with his logic, but Harry glared at her. “But the Potter*’s* lived in Godric’s Hollow.”

“No, no one knows exactly *where* Harry’s parent’s lived because they were in the Order, fighting Ol’ Snake-face and his followers, and probably moving around a lot, just like we do now. They were fighting a war – like we are. The house that Dumbledore set them up in, the one they used to hide after Lily got pregnant – *that* house belonged to Dumbledore; he grew up there. There was this book of Ol’ Bathilda Bagshot’s,” Ron said, rummaging in the rucksack again. “The house that Harry’s parents were hidden is at the edge of town near the end of the street. It’s secluded.” He pulled out a book, *Great Wizards of the Age* by Bathilda Bagshot, which had leaves and bits of parchment sticking out between the pages. “I marked a bunch of stuff,” he said as he handed it to her.

“My Aunt Muriel told me about Bathilda Bagshot when I,” Ron said, paused when Harry shot him an angry scowl. “Went to see her,” Ron finished, and his ears went pink, and he was unable to look at Harry for some reason. “Mrs. Bagshot was a neighbor of the Dumbledore family; she lived a few houses down the street. According to Rita’s book,” he said, indicating Rita’s book that now rested on Hermione’s knee, “she tried befriending Dumbledore’s mum, and they eventually became friends. Dumbledore himself was friends with her nephew. Rita Skeeter said in that book that the Dumbledores moved there after Percival—”

“That’s Dumbledore’s dad,” Harry stopped pacing as he interrupted him.

“—was imprisoned for killing some Muggles. Aunt Muriel said it was quite the scandal in her day, made the papers and all,” Ron finished. He looked up at Harry. “Godric’s Hollow isn’t a magical community; there are lots of Muggles that live there. She would’ve sought them out since they were a wizarding family. But in *Great Wizards of the Age*, Bagshot *mentions* Dumbledore living in Godric’s Hollow, even states where the house is – at the end of the street, surrounded by hedges.” He turned back to Hermione, and Harry started pacing again, clearly agitated.

“Here’s the thing, why hide someone in your childhood home if you’re trying to hide them from someone like You-Know-Who? It didn’t take much *foresight* to find out that the house belonged to Dumbledore, in fact, my parents and Aunt Muriel already knew that. So did Luna and Jenny Wang, I asked them once when I was talking to Ginny. And Justin and Susan knew it; Justin read everything he could on Dumbledore to convince his parents to let him return to school after Christmas our third year. See, it’s not exactly a secret because Dumbledore was so famous – even back then. Now, the Longbottom’s, they were hidden in a remote house in an old mill town. Somewhere really hard to find. That’s not all; Remus told us that Dumbledore talked James out of using him as Secret Keeper – but they didn’t use Sirius, either. I asked Remus about it the summer after our third year because it struck me as odd. Remus said that Sirius would have died to protect Harry’s dad.”

“That’s what he told us in the Shrieking Shack,” Harry said, and Hermione turned around to look at Harry. “He told us that he’d have died to protect them.”

“Right,” Ron said, and Hermione turned back to him. “And Remus said that Harry’s parents would have chosen Sirius except he was the obvious choice, and, with Remus being a werewolf, Dumbledore thought that Peter Pettigrew was the better choice – not so obvious.”

“Okay,” Hermione said slowly.

“Don’t you see, Dumbledore *knew* Pettigrew was the Secret Keeper,” Ron stressed. “He set him up to be the Keeper. No one else besides the Potters and Sirius Black knew about the switch, and, according to Remus, Sirius was willing to let everyone believe that he was the Secret Keeper to protect Pettigrew and Harry’s parents.”

“So he knew, but he also thought what everyone else did – that Sirius Black killed Peter Pettigrew,” Hermione pointed out, and Harry nodded, curtly.

“But then why didn’t Dumbledore help Sirius when he knew that he was innocent?” Ron asked.

“Sirius Black wasn’t arrested for betraying my parents; he was arrested for *kill*ing Pettigrew! And all those Muggles,” Harry said, the hurt in his voice evident.

She ignored Harry's rant. "He did! He asked Harry and me to save him, to help him escape," Hermione stated. "To use my Time-Turner to save both Buckbeak and Sirius."

"But he could have just as easily had Sirius stand trial and clear his name," Ron pointed out. "But he didn't. You, Harry and ~~aw~~ Peter Pettigrew as did Remus. Even though we were kids, at fourteen, well Harry was thirteen, we could still testify to having *seen* him. Alive and old. We'd have to place our memories in a Pensieve for the Wizengamot members to view and take Veritaserum, but school age kids have testified before."

Hermione considered his point. "It makes sense. Why didn't Dumbledore clear Sirius' name? Why keep him a fugitive? Even if they wouldn't hear us, Severus saw him, too."

Harry turned his head in her direction and his eyes narrowed.

"I'll get back to Sirius," Ron said. "Here's the thing, why Peter Pettigrew? He was weak. He hid in my family home as a pet rat for years, for protection. Professor McGonagall told my mom that a rat Animagus fit him. He hero-worshipped Harry's dad and Sirius, followed Harry's dad like a puppy, not talented at all, stupid, sniveling and whining about everything when caught, and he was a coward."

Hermione shivered, remembering how Pettigrew used to lust after her when they were in Severus' house.

"And from what Hestia Jones said, Harry's mum didn't particularly trust him. So why pick him?"

Hermione cocked her head slightly. "Lily didn't trust him?"

"That's what Ron thinks," Harry said. "Remus said that of the four of them, my mum wasn't overly fond of Peter. Remus said Pettigrew was never invited over unless he or Sirius was around. But that makes sense; he was my dad's friend."

"He was a sneak and a coward. He was only made Secret Keeper because Dumbledore needed to have Harry marked as an equal – that's why. He put Harry's parents in *his* house and cast the Fidelius Charm with Pettigrew as Secret Keeper, knowing that of the three friends, Pettigrew was the weakest – that he'd turn sides to save his miserable hide. I think Dumbledore knew Pettigrew's character, knew he would turn traitor, and counted on it, because that's exactly what the Rat did. It gets worse."

"Right. Sirius went after Pettigrew, and Pettigrew faked his death and killed all those Muggles to escape," Hermione said. "We know this."

"There is more. Dumbledore never visited Sirius in Azkaban, never got Sirius' side of the story – in *fact* *one* listened to him. Remus said that Sirius told him he'd known all along that the Rat had done it to frame him and fake his death, but he had no proof."

"And that's why he broke out of Azkaban," Hermione stated, remembering the story as well. "To capture Peter to prove his innocence."

"Right, only Dumbledore didn't want the truth about Peter's death to come out, not when it could mean losing control of Harry," Ron stated, making Hermione glance at Harry in concern.

*If that is true, then Harry was a pawn— "His weapon,"* Hermione gasped as Ron continued.

"No! That's not how it happened!" Harry snapped. "He wanted to strengthen the protection of my mum's sacrifice to protect me!"

"He visited Snape, but not Sirius. Dumbledore went to Azkaban *every week* until Snape was released, but he didn't visit Sirius *once – not once*," Ron said adamantly. Harry huffed and started pacing again, but Ron ignored him. "You know that hour gap in *The Fall of You-Know-Who*? That book you gave Harry to read about himself? You were always concerned about that twenty-four hour gap from when Harry's parents were killed to when Harry was given over to his aunt?"

"Yeah?" Hermione said, well, asked, not sure where Ron was going with this. "An entire day passed between the time of Harry's parent's deaths and the time Hagrid found him and delivered him to Dumbledore. I just assumed it was because the house was Secret Kept, and they couldn't see the house to know. Hagrid didn't know the Secret, therefore Dumbledore had to do something so that he could... What?"

"Wizarding law states that an adolescent, in this case a baby, if he or she is a surviving member of a deceased family, is to be given over to their closest living relative or predetermined guardian within twenty-four hours. Sirius Black was Harry's godfather. Yes, Harry had a living blood relative, but she's a Muggle, and the MLE prefers to have wizarding children raised by magical parents. I bet that there was an inquiry made regarding any living magical relative of Sirius' who would accept Harry."

"Narcissa and Bellatrix Black!" Hermione covered her mouth as she gasped, "Ohmygod!" *Kreacher had turned to them! He'd gone to them and told them about Harry and Sirius' relationship.*

"No, not Bellatrix Lestrange, she was in Azkaban back then," Ron said, shaking his head. "Harry's parents were attacked on a *Monday at night*. Sirius confronted Pettigrew Tuesday morning, and was arrested. My dad said that everyone knew that baby Harry had vanquished You-Know-Who – people were celebrating all over. When I asked him, he also told me that an inquiry was filed by the MLE that afternoon with the Wizengamot, so, yes, Narcissa Malfoy or Andromeda Tonks – the Black sisters, Sirius' cousins and closest living relatives would have been notified. In light of Sirius Black being in jail, his closest magical relative, or in this case relatives, would have been offered the option of caring for the child – Harry. But Dumbledore had to assure that Harry was safe and under *his* control. He obviously wouldn't have wanted Harry raised by the Malfoys. Andromeda Tonks would have accepted Harry gladly and had indicated that she would. Tonks told me that. But Dumbledore wanted Harry to live with his aunt – his Muggle aunt."

"Because of the protection of my mother's blood," Harry repeated. He'd stopped pacing but his hands were in tight fists. "As long as I could call that house home, I was protected."

"Possibly," Ron stated, looking up at Harry. "Only I'm not so sure that's really the case anymore. I think he told you that so you'd willingly go back to that hellhole. I mean, you already had your mother's protection on you; why have you raised in a magic hating household? Why not allow you to spend time with Sirius? Or for that matter with the Tonks?" He looked up at Harry. "Not that I didn't like having you over each summer, but still, you only needed to spend a few nights at your aunt's. It's not like it couldn't have been managed, you spending weekends and holidays in a carefully concealed house under a new Fidelius Charm with Sirius or the Tonks when you were a little kid. The Dursleys' would have allowed it, I'm sure."

But before either of them could answer him, Ron looked at Hermione and said, "No, because Dumbledore didn't want Harry influenced by Sirius or knowing anything about his past. He had my mum look after Harry once we became friends. Encouraged it. Sirius was reckless and immature. Don't get me wrong, I liked the guy, but really can you see him as a father? He knew that Fred and George gave Harry the map, and he would've told us all the secrets of the castle. And he encouraged Harry to sneak about and break the rules, said the risk is what was fun and all."

Harry was pacing again. "Which we did anyway, so I don't see the point."

"And the Tonks would've told him about his parents, shown him pictures, taught him magic and stuff," Ron added, ignoring Harry.

"And Dumbledore wanted Harry pliable to his ideas," Hermione said softly, barely a whisper.

Harry stopped pacing and asked, "What? You believe him?"

"I have to consider all the facts. Most of this is hearsay, but it does fit, like one possible scenario," Hermione said, looking at Ron's notes, itching to read them. She looked up at Ron. "But Harry did spend his holidays with Sirius the summer after our fourth year and Christmas..."



"Yes, but Harry and Sirius were never left alone," Ron said with a slow nod. "I didn't think about it at the time, but it's why Remus was around so much, and Tonks, Order members, my parents... to keep Sirius from being alone with Harry and to keep him from being too influential on him – to encourage Harry to be like he was – a Marauder. I'm sure of it. It's all here in the book, and with what we know, it all makes sense. Harry doesn't like my theory; we fight about it all the time."

Hermione rubbed her lower lip with her thumb as she thought about everything Ron had said. *Harry is a lot like Sirius – hot-headed, impulsive, reckless, and independent – but he'd have been even more so if raised by Sirius, who had never matured the way that Remus had...* "I don't know, it's plausible, but I... I just don't know."

Harry smirked at Ron and sat down.

~ meanwhile ~

Severus arrived at the Granger's house and knew immediately that the place was deserted. Not just empty, the occupants were gone and had been for a long time. There was seven month's worth of dust on every surface everywhere. *It's abandoned.*

The house had been placed under Dumbledore's Fidelius Charm but, since whoever the Secret Keeper was had written the address on the envelope, most likely so that Ginevra could correspond with Hermione, it hadn't been hard to locate. Or for him to gain entrance, since he knew all the spells protecting the property.

He crossed his arms as he looked around. It was perplexing. McFaul, Westmore, and Nott had claimed to have come here in search of Hermione's parents the week before their hand fasting, yet there was no evidence that the house had been breeched, let alone raided. McFaul and Nott weren't the type of wizards to leave a place they raided undisturbed or house undamaged, and yet everything was neat and orderly. And there was the property next door, which was currently under renovation, a complete remodel, judging by all the construction apparently going on. *Did the Order hide them?*

He thought back, trying to remember any hint, any indication of her parents' relocation. *No, no mention of relocating the Grangers – at least up until I did away with Dumbledore. They could have been placed in a safe house last summer before Hermione – no, if that were the case they'd have been worried... wanted word. No, Tonks has never mentioned Hermione's parents in any of her missives.*

The thought that he was missing something obvious nagged at the back of Severus' mind. Then it hit him. He walked over to look at the pictures on the mantelpiece, and then turned to look at the pictures on the table set up against the wall. There were many and all in nice frames. *There are no pictures of Hermione – not at any age.* He scanned the titles of the books on the bookshelf. All Muggle: Dental journals, novels, an encyclopedia set, thin plastic boxes with miniature motion picture posters under the clear plastic covers, and VHS ones that were obviously for exercising...

He walked though the house and up the stairs. There was a little girl's room, but any sign of the occupant was carefully removed. It could've been any little girl's room. There wasn't a magical item or book anywhere. In fact, there weren't any pictures or knickknack of any magical creatures either: fairies, mermaids, winged horses, castles, nothing. He crossed his arms and stared at the frilly daybed with the three dolls and several stuffed animals. He couldn't imagine this being Hermione's room at all.

He searched the rest of the house, careful not to disturb the dust. There was no evidence that Hermione had been in this house whatsoever, if ever, as if she'd never lived here or even knew these people. It was clearly evident that Hermione had literally erased her association to the house and the people who live here. *To protect her parents – she'd have had the time. If she was this thorough erasing her existence, she won't come back here.*

Severus assumed that Hermione wouldn't sleep out in the cold all alone all night either. At a loss, he decided to return to the island and talk to Cillian.

Severus felt the growing burn in his Mark just as he was about to Disapparate from her parent's house.

~ meanwhile ~

Cillian crossed off the last name on his list. Although he'd felt it was a wild white hart hunt, he'd at least been thorough. He'd even tried going to the Burrow himself. Ginny and Hermione were thick as thieves, but he'd been surprised to see the state of the house. He'd known about the Lestranges' raid, but the house was utterly destroyed.

He'd then returned to the last known address of the Waithes and Wangs, but their houses were both under the Fidelius Charm. Sighing, he gave up and decided to go check on Draco. Cillian arrived just outside the gates, ignoring the warning Klaxon in Hogsmeade caused by his Apparition. The two men placed as sentries opened the school gate for him, and he strode purposefully up the path to the great oak doors. The castle was eerily dark, with only a few windows showing any light. Even the windows in Hagrid's hut were dark. But then the astrological event was over, and the snow covered grounds were glistening brightly in the moonlight. It was possible the Professor was in bed.

He thought of sending Draco a message through their Dark Marks, but decided to wait. He could always do so if he couldn't find the boy. As Cillian opened the doors and entered the Entrance Hall, he saw Draco bounding down the steps toward him.

"Did you find her?" Draco shouted even before reaching the landing.

"No, not yet," Cillian stated. "I thought you would be in your common room."

"Are you serious?" Draco snapped, and Cillian thought he was far to wired up for merely watching the halls for Hermione.

"How are things here?" Cillian asked.

"Quiet," Draco snapped. "Every portrait is on alert. There is this crazy knight, Sir Cadogan, who has been guarding the corridor outside of the Headmaster's tower, and then there is this friend of the Fat Lady, Violet, who informs me every fifteen minutes that Hermione has not returned to the Gryffindor common room."

"So, she's not here," Cillian stated, and Draco scowled at him. "Did you see Severus?"

"No, no one. My Mark keeps burning, off and on all night, but I've not been summoned," Draco stated as he made a fist with his left hand.

"Mine, too," Cillian stated. "I believe that our Lord is giving us time to find her."

"While I'm stuck here," Draco snapped dejectedly.

Cillian smiled weakly. "Better here than Apparating to a list of homes for naught." He saw a ghost passing by on the first floor landing.

Draco turned to see what he was staring at. "They're on the watch, too."

"Any chance of getting into McGonagall's office so I can check the school registry?" Cillian asked.

Draco shook his head. "Nope, thought of that myself. But if she's moving around as much as you've been, the registry might not be accurate."

Cillian was thinking about the others on his list. "Well, let's get some coffee."

Draco shot him an incredulous stare.

"Look, I'm tired and thirsty and could use the caffeine," Cillian stated, turning for the stairs to the basement.

Draco shrugged and followed him. "So, no luck with her friend's homes? Nobody's seen her?"

"Nope," Cillian stated dryly. "Most all of the houses are under the Fidelius. The ones I can see are empty. You'd think everyone was in hiding."

"They probably are," Draco deadpanned.

Suddenly their Dark Marks burned. "Augh, shite!" Draco swore, his left hand in a fist, and his right clenching and unclenching above his left wrist.

Cillian was clenching his left hand as he turned to face Draco. "You stay here. I'll explain the necessity of your presence in the castle. See if you can find any way of breaking into McGonagall's office."

"It's useless; the old crone warded it," Draco said to him as Cillian turned to go.

"But I need you here in case – augh – she comes. Just stay here," Cillian said through clenched teeth. "I'll tell our master that you're trying to break in to get me the current addresses. Her password will be something Scottish. At least you won't face his wrath."

"Yet," Draco called out as Cillian ran off.

~H~

Hermione's head was swimming. She quickly read over some of Ron's notes and the pages Ron had marked in Rita's book and in Mrs. Bagshot's as she and Ron discussed his theory. The sad thing was it made a lot of sense, especially with all the facts the boys had uncovered.

Hermione then told the boys what had been going on in the castle, the Carrows' abuse and how Neville and Seamus were leading the DA in rebellion. "It's mostly minor stuff, writing slogans on the walls, flyers, releasing kids from Filch's chains," she admitted and was surprised when Ron looked questioningly at Harry. Harry shook his head. "What?"

"Nothing," Harry stated. "My scar is bothering me again."

"I thought you could control that!" Hermione exclaimed.

"No, all right, I can't," he snapped back.

"That's what Ginny has been saying to us, through the mirror," Ron said, changing the subject back. "The DA has grown, and they are mostly causing trouble for Snape and the Death Eaters in the school. But they are also swaying people's opinion and reminding the students of what life was like under Ol' Snake-face the first time around. And those kids in Fich's chains, they do it almost every night, Hermione. Most of the kids end up in the hospital wing."

She didn't know it was that bad. "Why hasn't anyone told me?"

"Possibly because you've sided with Snape," Harry snapped at her, and Hermione frowned at him. "Why haven't you been helping them, huh? Can't evade your bodyguard?"

"No, I can't," she admitted, her cheeks burning. She hadn't even tried. She'd been trying so hard to obey Severus, too wrapped up in keeping her head down and trying to avoid conflict with the Carrows to notice. Not that she'd been successful at all; the Carrows hated her and resented her very existence. *But Neville's face – his bruises, and Seamus...* Why hadn't she realized? "No one's said anything." She would have to change that. She looked up at Ron. "Ginny told me that students were pulled from the train, have you heard anything from her about them?" she asked.

Ron shook his head. "Nope, only who is missing." Michael Corner, Susan Bones and Farrah Chambers managed to escape the raid, and Michael told us what happened, but Charlene Weston, Wilberforce Wodehalle, Joaquin Schmidt Duane Saunders and others were taken someplace."

"Can you use the Deluminator to find them?" she asked.

"Tried that, but the light won't go anywhere," Ron said, his shoulders sagging. "They have to say my name, and it's really risky using the DA coins if they've been captured."

Hermione covered her mouth to hide a yawn. "So, what exactly are all the others doing while you're hunting Horcruxes?"

Ron crossed his arms around his knees. "Mostly helping the Order," he said, and Harry crossed his arms. "We've been working with Tonks and Kingsley."

"You can't tell her, Ron. You know she chose Snape," Harry said, and Hermione looked at him in shock. "She's married to him, and from what I saw, she's marked."

Hermione gasped in surprise. "How did – did you – I didn't accept it, it was forced on me!"

"So it's true?" Ron asked, his mouth open and his eyes going round as saucers.

Hermione looked down and nodded her head, tears forming in her eyes. "I'm – was his prisoner," she said softly, then looked up at Ron imploringly, her eyes beginning to brim with tears. "Yes, he branded me, but Draco saw it, and it's not the same as his."

"Draco?" Ron asked, still not believing.

"See, she even calls Malfoy Draco now," Harry said sharply. "Chums are you now?"

"He's not the same arrogant git as before, and I am getting through to him. With a little more push, he'll crack and may change sides," Hermione explained. "It's like that all over the school. Slytherin is divided. I saw Mr. Malfoy and he looks awful! He's being held prisoner in his own home, and he's wandless. The Dark Lord – you should see him, he's terrifying, sort of demented, and he's manipulative – in a cruel, calculating way."

"But you accepted his Mark," Ron said. "How could you?"

Hermione shook her head. "It's not the Dark Mark." She pulled her jumper off and rolled her sleeve up. "Draco tried poking his wand into it and nothing happened." Both guys leaned in to look at the brand on her flesh as she held her arm out for them to see. "See, it's brown, not black, and the snake has a greenish cast to it. The Dark Mark is black, the snake undulates and the skull is as hard as bone. The Dark Mark feels alive, mine doesn't."

Ron reached out to touch it. "Ron, don't! If you touch it, he'll feel her and come," Harry admonished him, but too late, Ron's fingers were palpating the snake on Hermione's arm.

"I've touched it, as did Mrs. Malfoy, Draco, and a few others, and nothing happened, nothing happened each time." Ron looked up at her questioningly so she explained, "When I was in Grimmauld Place, before contacting you, I tried to wash it off. I've seen Draco's and Severus' – I've touched both of theirs. They don't like their Dark Mark to be touched; Severus said it gives him a shooting sensation, a connected awareness the Dark Lord can feel. Mine doesn't seem to do that. There's no shooting sensation, I don't feel any awareness or presence when I touch it, the snake doesn't undulate, and the lion's head is soft—"

"Then why did he do it?" Ron asked.

"To make an example of me – to show everyone I belong to him," she stated sadly, tugging down her sleeve. Her forearm still hurt, but only a dull throb, which she felt more acutely when she closed her fist or lifted something, like the time she'd burned her arm on a hot cauldron. "I'm not really sure myself. I mean he had threatened to mark me before, but I assumed he wouldn't because then he'd be a hypocrite – branding a Muggle-born with his Dark Mark. But he's said that I belong to him, told me to call him my master. I was branded tonight, well, last night, at *His* Winter Solstice party. Everyone was there, even the supporters, and the drawing room where he marked me was crowded with people, so he had some reason to make such a demonstration – not that it helped."

"Well you're *His* now, then, aren't you?"

Ron turned to look at Harry, but Harry was fuming. Harry stood up, his fists clenched. "You're *His*. So you might as well go back to him."

"Harry!?" Hermione implored, reaching out for him, but Harry turned and left the room.

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Author's Notes:

Yes, Harry equated Rita Skeeter with a Jarvey and called her a jobberknowl. Jarveys are a magical creature that says rude comments and tells lies. (see HPL under Jarvey) A "jobbernowl" is a British slang that means a stupid person according to the New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. (see HPL, under Jobberknowl)

## The Hunt and Hunted

Chapter 35 of 43

The Dark Lord is in a rage. Hermione finds out more about what her friends have been up to and what life is like for the Undesirables. And Severus elicits some help in finding Hermione.

*A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabbellabloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick, and to DutchessOfArcadia and Dandru, for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.*

*Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.*

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~o35o~

The Hunt and Hunted

It was about four in the morning when Severus arrived at the Manor's gates. He sorted his memories out carefully and suppressed his emotions, forcing himself to appear calm and in control as he walked up to the front door. A house-elf with a small plump nose and wide green eyes, that matched the green in the tea towel he wore, approached. "May Judder takes your cloak, Headmaster, sir?"

Severus handed the elf his cloak, his attention drawn to the tension of the people lingering in the grand hallway. As he turned to walk into the ballroom, he could tell that the Dark Lord was in a rage; he could hear his displeasure even from the foyer. Severus stopped just outside the doorway to the ballroom to assess the situation. The guests of the party had apparently been dismissed, and only a few Death Eaters remained. However, those in attendance had changed from their finery into their usual black leather and wool, attire much more suitable for conducting raids.

"Dolohov, Wroithesley, Gerund and Jugson are watching the house, my Lord. She hasn't returned," Yaxley was saying, kneeling with his head bowed.

"VanHalal, MacCavish, Travers, and Rowle have returned to the school," Alecto said, sounding imperious, although she was kneeling as well. "Malburke and Macnair have joined your guard at the school gates."

Wonderful, now there is no way Hermione will attempt to return to the school Severus sneered silently.

"Nott, Gibbon, Selwyn, and Rathaille are in Hogsmeade," Yaxley added, "and the Searchers are all on alert."

"Runcorn and Westmore went to pay the Longbottom's a visit," Lucius said from across the room. "Zabini, Crabbe, and Goyle went to the Finnigan's."

"He means they're pacing the lane that the Finnigan residence is rumored to be," Cillian murmured dryly as he approached Severus. "Any luck? I've already been to the Longbottom's and Finnigan's twice each and the houses, if they're really there, are not visible. Nor are they perceivable, detectable, or tangible."

"The Fidelius?" Severus asked softly, and Cillian nodded as he handed his cloak to the house-elf.

Cillian turned to lean in closer to whisper to Severus, "The Fidelius. But I couldn't detect the Skrewt shell jewelry either."

"And the Longbottoms have more than one residence in which to hold up," Severus stated. "I'm assuming you were unsuccessful."

"Ah, Severus, Cillian, you've finally returned," the Dark Lord called out, cutting off Cillian's answer.

Cillian turned and squared his shoulders.

"Come forward and report."

Both men entered the room and knelt at the Dark Lord's feet.

"How did the girl escape?" the Dark Lord snarled through gritted teeth, glaring down at Severus.

Severus looked up, and the Dark Lord invaded his mind. The memory of Hermione running for the gardens and then Disapparating, followed by several images of the places he'd searched for her, flashed through his mind. When the Dark Lord withdrew, he saw the Dark Lord holding his wand firmly in his fist as he turned to look at Nagini coiled up on her large stand. The windows behind the snake shook to near breaking.

"What drew you away? How did you get separated at the party?"

As if his mind hadn't been searched, Severus answered the Dark Lord's question calmly. "The last I remember, I was cornered by Mordaunt, Alecto and MacCavish while Hermione was dancing with Mr. Endfield. They wanted to talk to me regarding some nonsense of putting Hermione into the Malfoy's dungeons for the rest of the winter holiday for Mengele and Macnair to experiment on while I assisted in their hunt for Muggle-borns," Severus stated. "If you'd like, ask Malfoy for his family Pensieve, and I shall give you the memory to view."

Alecto sneered at him, her hiss audible even over the other mumblings. It was very rare for one of them to freely offer a full memory for viewing, especially of one pertaining to a presumed failure and when the Dark Lord was so angry.

"Yes, that would be easier," the Dark Lord said, turning to face Lucius. "Fetch the Pensieve, Lucius, and be quick about it." He stopped right next to Cillian, glaring down at his bowed head. "Cillian, what have you to say?"

"I was conversing with Roquewood and his daughter, Larissa, when I saw Hermione being shuffled out of the ball room among the guests who were heading outside to the terrace. Belinda, Bellatrix and the Lestrangle brothers were following her, so I hurried to follow as well. I arrived in the gardens just as Hermione Disapparated," Cillian said calmly, ignoring the outraged huffs from Belinda and Bellatrix.

The Dark Lord whirled down on them. "Hush! I have several eyewitnesses that have said that you two chased her away!"

Belinda recoiled and quailed, but Bellatrix, still on her knees, reached out with her arms in supplication. "But, my Lord, I was only trying to stop the..."

"SILENCE!" the Dark Lord bellowed, and both ladies cowered.

"And where have you been all night?" the Dark Lord demanded, rounding on Cillian.

"Searching, my Lord," Cillian said from on his knees, his expression carefully guarded. "I've been doing my best to track her down. I have a list of all of her friends and those who are on friendly terms with Hermione at school. I have been methodically checking each residence, well, except for the residences of those who were in attendance tonight for your party. I assumed she wouldn't go to their houses."

"Where is Draco?" the Dark Lord asked, staring over their heads at the doorway.

"At the castle, my Lord," Severus said smoothly as he bowed his head, feigning reverence with a carefully constructed mask of respect.

"He has been keeping watch for the girl, and I thought it prudent for him to continue," Cillian stated, his head still bowed. "I do know that Hermione has not been seen in the castle."

"She could have slipped by that boy," Alecto said in a saccharine voice.

"Not likely," Severus said with a sneer. "I gave Draco the password to my office and told him to speak to Dumbledore's portrait. Considering the old goat's fondness for Hermione, he'll have every portrait in the castle assisting the boy."

Cillian nodded and looked up at the Dark Lord. "It's true. From what I saw, Draco has every portrait and all the ghosts watching every corridor and entry in and out of the castle for the girl. They are giving him regular reports."

"Very well, he can stay," the Dark Lord snarled through gritted teeth, and he stopped his pacing, facing Severus.

Lucius appeared, followed by two house-elves, maneuvering a pedestal holding a large, very old stone bowl. "Our family Pensieve, my Lord."

"Move it to the drawing room," the Dark Lord snapped with a flick of his hand. "Severus, Cillian, you come with me." The elves immediately maneuvered the pedestal and Pensieve to the smaller blue drawing room, and Severus and Cillian rose to follow.

The Dark Lord was very clear about what he wanted to see, and Severus carefully constructed his memory of that part of the evening, from the moment that Mordaunt and Alecto approached him and up to watching Hermione Disapparate. The Dark Lord watched the memory twice. "Cillian, you next, everything. I want to see the conversation with the Roquewoods as well." The silvery strand from Cillian's head was even longer than Severus'. The Dark Lord watched it twice as well.

"Severus, send Mordaunt and Alecto in here," the Dark Lord said as he pushed his wand into his Dark Mark. Severus turned heel and went to summon those requested, hearing the Dark Lord ask Cillian to locate Gregory Gloyle and Marek Schliinder.

When Severus approached them, Mordaunt acquiesced with a nod and turned for the drawing room, his shoulders sagging slightly, but Alecto glared at him and stormed off after Mordaunt.

Lucius walked over to Severus while he waited. "What about Draco?"

Severus turned to look at the wizard, taking in his appearance. Lucius had never in all the years he'd known him looked so harried. "I sent him to the castle to wait, and I want him there." He saw Narcissa approach. "Narcissa, do not fret, he is safe. The Dark Lord has not summoned him as of yet, and I don't think he shall."

"And the girl?" she asked, and he was surprised to see concern in her eyes.

"I was about to follow a lead before I was summoned to return," Severus stated, his eyes darting to the doorway of the blue drawing room.

Narcissa looked like she wanted to say something, opening her mouth and inhaling, but she lowered her head and turned to look at her sister. Both Bellatrix and Belinda were on their knees before the dais, waiting for the Dark Lord's decision regarding their *initiatives*. Severus was certain that Belinda was in some way involved, but how he wasn't certain. He still presumed she'd used some form of Imperius on him, and he was determined to find out which one. He already knew why. He waited in silence, as did the Malfoys, while those around them began to talk softly and move about the ballroom.

When the Dark Lord returned, he walked directly up to Severus and the Malfoys. "And how do you know you can retrieve her?"

"Her necklace and bracelet the ones I make her wear I can find her with this," Severus replied, holding the disk of Skrewt shell in his palm. "I was retrieving it when I was summoned." He hoped that the Dark Lord would accept his deceit as truth.

The Dark Lord picked up the shell disk and examined the runes and symbols.

"They are connected," Severus stated. It was a huge gamble; the disk still had a limited range, not that he'd admit that to the Dark Lord. "I know she has gone to the Weasley's home, the old headquarters of the Order, and her parent's house. So far she's been predictable."

"Yet, she eludes you," the Dark Lord sneered, handing back the shell disk as if it were offensive.

"She was chased off the grounds and fears for her life fears your wrath. I believe she's gathering things, what she feels are necessities for being on the run. Her wedding robes were left in the Black house, and all of her personal items were removed from her childhood home. I fully expect her try to sneak into the castle she will want her magical implements and books as well as her wand. That's why I have Draco there." Severus waited for the invasion of his mind, his altered memories in the forefront of his mind to prove his statements. The invasion never came.

The Dark Lord's frown stretched into a malicious grin. When his attention centered on Severus again, he said, "I know Potter is frustrated. He is angry, feels betrayed..."

"My Lord, forgive me," Severus said, lowering his voice with a sly smile. "I have every reason to believe she will try to contact Potter to meet up with him. Might I suggest using her to hopefully find out where Potter is?" Severus looked up at the Dark Lord with a smirk. "So far I have been only one step behind her at each location I tried. The signs of Apparition were fresh."

The Dark Lord rolled his head slightly and smiled. "Yes, Potter is frustrated annoyed."

"Hiding does that to children who have run away from home and have nowhere to turn to," Severus said with an evil smirk. "The boy is a pampered prince at Hogwarts, and Weasley, his side-kick, is used to his mother taking care of him, his every need met. Now they are on their own, no access to Potter's money, no one to wash their socks for them. I doubt they like being fugitives."

"Yet my men cannot find him," the Dark Lord snarled with a hiss as Cillian approached. "And he is not alone. We know some Mudbloods have joined him. How is it that they can find Harry Potter yet he still eludes me?"

Westmore approached and bowed, saying, "Pardon my intrusion, my Lord. The boys you summoned await you in the drawing room."

"Fine. Tell them to wait." The Dark Lord waved him off and looked at Severus.

"I believe they are moving frequently," Severus said calmly as if he hadn't been interrupted. He wanted to leave, and soon. "It is the only logical explanation to the numerous times the Snatchers claimed to have just missed them in each report I've been privy to."

"Yaxley did say that the girl went to the house on Grimmauld Place," the Dark Lord said. "Macnair said that he found this on the front step." He held out a small object and gave it to Severus.

It was one of Hermione's Skrewt earrings. "Yes, my Lord, it's hers. I made it myself."

"So, I know the Fidelius Charm is still in place; only Yaxley can see the door and only in his peripheral vision, but he can Apparate to the top step. Are the curses still in place on the inside?"

"No, they are no longer a problem. Nevertheless, I saw what I wanted to know. The boy had been there, not that long ago, and as I said, Hermione's wedding robes hung on a wardrobe. She found what she wanted and left."

The Dark Lord's eyes widened, and his nares opened and closed. "So go. Find her! *Want. Her. Back.* If she leads you to Potter, all the better. Notify me if you find him. *Immediately.* But, I want that girl back under my control."

"Of course. Cillian and I are doing our best. She will be found, I swear it," Severus said with a bow and left, Cillian right behind him.

When he entered the foyer, the same old house-elf appeared, their cloaks draped carefully in his arms. "Your cloak, Headmaster, sir," he said, holding up Severus' cloak.

Severus looked at the creature's wide green eyes and small plump nose as he took the garment and was reminded of Peren. The elf then turned, handed Cillian his, then bowed low and hurried off.

As Severus stepped out of Malfoy Manor, he looked past the black shapes of the trees and hedges of the Malfoys' gardens at the horizon. From the way the midnight blues still bespeckled with stars in the sky were just beginning to fade to rich, variegated shades of blues, he hazarded a guess it was a little after six in the morning. *Astronomical twilight, an hour and a half to sunrise.*

Cillian paused to look up at him. "You coming?"

He nodded and hurried down the steps. Although he'd been up all night, his adrenaline and the gravity of the situation were still keeping him wide-awake.

"So where to first?" Cillian asked softly as they walked down the graveled path to the Apparition site.

"Your island," he said softly.

Cillian nodded and Disapparated, and Severus quickly followed suit, arriving on the path that led to the house. Cillian was standing only a few feet away, his arms crossed, waiting. "So, what is the plan?"

"I'm going to the castle," Severus said softly, conjuring an illumination orb so he could see.

"What?" A glow orb left Cillian's wand as well and floated in the air above them. "The castle? But you told the Dark Lord..."

"I lied." Severus stared off through the trees. "Truth is, I have a few ideas, but I'm just not sure how to pull them off."

"You lied to the Dark Lord?" Cillian asked incredulously.

Severus smirked. "It wasn't the first time." His smirk widened at his friend's smug expression.

"So what are your ideas?" Cillian asked, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

"I'm going to try scribing for her with the disk, or to persuade Peren to assist me," Severus stated.

Cillian shook his head. "You're counting on forcing Peren, Hermione's house-elf, to betray her?" he asked with delicately intoned sarcasm. "She will never do it."

"Hermione is *marked*. If I can persuade her that the Dark Lord is biding his time, waiting for his *connection* with Potter to indicate that she's with him to strike, I might get her to cooperate," Severus said, enveloping his body in his cloak to shield him from the cold. "If not, there is always the School Registry. The only problem is that Hermione has to stay in one place long enough for the book to register her presence, otherwise it reads her last known location."

Cillian nodded, one of his eyebrows arching, and his mouth twitched.

Severus turned to look at the shadows between the trees. "I must ask that you keep this between us?"

Cillian glowered at him, his brown eyes darkened in anger as they narrowed in suspicion. "You've been asking that a lot of me as of late." He narrowed his eyes further into a scowl, looking at him curiously. "If I didn't know you as well as I do..." He crossed his arms, staring intently at Severus, his eyes barely slits. "And what's my part in this

scheme?"

"If I need you, I'd rather you be available to Apparate on a moment's notice without raising suspicions." Severus said with a conspiratorial smirk.

"Oh, you know very well I can manage that," Cillian said with a crooked smile.

Severus hoped that after they caught Hermione he wouldn't have to Oblivate his best friend. One way or another, Cillian had to change sides, and soon. "I'll make the Skrewt shell vibrate when I find anything. In the meantime, spend some time with Dianne. It'll be sunrise soon." He Disapparated for Hogwarts without waiting for his reply.

~H~

Hermione stretched. She'd been reading Ron's notes, Rita's book, and all the pages Ron had marked in *Great Wizards of the Age* and his Divination book while the boys slept. At one point, Dean had entered their 'room' to get some rest, and Harry left, mumbling something about taking watch. But Hermione was too wound up to sleep. From out in the main part of the tent, she could hear some of the others moving about and could smell the wonderful aroma of coffee, pork and eggs.

Ron and Dean woke with a start when someone patted the canvas barrier. "Hey, if you're awake, we've got breakfast ready," Dennis called out.

"Damn, Creevey, I just laid down," Dean grumbled as Ron stretched, yawning, and quietly scrambled to his feet.

"Hungry?" he whispered, looking at Hermione.

She nodded and reached for his rucksack, but Ron shook his head. "Leave it. Dean knows, well, most of it." He picked up his wand and tapped the binder. "Mischievous managed. Now, all the confidential stuff is blurry. Besides, none of the others come in here. C'mon."

With the exception of Dean, Oliver and Harry, everyone was gathered in the main room of the tent, fully dressed and many of them sipping on warm beverages. "Coffee or tea?" Katie asked Hermione as she handed Ron a steaming mug.

"Tea for me," Hermione said, looking at Anthony, Michael and Dennis sitting at the table in the main room of the tent.

"We don't have any sugar," Katie said when she returned, holding a large mug out to her. "But milk is on the table. Help yourself."

"Where's Colin?" Hermione asked, taking a sip of the watered-down tea.

"He's checking their traps with his dad," Katie answered. "Will you join us? I know we are all anxious for news on what you can tell us about what's happening in school."

Ron nodded, so Hermione followed Katie and joined the group around the table. She did her best trying to tell them what had been happening in the castle, but gave up trying to gloss over the abuse since everyone knew quite a bit already. Apparently, they simply wanted to hear her side of things and to see if she could tell them anything she'd overheard from Severus.

"Susan said you've been the Muggle Studies and Dark Arts teachers' punching bag," Angelina stated with deep concern in her eyes. "And what is this about you being married to Snape?"

"I was captured the end of June and dumped on Severus as his responsibility. The Dark Lord, he thought that if I was hand fasted to Severus I'd lose the trust of my friends that everyone would turn away from me. It hasn't worked, but it's what he wants," Hermione stated.

"She has a bodyguard that won't let the Carrows get too carried away, but she still gets a lot of abuse," Anthony said. "And so far Headmaster Snape makes her serve her detentions with Hagrid or him."

Hermione turned to Dennis. "Tell me, how did you find Harry and Ron?" she asked.

Dennis sat up straighter, but even on a cushion, the table came up to his shoulders. "Harry Splinched himself wasn't too bad," he added quickly when Hermione gasped. "But Ron was desperate for help and made the coins vibrate. He was giving us the information off a Muggle historical plaque, you know, using six letters or numbers at a time, and Dad knew right away where he was."

"I'd run out of Dittany," Ron said. "Won't make that mistake again, I tell ya."

"But I thought you were the one who Splinched?" Hermione asked Ron, confused.

"Yeah, back in October! But you try Apparating as you jump from a two-storey window so you don't land into a bunch of rose bushes! It's really hard. I mean, it's hard enough when you're concentrating and know where you want to go," Ron said defensively. "Anyway, we're talking about later, in the middle of November. Harry... well, Dean wasn't as good at Apparation as Harry and me at the time, and he grabbed onto Harry's arm," Ron explained with a shrug. "Harry didn't account for the extra drag and Splinched his arm. Dean's gotten loads better at it since then. Daniel, that's Dennis' dad, he wants us to call him Daniel, he used Muggle first aid to stop the bleeding," Ron said. "When Harry woke up, Daniel was tending to his injury, and Colin was sitting next to him. He was rather angry at me at the time."

"We weren't too far away actually; we were on the path to Castell Dinas Bran that starts from Canal Bridge and runs beside Ysgol Dinas Brân. Imagine that he was just over the hill, on the Offa's Dyke Path on the northwestern side of the castle. So we started saying Ron's name as we trudged up the hill, and he appeared. Just like that, Ron appeared out of nowhere," Dennis said enthusiastically, making Hermione smile. "We had to abandon the jeep, but we still have the radio. Ron showed us how to make our backpacks big enough to hold everything, including the tent. It all fits, everything!"

"So tell me, what have you all been doing? I saw maps when I arrived," Hermione said, sipping on her tea as Alicia sent large bowls with scrambled eggs and slices of pork to the table. Those closest to the kitchen started grabbing plates and passing them around.

"There isn't too much to do," Angelina said. "Main camp is primarily a hideaway for Muggle-borns. It has been carefully hidden since the start of all this. There are several witches and wizards who watch over the kids and try to teach them how to control their emotions and magical outbursts. There are these caves, huge caverns, where the magical kids can hang out, and all."

Several people gave her a sharp glare. "Oh, like I divulged that much!" Angelina shot back at them. "Outpost two is responsible for information. There are a few people who are staying in the house that brew potions; four are Healers who had to leave St. Mungo's. In fact, there are nine Healers at main camp."

"Healers?" Hermione asked between bites.

"Hermione, every Muggle-born is considered undesirable. When the Ministry fell, it was only a matter of time before those working at St. Mungo's were checked for their blood status. All the Muggle-borns that hadn't fled were arrested. All those who are half-bloods with less than desirable heritage who work in St. Mungo's were given slave collars with tracking spells on them, and they are not permitted to leave the hospital."

"Otherwise there wouldn't be any Healers left!" Alicia sneered. "More Healers come out of Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff than any other house."

"Isn't that stereotyping?" Hermione asked. "Like the saying that there wasn't a witch or wizard who went bad who wasn't in Slytherin? It's that sort of mean prejudices that started all of this in the first place."

"Nah," Angelina said, shaking her head. "It's facts. Statistically speaking, Slytherins aren't typically the selfless, nurturing kind, just as Gryffindor's aren't known for their

enduring patience or for enjoying spending long hours triple checking facts. There are jobs that require intelligence over brawn, ones that require magical strength over delicate techniques or strong transfiguration skills instead of subtle arts like Potions or the ability to do complicated calculations. It's just how things are."

Oliver plopped down next to Anthony. "Realistically, each house has its strengths and its weaknesses. I, for one, don't agree that every Slytherin is bad I was saved by..." He paused and looked away for a moment. "I was warned. Because of what happened last June, I took the warning seriously and hid, but only after looking up a few friends first and warning them as well. Katie and Alicia wanted to stick with me and help me warn some of our old classmates. We were almost picked up a few times by Snatchers."

"So there are lots of us," Dennis said. "But we've got to be really careful."

"And food is a problem," Alicia said. "If you don't want to resort to stealing or raiding Muggle trash bins, you starve. Outpost two is lucky, Justin Finch-Fletchley, William Collette and Pamela Wealthlow are really well off, and Roland Thaxter's step-dad works in food distribution for Morrison, so between them, they can support the needs of those there. We have the Creeveys, but main camp they have to do what's necessary to get enough to feed everyone. I know that on occasion they've stolen cows or raided a store... it's really tough. Outpost two helps when they can, and Roland's dad tries to send all the day-old stuff the stores return, if it's still edible, but still."

"They hijacked a bread truck once, even sent us some bread, and I know they stole bedding from a warehouse, but they had to," Dennis stated.

Hermione didn't like it, but as she listened to the others talk about being on the run, she was forced to admit that it was tough.

"Normally, none of us would resort to stealing, but it's not like..." Ron said, stopping mid thought. He exhaled and shook his head. "They do what they need to survive." He paused, but Hermione didn't have anything to say. Life was hard, and this was war. People living or hiding in war zones did what they had to in order to survive.

"Speaking of which, I have to get things organized for tomorrow's move and go get Wayne and Will," Ron said as he scrambled to his feet. "Excuse me."

Alicia rose and started collecting the plates.

"I'll help," Hermione offered, collecting those closest to her.

"Thanks," she replied. "Just so you know, we have to wash them by hand. Harry and Ron don't want us using our wands unless necessary. Too much magic in a remote place would tip off the Ministry."

"But in main camp they do magic. Or teach the kids to control their magic," Hermione said as she followed Alicia to the kitchen, her hands full of plates.

"It's the caves," Alicia said and shook her head. "Look, Harry said I'm not supposed to it's best if you don't know, all right?"

Hermione shrugged and offered to wash, letting Alicia dry. She'd ask Harry about it later.

~ meanwhile ~

Severus arrived on the side of the lake near the forest and looked up at the castle. From his vantage point the castle was backlit with the warm peaches and light blues of twilight, but he didn't really have the desire to enjoy the view. He drew his wand, casting two complicated spells on himself, "*Elevipondosa Exaurare*," to make himself almost weightless, nonverbally tying his magical core to the spell, and added, "*Flēogan*," as he spread his arms, lifting up easily into the air, and soared up to the castle. He landed on the top step with well-practiced grace.

He would try the School Registry first. If that didn't work, he'd try and convince Peren to take him to Hermione. Severus ran all the way to Minerva's office, quickly glanced over his shoulder, and used his overriding password to gain entry, something Severus failed to inform the Dark Lord that he was able to do. He slipped inside unseen and hurried over to the incased pedestal that held the School Registry. He pulled out the huge book and turned to Hermione's name.

Severus smirked at the fact that the Registry had added his surname. *Snape (nee Granger), Hermione Jean*.

He held his wand tip over her name and said the incantation, a well-guarded secret of the Hogwarts Headmasters and Headmistresses and their Deputies, that should update her current location. Another reason he was glad that Alecto was not given the Deputy position under him.

Severus scowled as the words appeared: *Current location: undetectable previous location: Swinley Forest Crowthorne Wood, Berkshire*.

He looked down the page at Potter's name and sighed. *Potter, Harry James - Current location: undetectable previous location: Swinley Forest Crowthorne Wood, Berkshire*.

Confirmation, she's met up with Potter. Somehow the thought didn't sit well with him.

Severus put the book back, stealthily left Minerva's office and ran all the way to his. "Peren," he called out as soon as the door closed behind him.

A loud pop followed by, "Yes, Headmaster, master sir," made him turn about-face.

"I know that house-elves always know where their master's are," he said, looking at the elf's upturned face. "It's dire that I find Hermione. Can you take me to her?"

Peren's ears drooped. "No, Headmaster, master, sir, Peren cans not."

"She was *marked*," he said before the elf left.

Peren turned. "Peren knows," she said, her ears drooping a little more. "I hears her screams and feels him burning my mistress' arm."

He stepped closer to her. "You served the Malfoys. You know that once marked you cannot run from him the Dark Lord will kill her, unless I can find her first."

Peren shook her head, her eyes downcast. "I can'ts."

"He has his Death Eaters searching for her," he said. "If I don't find her first, she'll be killed, and you'll be returned to your previous family, the Malfoys." It was a lie, she could always stay with him or here at the school, but he needed her to help him.

Peren's eyes widened and she trembled. "My mistress wills be killed."

"By the Dark Lord himself, you've seen how he treats his deserters."

Peren nodded, tears of fear forming in her eyes.

"I have to find her first. If I can, I can save her life, prove she came back to me." Gods, he hoped so. "Where is she? Where did she go?"

"Mistress did nots calls for Peren," Peren said, still obviously reluctant, but added. "I hears my mistress asks about the tents."

Tents? So she'll be someplace remote. "What else have they talked about?" he asked, but she tightened her hands into fists and started convulsing. "Did she mention a

locket?"

She nodded. "Yes, Mistress asks about the evil locket."

Severus took the sword out from behind Dumbledore's painting. "I have to give this to Potter. If she's with Potter he needs this sword, Peren. He can't kill the evil in the locket without it, and the evil inside it can and will possess them. If you don't know the evil I'm talking about, ask Dobby. He knows. Dobby!"

Dobby appeared with a loud crack and bowed respectfully. "Tell Peren about the evil diary, or about the ring and what the ring did to Dumbledore. Harry Potter has one of the Dark Lord's cursed items, a locket; he wears it around his neck." It was a guess, although Severus hoped he was wrong. The evil in the ring wanted Dumbledore to put it on, it had enticed him to.

Dobby's eyes widened. "Kreacher and Dobby both knows about the evil thinking locket Harry Potter must not wears You-Know-Who's locket!"

"He wears the locket they takes turns," Peren said, her ears drooping again and her lower lip quivering. "Peren hears Mistress offer to wears evil thinking locket."

"No, no, not right, cans not musts not," Dobby stammered as he paced. "Too evil. It harmed Kreacher, hurt Kreacher's mind. Dobby can not let Harry Potter hurts his mind with the evil thinking locket. Dobby can not."

"But you can hear him; you can hear Potter?" Severus asked.

Dobby stopped pacing and faced him with his hands on his hips. "You will not harm Harry Potter?"

"I will not harm Harry Potter," Severus stated, then knowing how fond the elf was of Potter, he elaborated. "If I'd wanted to harm the boy, I've had plenty of opportunities to do so, more numerous to count, in which I could've captured the boy and taken him to the Dark Lord. If I had done this, at any time in the boy's life, I'd have been given such rewards."

"Buts you did not," Peren stated.

Dobby was staring intently, and a bit unnervingly, at Severus, trying to discern the truth in his eyes. "Dobby knows you protects Harry Potter. Dobby knows how many times you stops other Death Eaters from harming him. But you is not a good wizard."

"If I tell you why, if I tell you my deepest secret, you must both swear to keep my secret," Severus said, now down on one knee. "I must have your sworn word, from both of you."

"Peren swears," she quickly answered. "Peren keeps all Headmaster, master's secrets."

Dobby stared at Severus for a few more seconds, staring at him in deep deliberation. "Dobby swears. Dobby will keep the Headmaster's deepest secret."

"I want Potter to win," Severus said. "In the end, I want Potter to defeat the Dark Lord."

"I's already knows this," Peren stated dismissively.

Dobby turned and gaped at Peren, stuttering, "Y-yous do's?"

"I's do," Peren stated. "I hears what is said. I's sees what Headmaster, master do's, and I knows." She then shook her head. "But unless my mistress calls for Peren, I cannots takes you to her. Peren is sorry, Headmaster, master, sir. I's cannots."

Severus inhaled and looked away. This was getting him nowhere. *Hermione has to call Peren?* "But if she does, will you help me save her life?"

Peren considered his request.

"She is Harry Potter's friend," Dobby said, trying to persuade her. "Harry Potter needs the sword to kills the evil thinking locket before it destroys him!"

"And she is marked," Severus reminded Peren. "It's a matter of time before she's caught, but it would be best for her if I find her first."

Peren's head drooped, as did her ears. "Peren wills do this to protect her mistress." She looked up at Severus sternly. "Buts you must promise Peren that she will nots be killed or tortured out of her minds."

He exhaled in relief. "I swear to you, I will do everything I possibly can to protect her. I want her back."

"Peren will helps you. If I hears my mistress call, I will takes you to her."

One down. "Thank you." Severus rose to his feet and walked to the window.

Severus sent his Patronus to Tonks, asking her to meet him at the ruin of Emmeline Vance's house. His request was for her to come alone, but he knew that there was no way Lupin would trust him. He went immediately to the large oak, in view of the house, Disillusioned himself and waited.

~H~

Hermione sat in a chair, reading Rita Skeeter's book across the main room from where Dennis sat at the table, flipping through a shoebox of photographs and postcards while Dean, Ron and Harry discussed possible locations on their maps. Oliver came out of the room he shared with Anthony and Michael and dumped two rucksacks on the floor. He stopped at the tent entrance and turned around. "The Creeveys are back," he said before leaving.

Hermione looked up, smiling as Colin Creevey entered the tent, followed by a thin, wiry looking man. Her smiled widened at the sight of the pair. Mr. Creevey looked too young to have two teenage boys, and although there was definitely the strong facial resemblance, and he had the same body frame as his sons, Mr. Creevey's hair was a straw-colored blond rather than mousy brown. Both carried a couple of rabbits by their hind feet. "So, looks like we're packing up, are we?" Mr. Creevey asked, handing the rabbits to Alicia.

"I'll clean them," Colin offered as he scurried into the kitchen area.

"Can it wait until after we set up in the new place?" Alicia called out after him.

Mr. Creevey was looking at the picture in Harry's hand. "Wouldn't go there," he said, shaking his head. "They have a winter festival and there are a lot of tourists. I might suggest the summit of Symonds Yat East in the Wye Valley. The boys and I have been there before. You can't get here unless you're a hiker, and a serious hiker or mountain climber. So no one will know we're there."

"We could always set up camp in the Forest of Dean. This spot," Dennis suggested, handing Ron a picture, "we camped in once was great. It's a bit densely wooded, but there was this huge fallen tree with big knarly roots. It would be easy for us to find. You and I could go fishing, Harry!"

Mr. Creevey looked at the picture and nodded. "I remember this trip, you were what, twelve? Good choice. Of course, there will be snow this time of year. Not too many like camping in the snow." He looked up at Harry and Ron. "It's very remote, no facilities, and nothing nearby for kilometers."

Harry looked up at Hermione and then turned to lean in closer to Ron. Still his voice carried well enough for her to hear him say, "What do we do with her?" with a jerk of his head in her direction.

Ron jerked back, a look of incredulity on his face, and turned to look at Hermione for a brief second. "She comes with us."

"I've been to the Forest of Dean with my parents," Hermione said casually, not letting on that Harry's question stung.

Mr. Creevey cocked his head at her. "Camping or did you use a Streamline?"

Hermione shook her head. "Camping."

"Roughing it?" he asked, clearly not believing her.

She nodded. "Camping in a tent," she replied, setting down the book. "My parents loved the outdoors."

"Doesn't matter, the more remote and difficult to get to the better," Harry said, looking at Hermione from the corner of his eye. "So we go there, by that tree."

Ron nodded.

"Right, Oliver and Dean will take Dennis to the site, and set up the dampening and protection spells. Once the dampening spell is set, call Ron and we'll send the others." Harry turned to Oliver and Dean. "Be careful and watch out for Snatchers. If you see any, Apparate right back, and we'll pick another site."

Oliver and Dean both nodded, Oliver's expression hardening as if preparing for a battle, and Dean smiled somberly.

Everyone jumped into action, and Hermione was surprised by the efficiency as everyone began packing the tents up for relocation. Oliver and Ron immediately began organizing the packing of the tents so they could be magically folded, while Harry and Dean went to pack their things. Hermione got up to help Alicia who was overseeing the packing of the main tent, while Katie and Angelina packed up the girls' tent, and the Creeveys packed up theirs. Once the tents were packed, Oliver, Dean and Dennis Apparated for the new site. Everyone else gathered together, each person carrying various types of backpacks, totes, rucksacks, suitcases, or canvas duffle bags. Ron had his Deluminator out and was watching it intently.

Colin passed around a photograph so everyone could get a good look at the location. "This is about four years ago, but it should look about the same. Concentrate on the fallen tree. We'll use that as our destination," he said softly.

"You're coming with me," Harry said, grabbing Hermione's arm as he Apparated.

~~oOo~~

Sword, Beast and Savior

Chapter 36 of 43

Hermione finds out what has been wrong with Harry, and Ron and Harry argue about whether they can trust her. Meanwhile, Severus makes a last ditch effort in the search for Hermione, putting everything on the line to save her.

The warnings I have listed for this chapter are implied. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick and for being my locations scout, and to DuchessOfArcadia and Lady_Rayne for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.

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~o 36 o~

Sword, Beast and Savior

Severus waited on the quiet street in Westminster, near the Whitehall area, for the arrival of the Auror and her escort under the Disillusionment Charm. He was under no illusion that she'd come alone, not to a mostly residential street to meet a Death Eater. Although there wasn't much cover in order to hide, his vantage point under the portico of the house across the street afforded him a full view of the entire street, of everyone coming and going; the pedestrians and the motorized vehicles. Not that there were many.

The quiet was broken by the sound of two cracks of Apparition, with the possibility of another much softer than the others. Severus smirked. *Inhabitationem humanam*, Severus said with a swish of his wand, adding, "*Identificāre effigia*," with a minute jab before the light left his wand tip. He watched the small distortions emerge from his wand, like Muggle bubbles that only visible to himself, shoot across the short distance from where he stood. One headed for the black, wrought-iron fencing of the neighboring house, one toward the house and the witch trying to take cover behind one of the stone pillars of the covered porch and a tall potted topiary, and the other seemed to disappear toward the side of the street between the parked cars. *Three*. When the first bubble returned, the one from the front of the house, he looked upon the image reflected within and smiled. *Nymphadora, naturally. Good.*

The second returned showing him Arthur's face. *Interesting. Not unexpected, but could possibly be made to my advantage.*

The third from the side of the street revealed Lupin's frowning mug. *Damn. Well, okay, I did expect him, but he could complicate things.*

Severus vanquished the bubbles and Apparated, none too subtly, to the pavement in front of the Georgian townhouse and held his hands down at his sides in a show of nonaggression. "I simply need to talk," he said quickly, keeping his wand down and clearly visible.

He heard Arthur's voice coming from only a few paces away from his hiding spot behind the black iron fence, "I have no reason to trust you."

"No? Then maybe you should ask *your daughter* how many times she's had detention with Alecto Carrow and actually *served* detention with that barmy witch," Severus said in his most polite tone. "Or ask any of her friends: Longbottom, Finnigan, Summerby, Macmillan, Cornfoot, Lovegood or any of the known DA members."

"Luna is missing," Arthur said, finally revealing himself. Unlike Severus, his wand was drawn, held up, ready to fight. "As are several of her friends, and you have Hermione as your captive."

"That is why I'm here. Hermione is in grave danger," Severus stated calmly but distinctly, watching a shadow shift between the parked cars. "Perhaps, Nymphadora, if Remus Lupin came out of hiding and joined us, we can all discuss this like *civilized* adults. But first, I suggest we go inside. You don't want to be seen speaking to me any more than I do you."

Nymphadora stepped forward, wand drawn but her concern evident in her expression. "What has happened to Hermione?"

"Come inside with me and I will tell you," Severus said, walking purposefully to the front door, ignoring Arthur's posturing and the wand aimed for his back. He saw Arthur magically pass through the fence in his peripheral vision as he aimed his wand at the latch. "*Ostium aperire*," he said, nodding as the door opened easily for him, and he walked inside followed by Nymphadora and Arthur. He asked, "Is Lupin staying outside?" over his shoulder as he went quickly up the stairs.

"No, of course not," Nymphadora replied as she and Arthur followed him to the second floor landing.

He repeated the spell to enter the elegantly furnished flat and let himself in. Severus walked into a room that still showed signs of a magical fight, up-righted a chair and sat down. "You have my word, I am alone, but I have precious little time to talk," he said, indicating the sofa.

Nymphadora moved into the room. "What happened?"

"Due to the time restraints, I'll be blunt and brief. Hermione was requested to attend the Dark Lord's Winter Solstice party. She was branded with his mark not the Dark Mark, but similar to what extent it is similar, I don't know. Bellatrix Lestrange and Belinda Morederk chased her off as the guests were gathering on the terrace to observe the astrological event this evening one the Dark Lord thinks is of great importance and omen. Needless to say, I, and many others, are searching for her. I have reason to believe that she's been to your house," he said, indicating Arthur, "and to Grimmauld Place. Both residences are being watched by... unfriendly associates."

"She was *marked*," Nymphadora gasped. "Why but that means he's a hypocrite!"

"Yes, she was given *His* mark," Severus repeated, "but I think it differs from the Dark Mark, although how much or if it's like ours at all, I don't know as of yet. However, if don't find her and bring her back, she will be designated by the Dark Lord as a deserter and terminated, most likely in the most painful manner possible for her defiance. And he *will* find her."

"When did she go missing?" Nymphadora asked, the Auror taking his comments seriously.

"Wait, she escaped?" Arthur asked as if finally catching on. "When?"

"Before midnight," Severus stated. "It's imperative I be the one to find her."

"To save your miserable arse," Arthur stated accusingly.

"No, Hermione's. There are witnesses, several actually, all in good standing, who can show the Dark Lord why she ran and that she was being threatened. So my arse isn't in any danger of reprimand," Severus replied, emphasizing the crude wording. "My only concern is for Hermione's life."

"What do you need?" Nymphadora asked.

Severus could hug the witch. She understood.

"You can't be serious!" Lupin exclaimed from the doorway, still under his Invisibility Charm. "Dora..."

"Remus, he saved her life remember her Splinching?" she asked, staring at the doorway. "You and I both know heroic efforts must've been made to save her she was Splinched *in half*! And you've spoken to Ginny; Hermione is treated more fairly in that school than we thought she'd be."

"She's tortured daily..."

"And Snape and her bodyguard protect her against the Carrows as best they can! She's not spent *one* night in Filch's chains, or served detention under either Amycus or Alecto Carrow. The only detentions we know about were monitored by Hagrid. He told us himself Severus sends the kids *to him!*"

"But..."

"No buts," Nymphadora stated, still staring at the empty doorway where Lupin was apparently standing, still Disillusioned. "Severus has sent me warnings, you know that. We knew about the attack on the train..."

"He said it was likely, and he didn't say where..."

"And about You-Know-Who's attempt to get the Magical Birth Registry *twice*. The raid on the Muggle ski resort, and the raid on the Daltons..."

"And the attack on Dodge's house..." Arthur interjected into the couple's argument.

"*And he betrayed Emmeline!*" Lupin exclaimed. "Or haven't you noticed whose house we're using?"

"Enough!" Arthur snarled. "What do you want?"

"I need to know if your daughter can contact Hermione through her mirrors?" Severus asked calmly.

Arthur actually paled. "How do you know about the mirrors?"

Severus cocked his eyebrow up and tilted his head slightly, showing his incredulity.

"Okay, you know but I don't like this."

"I haven't much time. Ginevra must have Hermione contact me," Severus stated, reaching into his pocket. Two wands well most likely three, all took aim at him as he slowly withdrew a box. "It's a pendant, not valuable, but it has a Protean charm on it. Ginevra can contact me through this and tell me where to meet Hermione. That's all I need, to have Hermione return to me willingly Ginevra does not have to place herself in any danger. I promise to give the pendant's match to Hermione when I find her. I give you my word, my oath which if you remember, I never break."

"That's all you want?" Arthur asked in disbelief.

"Yes, that's all I want. But, the sooner the better. If I don't find Hermione soon and I mean *very soon* she's dead." Severus righted the coffee table and set the box on it as he rose. "I'm leaving. I have a girl to find." He walked out, feeling Lupin move out of his way, descended the stairs in a hurry and Disapparated on the doorstep.

~ H ~

Hermione staggered as soon as she actually felt the ground under her feet, nearly losing her balance, except that Harry had a firm grip on her arm. They were in a wide forest ravine with large, snow-capped rocks. The area had a dense growth of old yew trees, oaks and ferns rising up out of a layer of snow, and a stream down the slope with large, snow-capped, moss-covered rocks... This was not the place in the picture.

"Now, you are going to tell me *exactly* why you wanted to find me, Hermione," Harry demanded, shoving her away from him so that she fell on her bum.

She looked up at him and inhaled sharply. His wand was drawn and aimed directly at her. "Harry? What? Why?"

"You tell me, *Death Eater*," he snarled.

"Death Eater no it's a mistake! It's not what you think it's not the same," she pleaded as she tried to get back up on her feet. "I'm not really a..."

"Stay there," he snarled as he stepped forward and pushed her down again.

She fell back onto the snow-covered ground with an 'umph.' "*Harry!?*"

"Hands up." He stared down at her, his eyes narrowed as he searched her face. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"You're *His!* You've joined *Him*. Don't even begin to deny it I know."

"I'm *His* prisoner...well, I was his prisoner," she stammered. The cold, wet snow was melting a bit under her bum and soaking into her jeans. Even though she wore a long-sleeved T-shirt and a flannel shirt under a heavy jumper, she was not dressed for the biting cold as he was. He wore the same layering as she, only he had a thick coat and a scarf on as well.

"I SAW YOU!" he shouted. "You call him *master!* You knelt before him and called him 'my Lord.' You thanked him and kissed his hand! *saw it!*"

"You're still having those dreams..."

"*Visions*, Hermione, visions! He showed me!" He was holding his wand so tight, his hand shook. "I saw your *wedding*. *HE* walked you down the aisle, and *He* gave you away to Snape! And you were *smiling!* He told you that you were *His* as you knelt at his feet, and you are now *bound* to *Him* by Snape's oath and by that bloody Mark on your arm!"

She simply stared at him as he continued to rant. "You let him cup your face and stroke your hair the two of you are quite chummy now, aren't you? It's like watching Bellatrix, the way you give into *His* touch. Do you like it? Do you desire it, Hermione? Do you want *His* affection, because it sure looks like you do? Even your husband allows you to..."

"It isn't like that!" she shouted.

His nostrils flared, and his head tilted side to side in his annoyance, and she was horrified shocked to her core to see him do the Dark Lord's now familiar movement.

"Yes it is I saw you and *Him* together he *shows* me," Harry spat angrily. "Or isn't Snape enough? The way you rut with Snape, letting that greasy git take you any way he wants to..." He glared down at her as she sat on the ground terrified of her best friend. "Do you get off fucking him in front of Tom? it's disgusting!"

"I've never *we haven't ever!* Hermione covered her mouth as she gasped in horror. "You don't understand it's out of context, Harry it must be!"

"Oh, I doubt that. Ginny tells me you are living together in the Headmaster's tower. Tom shows me enough for me to know that you comply with his *every* wish, you even allow that hag Carrow to beat you, and you do nothing. You've given up on your friends you're not helping the DA at all, and you you..." He turned as if in disgust.

"I have not abandoned my friends!" Hermione shouted. "*IF* I'd had any way of getting away or of finding you and Ron that's why I Ginny and I made the mirrors. So I could..."

"Spy on me," Harry snarled.

"NO!" she shouted back as she tried to get up again. "I did it *to help* you!"

He flicked his wrist slightly, making her fall back down, and her ankle turned awkwardly. She cried out in pain as she moved her leg.

"Did you tell Snape about the Horcruxes?" he asked coldly. He was holding his wand loosely in his hand with his first two fingers straight, much like the Dark Lord did when he used his wand.

Her ankle hurt, a sharp, throbbing pain, and she hoped he'd not broken it. "No, Harry, I wouldn't! I didn't..."

"But he knows enough to have you tell Ron and me about the artifacts in the museum," he said, his nostrils flared, and his eyes were hard and cold.

"He knows because *Dumbledore* told him about them he had Severus go check them out as possible Dark Artifacts!" she shouted back at him. "Severus knows that you are searching for artifacts, things that belonged to the founders... something the Dark Lord may have corrupted into I don't know how much *Dumbledore* told Severus, but his information was right, wasn't it? Ron told me that you believed me!"

There was a soft crunch of boots on snow, and they both turned to see Ron amble his way toward them. "Oi, mates, quiet down!" he shouted as he came to a stop. He looked from Harry to Hermione and back again. "What the bloody hell?"

"*She's a traitor!*" Harry snarled.

"What? No, wait!" Ron exclaimed and then started casting spells. "There. Now any bloody Snatchers around won't hear you *twyelling* at each other! Now what is going on?"

"She's in league with Tom Riddle," Harry repeated.

"No, honestly, Ron, I'm not!" Hermione pleaded, looking from one wizard to the other. "He's horrible. I admit I've done what I'm told I have to! But I haven't joined him I haven't!"

"You're not on again about all those visions are you?" Ron asked Harry.

Hermione clamped her mouth shut with a snap.

"I *saw* her!" Harry snarled, but his arm holding his wand relaxed somewhat, and his fingers curled more securely on the grip, the way he normally held his wand.

"You saw what of' Snake face *wanted* you to see just like he did when he wanted you to believe that Sirius was in trouble, remember?" Ron said, trying to make Harry see reason.

"She's friends with Malfoy you heard her, she calls him Draco!" He turned on Hermione who was slowly clambering up to her feet. "What's that all about?" She froze as he leveled his wand at her chest. "I've seen you pleading to Tom to spare him not to punish him for something you did taking the blame, just like you used to do for me."

"He's under orders to befriend me," she stated, although lately they had been getting on, well, they had been. "Even his father has pleaded with me to befriend Draco. Its part of the Dark Lord's plan, Harry, and apparently it's *working*."

"Is that why he gave you a house-elf?" Harry sneered. "I thought you were opposed to house-elf enslavement."

"You mean Peren?" Hermione gasped. "Peren has nothing to do with all of this!"

"Yes, Peren, if that's her name," Harry shot back at her. "Apparently the Malfoys gave her to you as *awedding present*!"

A low, rumbling growl emanated from somewhere in the trees behind them.

~ meanwhile ~

Severus paced his office. This was taking too long. Time was running out, and he was wasting precious time. He swore, feeling anxious since Ginevra hadn't contacted him yet. *It is possible that the girl refuses to believe that Hermione would be safer with me than with Potter. Or Arthur never gave Ginevra the pendant, thinking I could use it, would use it, to endanger his precious daughter.* He opened his palm and aimed his wand at the pendant, making the match vibrate again. The mate on his palm remained inert. *Damn.*

He paced, trying to think of another option. He faced Dumbledore's portrait and scowled at the sleeping image. "Don't you have any great wisdom to impart?" he grumbled.

Dumbledore opened his eyes. "What more can I say or do?" he asked, his blue eyes somber for a change. "You have tried all options available to you."

"Not all," Severus said defiantly. He was not going to give up hope. "But if I cannot get her back, it will be my neck, and the Carrows will run this school."

He heard Peren whimper from her hiding spot behind the pillar at the base of the stairs. The house-elf's ear was visible from behind the pillar. He smirked at her attempt of subterfuge.

"Open up old man," he said as he approached the portrait. There was a faint click from behind Dumbledore's frame, and the painting swung open on its hinges. He pulled the sword out from behind Dumbledore's painting again.

"The boy will have to have great need to yield it, Severus," Dumbledore said as his frame swung back into place with another audible click.

"So you have said a hundred times," Severus said with a heavy sigh. "I have to find him first."

Suddenly Peren jumped out of her hiding place as if shocked. "Peren hears her mistress!"

"I know you can hear her," he snapped. "What I need is for you *tdake* me to her."

"No, no, my mistress says Peren's name," Peren said exuberantly. "It's cans takes you to where she is."

Peren disappeared around the pillar as if going behind the stairs, confusing Severus for a moment, before she ran out again and over to him. Oddly, she had wrapped some cloth around her feet and had a blanket wrapped about her body. She chuckled nervously as she clasped Severus' hand. "Peren only walks in snows once before. It was very cold on Peren's feets, sir."

Severus chuckled softly. "Maybe you should reconsider wearing shoes," he said with a smirk, and she looked up at him in horror. "At least for going outside in the snow."

He Disillusioned himself just in case and grabbed the sword. Severus nodded, and she Disapparated, taking him with her. The sensation was different than he was used to, the compression severe. They arrived, with a soft pop, in a wide forest gorge, heavily populated with old yew trees, oaks and dense undergrowth pushing their way through a blanket of snow and rocks. There was a swift moving stream with snow-capped, moss-covered rocks before him, with a sloping bank on the other side.

"No, I can't... Wait!" Peren angled her head, her ears wide. "Peren can hears her mistress but not sees her." She pointed to the other side of the stream. "My mistress is there but not there, sir."

"That's good enough, Peren," Severus said, gripping the sword in his fist. "You did well. Go back to the castle and keep an ear out for her. I'm going to look around."

"Calls if you needs help, and Peren will comes," she said and vanished with a soft pop.

Severus thrust the sword into the frozen ground and took the Skrewt shell with the engraved runes and symbols out of his pocket. He balanced his wand on the shell and muttered, "*Dētegere accertener shells*." This time the shell vibrated, and his wand turned and pointed ahead through the trees along the stream, right where Peren had pointed to a moment ago. He grabbed the sword and walked forward, watching his footing as well as his wand.

He could feel the magic in the shell in his hand, but couldn't see or hear her. He walked silently forward and after a few feet the vibration increased. He stabbed the sword into the ground again. He swept his hand very slowly in a wide arch before him, examining the space around him for a magical signature. A vague sense of a repelling charm hit him, and he smiled as he forced himself to concentrate, detecting the protection spells. Using a few complicated spells with his wand, he was able to determine that there were three bodies ahead of him: one girl and two boys, all three of them young adults. He grabbed the sword, walked forward, and leaned against a tree by the stream, still Disillusioned. He wondered how he was going to pass the sword to Potter and get Hermione to come to him willingly.

Severus looked over his shoulder and examined his surroundings. It would have to do. If he had to feign an attack then he'd do it. He could put on the Death Eater garb... maybe call Cillian, even though he could easily take Potter and Weasley by himself. And he could use the Skrewt shells around Hermione's neck to 'capture' her. He contemplated summoning Draco, but dismissed the idea. The boy would be of no help.

He just hoped Hermione believed the ruse.

Suddenly, he heard a branch break across the stream and to his left, and a low, almost feline rumbling snarl.

The fates, it seemed, were against him. He heard a few soft crunches in the snow, followed by the hungry snarl and growls of a large beast, one eerily similar to the graphorn that Hagrid had put in the school iron paddocks, hoping to use the beast in one of his lessons. If it was a graphorn, and it was hunting, then Hermione would be in danger. She was wandless, and if she was with Potter and Weasley, Severus knew that neither knew how to handle the magical beast even under the best of conditions.

Still, this could work to his advantage.

He aimed his wand at a few large rocks in the stream to shift them carefully, so as not to disturb the snow on their surface, and cast a series of spells as he pushed the sword down deeply into the gap. The rocks landed back in place, effectively trapping the sword, and the water between them instantly froze. The hilt shimmered in the dappled light, remaining well above the water.

Severus aimed his wand low and cast his Patronus pleased when a silvery wolf appeared instead of the bloody doe of his youth when he'd still been utterly smitten with Lily Evans.

~ meanwhile ~

"You're telling me that you *trust* her?" Harry asked. "After *everything* I told you."

"You heard Ginny," Ron said, his wand pointed at the ground. "Hermione doesn't have a choice. She's followed everywhere by that Death Eater, Cillian, and Malfoy, and *she's not allowed her wand*. That Death Eater takes it away from her after every lesson. How is she supposed to fight off anyone if she's *unarmed*? You didn't fight against Umbridge when she was making you do all those lines, did you?"

"That's different," Harry snapped. "She's *Marked* he *Marked* her!"

"Give me the locket," Ron insisted, holding out his hand. "Hand it over."

"It's not because of the bloody locket!" Harry snapped back. "It's *her* she can't be trusted."

"You don't know that!" Ron said. "If she's *His* and *he Marked her* then why didn't she summon You-Know-Who, eh? Why hang around with us when she could've gotten us all trapped and killed? Think, Harry. It's Hermione we're talking about! You know what Ginny said what Neville said! She was trapped. She got away."

"Took her long enough," Harry sneered, scowling, his nostrils flaring. His head jerked to the side, then rolled to the other side again as if he was stretching his neck.

"Give me the locket," Ron demanded.

Hermione heard the snap of a branch breaking behind her and a low, deep, guttural rumbling snarl, making her whirl around to face the direction of the sound. Suddenly a silver wolf bounded into the clearing, walking straight up to Harry and Ron. "It's Sirius!" Harry exclaimed, looking around.

Hermione scanned the area, trying to see the Patronus' source. It shouldn't have broken a branch or made that snarling sound... "Sirius is dead, Harry," she reminded him, gently. "It's not his."

Harry moved forward toward the silvery wolf as he replied, "He fell into the veil, Hermione, that's not dead, that's trapped."

"No, Remus said he was dead everyone said he was dead," Ron said, reaching out to stop Harry from following the Patronus. The wolf backed up, turned and walked away a few steps toward the stream, then looked back at Harry as if waiting for him to follow it. "Harry wait!"

But Harry wasn't listening. He followed the wolf Patronus down to the stream and pointed. "Hey look!"

Hermione turned and was stunned to see the sword of Gryffindor, sticking out of the middle of some rocks on the other side of the stream.

"If he's dead, then how come that's here?" Harry rushed forward, walking through the stream as fast as he could against the current.

"Harry, be careful," Hermione cried out as Ron started to try and cross the stream.

Harry reached the sword first and tried to pull it free. "I can't get it out," Harry shouted as he pulled and tugged on the hilt of the sword. "Help me pull it out!"

Hermione heard a few soft crunches in the snow and a soft rumbling growl, followed by a throaty snarling of a large beast. Hermione turned and looked up... and gasped. "Guys, we have bigger problems!"

A large, greyish-purple creature with two extremely sharp horns, long sharp canines, and a strongly-muscled, humpbacked body crouched down on a rock not too far from her as if it was about to spring. It looked like a demonic, wild European bison bull with a werewolfish-like head and lion-like legs with claws. Hermione knew graphorns grew to be ten or eleven feet long and could weigh up to six or seven hundred pounds, and although this one looked young, only eight maybe nine feet long, it was still a dangerous beast. "Harry, Ron, run!" she warned them as she backed up toward the stream, away from the huge beast.

Her rational mind was screaming for her to run away as she moved cautiously away from the animal. The graphorn made a snarling roar, showing its long canines, which were much longer than the rest of his razor sharp teeth. Her foot slipped, and for a moment she lost her footing, falling down on her hands and knees, the pain in her ankle increasing. She tried to get up and slipped again, her weight making her slide backwards through the ice, and her foot landed in the water of the stream. She screamed as the piercing cold of the water startled her, but her foot was now jammed, and she couldn't pull it free.

~ S ~

Severus shook his head from his vantage point a few meters away. Potter was as impulsive as ever. He'd left the protection of the spells and rushed through the stream. *You have to earn the sword, boy*, Severus sneered silently. *It cannot be given to you for you to possess it. The sword only comes to those who are in need of it.*

Weasley, who'd likewise stepped through the protective boundary, had followed Potter, then stopped what he was doing and rushed over to help Hermione when she'd slipped into the stream, firing curses at the graphorn. The beast sidestepped, clawing at the ground, making deep gouges in the snow-covered ground, and shook its head. It roared and hissed and made deep snarling growls, its front claws extended as it swatted the air. Severus swore softly and added his own impediment curses, timing them carefully with Weasley's spells. The graphorn slowed, but didn't halt its advance.

"Don't! You'll only make it mad! Graphorn hide is even tougher than a dragon's, and it repels spells!" Hermione shouted, trying with all her might to free her foot.

The beast shook its head violently again, slashing its horns in the air and made a wild rumbling roar.

She stared at the creature as it began to move toward her. "Gods help me, Ron! I'm stuck!"

From his vantage point Severus watched as Weasley tried to both help Hermione with one hand while sending bursts of spellfire at the beast to make it back away. Graphorns were extremely dangerous animals, but surely even Weasley could handle one wild animal. Although it was easily five and half feet tall at the shoulder, it didn't even look fully grown, just past its lanky and awkward stage, but possibly topping six hundred fifty maybe sixty pounds. Still, a few well aimed Sectumsempra curses would

have the beast backing off. Wizards have killed the beasts before some had even tried fencing in a few to raise domestically (although that was an utterly insane endeavor in his book) graphorn horns were useful for potions, and the animal's hide was used for high-end protective wear.

The graphorn leered at Hermione with hunger driven intelligence in its large, grey-brown eyes as it moved over the rocks and through the vegetation, although it was also watching Weasley intently. Its large four-toed paws were well suited for the terrain. It roared a hiss that became a snarling growl as it advanced again, its horns aimed at the pair.

"Ron, forget me. Take Harry and go!" Hermione urged him, pushing on his chest as she desperately tried to pull her foot free, and Severus could hear her panic starting to rise in her voice.

The animal backed off as it bared its teeth, showing its long canines. It snarled, making wild rumbling roars as it circled Weasley and Hermione, while Weasley tried to free Hermione.

"I need the sword," Potter said, still struggling to free the sword from its icy confinement. "It won't come loose. I have to help her." The sword glowed and slipped free of its confinement, and Potter stumbled back and fell in the water. He struggled to get up and trudged through the water, sword in hand, to help Mr. Weasley defend Hermione.

*About bloody time!* Severus aimed his wand, uttering "*Sectumsempra*," a millisecond later than Potter shouted it, but the spells only left deep cuts across the animal's chest. The beast turned its attention toward Potter.

Finally, Hermione lurched as her foot came free, nearly falling, except that Weasley grabbed onto her before she fell into the stream. "Got you!" he said, pulling her to him with one arm. "This way, across the stream," the boy suggested, half dragging Hermione with him through the current to the opposite side. Severus smirked, it was a good move, except there were enough rocks for the beast to use to cross the stream.

Potter cast another *Sectumsempra* after another, making lacerations on the animal's chest, legs and neck.

The beast backed away, snarling and snapping its jaws angrily and jabbing the air with its sharp horns as Weasley helped Hermione scramble out of the stream onto the snowy stream bank.

"Harry, come away!" Hermione shouted.

Potter turned and trudged through the water to reach the other side, casting spells at the graphorn now standing on the bank, snarling angrily. The beast lunged, landing on a large rock. Severus determinedly hissed, "*Lapso-concido*," as the graphorn sprung again, making the animal slip on the rocks behind Potter and stumble, falling into the stream.

Potter turned as the beast lunged at him again, raising the sword up as the beast came down on him the same time Severus snarled, "*Sectumsempra*," again, putting all his determination into the curse. The beast landed on the sword, its momentum and weight driving the blade home the same time Severus' curse sliced deeply into the graphorn's neck.

The beast collapsed down dead on top of the boy, trapping him under the water. Weasley moved quickly to Potter's aid, levitating the graphorn off him as Potter struggled to get up, gasping for air. Weasley grabbed his hand and helped haul Potter to his feet. Potter turned, soaking wet as he drew his wand, shouting, "Show yourself, coward!"

Severus stealthily moved over to where Hermione was standing as the boy swung his wand wildly back and forth, trying to determine where Severus was. When Severus was a few steps away from her, he terminated his Disillusionment spell. Hermione gasped as she stared at him, then at Potter and back.

"Hermione, run," Potter shouted.

"No," Severus said softly. "Hermione, please, I came here for you. I will let your friends leave, but come with me."

Weasley, who had been trudging through the stream to get to Hermione again, stopped, staring at Severus with utter disbelief, his wand aimed at Severus. "You! How did it was *you*?"

"Ron, get him!" Potter shouted, taking aim against Severus.

With lightening speed Severus cast the Disarming spell a millisecond before Potter, effectively disarming the irrational boy. He caught the boy's wand and tossed it aside.

"It was *his* Patronus, Harry," Hermione shouted, trying to help the situation.

"No, it was *Sirius*," Potter shouted back as he grabbed hold of one of the beast's front legs, trying to lift it to get at the sword.

"Would you listen to yourself?" Weasley shouted. "He could have just as easily killed *you* but he killed the beast instead."

"I killed the beast," Potter grunted, bracing his foot on the graphorn to counter his efforts at pulling on the sword.

Weasley lowered his wand, staring at Severus and back to Hermione, and Harry growled, trying to lift the leg and pull the sword from the dead graphorn at the same time. "*Accio sword*," Harry shouted, pulling on the hilt with both hands.

Severus looked down at Hermione. "You must come back or you will be the death of me. The Dark Lord will kill me if you don't," he said softly. "I don't have a lot of time."

Weasley looked from Severus to Hermione again. Severus, like Weasley, could tell that she was torn; she knew that she needed to go, but she wanted to stay.

"If you don't, and the Dark Lord kills me, he will make Alec Carrow headmistress. She will dispense with Professor McGonagall and place her brother as deputy headmaster of the school," Severus said loud enough for the boys to hear.

Hermione lowered her head dejectedly.

Weasley nodded, looking defeated but at the same time resolved. "You have to for Ginny."

She nodded, stepping closer to Severus, and he held out his hand. She grasped it. "I understand," she mumbled and looked up, adding, "I just want to say good bye first," softly.

"No!" Potter screamed. "*Accio wand!*" He shouted, and his wand flew up to him. He snatched it in mid air and swung around to fire at Severus.

"NO!" Weasley shouted, forcing Potter's arm down. "You can't. He's right. She has to for Ginny's sake! For our friends..."

"You can't possibly believe him?" Harry snarled, yanking his arm free. "He killed Dumbledore he's a liar and..."

"Good bye, Harry, Ron. Stay safe and give my regards to the others," Hermione said sadly. "I'll tell Ginny you said hello."

Harry took a step closer and aimed his wand the same time Ron said, "Look after her, Snape."

Severus Apparated, taking Hermione with him as the word, "*Immobulus*," echoed in the air.

They arrived in the main production floor of the old abandoned factory his father had worked in. "Consider this my Christmas present, Hermione: your time with Potter mine to you; your coming back with me yours to me." His fingers tightened on her arm as he jerked her around to face him. "Now, tell me. Why did you leave?"

"I had no choice! She was going to kill me, I know it," Hermione said, her eyes pleading with him to understand.

He smirked at the openness of her expression, her every emotion on full display for him to see if he was to believe her act. "He marked you, Hermione. He marked you as *His*. No one was going to hurt you without incurring the Dark Lord's disapproval and facing his anger and *believe me* no one wants to incur his wrath."

She shook her head. "I know he marked me! It hurt like *hell* when he did. But I was in danger. Belinda and Bellatrix hate me they were chasing me! You should've seen them their eyes. They were going to kill me!" Her words echoed, growing softer in the cavernous space.

"Why didn't you run to him? Why didn't you go to the parlor where the Dark Lord was...?"

"I couldn't I was they were... There was only one way to *go out!* Everyone was going outside I couldn't see you!" she stammered, now deeply agitated and afraid, the echo repeating her last words. He could clearly see the fear in her eyes. "You left me alone, and I had nowhere to go..."

"Let me see, Hermione," he demeaned firmly.

She nodded once and looked at him straight in the eyes. Her trust astounded him.

He said, "*Legilimens*," softly and delved into her mind easily. The memory wasn't too hard to find, and unlike when he had to search, it flowed smoothly before him. He saw Belinda and Bellatrix staring at her with matching malicious grins. There was a brief confusion, a momentary headiness, before the words, "*Run. Get away. I'm in danger, and I don't even have a wand!*" echoed loudly in her mind, and he felt an irrational level of fear emanating from her. He saw her hurry toward the steps of the terrace that led to the gardens, thinking that she was in grave danger and had to escape somehow and as soon as possible. He heard her pleading in anguish, '*Severus, where are you? Why aren't you here to protect me?*' as Belinda and the Lestranges followed after her. He felt her fear increase as he saw Antonin Dolohov and Thorfinn Rowle closing in on her to her left and Fergus Jugson approaching her on her right, followed by Narcissa Malfoy. He heard her plead desperately again, '*Severus, please, where are you?*' It was enough. He broke the contact and looked up, staring blankly across the huge barren room with the blackened brick walls and dingy, broken windows as he considered what he saw.

"I had no choice, they were after me, I... I-I *Oh, my gods!* The Imperius! I was she it was the Imperius wasn't it?"

He only half heard her, deep in his own thoughts. He remembered that same brief headiness, that momentary confusion, when Mordaunt, Alecko and MacCavish had cornered him at the party. "Thank you," he said softly. When the Dark Lord saw her memory he would be angry, but he would also see the reasons for her actions. He could still get her out of this situation unharmed.

"Now I have a question," Hermione said determinedly. He looked down at her and raised an eyebrow at her presumptuousness. "Why did you kill Dumbledore? He trusted you unconditionally."

"Unconditionally?" he repeated in absolute disbelief. "You think he trusted me *unconditionally?*"

"Yes, he had absolute, unwavering faith in your allegiance," she stated. "Why then kill him? I mean, I've seen you time and time again help Harry. You've saved him a dozen or more times. You've saved me. Why did you kill him?"

He crossed his arm as he stared down at her. He was not going to waste time dredging up his past affiliation with the old fart, there were more pressing...

"If you don't tell me, I'll openly side with the DA and fight for what I believe in, damn your rules damn the Dark Lord and his bloody mark. I am not going to sit by and *let him* win."

Was she threatening him actually threatening him? "You, break the rules? When have you ever *NOT* broken the rules?" he snarled, not bothering to keep his voice low in the old building. "I've known you for six and a half years, and you are a defiant rule breaker."

"I am not!" she exclaimed and then blushed. "Not all the time, well, only when it was warranted."

"When it was *warranted?*" he sneered. "Every year, for whatever reason Potter dreamed up, every time he interfered in affairs he shouldn't have you three would trot off on your wild adventures, meddling in matters much better left to your superiors!"

"And you were always there, weren't you?" she quipped. "Watching out for us!"

"Yes, I was," he said angrily. "I was there, each time, watching over you, protecting you, keeping you and that insolent prat out of harm." She recoiled in shock, which angered him even more.

"Not all the time!" she exclaimed. "Where were you when we were saving the Philosopher's Stone? And you weren't there when Harry and Ron fell into the Chamber of Secrets!"

"I *was* there! *Both times*. Who do you think had the necessary potion to enable Dumbledore and myself to get past the flames to rescue Potter? And as for the Chamber of Secrets *I don't speak Parseltongue*, and I couldn't open bloody the entrance!" he snarled back, his voice echoing, again.

"You were not there *all the time* there were times when we ... what about our fourth year!" she paused. "You were not watching over Harry then."

"You think so? Then who else invented the potion that enabled you to sleep *unharméd* and without drowning underwater for several hours? Who do you think slipped Madam Pince two signed permission slips allowing you and Weasley unrestricted access to the Restricted Section and granted you both the privilege of staying up well past curfew so that you could help Potter figure out his clues and prepare for his tasks?!" He ran his hand down his face. "I *always* knew when you were breaking the rules! I could always tell when you and Potter were in trouble," he said, extending his fingers fully. "I could feel it!"

"You you could feel it?" she stammered, her head angled slightly and her forehead creased.

"Didn't you consider it odd that I was in the corridors whenever you were breaking the rules? I've always known!"

She shrugged. "You patrolled the corridors at night. All the professor's..."

"No, we don't. Why do you think we have portraits all over the place? *They* watch the corridors at night. I have two portraits that *watch* the corridors outside Gryffindor tower *they* informed me if the Fat Lady was opened at night," he said.

Her eyes widened then became glassy as she thought about what he said.

"Yes, Elaine Cavendish, the famous alchemist who discovered Liquid Light, and Isabella Violet, nee de Valois, daughter of Charles de Valois, Duke of Berry."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Violet the Fat Lady's friend she was Charles de Valois' daughter? I didn't know she was in Slytherin?! Wait..." She paused and her eyes darted to the sides and narrowed as she thought. "Charles de Valois... He was Louis XI's brother?"

"Yes, and Isabella was his second daughter by his mistress, the Viscountess Colette de Chambes. And she was in Slytherin. She renounced her title and erased all records of her birth to flee the Spanish Inquisition at the age of thirteen and was brought to Hogwarts by Eberhard Paumgartner, who was Head of Slytherin at the time. Both ladies have frames in my chambers or can enter the frame in my office. In fact there is a bell on the frames in my chambers so they can get my attention... They would alert me each time you three snuck out of the common room. Even the Weasley twins didn't cause the staff as much trouble as you three did! That you three do! Bugging hell, you and Potter you're going to be the death of me!"

"No, we're not!" she exclaimed. "We've never done anything to get you killed well, before this all started with me and you..."

"No?" he asked, interrupting her curtly, his eyebrows rising up slightly. "He nearly did today! He almost killed me his second year when he walked into the Acromantulas' lair, and in his third year when he fell off his broom playing Quidditch and then again when he followed that werewolf down the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack! And his fourth year only Potter can be so utterly *inept* so incompetent and lazy that he nearly killed me simply *by procrastinating on his tasks*! In fact I felt the suffocating binding of the vow restrict on numerous times your fourth year. Then two years ago, during your fifth year when you and Potter didn't return from the forest, I knew immediately you were in danger blindly falling into a trap," he said, and she cocked her head slightly, her brows furrowed. "Yes I alerted the Order. I knew Black wasn't in danger I checked in on him. I had just returned from headquarters when the Binding tightened, strangling me, and I knew you'd gone to the Ministry and were in trouble."

"How?" she asked stubbornly, standing there defiantly before him with her hands on her hips.

"Because of the bloody Vow," he snarled, nearly shouting at her, his voice echoing in the vast space. "She made me promise to watch over and protect her son until the day came when he would fulfill that thrice damned prophecy! I was also forced to promise to serve Dumbledore faithfully, to do whatever he asked of me, and do whatever I could to help the Order of the Phoenix," he said with great disdain. "I said that I would do it for *her* and in doing so, my vow was tied to her blood as well. Every day I walked into the Great Hall for meals, every time I entered my classroom, every time I answered the old man's summons, he knew. If I was alive, he knew that I was keeping my vow to Lily. I'm tied to her until the terms of that bloody vow are fulfilled until the day Potter faces the Dark Lord and fulfills that fucking prophecy."

"If an Unbreakable Vow releases you after you fulfill your vow, then why was Draco living with you," Hermione asked and bit her lip.

"Because the Dark Lord ordered him to as a punishment to Narcissa he took her son away from her and gave him to me to train," he said and counted to five slowly. "Now I want you to do something for me. I want you to sway Draco over to our side."

"What?" she gasped.

"Draco isn't like his father; he hasn't the stomach for all of this," Severus said, forcing himself to calm down. "He's wavering, I know it. He likes you I see it. Oh, he's not in love with you, but you've impressed him for years, even though he has only ever spoken of you with great contempt. He's been competing against you ever since he'd met you. This year he has come to get to know you better as a friend. Befriend him actually befriend him. Make him see what a true friendship is, and that there is a way out. I cannot. Once he's turned, then I can tell him about my role in all this, possibly. He's a good Occlumens; he blocks the Dark Lord effectively."

She nodded, considering his request. "Okay, I'll try."

"And I want you to help me turn Cillian; he's wavering as well. Imagine if they were on our side, Hermione. I need him both of them." He looked away, as if he'd heard something, and then looked at her. "I have reasons to think that he is already disenchanted with the Dark Lord, enough to be defying him well, in one way he already is. But there have been incidences... and signs. I've known him for years, but like with Draco, I cannot reveal myself, my true allegiance, until I know for certain he's admitted his true feelings. I need you to do it, to sway him, to make him admit his discontent."

She nodded again in understanding. "All right, I can try. But won't the Dark Lord be angry if I do?"

Severus laughed. "He's expecting you to try. However, he doesn't believe that you'll be successful in turning the son of a devout family, such as Draco, or a loyal follower like Cillian." He looked up and his gaze scanned the old factory. "Can you hide this conversation in your castle palace?"

"Easily, as I have no idea where we are," she replied. "I'll bury it in the dungeon somewhere."

"Good," he said as he reached out and grasped her arm. "Now, keep your wits about you; you have to face the Dark Lord."

She inhaled in shock and paled.

"You knew you'd have to," he said with a smirk. "But first, we have a stop to make."

~~oOo~~

Author's Notes:

I made up *Identificāre effigia*. It's taken from the entry of identity on Dictionary.com: 163545; < Medieval Latin *identificāre* is equivalent to *identī ( tās )* identity + *-ficāre* = identify roughly.

And *effigia* is from <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl> It means: an image, likeness, effigy; a shade, ghost; an ideal.

*Lapso* means: [to glide, slide, flow; to slip, fall down]

*concido* means: [to fall down].

Theophrastus Paracelsus, a celebrated physician and reformer of therapeutics, mentioned **Eberhard Paumgartner** as being one of his earliest teachers. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11468a.htm> So, for fun, I put Eberhard in Hogwarts and made him Head of Slytherin.

Of all the graphorn pictures on the net, I chose this one, the Graphorn by nun witta as the 'realistic' version in my story; <http://nun-witta-gun.deviantart.com/gallery/#/d3fj4y8> as opposed to the purple one that is more like a graphorn you'd see in a children's book.

I have art! Thank you, Proulxes, for the incredible drawing of the Graphorn scene! It can be seen on my deviant art account under my penname: <http://beaweasley2.deviantart.com/#/d5jxzm>



# Insistences and Consequences

Chapter 37 of 43

To quote Severus, Gryffindors are never subtle, especially when they want you to see things their way. And it's time to face the Dark Lord... What's the saying? To pay the piper.

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick and for being my locations scout, and to Lady\_Rayne and DuchessOfArcadia, for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.



~o 37 o~

## Insistences and Consequences

They arrived in a wooded area. Hermione immediately turned, scanning her surroundings, trying to determine where he'd taken her. They were in a forest of pine trees and oaks mostly. She could see bits of dark blue, possibly a lake since she couldn't hear any waves crashing, through some of the tiny gaps between the tall trees and underbrush.

Severus grabbed her hand roughly, aiming his wand at her wrist, and activated the Skrewt shell bracelet. She cried out from the sharp, prickling vibration and tried to jerk her arm free. When he let go, she shook her wrist as he aimed for her neck. "Please don't," she started to say but was cut off as the necklace vibrated the sharp, stinging sensation making Hermione's eyes water. "Why?"

"You are not leaving me again," he snarled. "Damn it, Hermione, you should have trusted me!"

"I *do* trust you!" she cried out, wondering why he was suddenly being so horrible. They'd talked about it she'd shown him her memories...

"I know you do," he sighed softly, then growled out, "Come with me," sharply as he grabbed her arm and dragged her along the path into the trees.

"Where are we?" she asked, wondering why he wasn't taking her to the Dark Lord. Not that she was looking forward to that meeting.

He completely ignored her question, but his fingers relaxed a fraction as he led her deeper into the trees.

They had only gone about a few feet when Cillian appeared, running toward them on the path. Severus forced her to stop, and his fingers relaxed a bit, although he didn't let go of her arm. She thought she heard him hiss, "*Appearances*," softly, but wasn't sure. His eyes were like cold obsidian, his expression set in a satisfied smirk, but he'd said before that sometimes he acted a role for appearances sake.

"So you found her," Cillian said, stopping in front of Severus.

"Obviously. She chose to return to me," Severus said in an immensely satisfied tone. "I need you to keep an eye on her for a while."

Cillian looked at Hermione through narrow eyes. "And you still trust her?"

"Oh yes, I trust her. The Skrewt shells are active she can't leave and she has no idea where we are, so your security is still in place," Severus said, adding quickly to Hermione, "Remember what I said to you I expect you to try harder." He looked up at Cillian. "Now, I have a graphorn to harvest and a boy to get," he said and disappeared with a loud crack.

Hermione was incensed; Severus had said he was going to let her friends go... but if he was actually going to harvest the beast... Did she really trust him? Could he trace Harry somehow? He'd never lied to her, ever, that she could recall. Harry and Ron were sure to have gone to the new campsite by now if the campsite was still going to be in the same place... Did she inadvertently show him the picture of the camp's location?

"What did he mean, he has a graphorn to harvest?" Cillian snapped at her.

"When Severus found me I was there was a graphorn, and my foot was stuck..." she stammered, not sure what to tell him and not wanting to lie to him either.

"Where did you go?" he demanded, grabbing her arm roughly. "We've been searching everywhere for you!"

"Places I thought Severus might go I was scared." She tried to free herself but his grip tightened. "I was trying to get away from ~~your~~ sister and Bellatrix LeStrange... I didn't know where to go, or what to do, so I went to the most obvious places I know, hoping Severus would find me," she rattled off and tried jerking her arm free again. "You're hurting me!"

"You nearly got me killed never mind what the Dark Lord will do to Severus," he snarled, his glower murderous.

She sucked in a huge gulp of air and asked, "What do you mean, 'what the Dark Lord will do to Severus'?" fearing the answer.

"What do you think I mean?" he snarled. He tugged on her arm to make her walk with him. "What did you think your stunt would accomplish? The Dark Lord will question us both, and our answers had best impress him or we'll suffer his wrath."

She swallowed the hard lump that seemed to suddenly be in her throat. "What do you mean *both* Severus and me or Severus and you?"

He turned on her. "Me. Severus. *And* you." She took a step back at his vehemence, and he advanced on her. "Who did you think I meant? Severus and I are both responsible for you. We shall have to answer for your escape and where you've been and whom you spoke to if you spoke to anyone and why it took a *day and a half* to find you!" he snarled, looming over her threateningly. "So far the Dark Lord has been lenient with us, but his tolerance has limits ones I don't like having tested or pushed to far."

Hermione cringed at his statement. She didn't want him or anyone to suffer for her actions. "But it wasn't your fault. I was being chased and was afraid for my life I you can't be punished for what I did?"

"Do you want to bet?" Cillian sneered, his normally warm brown eyes hard and cold as he glared at her. *HE's* a harsh master one to be *obeyed*, or there are consequences *severe consequences*."

"Then why do you follow him?" she asked, wondering how someone as intelligent as he was could remain loyal, even after everything he knew first hand.

"I have no choice," he sneered.

She shook her head. "We always have choices! Everyone has choices."

"Well, I made my choice a long time ago, and once a Death Eater always a Death Eater," he said with a dark smirk.

"But that's not always true, is it?" she asked. "I mean it would be possible to serve two masters? Muggles did it..."

"I've made my allegiance clear, I'm his a loyal follower," he said angrily, turning away to continue down the path, making her stumble after him.

But even in his anger she could detect a hint of resignation in his tone, as if he felt there wasn't a way out. "You could always change sides, help the Order..."

"No one leaves the circle. No one defies the Dark Lord and lives."

She stopped short, gaping at him. *Severus was right?! Try harder...* his voice echoed in her mind.

Cillian jerked on her wrist, hard. "Keep walking."

She stared at his back as she followed him, wondering how she was going to get him to see she was right. The trees thinned suddenly, and Hermione found herself walking through the snow toward a rather large, grey slate manor house. A low rockery, box hedges and bare roses surrounded a front garden area and a stone path led up to the front door. "Whom exactly do you want to win this war?" she asked.

"The Dark Lord *is* winning," Cillian said with a snort and made her start walking again. There was a bite to his words, but there was a subtle inflection again as if he was resigned to an inevitable outcome one that hadn't even been decided yet.

But the prophecy said *equals*. Harry had a fifty-fifty chance to beat the Dark Lord. Hermione believed it; deep in her heart she knew Harry's chance was better than merely fifty-fifty because good always won over evil... "And yet, Harry escaped from him twice," she said. *Four, if one considered the possessed Professor Quirrell... and the soul in the diary their second year...* but she didn't think Cillian would count those. "And he eludes him even now. The Order is still fighting and the Muggle-borns are..."

"Being rounded up and eliminated," he said darkly.

"Not all of them," she stated. *The Order is growing and the DA is too*; if she were to believe everyone who was with Harry and Ron.

"You think we're not being effective that we don't know what we are doing?" he challenged her. "We have the upper hand, Hermione! We control the Aurory and the Ministry of Magic as well as Hogwarts. Even the main shopping areas are under his control now, like Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade and the Temple Bar Gennel."

They entered the house, and he stamped his feet on the doormat inside the entry hall. He looked into the room on his right, smiling for a moment.

She paused to look into the room briefly and saw a woman with softly curling brown hair in a long, flowing wine-colored robe and a hunter green cashmere wrap, sitting by a window engrossed in a book. Hermione looked up at Cillian, wondering who the girl was. "Behave yourself until Severus returns."

"But not everyone is just falling in line, are they?"

"And how would you know? You've been locked away in your castle," he said sharply.

"I read the papers."

He scoffed at her as he turned to enter the room on his left, and Hermione followed him into a sizeable, well-appointed drawing room, barely taking time to register the antique furnishings. "All I'm saying is that there is resistance. Right is right, and no matter how tightly you try to squeeze your fist, people will slip right through your fingers. And those who know what is right will stand up and fight for it."

"Not everyone, some cower like mice," he said, turning on her. "You'd be surprised how many beg for mercy and do as they are told."

"And I know that there are those who rebel against tyranny and the insane genocide of a mad man," she countered.

He stepped closer to her, leaning forward as he snarled, "You dare call the Dark Lord a mad man?"

Hermione involuntarily took a step back. "How can you be around him, listen to him, and still think he's sane? He's the most manipulative, evil person I've ever..."

"He isn't evil!" he shouted. "He wants to purify our race to make the wizarding world a better place."

"That's bullshit! Is it a better world in which innocent children are murdered in their beds? Killed simply because by some chance of fate they have magical ability but their parents don't? Muggle-borns are not stealing magic they are born with the ability! We're not an abomination! We are born this way magical," she said emphatically. She could see in his eyes that he wasn't going to argue that point with her. "The problem is that the Dark Lord's better world includes *genocide*! Of innocent people of children! He's crazed, demented..."

"*He's brilliant!* The strongest, most powerful wizard I've ever met. He knows more about the Dark Arts than any wizard before him..."

She stepped closer to him. "According to Dumbledore, he underwent so many dangerous, magical transformations, delved so deeply into the Dark Arts, that when he resurfaced as Lord Vol..."

"*Don't say his name!*" Cillian snarled loudly, almost a shout, cutting her off even before she made the 'd' sound. He glowered down at her, his dark eyes narrowing dangerously. "Never say his name."

"Fine...Tom Riddle, the Dark Lord, ole Snake-face," she said, unfazed as his expression darkened. "His name is Tom Marvolo Riddle; his mum, Merope Gaunt, named him after his father his *Muggle* father. Did you know he is a *half-blood*? Were you in the graveyard the night he came back? The night Harry escaped from him for the second time? That was his *father's* grave," she said, and he scowled at her, his one eye narrowed a bit more than the other, as if he might be trying to ascertain if what she was saying was true. "Tom Riddle was a student at Hogwarts. Did you know that? He *used* to be a handsome boy I saw a picture of him!"

He looked away from her. She'd been around him enough to see that he was conflicted angry, yes, but something else as well.

"He's a hypocrite! Based upon his own blood-purity guidelines for elimination, the Dark Lord himself is an undesirable! His mother, if she were alive today, would be severely chastised for lusting after a Muggle for debasing herself with that Muggle, Tom Riddle, and defiling herself with mud."

Cillian turned to glare at the windows. Maybe he already knew that the Dark Lord was a half-blood. "I wouldn't be surprised if he had a narcissistic personality disorder, he's mental a megalomaniac and you think he's brilliant?"

Cillian whipped about to face her again. "He *is* brilliant!"

"Have you ever really sat and analyzed him and his actions really looked at this wizard you so revere? He has delusional fantasies of power, omnipotence*immortality*, and he's fanatically preoccupied with issues of *his* personal superiority, *his* power, *his* prestige he's the vainest person I've ever met!"

"Enough," Cillian shouted. "Keep your opinions to yourself." He turned, stormed across the room and through another doorway.

Hermione, incensed that he simply walked away from her, followed him, continuing despite his demand for her to stop. "He regards himself as superior to everyone; he has an inflated sense of his own opinions and cares nothing for those of other people. In fact, have you ever seen him care about anyone but himself and his bloody snake? Does he have any *real* friends I don't mean loyal supplicants or followers real friends? Or have you ever seen him with a human love interest? And I don't mean women he uses to service his needs *lovers*. Even when he's being *nice*, it's calculated and manipulative so he gets what he wants."

She stopped in the center of the large room, and Cillian turned sharply to face her. "Do you really want to live the rest of your life under him as your master? Once he conquers the wizarding world, what's to stop him from abolishing all government and making himself tyrannical ruler of England and putting Muggles in their rightful place! Or who do you think will be sitting on the wizarding throne?"

"He never said anything about abolishing the government," Cillian snapped. "And he put Pius Thicknesse as Minister of Magic."

She let out a sharp bark of laughter. "Of course he did he put a puppet into the position, and that left him free to move about without the restrictions of civil office while his puppet handled all the mundane things. But who is really in charge of the Ministry? Certainly not Minister Thicknesse! He answers to the Dark Lord. I bet Thicknesse doesn't make a move without groveling for permission."

"He has a lot of things to do," Cillian stated loudly, "or haven't you noticed we are fighting a *war*!"

"Yes, he has plenty of people to handle *themundane things*. He appointed Devon Yaxley as head of the MLE and in charge of Muggle Infiltration Defense. He put Morgund Runcorn as head Auror not that they're looking for Dark wizards anymore they're hunting down innocent citizens. He put Wesley Westmore as head of Magical Transportation, and Blaine Macnair is head of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures!" she said equally as loud. "He appointed Barcus Mordaunt as assistant head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission, under Dolores Umbridge I bet she's a loyal follower too."

Cillian just chuckled condescendingly. "Not that old crone, no. She's just a supporter, believes like we do."

"*I bet*," Hermione said contemptuously. "She's a contemptible hag."

"What is all this arguing?"

Cillian and Hermione both turned to see two women enter the sitting room, one obviously the mother of the younger woman. The older one had short, wavy, brown hair, kind brown eyes, and was wearing a white blouse under an embroidered waistcoat and a dark pink wrap with tan trousers. The younger woman was the one Hermione had noticed earlier reading by the window. She was very beautiful, with a heart-shaped face and her brown hair falling in soft curls past her shoulders, with a slender, yet shapely figure. Cillian's expression softened. "Just a disagreement, Juliet, don't be concerned," he said, his tone forcefully modulated to be respectful to the lady, before he tuned and glared daggers at Hermione.

"But you were arguing about *him*," the younger woman said, moving toward Cillian. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes, everything is fine," Cillian said politely with a smile that belied the angry tension in his frame. "A difference of opinions."

The younger girl turned to look at Hermione. "Who's this?"

Cillian looked at Hermione as if not sure what to say. "This is Severus' girl, Hermione."

Hermione extended her hand. "Hermione Snape."

"Dianne Henley," she said, shaking hands. "And this is my mother, Juliet."

Hermione shook hands with Juliet and was surprised that when they touched there wasn't that faintly subtle quiver-pulsation she'd expected that happened when magical people shook hands that aura most magical people possessed. The woman didn't have innate magical energy she was a Muggle a Muggle staying in Cillian's home. "A pleasure to meet you," she said politely, smiling at Juliet.

"Are you the girl Severus married, then?" Dianne asked.

Hermione turned to Dianne. "Yes, we hand-fastened last August."

"I heard it was a lovely affair," Dianne said, her soft brown eyes openly regarding Hermione.

Hermione tried to keep from rolling her eyes. "It was extravagant, flowers and fairy lights everywhere... The Dark Lord walked me down the aisle and gave me away."

Dianne cringed at the idea, then carefully controlled her face into a polite smile. "What about your father? Oh, sorry. Is he still alive?" she asked, curious, indicating they should sit. Cillian looked at Hermione pointedly, his eyes narrowing as he shook his head, warning her.

"My father is a Muggle," she said, glancing at Juliet quickly to see her reaction. The woman did look surprised as did Dianne. "My parents did not attend but then, considering the company, it was probably for the best."

"Oh." Dianne nodded solemnly, her eyes sympathetic but curious. "I'm sorry they couldn't. I hope they are happy for you."

"Oh, *bother*," Cillian exclaimed and stormed from the room.

Hermione excused herself and ran after him, finding herself back in the long foyer as Cillian exited the house out the back door. She followed him out onto the ornate patio at the rear of the house, the door slamming shut behind her as she called out to him, but he didn't stop. She stormed forward and exclaimed accusingly, "She's a Muggle-born!" pointing behind her at the bay windows of the sitting room.

Cillian stopped, spun about-face and glared at her. "Yes, I know she's a Muggle-born," he snapped.

"What are you doing with a Mudblood, Death Eater?" Hermione asked accusingly.

He narrowed his eyes, and she could feel the animosity radiating off of him; his cutting stare had the force of a blade. "Do*NOT* call *her* a Mudblood," he growled out forcefully.

"Well, she is, isn't she? To all you Death Eaters she's the scum of the earth an undesirable lower than mud. Her very existence is the reason for this war her infiltration into *your* world."

"You don't know anything," he spat, his body rigid and his hands fisted tightly.

"Don't I?" she asked, knowing she was pushing too hard, pressing her luck.

"No!" he snarled, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "You don't know *anything!*"

"Of course I know I'm a Muggle-born, too! People like her Mudbloods like me! Arrested, sent to Azkaban Kissed and left floating in the sea to drown," Hermione said with delicately intoned sarcasm. "Or aren't you a part of all that, Death Eater?"

Reflexively, he drew his wand, his glower darkening as he stared at her enraged.

"You love her, don't you?" she asked, trying a different tactic. "Is she the person you hinted to me about when we were alone in the library?"

His eyes narrowed into a scowl as he stepped toward her and growled out, "That's none of your business." His wand shook in his clenched fist.

"Yet, you hide her away in your house, keeping her and her mother here as what?" she asked, tilting her head slightly to the side. She could see that he was conflicted again; if this had been a casual conversation he might have admitted his reasons, but he was too angry, too upset to trust her here and now. "Your mistresses?" she pushed.

She must have struck a nerve. "For your information she is *NOT* my mistress she's my my... And Juliet and her husband you this is none of your business."

Hermione took a step closer to him, and he backed up accordingly. In the last four months, they had developed a rapport between them, a trust, almost a friendship. He'd been honest to her when she'd asked him about his past, his friendship with Severus, and his school days. He'd even shared a few recollections and anecdotes with her when they'd been alone in the library. And she was either going to lose that friendship or bring him over to her side of this conflict. "That's quite a risk, hiding undesirables. What if you get caught? What if he finds out? What if one of your brethren finds out? Or your sister gets suspicious about the real reason you won't consider a respectable match? Then what? Aren't you supposed to be trimming the Mudbloods and undesirables out of proper wizarding society, eliminating them or turning them over to the Muggle-born Registration Commission for incarceration or elimination?"

There was a flicker of fear in his eyes at the mention of the MRC.

"Why won't you admit it you hide her because you love her. People like Dianne are not undesirable. She didn't steal her wand or steal her magic. She's not an immoral pretender or a charlatan..."

"No, she didn't," he admitted. "She's a witch."

"But you know it's wrong, don't you that he is wrong?" Hermione pushed. She could see the conflict in his eyes; she could see that he agreed but wasn't going to admit it. "He may have originally had good ideas; things you felt were needed, that had to be done if the wizarding world were to come out of the shadows. Originally, you may have agreed with some of his opinions, even shared a few. Or you got caught up in the fervor..." She noted that he relaxed a fraction, his shoulders not as tense as before as he looked at her, his face flushed with either embarrassment or anger, she couldn't tell probably both. "But somewhere along the line you began to question, to think, to realize that maybe he wasn't right about everything. That maybe he wasn't what you thought he was..."

"I knew very well who he was and what he stood for," he said. He inhaled, his chest expanding, then relaxing as he let out his breath. "I was enthralled by him everyone was. Marcus was right; he was... It was a long time ago. He was winning. It was join or..."

"Be killed," she finished for him. "You're not the only one. There were many who were swept up in his cause during the first rising."

He opened his mouth to say something and then snapped it shut.

"And then he demanded more, took more and assumed that those loyal to him would want what he did," she said. It was how the books and the articles about the Death Eater trials described the rise of the Dark Lord. "He was charismatic, said what you wanted to hear, drew you in and once in you were trapped." His eyes narrowed again, but she pressed on, "But there is a way out not that I am suggesting leaving him, but to choose that, when the time comes, you'll stand up for what you want what *you* believe in. There will be chances, opportunities that if taken, even cunningly, will ensure that our side wins. That Harry wins. If you take those chances, you will come out on the right side in the end."

"He I can't," he stammered. "This is all hypothetical and impossible."

He was listening. He didn't hex her or shut her up. *Maybe Severus is right he's ready. He just doesn't know whom to trust.* "No, I know, I... In the end it will come down to him and Harry. It's why he's so afraid of Harry why he insists that *he* has to be the one to kill him. It's more than an obsession and there are some of his followers who don't understand why but I do. I know."

His eyes narrowed and his lips pursed.

"Did it never occur to you that maybe there are darker forces involved the Fates a prophecy? He has to face Harry it's his destiny."

There was a momentary flicker, a widening of his eyes that was immediately concealed behind a stony mask, but she saw it. Maybe he had heard about the prophecy, or he might know what Severus knew. "Dumbledore believed that Harry had the power to defeat the Dark Lord he banked on it. He put everything he had into preparing him and me for this task... to vanquish the Dark Lord for good. I believe that Harry can do it."

"Enough!" he snapped. His lips twitched, but the next instant, he was sneering once more. "You don't know what you're talking about leave me alone." Cillian turned and sprinted across the grass.

Hermione tried to follow him but he was a fast runner. Just as he disappeared into the trees, she suddenly crashed, face first into what felt like a solid wall. The magical boundary shimmered unyielding where she'd impacted with it, and she fell back several feet, landing on her bum, knocking the wind out of her.

"Oh my god!" Dianne dropped to her knees, placing a hand on Hermione's back, helping her to sit up. "Are you all right?"

"What was...? I hit... a barrier?" she stammered. The magic was strong, impenetrable and had been completely undetectable.

"It's the shield. It surrounds the house. Cillian and Severus can pass. I can too, but it's for my protection," she explained as she helped Hermione stand. "It's best not to try leaving again unless you're escorted."

"Okay, I won't," she said as she straightened out her jumper and wiped her hands on her jeans. "I was only going to follow him..." Hermione felt her face flush slightly. *Of course there's a shield.*

"It's disconcerting, I know, but really it's for our safety," Dianne said with a lilt of her head and an apologetic smile. She stepped back and regarded Hermione critically. "What were you fighting about now?"

"The insanity of being a minion loyal to the Dark Lord and making choices," Hermione said truthfully.

Dianne's eyes became frosty. "You're Potter's friend one of..." Her eyes widened and she took a small step back. "But he said you were yielding," she said and then looked at the trees where Cillian had vanished. "You're not, are you? You still believe... and you he... No, he can't he can't!" she said, her voice becoming frightened, concerned, as she slowly moved away from Hermione. "If he does, he will die the Dark Lord will kill him!"

"If he's wavering, it's a good thing," Hermione said, but Dianne wasn't listening to her as she backed up to where the boundary was.

"I'll talk to him. He just has to calm down, that's all," Dianne said, hurrying across the grass as if nothing was there. She turned and ran, following Cillian into the trees.

Hermione watched her go with a sense of jealousy. She stood there, staring at the same spot, willing Cillian to come back.

"You won't be able to go in there," a man said behind her, making Hermione turn sharply in the direction of the voice. "It's their private place." He was a short man, easily five inches shorter than Juliet, with a round face and eyes framed by worry and laugh lines. He motioned for Hermione to go with him back into the house. "It's cold out here, come back inside where it's warm."

Reluctantly, Hermione followed him inside. Mrs. Henley was standing in the hallway, smiling at Hermione sympathetically. Hermione smiled back, at a loss as to what to say.

"How about a nice cup of tea and a slice of fruit cake?" Mrs. Henley offered.

"Okay," Hermione said with a shrug.

Hermione wanted to be near the back door for when Cillian returned, so they joined Hermione in the large sitting room. The fine room had two large bay windows that let in plenty of light and handsome maple and walnut furniture. Mr. Henley walked over to the fireplace to light a fire as Hermione and Juliet sat in the chairs closest to the bay window nearest to the door.

"How do you know Cillian?" Mrs. Henley asked as a rather tall house-elf wearing a knitted shawl over an old dress and slippers appeared with the tea service. The elf kept her ears down and back with her head bowed, and Hermione thought she detected a concealing spell on the creature. "Thank you, Ella," Mrs. Henley said, and Ella nodded and shuffled from the room.

"Sweet old lady," she said, checking the pot. "Efficient, but won't say much to us."

Hermione smiled at the comment, curious about the house-elf's attitude and clothes but said nothing, answering the first question instead. "Cillian's like my bodyguard-protector at school," she admitted, hoping that they wouldn't want too many details.

Mrs. Henley smiled as she poured the tea. "Yes, Cillian is quite protective," she said and looked up. "Milk?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes, please." She accepted the cup. "How long have you known Cillian?"

"Since... it's been what, Andrew? Seven years?" she asked her husband as she fixed his tea.

"They had been dating three or four years before this Dark Lord remerged, and he forced us into this safe house," he said with a slight bit of resentment in his voice. "Of course, it's for our safety. Those Death Eaters know about us, and we'd be killed for having two magical children."

"Annabel is thirteen years younger than her sister, but she's like Dianne," Mrs. Henley said with a slight twitch of her lips, handing Mr. Henley his tea. "Imagine our surprise. Our little boy isn't though he's normal."

Hermione tried not to smirk or roll her eyes at the comment. "Are they here as well?" she asked, but Mr. Henley shook his head.

"They were sent abroad," Mrs. Henley said, then clamped up at Mr. Henley's warning glance.

Hermione set down her cup. "No, it makes sense; it's very dangerous for Muggle-borns right now," she said, feeling sorry for the couple. "I had to send my parents abroad for their protection. It's really hard. I miss them terribly, but I know they're safe."

"So your parents are Muggle-born?" Mr. Henley asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No, I am."

Both their eyes widened at her admission. "But you're at Hogwarts?"

She nodded, looking away thoughtfully. "I suppose you could say it's under extenuating circumstances," she said and looked at them. "I'm the Dark Lord's prisoner, of sorts, and married to Severus Snape... He's headmaster now. I it's the Dark Lord wants me available to him and under his thumb..." They looked confused, so rather than explain, she simply said, "It's complicated."

"It's all complicated nowadays, although it's hard not knowing what's going on," Mr. Henley stated. "Oh, we get word occasionally, mostly from Cillian, and there is an owl that brings us the *Times* on Sundays, and Dianne gets the *Daily Prophet*, but Cillian warns us not to believe everything we read in *that* publication. And once in a while, Cillian picks up our post and brings it to us, but we are so cut off."

"So Cillian and Dianne...?" Hermione prompted, hoping that her guess was right.

"Nice enough bloke. Loves her, he does. They would've been married... but... Well, he shows up suddenly two years ago and tells us we have to go into hiding. My partner, Jack he's the watchmaker he and Oliver are running the shop. Cillian told us that when this is all over, he'll fix things... but it's not going to end soon, is it?" Mr. Henley asked, but although he was smiling amiably, there was a sadness to his voice.

They talked about the wizarding world, the events that they knew to be happening, and Hermione was surprised by the amount of information they had. However, the Henleys spoke in terms of Dianne's world and their world, as if the wizarding world was a completely separate plane of existence that only magical people could cross.

~C~

Cillian walked part way around the circumference of the stone pavilion and stopped, arms crossed, staring out across Derwent Water towards the far shore. This view, looking at the placid blue lake surrounded by the Lakeland Fells, was normally one of his favorites on the island.

He remembered climbing Catbells frequently as a child, delighting in the view back towards the island that only he could see, thanks to the magic that had been placed upon it. The thought that there was such a secret place, in plain view of all those ordinary Muggles walking up the hill alongside him, had thrilled his younger self. It was one of the many ways that had made him feel powerful and special as a young wizard.

But now the serenity of the lake before him did nothing to soothe his thoughts. His mind was in turmoil. He should never have allowed that snip of a girl to go on like she had. *I should have cut her off or silenced her* except she'd said so many of the things that had plagued him over the last year, well, two years, if he was honest with himself.

He scuffed his boot in irritation and leaned against one of the stone columns of the colonnade and crossed his arms again. He had blindly followed his brothers into the inner circle of the Death Eaters at eighteen, ready to fight for wizard supremacy. But after the Dark Lord fell and peace returned, he realized his folly that and he'd met Dianne. She was several years younger than him; she'd been a knobby-kneed teen the last time he'd seen her at school, who had turned into a beautiful lady, and he'd fallen for her instantly. It took three months for her to agree to even go out with him, and when she saw his Dark Mark for the first time it took another six months to prove he regretted it, that he didn't hold to those ideas any longer.

But there was no way out. The intermittent irritation from his Dark Mark on his arm flared slightly, and he kicked the pillar behind him at the reminder. At least he wasn't being summoned.

He let his gaze travel over the shoreline, wishing he could simply hide here at his great-grandfather's 'cottage' until the war was over.

Except no one left the Dark Lord. No one. It was suicide.

He looked down at the snow-covered ground. In spring, the area around the pavilion would be thick with irises. Dianne loved irises.

As if his thoughts had summoned her, he heard her soft voice call out, "Cillian," and he turned his head. She approached him cautiously, unfortunately well familiar with his temper when he was truly angry or upset, as he was now.

He took a deep breath as he shook his head, and she came to him. He pulled her to him once she was within arm's reach and held her tightly with his nose buried in her hair. *Lemon verbena*. She always smelled like lemon verbena and vanilla.

"Cillian, you can't, you know this," she said softly into his chest.

It was her greatest fear.

It was his deepest wish to leave with her and her parents and never return.

But after what had happened to Karkaroff, Cavendish, Lundergan and others, she had refused to go with him to Ponsitano, Italy *Of course she's right, there is nowhere on earth I could go*, he thought with a heavy heart. *Not even the deepest part of Brazil or the remotest territory of Australia*. That, and he did love his family; his desertion could cost his family their lives. And he loved Dianne's family, enough to risk everything to protect them.

Several months later after the Dark Lord's return, he'd forged the needed documents, put most his wealth in a Muggle bank, and transferred all his lands under a false name. Mr. Henley had helped him. To thank the man, he had abducted his family, sent the two youngest children to stay with their relatives in Germany, and deposited Mr. and Mrs. Henley and Dianne here, on this island, a little more than a prison, one Mrs. Henley and Dianne compared to the attic an Anne Frank had written about.

Cillian had then hidden the Henley's house under the Fidelius Charm. He altered the memory of Andrew's two employees into thinking they ran the business for him (under the assumed name of Henry Clark), and locked all his memories of what he'd done down as deep as he could bury them in his own mind.

A practice he had become good at over the last two and a half years. Boxing away and burying the memories that the Dark Lord was not to see and Occluding his mind were skills that he had worked hard to perfect. The act of doing so gave him a savage sense of pleasure; knowing that the Dark Lord could not have all of him enabled him to hold on to a degree of self-respect.

"No, when school resumes, I will go back to the castle," he said with a heavy sigh *Under the watchful eyes of the Dark Lord's most trusted servant and my best friend* At least there he didn't have to torture innocents, destroy homes, and haul families to the MRC. Moreover, Severus didn't care about his association with Dianne; he probably thought of her as his mistress, his plaything.

That and there was a lot of pressure for the pure-blood witches of eligible age to bear children, and pure-blood fathers were not ones to accept unwed mothers, especially their precious daughters. Cillian dreaded being forced into a farce of a marriage to repeatedly impregnate a witch he didn't love. Sons to be raised into the New Order of Walpurgis, who would someday rise to the inner circle of the Death Eaters, and daughters who'd grow up to become breeders of more potential Death Eaters.

In a way he envied Severus; he had an eight-month reprieve yet before he had to begin breeding with whomever the Death Eaters' wives thought appropriate. Only, Cillian was certain that Severus had fallen for Hermione, that he truly loved her. When her usefulness was over, Cillian doubted that Severus would kill her. *No, he will be in the same mess I am, trying to save an undesirable from her fate.*

The whole situation was a fucking nightmare.

"Are you all right?" Dianne asked, leaning back to look at him.

Cillian smirked at her. "I love you," he said and kissed her as if it was the last time he'd ever be able to. He loved the feel of her lips, the taste of jasmine tea and lemon biscuits on her tongue and the way she molded into his arms. Kissing her was like breathing in life; although he'd never admit it to anyone, it made him feel whole.

When the kiss ended, he supported her until her legs gained their strength again, and she smiled at him. Even her smile warmed him from the inside out. Her arms tightened around his waist as she laid her head on his shoulder. He liked the way she fitted so well against him. He held her, closing his eyes and breathing in the smells of the trees, the lake and her scent.

He loved the fact that she'd let him just hold her without uncomfortable chatter and questions.

"Are you cold?" he asked after a while when he'd felt her shiver.

He felt her head move and her shoulders shrugged slightly. "No."

He smiled at her and chuckled softly. "Let's get you back to the house where it's warm."

She nodded but didn't move right away. "Or cast a Warming Charm on us."

He silently laughed, and his lips twitched slightly at her suggestion. "C'mon," he said, making her move so they could walk back together.

As soon as he and Dianne stepped through the shield and walked toward the patio, he saw Hermione's face momentarily in the window, and he groaned silently.

"What?" Dianne asked.

"Nothing," he replied, *just an annoying Gryffindor who thinks she's right and isn't considering the consequences of what she's insisting on.*

~S~

Severus landed on the island and strode purposefully up to the house. He adjusted the mass of newly harvested hide and the two horns in his arms so he could open the door and entered the entry hall, just as Hermione exited the large sitting room at the back of the house. "Hermione," he called out to get her attention. She stopped and turned, her expression changing from glad to see him to apprehensive. "What? No hug?" he asked with a smirk. "Come here."

She approached him, eyeing the hide and horns in his arms.

"How did it go?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Not so well," she replied, looking dejected. "I tried, really I did. I pushed, maybe a bit too much, but he became angry and ran off through a barrier."

*I bet you tried*, he thought, controlling his face to hide his smirk. "You'll have time tonight to try again," he said, dumping the hide and horns to the side of the room. He didn't have to use Legilimency to know how hard she pushed. *Gryffindors are never subtle, especially when they want you to see things their way.* They tended to be blunt and persistent, and Hermione was intelligent and good at vocalizing her thoughts. She'd wear Cillian down, and then he could finally have a serious talk with his friend.

When he stood up, she said, "He's just walking back with Dianne," indicating the back door.

So, she has met Dianne. Good. "What do you think about Dianne?"

"She's a Muggle-born like me," she said, eyeing his robes as he nodded. "I think you're right about Cillian, but I think she knows he's wavering. I think he has thought about leaving the Dark Lord, but won't for obvious reasons."

*The torture of your loved ones and*, "Death," he said with a nod. Hermione nodded confirming his statement. *So that came up? Interesting.* He'd have to ask to see her memories of their argument; she might have missed something important.

The back door opened, and Dianne entered, followed by Cillian. "If I seem angry with you, ignore it," he said softly as Cillian, followed by Dianne, approached.

She hung her head and nodded. "Pretenses, right? You keep a lot of secrets." She didn't mean it as a compliment.

"Yes, I do," he said succinctly.

"What are you going to do with that?" Cillian asked, pointing to the greyish-purple hide and gold horns. He made a quick glaring glance at Hermione, then looked at Severus.

Severus raised an eyebrow and looked at Hermione, frowning at her. "The horns are going into my personal stores, although I may sell one," he said as he turned to Dianne, and his lips curved into a small smile, "and the hide I'm going to give to you."

"That's thoughtful of you," Cillian sneered. He was obviously in a bad mood. "What is she going to do with that bloody mess?"

"Whatever the lady wants, I suppose," Severus stated, indicating the hide on the floor. "It's hardly *bloody* I cleaned it. I used the Scraping, Scudding and Fleshing Charms on the hide to remove the flesh, fat and membranous tissue, so it's ready to be salted." He'd cleaned up before returning, even tried to clean his robes, using that icy water to do so. He'd dried his clothes magically and warmed them with charms, but nevertheless, he flushed slightly, knowing there were still some bloodstains on his robes.

"Really, Severus, and you just dump it in the hallway? True finesse," Cillian complained.

Dianne quickly interjected, "I'm sure that I can I'm more than capable of dealing with the hide, Cillian."

"Dianne, I'll brew you the potions for curing the hide after we return," Severus said, grateful to her.

Dianne's gaze jumped from the hide on the floor to Severus with a quick snap of her head. "Return?" she asked.

"Yes, return," Severus said definitely. He looked at Cillian. "It's time to face the Dark Lord."

He actually felt sorry for Hermione when he saw her complexion pale and her eyes widen in fear.

~ H ~

Hermione stood just outside the doorway between the large hall and the drawing room where the Dark Lord was holding court, waiting until the Dark Lord called them forward. Severus and Cillian stood behind her, silently observant of everything around them. Hermione could hear the conversation being held between the Dark Lord and the men he'd identified as Rosenberg, Mengele and Vorster about the magical surrogate program and the experimentation of magical implantation of carefully bred fetuses into witches who'd been proved to be of proper wizarding blood. The implications were grotesque, even though the wizards tried to make it sound promising for the repopulation of the wizarding world.

The wizard currently speaking, Mengele, who had a nasally voice with an odd accent, was reporting that many of the half-blood infants showed the early promise of magical strength. "I suggest that Death Eaters father as many children as possible, using as many half-blood girls as possible. It's possible that the pure-blood ancestry would be strong in these children, beating out the infection of the Muggle-tainted blood. This would create strong, hereditarily viable magical children, and eliminate the number of squib defects. Also, if we segregate these children, use 'pure-bloodisation', raise them in good homes under proper guidance, they would grow up to serve you, Master."

Another voice spoke up, "I would like to set up maternity homes a place of pride where women could give birth and receive care. We can press Healers into service, if needed, and the homes can serve as daycare facilities for the mothers so that they can propagate as needed and as frequently as possible to build up the pure-blood race."

"But according to the Magical Birth Registry, pure-blood births are declining, while the last copy of Hogwarts School Registry indicates that Mudblood births are on the rise," the Dark Lord stated. Hermione cringed at the irritation in his voice.

She recognized Macnair's voice when he spoke up, "My Lord, we could remove the children take them to an improvised shelter an orphanage or Vorster's maternity home perhaps, to be raised to serve you, as fighters for your cause." Hermione knew that Mengele and Vorster had been put in charge of the Magical Children's Health and Welfare Office. "They would never gain proper status, naturally, but they could be used as soldiers..."

"This war will be over before they reach their maturity to fight," the deep voice she thought might be Rosenberg's said. "My Lord, another alternative is to make them available for adoption by Death Eater families or loyal supporters as foster parents. Properly taught, both in society norms and to know their place, they would grow in your service, loyal to you and your will. We would be able to then raise the children properly, from newborn infants to age of eleven when they would start Hogwarts."

"Who would want a Muggle's spawn? Don't we have enough Mudbloods to eliminate now? And we'd have to sterilize them to keep them from breeding," a gruff voice stated.

Hermione saw Draco walk over to his father. Draco glanced around the room, possibly taking note of who was in attendance, and spotted her, watching him. He glared at her, made to walk up to her but his father put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "You can speak to her later," Lucius said as he tried to draw Draco away. "If the Dark Lord sees fit to let her live."

Draco nodded, and Hermione watched him turn to leave with his father.

A thin, pointy-faced man with a prominent nose entered the hall from the drawing room, stopping next to Severus. "Snape, Gwynek, you were not announced," he said saucily with a grin. "One moment while I rectify that." He turned heel and returned to the drawing room.

"Might as well go in," Cillian stated, grasping one of Hermione's arms gently.

"Why not," Severus agreed softly and he grasped her other arm, his fingers relaxed but firm. Not that she was about to struggle or refuse to enter the room and face the

Dark Lord, but if her knees gave way, at least they'd be holding her up.

Hermione saw the pointy-faced man bow before the Dark Lord, but Voldemort acknowledged them before the impertinent wizard had a chance to speak. "Severus, Cillian, I see you've returned Hermione to me," he said, his voice quickly becoming ominous. "Bring her to here."

She cringed at his sudden bitter tone but willingly went with the two wizards at her side to face her fate. Severus had said that given the situation, once he saw her memories, she might come out unscathed. She hoped so.

She saw Bellatrix curled up, trapped in a magical sphere next to the dais where the Dark Lord's throne stood. The barmy witch glowered at Hermione as she approached. Belinda was lying on the floor in manacles and chains beside Bellatrix, apparently unconscious, her face bruised, and she had a small bit of blood oozing from the corner of her mouth. Hermione cringed inwardly at the thought of what could've happened to the witch. She felt sorry for Cillian, having to see his sister in such a state. She might not like the woman, and knew she'd tried to kill her a few times now, but seeing her like that, Hermione felt pity for her.

The Dark Lord stood and stepped down from his platform, radiating anger. "You left me!" he snarled venomously as both men shoved her ahead of them, keeping back a full step behind her on either side. "After all I did for you the honor I bestowed upon you you left me!"

Hermione kneeled as gracefully as she could. "Yes," she said, lowering her head in shame and fear. She could sense both men kneel behind her and tried to force herself to breath normally, unable to look up at the angry wizard above her.

"That's *it* YES?" the Dark Lord snarled furiously. "*Extremus Gelidus*" he said deliberately, his wand a blur before the tip pointed directly at her, and she instantly felt a rush of intense cold, beyond chilled-to-the-bone cold, envelope her body. Hermione fell frozen on the floor, screaming, her body jerking from muscle spasms and convulsions, feeling stabbing pin-and-dagger-like pain piercing every inch of her body. Each inhalation burned her lungs.

"She came back with me willingly, my Lord," Severus' calm, melodic voice penetrated her pain filled mind. "Given the choice she chose to return. She chose to come back to you," he said.

The Dark Lord froze and ended the curse as he turned on Severus, his wand held casually in his fingers, ready to strike. Hermione lay on the floor, panting and shivering uncontrollably, never more grateful to him for speaking up.

"Show me," the Dark Lord demanded.

Severus rose, moved forward and knelt, lifting his chin like a supplicant so that he looked up at the Dark Lord's red eyes.

Hermione could only guess at what Severus allowed the Dark Lord to see. She pushed herself up and leaned heavily on her arms but was still too weak to get up properly, shivering uncontrollably from the cold of the spell. Time stretched as she waited in nervous anticipation, the bone-chilling cold barely dissipating.

The Dark Lord laughed out loud, his head thrown back and his high-pitched cackle filling the room. "Well done, Severus, well done." He turned on Hermione. "But still, you left me," he snarled at her.

She pushed herself to her knees as she pleaded, "I was being chased," ignoring the shooting pains as she did. "I thought I was in grave danger. I thought I had to go. I had to leave or I'd I'd... Even after you said I was to be left alone they Belinda and Bellatrix didn't," she stammered, kneeling deferentially, still so afraid she could only look up at his robes.

Bellatrix looked murderous. "I was only trying to stop the girl," she yelled from her confinement, her voice muffled from the bubble.

"She was I believed she was going to kill me. I know it's I wasn't thinking normally I panicked," Hermione said, two tears falling unnoticed down her cheeks. "I I had nowhere to go, and then when I did, I realized I had no way to find Severus..."

"You could have returned here," the Dark Lord snarled ferociously.

"I didn't think I could..." She paused, and she could literally feel his glare on her.

"Prove it. Show me, girl. I want to see it."

She forced herself to look up at him. She was terrified of the cold tone of his voice, the piercing anger of his gaze. She looked him in the eyes as best as she could, fighting back the compulsion to cower and lower her gaze. He shoved into her mind, and Hermione fell back at the impact. She offered up her memories openly: arriving at the Burrow and seeing it a charred ruin, knowing Severus was not there, then arriving at Grimmauld Place and getting by the Death Eaters in the street, hoping to find Severus in the house, then realizing he was not. She repeated her memory of walking into the garden of the Burrow, and the devastation of the house, emphasizing that she knew Severus wasn't there. She showed him images of her, Ron and Harry in the forest gorge, trying to fend off the graphorn, Ron defending her while Harry tried to free the sword, and Harry using the sword to kill the beast. She showed him the first moment she'd been aware of Severus' presence, followed by her telling Ron and Harry that she would go with Severus so he would not be killed.

The cruel pressure in her mind suddenly stopped, and she gasped as she righted herself.

"*Potter has the sword?!*" the Dark Lord raged at Severus.

"It's merely a copy, my Lord," Severus said with a smirk. "One to fool the students so that the sword you hold remains safe."

The Dark Lord turned on Hermione. "Why try to find Severus and *not* me?"

"I was afraid to come back here! I don't know where the house is and the gate I didn't think it would let me pass. And I realized too late that even if I could've somehow found the house, I didn't know I believed that you would kill me I was certain of it. I thought that if I could find Severus he could, well, he might... I had to find him but I irrationally thought he had abandoned me. But I couldn't find Severus anywhere..." she babbled, stammering nervously, almost incoherently.

"Enough," the Dark Lord snapped, and she cowered, bowing as low as she could. "See how dependent she's become on you," the Dark Lord said to Severus and then turned on her again. "I would have protected you."

"I believed you'd kill me," she pleaded emphatically. She wiped her face, only now aware of the wetness on her cheeks.

"I should now," he retorted venomously and then became coolly calm, "except I find myself surprisingly pleased with you at the moment. I can feel Potter's anguish. I knew he was enraged by something. I could feel his defeat, his loss and did not know what brought it on." He stood directly in front of her. "Get up, you silly girl."

Hermione struggled to her feet, surprised that she could stand, but hung her head, peering up at him from under her fringe.

"Look at me," he barked, and her head snapped up to comply.

He entered her mind again, forcefully, but this time, she was able to remain standing. He searched through her mind. He plowed through the memories of the night she ran, her escape. It replayed in fragments, which she tried to sort out for him, starting with the end of her dance with Mr. Endfield, the fear rising to irrational levels in her mind, being hustled out onto the terrace with the other guests, panicking as she anxiously searched for Severus, and her terror-filled flight down the steps to the gardens. He pulled up the memory of her dance with Mr. Endfield again, even backing further, repeating the dance in her mind over and over, as if searching for the exact moment when she realized she was in trouble in danger. He followed the thread of panic as she ran for the gardens and up to when she'd Apparated, examining it several times.



She knew that he could feel her irrational fears and her desperation to find Severus. When the contact broke, Hermione slumped down to her knees, her whole body so weak she felt boneless.

He stood before her, staring down at her head and even though she was only looking at his feet, she thought that she could feel his anger begin to ebb. He reached out his hand. "Give me your left hand," he demanded.

Although fearful of his intent, Hermione placed her hand in his.

"Apparently, I misjudged you, too trusting of your compliance." He turned his wrist, twisting hers and aimed his wand at her arm. The materials covering her forearm ripped, exposing her flesh. "You will not run from me again, Hermione. *Ever.*" He jabbed his wand into her mark, making it burn, a deep searing pain, and she screamed. Her natural reflex to jerk her arm free only made the pain intensify, and he jerked her hand toward him, holding her tightly. Her knees gave way as she cried in pain, and when he was done, to her horror, the snake in her arm moved.

He shoved her arm away from him, and she cradled it against her as she cried silently.

"Severus, your arm," the Dark Lord demanded.

Severus moved forward, opening his sleeve as he did. "You and she will be joined. If she runs again, you will bring her back to *mèmmmediately.*"

"Of course, my Lord." Severus held still, holding his breath as the Dark Lord jabbed his wand into his Mark. If it hurt him he showed little sign of it. A lion appeared, held trapped in the twisted coils of his snake.

"You can touch the lion and it will take you to her," the Dark Lord told him as he let go of Severus' arm. He turned to Cillian. "Cillian, you are her guardian, are you not?"

"Yes, my Lord, that is my task," he admitted solemnly.

"Then come here." The Dark Lord repeated the act, changing Cillian's Mark to include the lion. Like Severus, he inhaled sharply once but showed little reaction to the pain. When the Dark Lord was done, he stood back and ordered them to rise. "Take her and go," he said, "but I warn you, Severus, keep her close until school resumes."

Severus nodded respectfully. "Yes, my Lord. She will not be out of our sight."

~~o0o~~

Author's Notes:

Chapter images: As I imagine it, Cillian's house is similar to the manor on Derwent Isle, only the part of the wall between the two bay windows on the left and the third window to the right is different; there is a door and a nice large patio.

<http://www.visitcumbria.com/kes/derwent-isle-house.htm>

The island, if you could see it, would be like the Derwent Isle: the same trees, the same expanses of lawn behind the house but with a formal front garden, a Druid Circle and a pavilion. And there isn't a boat dock; wizards don't need boat docks.

## Impinging on Slytherins

Chapter 38 of 43

Hermione takes advantage of some time alone with Draco and Cillian, hoping to make an effect or an impact on them.

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*Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.*

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~o 38 o~

Impinging on Slytherins

Draco had ditched his father at the first opportunity when he'd heard Hermione scream and now stood by the door as he watched as Snape helped Hermione get up. Severus was clearly trying to make it look like he was hauling her to her feet, his expression one of harsh disdain and his voice cold with anger. But Draco knew the wizard better than that; he'd seen the relationship change since that evening when the girl had been dumped at Severus' feet. Severus liked Hermione, a lot, and Draco was certain that there might be an even deeper emotion lurking beneath the harsh façade.

Cillian Gwynek took the girl's other arm, so he and Snape could 'drag' her from the room. Draco slipped through the group lingering outside the doorway and waited for the trio to enter the Grand Hall. He wanted to see Hermione, to...

He scoffed at himself. *To what? Console her?*

He wanted to see the mark, to see if it was now like his. He wanted to see if she was all right which was completely irrational. He hardly liked the girl. And yet he wanted to see her nonetheless.

He shoved his hand in his pockets and fingered the potion vials he kept on hand to help with the after affects of the Dark Lord's displeasure. Draco had suffered the Freezing Curse himself and knew well the pain the girl had felt, the indescribable icy-stabbing pain piercing every inch of her body. In addition, if the curse was done with any amount of intent, it could give the victim a bone-chilling cold that could last for hours afterwards, and the Dark Lord was exceptionally gifted with the curse. Hermione would be in pain for a long time yet, unless Snape let her bathe in the recovery bath balm Draco had helped Severus to create. *Which he will. He won't let her suffer needlessly.*

He saw Severus, Gwynek and Hermione heading toward the door and followed. The other Death Eaters in the large hall were watching or walking by so Draco kept his face as expressionless as possible.

"Severus, one moment," Gwynek's older brother said, walking up to them quickly.

"Yes?" Severus asked smoothly as Gwynek's older brother turned and acknowledged Gwynek with a friendly, "Little brother," and then faced Severus again.

Gwynek responded by saying, "Marc," with a nod.

"May I have a word with both of you?" Marc asked.

Draco stepped closer, catching Cillian's eye but not Severus'.

Severus considered for a moment, giving the impression it was an imposition as Draco approached. "Of course, a moment. Draco, will you keep her with you?"

"Of course," Draco stated, startled for a moment, and then looked at Hermione. He considered the best place to take her. "I'll take her to the dining room; it's empty."

Both Severus and Cillian seemed to consider the option, and Severus nodded. "All right," he said and turned to Marc.

Draco could hear Marcus Gwynek say, "My sister put Sherrilyn on the list..." as the men walked toward a more secluded spot in the Grand Hallway. Hermione paled slightly as Severus moved away from her, and Draco clasped her arm, angry that maybe she didn't trust him to protect her in his own house. She practically fell against him, making him support her, and he could feel her shiver, whether from fear or the effects of the curse, he couldn't tell.

He said quietly, "Runty, light the dining room fire and bring me some hot broth," knowing that the house-elf would respond to his demand.

Once they were inside the dining room, he shoved her into a chair and flicked his wand at the doors, closing them. "Let me see your arm," he demanded, a bit harsher than he intended, as he pulled out the vials from his pocket and handed her one. "It will warm you up a little." At least it would stop her from shaking so badly.

Hermione looked at him curiously.

"I've been the recipient of that curse before." *Damn*, he sounded like a Hufflepuff.

"Th-thank you, D-Draco," she replied, drinking the potion with shaky hands without even asking what it was.

Gryffindors so bloody trusting! I could have handed you a bloody poison he thought as he rolled his eyes and waved her sentiments off. "Let me see the Mark."

She placed her arm on the table and the remains of her sleeves fell away, exposing her forearm. It looked the same, the snake coming out of the lion's mouth, but the colors had darkened. Not black just darker. He stroked her skin gently, ignoring her hiss, careful not to press into the Mark, and felt the snake undulate. The lion seemed firmer, solid, although the mane was still pliable. *Damn. It is a Dark Mark! He did it! He really did.* "Do you feel anything when I touch it?" he asked.

She nodded. Her teeth were chattering so badly it made her stammer when she spoke, not that he was surprised. "It still hr-hurts, sh-sharp t-tingles as well as itches, b-but where y-your f-fingers are it f-feels like a p-prickly-burning hot... f-feeling."

His did the same thing. "Do you sense anything from it? Feelings?"

She paused, biting her lip. Her voice was shaky as she spoke, "B-besides the pain? I feel... a-anger... ir-irritation... I think."

Draco looked up as the house-elf set a bowl of steaming beef broth in front of him. He pushed it over in front of Hermione. "Eat. Hermione, you can now feel the Dark Lord's moods, and if you press it, it will connect you to him."

"He s-said it will connect me to S-Severus and C-Cillian," she said, her voice rough, and tasted the broth. The broth sloshed as her hand shook, and he used his wand to clean up the drops that spilled.

She smiled slightly in appreciation of the taste; Runty made really good broth. "Th-thank you."

He could see his potion begin to work as she took the next spoonful; her hands weren't shaking as much. He let her eat some more before asking, "Why did you leave?"

She looked up. "You weren't in there?" she asked, the stammer from her teeth chattering was gone, but she still had an audible quiver when she spoke.

He shook his head, and she sighed. "I had this irrational fear that I was in grave danger that Severus had abandoned me that I had to run, get away. I saw your aunt and Cillian's sister following me, so I ran." She took another spoonful of broth, her hands quivering slightly, spilling a drop.

He waited silently, knowing she'd say more.

"I wasn't thinking straight, I know that. But, I can't really explain it. I couldn't think of anything else but running away."

Of course he'd heard the others testify to the Dark Lord about what happened. *Most of them thought she'd been hit with the Imperius, and her explanation fits.* He asked, "Where did you go?" and she listed off his mother's cousin's house, the Weasleys' burrow and her grandmother's. "Not the castle, then."

"No, I didn't think it would be safe," she replied.

"And you came back?" he asked, still not believing that she hadn't run off to join Potter and the Weasel.

She looked up as she swallowed more broth. At least her hands weren't shaking anymore. "I had no choice. If I hadn't, then Severus might be punished for losing me, or worse. Alecto would be made Headmistress, and I know she'd remove Professor McGonagall and Hagrid from the school possibly have them arrested..."

"No other reason?" Draco pushed.

"Isn't that enough?" she asked, her voice still a bit rough and tremulous, taking another spoonful. "Then there is you."

"What about me?" he asked, wondering what she was on about. He was fine.

"Who else cares enough to try and make you come to your senses? Who would be your friend and try and save you from all this madness?"

"Save me?" He scowled. *Crazy cow.* "I'm fine. Just eat your broth."

"Yeah, you look it," she said, eating some more broth. "I heard them, in the throne room. A breeding program? Maternity houses? Foisting half-blood kids on to pure-blood families in an imposed fostering program? Forcing half-blood girls to have sex with Death Eaters to conceive their babies?" she asked disdainfully, enunciating her words even though her voice still quivered slightly. "I bet your more chavvy thugs really like that plan!"

Draco scowled at her comment. "No," he snapped, but he actually knew that it was true; many of them did like the idea.

"Aren't all the pure-bloods flocking to him, choosing to cower and bow to his might?" she asked, the scorn evident even though her words trembled slightly from the bitter cold she still felt. She sipped a bit more broth and then looked up at him. "I happen to know that the resistance is growing, not crumbling. I happen to know that Dumbledore's Army's numbers are greater than they were in our fifth year and that even though Dumbledore is dead, those who were fighting under Dumbledore's resistance group are gaining support."

What the fuck? "How can you know that if you haven't been in contact with Potter?" Draco asked.

"I read the papers and I listen. You're here, listening in; what have you heard that everything is going well? Or are things not going as smoothly as he and all the Death Eaters want it to? Simple snatching raids are turning into all out fights, MRC arrests turning into fierce wandfights or traps set for the Death Eaters, and defiance is rising up in unexplained places, and a lot of the Muggle-born targets are not at home when your brethren attack they've escaped."

Damn. How can she know all this? "No, you're wrong," he said, thinking about everything he'd learned and heard.

"After Mordrid Cravenweld's downfall, his supporters were hunted down, arrested, convicted, and many killed or given the Dementor's kiss same thing happened after Gellert Grindelwald fell, they..."

"I know," he snapped. *I've read the books, damn it.*

"...and when Harry wins, it will be the same," she said, pointing her spoon at him.

"*The Dark Lord is winning,*" he said angrily.

"Is he? Then why is the resistance *growing*?"

Merlin's beard, she's insufferable. "It isn't *growing*." But that wasn't the truth. She was right; several raids over the last month had turned into wandfights, the Death Eaters defeated by large, well-organized groups.

"So, are you *happy*, Draco? Is your family doing well? Have you had *anice* Christmas?"

You have persistence; I'll say that for you. If he was honest with himself, the answer was no; not that he'd tell her that.

"Because in the end it will come down to him and Harry, squared off, one-on-one, *equals*, just like in the graveyard, and only *one* will survive. Believe me, I know. It's fated destiny."

It's fated? Potter and the Dark Lord equals she's barmy! He looked up to see Severus walking toward them, followed by Draco's father, that bloody werewolf and Gwynek. His father's eyes narrowed, as did Severus', and Draco wondered how much his father and Severus had overheard.

Severus stopped right by her chair. "Hermione, it's time to go," he said smoothly, and if he was angry by what he'd overheard, his voice and expression gave nothing away.

Hermione nodded, put down her spoon with a slight clatter and dabbed her mouth with her napkin. "Draco, thank you for the broth. It was delicious," she said politely.

"You're welcome," he said automatically in a flat monotone, watching his father as Hermione rose, still wobbly, before Severus took hold of her arm, supporting her as he led her out of the room with Gwynek right behind them.

As soon as the door closed, his father hurried over. "Draco, what was she saying about the graveyard? Only one will survive what's fated? What is destined?" he asked as he sat in the chair Hermione had vacated.

"She was rambling, Father, nothing more," he replied, hoping to brush it off. *She was hinting about that bloody prophecy.* Something his father still wanted desperately. "She's always saying such nonsense. She believes that Potter will defeat the Dark Lord," he added dismissively. At this point, Draco felt that his father was so desperate to appease the Dark Lord, so anxious to gain back his family's honor by any means that his father would turn in his own mother to do so. Draco and his mother were constantly watching what they said and what they did, keeping their emotions and expressions carefully in check, their Occlumency shields up... It was exhausting.

"Draco, she's Potter's friend. It's possible she knows the prophecy," his father said, his voice heavy with desperation. "If you could get her to tell you, to learn the missing parts, he would..."

He looked at his father. The man was the extreme opposite of what he'd once been, the once proud and imposing wizard was a sniveling, grasping, despondent wreck. He was even wandless the Dark Lord had taken away his wand. "What, Father, honor us? Restore that which he's taken? Look around," Draco said with a sweep of his arm. "We are prisoners in our own home."

"Shh," his father hissed, holding up his hands. "Not so loud, Draco."

"Exactly," Draco snapped, although he had lowered his voice. "Not so loud! *He* might hear us complain. The Rat might see us or overhear what we say. Greyback might sniff us out. Wretched scum we'd never have allowed to even darken our gate are *living* in our guest rooms! We have no more honor, Father, we're a disgrace!" He stood up to go, but his father grabbed his arm.

"Draco, do not speak to me like that," he hissed angrily. "I'm still your father."

He tried not to smirk. His father. He was a mess. He was unshaven, his once lustrous hair stringy, and he still bore the stench of Azkaban even after all these months. *Had the man forgotten how to groom himself? Did he even bother to bathe? At least his robes are clean, wrinkled, but clean.* "Yes, Father, you are," Draco said a bit more politely, although the condescension seeped through. "But we are no longer the lords and masters of our own home, are we? Face it, he has taken over everything, and we are reduced to being his *servants*. He has *no* intention of *ever* giving you *any* of the things he promised you."

"Draco, we only have to appease him..."

"Where does Mother go late at night? Who is hitting her?" Draco snapped.

"No-no one is..."

"I see her bruises, Father. I see the thick concealers and the high neck robes she wears," he spat. "You think I don't know? I know!" In fact he was all too aware of exactly where she slipped off to at night, and to whom. She even refused to allow him to brew her Bruise Paste.

"Do not speak of these things," his father pleaded.

Draco moved to leave. "Don't worry, Father, Draco be's a good, obedients servant, Draco is," he said, mocking the way house-elves spoke.

"Draco!"

"No, what is said between us stays between us. But I have to go serve my master now," he said. His father's eyes burned with fury at his insolence. "Besides, if you haven't worked out the prophecy yet, you never will." *Between what Mother told me and yes, she told me what Hermione said to both of you've figured it out.* "But it won't help our situation. He's punishing us and took what's ours, and nothing we do is going to make it better."

H~

When the suffocating, squeezing sensation between the Apparition origin and their destination suddenly stopped, the last place Hermione expected to be was along the tree line that surrounded the back garden of Cillian's house. Severus grabbed her arm and pulled her with him across the lawn. The barrier, which had stopped her before, let her pass, but with some resistance, irritating her already curse-tender skin.

"Are you going to help Marc and Sherrilyn?" Cillian asked.

"It isn't so hard if there aren't any physical... impediments," Severus stated.

Hermione wondered what was going on as Cillian looked down and shrugged. "Could be. Marc hasn't been too lucky, and I know they've tried." He looked at Severus. "Do you think all the others are under the same pressure to have their wives pregnant by the end of January?"

"If Ulisses Macaulay is working with Mengele to create the conception potion, then yes. Besides, you know that the Dark Lord wants children," Severus said sarcastically, almost rhetorically, because he seemed to be deep in thought.

Hermione rubbed her arms, waiting patiently.

"For his new world order...," Cillian stated, but his eyes were cast downward, glazed with thought as well. He looked up at Severus. "So will you be going back to the castle or to your house?"

Severus shook his head. "I was hoping to use your basement."

Cillian crossed his arms. "It's one of her haunting places, but if you can put up with her annoyances, okay. What will you need?"

"She's easily handled," Severus scoffed, referring to Cillian's resident ghost. "I will need a few things from home."

Cillian smirked, and Hermione tried to hide her grin.

"Only a few?" Cillian challenged him. "Not your whole lab?"

"Only a few of my implements and some fresh ingredients," Severus said, his eyes narrowed, but Hermione also caught the teasing glint in his eye. "Unless you wanted a fully stocked potions lab? I would be happy to make you a list."

Cillian chuckled. "Potions wasn't my best subject in school, as you well know. I'd rather get my potions from you."

"I should pay Sherrilyn a visit," Severus stated, "to find out which potions she needs before Mengele summons her to his lab."

Cillian winced and made a sweeping motion with his arm as he said, "By all means, sooner better than later. If Sherri isn't at home, she'll be at my parent's house. You still remember where Grouse Hill House is?"

"I remember the house; near Robin Hood's Bay, Whitby." Severus nodded. "Watch her for me?" he said, indicating Hermione, who had wrapped her arms around herself to try to stop her body from shivering from the after-effects of the curse and the cold air not that it helped any.

Cillian crossed his arms, staring down at her. "Okay." He looked up at Severus. "How long will you be?"

"An hour, at least, perhaps longer," Severus replied and looked up at the sky. "I should be back before dark." He turned to look at Hermione. "I'll bring you something for the after-effects of the curse and a change of clothes before I leave."

"Thank you," she replied, the shivering from the effects of the curse coming back.

"I've got some of the potion," Cillian stated, taking Hermione's arm. "And Dianne can lend her some robes."

Severus nodded, said, "Fine; I'll see you later," and walked back through the barrier before Disapparating with barely a pop.

Cillian helped steady her as they walked through the snow to his house. She was grateful to be able to lean on him. The biting cold did nothing to help dispel the deep penetrating cold from the Dark Lord's curse that had painfully stiffened her muscles and joints. But as soon as they stepped onto the patio, he made her sit on one of the wrought iron chairs with a not-too gentle shove. "Now, tell me where the fuck did you go?"

She repeated the list of places she'd been, in order, although she said, "a place from my childhood," rather than 'her grandmother's house' as the first location.

"Why?" he demanded. "What possessed you to just run off like that?"

Hermione sighed, shivering uncontrollably. She had expected this interrogation and sincerely hoped to get this over with as quickly as possible, because the bit of snow that had been on the chair was seeping into her jeans. "I was under the Imperius."

"The Imperius. Really?" Cillian said with an incredulous sneer. "You were hit with the Imperius at the Dark Lord's party? Right after he claimed you... after he marked you as *his* with *everyone* watching?"

"Yes," she said defensively, her arms wrapped tightly and leaning forward slightly with her legs crossed, trying to fend off the cold. At least he wasn't making her do this in front of the Henley's. "Everything was fine, for the most part, until after the music stopped and everyone was getting their cloaks on to go outside. Suddenly, I was desperately and irrationally afraid and felt an intense compulsion to flee. I felt utterly abandoned and vulnerable and had this absolute certainty that I was in danger. I saw your sister and Bellatrix, neither of whom like me, watching me, and I I thought they were going to kill me." Her voice was surprisingly strong, but then she assumed Draco's potion was still working.

"Why didn't you call out? Why not run to the Drawing Room or look for Severus or for me?" he asked, glaring at her.

"I couldn't see you!" she said, tears forming. She was so cold, and the metal chair and icy air only made it worse. "I looked for you and Severus; I even looked for Draco."

"And yet you ran?" he asked, his arms crossed as he looked down at her. "Have you ever felt the effects of the Imperius Curse before?"

Hermione crossed her arms tighter and leaned forward more, shivering, her teeth chattering. "Yes," she admitted. "Twice! First in my fourth year when Barty Crouch Jr. used it on me and just this last summer Severus used it on me as well," suddenly remembering that he'd used it to control her that night in the glade, the first time she'd faced the Dark Lord.

Cillian's eyes narrowed. "Was this like those two times? Did you sense a light headiness at all, a befuddled disorientation or muddled stupor?"

She shrugged. "I don't know; I was panicking. I suppose you could say I felt a disoriented sense of fear. I certainly wasn't thinking logically at all." She was so cold. She wanted to get up, but she didn't think he'd let her, and sitting on the ice-cold wrought iron chair wasn't comfortable at all.

"Severus said you chose to come back," he stated, but really more of a question.

She nodded. "I had to."

"Really," he sneered.

She looked up at him and flinched at his icy stare. "Of course I did! I didn't want Severus punished by the Dark Lord! And if anything had happened to him, Alecto would take over the school, and then where would my friends be? Who would protect them from being maimed or harmed?"

His eyes narrowed dangerously. "That's your only reason?"

Hermione was growing impatient with his questioning. *Why won't he believe me?* She allowed more asperity to come in to her voice. "I didn't know how to find Severus or you! I was afraid of what the Dark Lord would do, I still am. And I love him Severus I love him."

"You have a funny way of showing it," he sneered. "You were gone for a day and a half. In all that time you couldn't have thought of one place he'd look for you? Nor did you wait around at the places you did go long enough for him *to find you*. He went to all those places you've mentioned. You could have waited, hidden somewhere and waited. You could have gone to Severus' house. Draco was waiting for you at the castle in case you went there. I tried each of your friends' houses..."

She sat up straighter to stare at him, ignoring the melting snow seeping through her jeans and the uncontrollable shaking in her limbs. "I couldn't remember Severus' house well enough to visualize it! All I remember was the bloodstained flagstones and the blood-splattered fanged ivy. And I was afraid to go to the castle! I had no idea you were looking for me, and I had no idea Draco was at Hogwarts! Besides, I was afraid to go to Hogwarts in case the Carrows or the *security officers* were there. I could have contacted an Order member, but thought better of doing so in case..." She was not going to admit to contacting Harry and Ron.

He stood there, arms crossed, a scowl on his face, staring at the... distance? At the trees.

She threw herself back into the chair and crossed her arms, glaring at nothing in particular. It was damn cold, her forearm hurt throbbed, and she was shivering uncontrollably, but she was too angry to say anything to him about the cold. *The ungrateful git*. She came back. She came back for Severus, for Ginny, and her friends, and for him, and she knew that because of her flight, things at the castle were likely to be worse than before. The Carrows would be relentless in her punishments if only to teach her obedience and put her in her rightful place.

"And are you going to behave yourself?" he finally asked.

She looked up at him, her arms still crossed tightly under her breasts. "If you mean, like I was before, being polite to the Carrows and keeping my head down, relinquishing my wand to you after each lesson and not talk back yes. If you mean am I going to stop recruiting? No."

He glared at her.

"I'm right you know," she said. "We can win this."

"You're a stubborn, insolent chit," he snapped.

She sat up and her arms relaxed a bit. "I know that you're not as steadfast in your beliefs as you want me to believe."

"Really?"

"Cillian," she said, her tone softer than before, even though her teeth were chattering wildly. "I'm not just saying this to anger you! *see it*. Being here, meeting Dianne and her parents, confirmed my suspicions, and... you're not a bad person. You're a *good* person caught up in a terrible situation with horrible people..."

"They are not horrible people," he snapped.

She couldn't believe his denial. She was so incensed, she forgot the cold. "Are you kidding me? Really? Greyback a bit of a lad, is he? And Pettigrew isn't a creepy toad? The Carrows are chavs; Alecto, what a daft cow, and Amycus, what an idiot! He doesn't even know the counter curses to his own spells! *We his students* have to look them up for him. VanHalal and Crabbe are knob heads, and Travers and MacCavish are stupid thugs, Macnair and Rowle are scrubbers."

He smiled, barely, but a little.

"I know that the Glenwrythes, Whitehalls and Malfoys are toff, and I think the Roquewoods and Rosiers are too, but the Lestrangle brothers are mong nutters, and do you really think that Bellatrix hasn't lost the plot? And those are the ones *I know!*"

"Rubbish," he said, but he still had a crooked little smile as if he found what she'd said amusing.

She slumped back into the chair, hugging herself. "Well, you know them better than I do. I've only seen them at formal parties and when they attack children."

He arched an eyebrow at her.

"The Department of Mysteries my fifth year. Malfoy, Yaxley, Avery, Mulciber and Dolohov were there. I think Crabbe and Goyle were too," she said with a shrug. "Dolohov what a great guy! I mean he could have used a Stunner but *nooo* he hit me with a really nasty hex that nearly killed me! Ronald Weasley, Luna Lovegood and I all have scars from that day, and Neville, who'd been hit in the face, had to have magical rhinoplasty and maxillofacial repair. And then last May, when the Death Eaters broke in and attacked the school, *not one* of them held back or used impediment or immobilization spells that time either. They used curses severe curses on underage children! They tried to kill us!"

"Not all of them are like those thugs," Cillian stated, but for a moment, she could see shock and indignation reflected in his eyes.

"No? All right, how many of the Dark Lord's followers are fine, upstanding citizens of society and *good* people?" she challenged him.

"I can name several: Brian Petersen, Edgar Walsingham, Henry Westmore..." he said quickly, possibly naming his friends.

She sat up again, leaning forward slightly. "And how many of them are Marked? How many are in his inner circle? Or are they simply supporters, caught up in all this because they are afraid for their families?" she asked, already knowing that Messrs Glenwrythe, Lockhavens and Whitehall were not Marked. In fact, Hermione strongly suspected that Mr. Glenwrythe might be hiding undesirables in his cellars. "In fact, I strongly suspect that there are many so-called followers who are acting as supporters simply to protect their families."

Cillian looked away again.

Dianne came out of the house, wrapped in a thick cloak. "What are you two doing out here?" she called out, waving at them to come to her as she added, "Come inside, it's freezing."

"Coming," Cillian shouted back and hauled Hermione up out of the chair. "Don't give her any grief. I don't want you to discuss any of this with her," he warned her, guiding her into the house. "Dianne, please take Hermione upstairs and show her the guest bath. I'll be up shortly with her oils."

"All right," Dianne said, slipping her arm around Hermione's.

She was so cold, shivering so badly that all she wanted to do was curl up in thick blankets by a roaring fire. She even thought that she might ask for a bottle of Firewhiskey.

Dianne rubbed her arm. "Let's get you warm. You must be utterly freezing." She shed her cloak and led Hermione through the long foyer to the stairs, holding Hermione's shaking body firmly to her side. "He cursed you, didn't he?"

Hermione nodded. "The Freezing Curse."

"Oh gods he's used that on Cillian! And you were sitting out there in the snow?" she asked, letting Hermione lean on her as they started walking up the stairs. "What did you do?"

"I tried to run away," Hermione admitted.

Dianne stopped, gaping in shock. "You did what? And you're alive?"

"Apparently," Hermione said. "Although alive may be a relative term. I'm freezing to death."

"Let's get you in the bath; that will warm you up. Cillian's oils will help," she said.

As the girls climbed the stairs, Hermione's joints hurt as if she were an old maid. She could feel the effects of the potion Draco had given her beginning to wear thin.

"Why didn't you come straight into the house?" Dianne asked. "What were the two of you talking about on the patio?"

"Same as before," Hermione said, finally glad to reach the top of the stairs.

Dianne gave her a quick disappointed glance and then turned to their right, indicating the way with her hand. "Down here."

The house was large; Hermione could count at least six doors, just on this side of the house, and she was sure she spotted another three, maybe four, down the other side of the hall.

"You should keep your opinions to yourself, you know," Dianne warned her, the disapproval apparent in her tone.

"You do know that if the Dark Lord wins, this house will become your prison," Hermione said.

"I'm quite well aware of that," Dianne snapped as she pushed open a door, revealing a lovely bathroom with a large, clubfooted tub. The room was blissfully warm and humid from the steaming hot water. "Oh good," Dianne said and turned to Hermione. "Ella is really efficient. Do you need help undressing?"

"No, I can manage," Hermione replied politely.

"All right," Dianne said, turning to go. "Call Ella if you need anything."

Hermione undressed gingerly and was about to enter the tub when Ella appeared, holding a bottle with one hand and the other hand over her eyes. "Ella brings this for Miss. Master Cillian is with the Muggles," she said in a husky voice, but without any rancor or malice, so Hermione assumed the elf didn't dislike Muggles. Ella poured the contents of the bottle into Hermione's bath and disappeared.

Saying her thanks aloud anyway, Hermione stepped into the tub and gingerly sank into the hot water even though the contrast of the heat and her cold body made her skin prickle painfully. She lay back, lifting her hair over the side and rested her head on the bath pillow as her body adjusted to the heat with a sigh of relief. The contents of the bottle made the water smell divine. She could easily discern eucalyptus, camphor and wintergreen oils, and guessed that the potion might have castleberry, vervain and St. John's wort essence from using them in school. There was a subtle hint of lavender and peppermint that wafted up on the steam, and there was a tingling sensation all over her body. Never had a bath felt this relaxing. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift.

Hermione woke with a start when a small, long-fingered hand nudged her arm. "Is Miss wanting to comes to dinner, or is Ella to brings Miss her foods here?" the elf asked.

She had no idea how long she had been soaking. "Oh, no, I'll get out," she replied and thanked the elf, but Ella disappeared immediately without reply. Hermione dried off and looked about. Her jeans, under garments and socks were folded, apparently laundered, next to the robe Ella had left for her. She wondered where her long-sleeved T-shirt, flannel shirt and jumper were, but considering that the left sleeves had been severed by the Dark Lord, she assumed that Ella still had them, maybe even trying to repair the damage.

Hermione sat on the edge of the tub, wrapped in her towel, staring at her Mark. There was little doubt now; the Mark on her arm was different. Draco had warned her not to touch it too often, that *He'd* feel her if she did, so Hermione resisted the urge to touch it, just in case. Still, even just watching her Mark, the snake seemed to undulate slightly even though it didn't actually move, and she could feel it in her skin now as well. It was an odd sensation, an irritatingly itchy feeling, as if something was moving beneath the skin. It felt alive.

Sighing, she dressed, putting on the dark orange gown and a cinnamon Elizabethan loose coat style robe with her boots that Ella had laid out on the settee, noting that the clothes were a bit long for her. As Hermione descended the stairs carefully, she glanced up and saw Severus waiting for her. She hurried down the last steps and rushed to his arms, almost tripping on the landing.

"What's wrong?" he asked, wrapping his arms around her.

"Nothing everything," she said, hugging him tightly and smiling against his chest as she inhaled his familiar scent. "It's just I couldn't say thank you for making him stop, and then you left..."

"I didn't stop him, Hermione," he said, and she pulled back to look him in the eyes.

"Yes you did," she said, confused. *Of course he did. Didn't he do it intentionally?* You told him that I came back to you, I heard you. He stopped when you spoke up."

His lips twitched, an almost amused smirk. "Do you feel better after your bath?"

She nodded. "Much better."

"You should soak again before bed," he said as he led her through the parlor, where she'd first seen Dianne reading, and into the dining room. Hermione smiled; Mr. Henley was pushing in Mrs. Henley's chair for her at the long mahogany table. Cillian and Dianne were already seated.

Dinner was a subdued affair. Mr. Henley commented on Hermione's robes, apparently a style Dianne liked, saying, "She always did like the Middle ages and the

Renaissance," and then asked if Hermione liked wearing the 'romantic medieval' styles, too. They talked about theater and books, then movies, Mrs. Henley asking Hermione what was the last film she'd seen.

The last ones Hermione remembered seeing were *Jurassic Park* and *Mrs. Doubtfire*.

After dinner, the men retired to the sitting room, but Dianne excused herself, going upstairs to retrieve what looked like a large antique tea caddy. She passed Hermione in the parlor and walked into the dining room.

Not wanting to be alone in the parlor, Hermione followed Dianne, curious as to what her hobby was.

"Cillian gave this to me for my hobby," Dianne said with a smile. When she opened the top of the tea caddy, then swung open the front, Hermione was quite surprised; it had far more drawers than Hermione thought possible. The top tray was full of delicate tools and wires. Underneath it there were several little cubbies and the drawers, which appeared deceptively small, were full of all sorts of beads as well. Dianne removed a tray from the bottom that had several pieces in progress laid out in the ridges.

"You make jewelry?" Hermione asked, amazed.

"I do," she said, searching through the compartments for something. The small compartments rearranged themselves within the ancient box with each wave of her fingers and began to move and switch with each other, rather like an intricate puzzle. Hermione saw glimpses of all sorts of beads, crystals, loops, clasps and findings. One small compartment rose slowly upwards, above the others. Dianne smiled, picking up the little wooden compartment and plucked out twelve of the small crystal beads.

"Who do you make them for? Do you sell them?" Hermione asked as Dianne sorted out where she would put the crystals on one particular line of beads.

"I used to," Dianne replied. "Vivienne Lacewell, Chantilly Hanretty and Hilary Walden they were my friends in school used to love my jewelry, and there were others who would buy pieces or sets. It was quite the rage for a while. Not that I can do much with them now." She lifted out another compartment, considered the beads, then put it back, choosing another. "My father is a jeweler, and my mother used to help in the shop when she wasn't teaching."

"My parents are dentists," Hermione stated, watching Dianne work with a mild sense of awe.

"My mum told me that you had to send your parents away," Dianne said, stringing the beads on a wire.

"Yes, for their protection," Hermione said with a nod, not really wanting to say too much.

"Surely they could've been hidden," Dianne said, rather more like a question, not looking up from her task.

"They are Muggles, and I'm fairly well known because I'm best friends with Harry Potter and Ron Weasley," Hermione said *Not that Harry is all that keen on me right now.* "I was going to go with them, but I was captured." *There, that is safe enough.*

Dianne's hands, still holding the bracelet she was working on, dropped to the table. "Captured?" she asked, surprised by the statement. "But I thought...? But you're with Severus?"

Hermione shook her head. "I was dumped at Severus' feet, and forced to... I-I..." She couldn't say it; she felt her face flush with embarrassment.

"But that doesn't make any sense! Cillian tells me that he loves you, but that you are also one of the Dark Lord's prisoners," Dianne said, her brows furrowed, then relaxed.

Hermione forced herself not to react to her innuendo that there were other 'prisoners'. "I am."

"At least you can attend Hogwarts," Dianne said wistfully.

Hermione didn't know what to say; she didn't want to tell Dianne how horrible it was at times she'd sound ungrateful. So, she just watched Dianne organize the order of the beads on her tray.

"Would you like to see some?"

"See some...?" Hermione asked, unsure, as Cillian entered, holding a snifter in his hand, and sat down.

"Ella, bring me the jewelry case," he said quietly. Ella appeared a moment later carrying a huge jewelry box. "Thank you, Ella."

"Master," Ella said with a bow and disappeared.

Cillian flicked open the latch on the front and opened the case while Dianne continued to work on her bracelet. Hermione was stunned. There were hooks on the doors of the case, holding all sorts of necklaces, bracelets and anklets. In the middle were many long, flat drawers with all sorts of bracelets, earrings, necklaces, and even a few tiaras. Many were laid out as sets. "These are amazing," Hermione said, lifting out a bracelet with a combination of semiprecious gemstone beads and crystals. She picked up another and smiled at the intricately detailed hippogriff beads at intervals on the necklace. The matching bracelet had several magical animal charms. "You made these?"

"She's talented," Cillian stated, and Dianne blushed prettily, lowering her head slightly. "Well, you are."

"Where do you get your beads?" Hermione asked, examining another bracelet with lapis lazuli, blue topaz, blue goldstone and moonstones interspaced with small intricately carved gold beads.

"From gems shows, specialty shops, flea markets or in Portobello and Piccadilly and carboot sales, catalogues... all over, actually. I've been collecting for years," Dianne said, finishing off the strand. "Cillian finds some interesting beads for me as well."

"I have my sources," he said with a proud grin.

After a long pause, Hermione said, "I love your house," to Cillian as Ella placed mugs of hot cocoa in front of Hermione and next to Dianne.

"My grandfather gave it to me," he said dismissively.

"Oh, don't be modest, tell her the history of the place," Dianne said with a grin, adding a clasp. "It's fascinating; you'll love it."

He shook his head and smirked at her. "You like the fact that it's infamous."

Now Hermione was intrigued. "Infernal?" she asked before sipping on her cocoa.

"Crydeyrn Mordaunt lost the island to my great-grandfather, Caddaric Gwynek, in a bet," Cillian stated.

Hermione paused and looked at him from over the rim of her cup. *Island? Where were they?* "Mourdaunt. I've heard of Barcus Mordaunt isn't he the assistant head of the Muggle-born Registration Commission? Is there a relation there?"

"Yes, and Mordaunt claims to be a direct descendant of Merwyn the Malicious, whose real name was Merwyn Mordaunt, by the way," Cillian answered with a smirk and

then smiled at Dianne as he brushed a strand of her hair back over her shoulder. "At least according to the records my grandfather found in the attic."

Dianne smiled up at him and then went back to choosing beads to finish her next project.

"So what was the bet?" Hermione asked. If she could get him to talk about the place, he might let slip where they were.

Cillian turned to look at her. "The bet? That he could get a Muggle to accidentally row his boat to the island. Crydeyrn said he could, but the Muggle still wouldn't see it," he explained with a smirk. "So, Caddaric used the Imperius to make a Muggle in a boat row to the island. However, once the Muggle reached the shore, he saw the island but didn't know which one he was on."

There is more than one? I wonder how many? "What is the name of the island?" Hermione asked, enthralled, and trying to fathom where they could be by his story. They had to be close to land since someone could row to the island.

"Cravenweld Island, of course, this is the Cravenweld House," Dianne said with a smile. "It's haunted, but the lady rarely comes out of her room."

"Or paces the gallery on the first floor," Cillian said. "At least she's not a nuisance." He turned back to Hermione. "According to what my grandfather said, Crydeyrn Mordaunt claimed that the island and the house once belonged to Mordrid Cravenweld," Cillian added with a smirk.

"The Mordrid Cravenweld?" Hermione gasped in shock. "The Dark wizard who rose to power during the beginning of the High Middle Ages?" He had been the Dark Lord of his generation, almost as dangerous as Voldemort, and was thought to be a direct descendant of Mordred from the Arthurian period. *Professor Binns said he was from Alloway in South Ayrshire, Scotland, on the coast of Firth of Clyde. The Isle of Arran is in the Firth of Clyde... and a few small islands. Maybe we are in the Firth of Clyde?*

Cillian simply shrugged, but the glint in his eye told Hermione that he was proud of the fact. "Of course, anyone who took History of Magic knows that. Caddaric refurbished the house, practically rebuilt the place, and my grandfather made further improvements to suit his needs."

Much to Hermione's irritation, Cillian wouldn't say anything more about the house, saying that was all there was to tell. "Did the records your grandfather found indicate that the Mordaunts were related to the Cravenwelds?" she asked, hoping to draw out more information.

Cillian shrugged. "Mordaunt claims they do, but no, I don't recall my grandfather saying so. I only saw the old books when I was a young boy."

"So, who is the lady that haunts the house?" Hermione asked, curious. Maybe she could find the ghost and talk to her.

"Her name is Igraine. She is either Igraine Malory or I remember my grandfather mentioning an Igraine of Alloway. Either way, she avoids everyone," he said. "Unless they use her bedroom or the room in the basement where she dried her flowers."

Hermione was once again intrigued by the mystery, first the location of the island and now this mysterious lady ghost. Unfortunately, Cillian and Dianne began to talk about mundane things, like grocery requests, her mum wanting more yarn for knitting, and her father wanting more tobacco for his pipe.

Severus walked into the room. "Hermione, come with me," he said and waited for her.

She rose, thanked Cillian and Dianne, and followed him out of the room. He led her into the foyer, up the stairs, down the hall, to a bedroom across the hall from the bathroom she'd used earlier. The room was large, with a sitting area, two open doorways, a large double wardrobe, a writing desk and a huge bed.

Once he closed the door, he turned to face her. "Well...?"

"Well, what?" she asked, still taking in the guest room. The doorways led to two small chambers: one that may have served as a servant's room at one time and the other a large closet.

"How are things going with your task?"

She turned to face him. She knew exactly which task he meant. "I'm trying."

"But, as yet, clearly without success," Severus said sternly.

She sighed in frustration. "I'm trying, really I am, but he's... he's almost there. I can see it, but he's irresolute." She took a deep breath. "I think that if you confided in him, he'd sway."

"I can't," he said, turning his head and crossing his arms.

"Why?" she asked, befuddled. If he knew Cillian was on the verge of trading sides, what was he afraid of?

He turned to stare at her. "Because I don't want to Oblivate my best friend if I'm wrong."

"You're not wrong," she said, wondering at his hesitation. It was a risk, a huge one, but she knew with every fiber of her being that Cillian needed to *hear* her say it. "I think he's afraid because no one has ever turned away from the Dark Lord before and survived well, as far as he's concerned anyway. He knows people who were killed for desertion." She paused. *How to make him understand?* "He's afraid to there is so much that he's responsible for, the weight of his commitment to Dianne and her family." She stepped forward to him, and he dropped his arms to his sides. "You may have to show him your true loyalties so he knows it's possible."

He turned and stared at the candle on the mantelpiece. "I can't; the risks are too great." There was a tick in his jaw, a firm determination in his expression. "Ella, draw Hermione a bath." He faced her again. "I'll be right back."

"Severus, no wait!" she cried as he turned to leave. She moved to follow him. "I'll keep trying, but he's convinced that desertion is impossible, and I don't think he's ever considered walking the line like you do."

"Then make him see it!" Severus said sharply as he opened the door. He was gone before she could retort.

Sighing, Hermione walked over to the guest bathroom and sank once more into the luxurious bath, inhaling the relaxing lavender infused with the refreshing peppermint eucalyptus, camphor and wintergreen aromas. Turning Cillian from Voldemort was proving to be an almost impossible task. She closed her eyes. If Severus would just talk to his friend... give him any indication of his true loyalties, she was sure that the younger Slytherin would become an ally.

When Hermione opened her eyes, Severus was leaning against the counter, watching her.

"I'm not angry with you," he said softly. "But I need him turned before school resumes."

"I can keep trying," she said and swirled the water with her hand. "But he may not come around just because I tell him it's possible. I think he's seen too many of the others punished or killed to take it on my word alone."

"Please, just try." He grabbed a towel and stood up. "Stand up," he urged her quietly.

Nervously, Hermione stood, wishing there was less light in the room. The water ran down her exposed body, making her skin tingle from the change of temperature as he stared at her. His eyes were dark and unreadable in the shadow from his hair. She covered the apex of her groin with one hand as her other arm moved across her breasts

automatically.

"Don't. Drop your arms."

It was an order, softly spoken, but the lust in his voice made it sound like velvet and smoke. She dropped the arm covering her chest, wanting to clasp her hands in front of her sex.

He reached out and moved her hand away. "Don't," he said, almost a deeply strained plea. "You have no reason to hide from me."

She could see the reflection of the candlelight in his eyes now that he was closer, and she shivered under the intensity of his gaze. "You really don't know you're beautiful, do you?"

"Me?"

"You."

He opened the towel and began to dry her, the fluffy terrycloth soft and luxurious on her skin. He knelt in front of her, and she felt suspended, like time had stopped, as he ran the towel down her arms and over her chest, as if worshiping her. Severus leaned in as his hands holding the towel moved down her body, and he sucked on her nipple. She inhaled deeply at the contact of the warm feel of his lips and the flutter of his breath on her skin. She exhaled with a soft moan as he switched to her other nipple, making the first one pucker from the instant chill of the air. As the towel moved down her front, so did his kisses.

She closed her eyes, every fiber of her being focused on the sensation of his lips, the caress of his breath, and the tingle when his warmth was gone, only to touch her on another spot. She felt utterly exposed, yet adored. He dried off her back, his lips brushing languidly on her stomach in a way that made her innards flutter in response. The towel slid down her legs, one at a time, as he placed random kisses on her heated flesh.

He stood and turned her around to face the mirror so he could watch her reflection as he stroked the side of her face with one long finger while trailing the fingers of the other hand on her arm, down to her waist. She could see his eyes clearly, and she stood frozen, seeing the look he usually gave her just before he entered her. Her shyness warred with her desire to see him look at her this way, as if he truly wanted her and liked what he saw.

His gaze traveled down her reflection as his hands, one sliding down her neck, across her collarbone to her chest, the other moving down her abdomen, seeking her groin. "Yes, you are lovely," he purred, his voice thick and deep. "Do you have any idea what you do to me? How much I want you?" His hand cupped her breast, holding the weight as his other hand brushed her pubic hair. His stiff penis pressed against her, twitching.

She swallowed, meeting his gaze in the mirror, her arms at her side, unsure if she should move. She ached to have his fingers lower, to have him touch her sensitive nub, already throbbing with want. "Yes," she replied breathlessly.

He leaned his head down, his eyes still on her reflection, until he kissed her right where her neck and shoulder met. She angled her head to give him access, and his lips trailed upward to right below her ear. He pinched her nipple and slid one finger into her as he kissed her, his breath hot against her ear. "Yes?"

"Yes," she replied, so wound up she was breathing hard. She ground her buttocks against him, loving the answering growling moan he made.

"Bend over."

Another command, softly spoken, and it sent shivers through her. She did as he asked, placing her hands on the counter. He pushed her legs apart as his fingers slipped into her heat. She could see him watching her, see his expression as he stroked her and felt him push at her entrance, filling her. His thumb caressed her nipple with feather light strokes, and she pushed back onto him as he slowly sunk into her. The look on his face was one of pure bliss, and she bit her lip as she watched him. He leaned forward, making her lower herself on to her forearms, riding her. She closed her eyes a second, loving the sensations he created. His hand grasped her hip, pulling her back into him with each plunge, and she tried to match his movements, moaning in pleasure. She reached down to feel him slide in her, her fingers raking his penis as it slid in and out of her.

"Gods, Hermione," he growled, quickening his pace. He grunted, his face contorted, and he pulled out suddenly.

He pulled her up, turned her around and sat her unceremoniously on the counter. He lifted up her legs as he knelt down and sought out her wet lips, moving from her knee to her entrance and then finally to where she wanted him the most.

Hermione hooked her legs over his shoulders as he feasted, falling back against the mirror with a thunk of her head, totally uncaring if he kept doing what he was presently doing. He rose slightly, as if on a stool of some type, pulling her bum all the way to the very edge of the counter, his fingers digging into her flesh. She tried to pull back, gain better purchase on the hard marble, feeling like she was slipping, but he pulled her toward him, sucking, nipping, his tongue making her mind spin and her core throb and pulse, the pressure building deep within her. It surged, growing outward while at the same time tightening toward her center. She inhaled, sucking in full gasps of breath as the sensations spread and pulsed until finally she felt it break, the release exploding in deep strong spasms, pouring through her and down, and she cried out, grasping for anything to hold onto.

He stood up, grinning and plunged into her, making her cry out in sheer overload. He drove into her, his movements hard and forceful, making her head slide on the mirror and the counter edge dig into her bum, but she was far from caring. The sensations, the release she felt seemed to pull back, grow and surged forward again as he pounded into her, growling her name as he came she came again. Her cry echoed in the bath, as feral as his.

His head landed on her chest, his hair as wet as hers, the warmth of his breath, ragged and labored, matched hers. She slid down his body, her feet landing on a small padded stool, and his arms tightened around her holding her up, their bodies pressed together.

Only when his breathing slowed did he move away, still keeping his arms around her waist. "Thank you."

~~oOo~~

Author's Notes:

When Draco is listing off the places Hermione mentions she's been to, he considers Grimmauld Place as his mother's cousin's house he's not acknowledging that it is Harry's. As for the 'Weasley's burrow', it's lowercase because Draco is being condescending. He considered their house a 'pig sty' remember?

Hermione is guessing at the location of Cillian's house based on what she knows about Mordrid Cravenweld, but she's wrong.

Christmas at Cillian's

It's Christmas! Hermione has a task and it's not progressing as she'd like; Cillian is resistant, but then he does have others to consider, and Severus surprises Hermione.

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick, and to Lady_Rayne and Phoenix for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.



~o39o~

Christmas at Cillian's

Hermione woke up slowly as the drowsiness she felt dissipated. She turned her head, taking in her surroundings, saddened that she was alone in the huge Jacobean style bed. She rolled to her side, wondering what time it was and when Severus had arisen. The black sheets and thick comforter of gold patterns on black were luxuriously soft and warm. The black and tan damask drapes had been tied back, and Hermione could see grey skies through the window. *Cillian's house*, she sighed. The events of the last few days washed over her, and she lay there contemplating it all.

Realizing she had to get up, Hermione sat up and was surprised to see presents at the foot of her bed. *Oh, that's right, it's Christmas morning* she thought matter-of-factly as she reached for her presents, except that the realization saddened her instead of the normal exuberance she usually felt each Christmas morning.

She picked up the first gift, a book, discernible even through the wrapping. *Ginny always bought me a book*, although it was unlikely this was from her. As she peeled back the wrapping, her thoughts were on her friends. *Ginny and Tinko might be exchanging gifts, wherever they are, and Janilynn and Jenny would be, too, since they are with Seamus*. She wondered what Harry and Ron might be doing this morning and where they might be hiding. She doubted they were exchanging gifts, well, maybe it was unlikely they were considering their circumstances but she hoped that they were staying safe and well hidden. Hermione knew that her Slytherin friends, Glenwynn, Felicia and Adriana wouldn't be; they'd celebrated Winter Solstice this year instead.

She thought of Breanna's note and the gloves she had given her with a saddened heart, remembering Glenwynn's, Felicia's and Breanna's reactions when the Dark Lord marked her. *If they are still my friends. Ginny will forgive me for the Mark, but the others... Would they still be my friends?* Did they know her well enough to realize her position and that it was thrust on her against her will? She hoped she could convince them.

She looked at the book in her hands.

The words on the spine were written in old English, *The Magike and Dweomercraft of Myrddin of Britanniae*. She smiled in delight. She ran her fingers along the aged leather binding of the book and then opened up to the front leaf to read the inscription on the facing page, but found none. She turned to the index and found a marker with the picture of the thirteenth century 'Merlin', by Robert de Boron. The inscription on the marker read only, *Happy Christmas, Hermione*, in Severus' writing. Her smile widened, and she felt his absence even more keenly.

She thumbed through the book, loving the texture of the old velum pages and handwritten script. It was a very old book on ancient charms and transfigurations written in Anglo-Saxon runes and old English and beautifully illustrated. It would take some doing, but she'd translate it.

She set the book aside and opened the next gift, revealing a chocolate brown, tan and burnt orange pashmina scarf from Cillian. She frowned. *How ironic*. The same man who had her freezing to death outside his house after she had been cursed by the Dark Lord gave her a soft, luxurious scarf to keep her warm. Hermione closed her eyes. She supposed she understood why he'd been so angry, but really. She tightened her fingers on the soft wool.

She hadn't consciously defected; she'd been hit with the Imperius Curse, her life threatened, Severus or Cillian had been nowhere to be seen, Belinda and Bellatrix closing in, and she'd panicked. *I came back! It was dangerous; I could've been killed, but I came back. The Dark Lord nearly froze me to death, and then Cillian made me sit outside on a snow-covered iron chair as he ranted at me about my defection my supposed defection as if I had had any choice in the matter! It was bloody cold, and he knew the effects of the curse he keeps the antidote on hand! Even Dianne knew what curse the Dark Lord used so she's seen the effects she knew what I was going through.*

She growled in frustration. Of course running away like that could have cost Severus his life, she knew that, and it could have possibly endangered Cillian's life and his family's as well. The Dark Lord had called Cillian her guardian. Severus was her keeper, her gaoler, Cillian her guardian, and she their prisoner.

She looked at her mark, her Dark Mark. The Dark Lord had changed *both* of their Marks, joined Severus' and Cillian's somehow to her own. A lion trapped in the twisted coils of the snake; the symbol of it not at all lost on Hermione.

She turned her head, staring at the grey rain clouds outside the windows.

She covered her face with the soft warmth of the scarf and screamed silently in frustration. She breathed in a couple of times, feeling her sadness threaten to overwhelm her. *Christmas is supposed to be about love and warmth and affection and... family*. And she had none of those things here. She had never felt so alone. She wondered how Ron and Harry were, as well as the others in the forest. She thought about the Weasleys and her other friends from school.

Hermione reached for the next gift and tore off the wrapping. Inside were two Honeydukes boxes; the box of Sugar Quills had a small card signed with Jenny's right-slanted script, and Tinko's precise left-slanted script was on the gift tag of the Flossing Mints. She opened the next present; Janilynn sent her a box of Pepper Imps and more Flossing Mints. She opened up the last gift and stared at it in amazement: a lovely box that held a sachet and a book, *Witchtales and Magical Legends and Folkloric Fantasy*. The card read: *To make you smile when you're feeling down. Mum used to read these to me. I marked my favorites for you. Ginny.*

How did they...? Hermione looked at the door, then back at the gift tags in amazed wonderment. *How could they have? Peren? Does she know where we are?* The only logical explanation was either Severus or Cillian had brought her gifts here... unless Peren had managed to find Cillian's Secret-kept, Fidelius hidden house, which had every known Muggle-repelling and anti-Muggle spell. *Impossible, isn't it?* It had to be either Severus or Cillian.

She wrapped the scarf around her neck and picked up the last parcel, something wrapped up tightly in linen and tied with a ribbon. She pulled on the ends of the bow, and the parcel literally fell open, revealing a handmade tea cozy, which had indeed been folded tightly and wrapped in a handmade handkerchief, both embroidered with an

elaborate H. A tiny piece of parchment read:

Happy Christmas, Mistress

from your Peren

Hermione picked up her book from Severus, her shoulders sagged, and she started to cry, holding the tea cozy and the book against her chest.

~S~

Severus left the library to see if Hermione was awake yet. She had been so exhausted last night that the girl had fallen asleep immediately and had barely moved at all in her sleep. It had been disconcerting to wake up and see her still on her side of the bed, almost in the same position as she'd fallen asleep in, instead of sprawled over his person as she usually did.

He could understand her exhaustion; he had no idea how much sleep, if any, she'd had on her run. She had been with Potter and Weasley one night, but he refused to think they did anything more than talk, catching up on what had happened to them since their parting the end of June. No, the strain on Hermione's face and dark circles under her eyes indicated she'd gotten little sleep if any. However, she'd been quite receptive to his advances after her bath, which pleased him.

He smiled smugly at the memory of taking her in front of the mirror, being able to not only see himself thrust into her lush body as she bent over the bathroom counter but to also watching her expressions in her reflection. His body immediately reacted at the memory. And then to have her timidly initiate sex after they had adjourned to bed. She was still quite innocent when it came to sex, her coy glances as she bit her lip, tentative soft touches, and gentle hesitant kiss that became more assertive as he responded to her. He encouraged her to take charge, to direct him in what she wanted. He loved her responsiveness, her mewled moans of pleasure and the way he could make her cry out his name in the throes of passion.

Even though he knew she needed the rest, he hoped she wouldn't sleep away the entire day. She'd already missed breakfast, and Ella was about to serve lunch.

As he entered their bedroom, he was pleased to see she was up. He smiled inwardly at the sight of her sitting on the bed, a mass of crumpled paper around her, wearing a new scarf and hugging his book and what looked like a chintz... pillow, and she was... *Bloody hell*, she was crying!

Why was she crying?

He stared at her, utterly dumfounded. She'd been fine yesterday. What could possibly have happened to make her cry? He knew that no one had been to their room; everyone else in the house were still downstairs. No one outside the house knew she was here, well, except for her house-elf, Peren. Peren and Dobby were the only house-elves who knew about the island, and both promised to keep it secret. An elf's promise was as binding to them as an Unbreakable Vow; they'd been known to blackout or swallow their tongues rather than divulge a secret.

Hermione turned, smiling, and he was confused by but pleased to see her smile; however, the contradiction of the two disparate emotions only baffled him more. She wiped her face and dropped the book and pillow on the comforter as scrambled from the bed.

He watched her as she ran up to him and flung her arms about his person. He instinctively hugged her back, still trying to ponder the reason for her tears.

"Thank you, I love my book," she exclaimed, leaning back to gaze up at him and rising up on her toes to kiss him.

"And *that* made you cry?" he asked as he leaned back to look at her face.

She shook her head and rested her cheek against his chest, hugging him again.

Then what made you cry?"Hermione, what's wrong?"

She shook her head again and wiped her eyes. "It's Christmas," she said softly.

"And do you often cry on Christmas?" he asked. He'd known that some women did, for unfathomable reasons or for long held hurts known only to them. His own mother used to cry at Christmas.

"No," she said, muffled by his coat.

He took hold of her arms and held her away from him so he could look her in the eyes. She shrugged, looking down at his buttons, so he cocked an eyebrow at her and waited silently, a technique that usually got the students to say more. Something. Anything. "No?" he asked, about to give up.

"I was thinking about my friends, and everything, and... well, I miss them. I miss my mum and dad. I miss... well, everything."

"Oh," he said, tensing up at this admission from her, although he relaxed as he hugged her when she hugged him back. No, it wasn't an ideal Christmas. He felt slightly guilty, this being their first Christmas together, but under the circumstances it was the best he could do. At least she liked his book, although he'd never admit to her on how he'd acquired it. "Lunch will be served soon."

She pulled back again and looked up at him, then looked down, fingering his buttons.

"What?"

"Couldn't we, um, be by ourselves for a while?" she asked, still staring at his buttons.

"It would be rude," he started to say, considering whether or not to humor her request and join her in bed. "Maybe later."

She nodded again, lowering her head as she turned away to hide her disappointment.

Her utter compliance, while making his situation easier, bothered him. He hated the fact that because of her imprisonment he was forced to keep her so tightly under his thumb, and he hated the times it seemed she'd lost her spirit. "Go wash your face and change. I'll wait," he said, walking over to a chair, his mind already sorting through possible outlets of where to be alone with her. Taking her anywhere had the potential for complications. His house was out of the question the castle was not an optimal option either. She wore the Skrewt jewelry, minus her earrings, but they couldn't go anywhere magical for fear they'd be seen. Still, it felt good to his ego that she desired his company.

When Hermione joined him in the sitting area of their room, she was wearing the same robes as yesterday. "I don't have any other clothes," she replied, spreading out the skirt of her robe as she looked down.

He realized that she was right. The bags Peren had packed were at his house. She didn't have warm winter wear *Damn, I'll have to rectify that.* He would have to come up with something, and he wasn't going to trust Cillian's tastes. In the mean time, he'd go to Spinner's Ends and get their bags.

He handed her the earring Macnair had found outside Grimmauld Place.

"You found it!" she exclaimed exuberantly.

"Yes," he said, surprised by her reaction. Even though the light pewter grey had an iridescent sheen, he thought they were ugly.

She hurried over to the dressing table and put on the other one, smiling when she faced him.

He raised his eyebrows and his lips curved slightly, bemused that she liked the ugly things so much. "Let's go," he said, getting up.

~H~

Christmas Day had passed uneventfully. Ella had produced a lovely roast goose with the traditional fixings and side dishes, and the tension within the house had dissipated enough for them to have a festive family style Christmas day. Hermione made no effort to press Cillian and Dianne about the Dark Lord, opting to try and enjoy the time spent with the Henleys, Cillian and Severus.

However, knowing the urgency of turning Cillian before they returned to Hogwarts, and that she only had six days to manage her task, Hermione had sought out Cillian at every opportunity over the last three days to talk to him. Thankfully, the weather had seemed to be in her favor; sleet had quickly rolled through, becoming snow flurries, and the bitter cold wind had kept everyone inside the large house. Cillian, in order to avoid the impending argument, had rarely left Dianne's side or he'd get frustrated with Hermione and leave. Today however, the weather had improved; it was a glorious Monday morning, unfortunately.

Hermione sought out Cillian, finding him reading a book in the Long Salon while Dianne knitted in the chair beside him. Hermione approached. She hoped he'd not leave the house if she tried convincing him to change his loyalties and join her side in the war.

"No, Hermione, I'm not going to discuss this further," Cillian snapped when Hermione sat in a wicker chair facing him with a steaming mug of cocoa, wearing her new scarf and one of Severus' robes over the dress Dianne had lent her.

She had tried every argument she could think of to make Cillian see that it was possible, that he could be on the right side and still not be a deserter. However, she was getting nowhere. And Dianne also resented her efforts to persuade him and scowled at Hermione frequently or admonished her for her nonsense, afraid she was trying to get her lover killed. "But you can," Hermione persisted. *Let's try this tact.* "It wouldn't be that hard if you knew Occlumency."

"The Dark Lord always knows when someone is lying to him," Cillian insisted flatly.

"But Severus..." She caught herself before divulging anything she shouldn't, but he turned sharply, staring at her.

His smirk darkened, twisting his face as he stared at her. "Severus is a loyal follower, Hermione, one of the Dark Lord's most trusted."

"And a spy for Dumbledore and the Order," she said, knowing that he already knew that.

"He was able to spy on the old man *for* the Dark Lord," Cillian said, his eyes narrowing. "He was the Dark Lord's eyes and ears into the old man's plans."

"Will you let it rest already, he's not..." Dianne started to say but Hermione ignored her outburst.

"And that could never work the other way around, could it? spying on the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters *for* Dumbledore and the Order, keeping your *true* self carefully concealed behind emotionless shields," she said in a offhanded way with a flip of her hand.

Dianne scowled at her and then placed a hand on Cillian's arm. "Don't listen to her; she's talking madness that will only get you killed."

But Hermione pressed on as if she hadn't spoken. "If you're a good enough Occlumens, you could conceal what you want to hide by anticipating what he might want to see, circumventing and outwitting him by misdirection, tucking what you don't want him to know about behind that which he already knows or hiding it altogether."

"Stop this stop it *stop it!*" Dianne cried out, hitting the table with a fist.

"But to do that you'd have to be rather clever, wouldn't you?" Hermione said, talking over Dianne, her head quirked and looking at Cillian with a cheeky grin. "Because it would take intelligence, cunning and a tremendous strength of will..."

He regarded her, his brown eyes boring into hers. "It can't it wouldn't work," he said, correcting himself. "It's impossible to lie to him."

"Really," Hermione said with as much bravado as she could. "I have."

He jerked back a bit in his chair. "No, you have not!" he snapped.

"I *have* been able to hide things from him," she replied, tilting her chin up slightly with a self-satisfied smile as she'd seen Pansy do. "There are things between Severus and I that he hasn't seen..."

"He's hardly interested in Severus' sex life," Cillian injected as she added, "...and things between Ginny and myself."

Hermione made a smug little smile and stared at him from under her lashes. "What makes you think I'm talking about my sex life? I've easily hidden my conversations with friends from the Dark Lord, conversations with Jenny, Neville and Seamus." *There. That should get him.*

"I *know* where you are and what you're doing, and you are certainly not participating in their rule breaking and miscreant behavior," he said sternly.

"Are you sure?" Hermione said as coyly as possible. "You don't follow me *everywhere*. I know quite a few things the Dark Lord would kill for has killed for to obtain. I know quite a few secrets. In the end it will come down to him and Harry. The prophecy he wanted two years ago said so."

He narrowed his eyes and tilted his head as he regarded her. "What do you know about the prophecy?"

Hermione tilted her chin up slightly and looked him straight in the eye, challenging him.

He leaned closer even though Dianne tried to restrain him. "I can find it," he snarled as he drew his wand. *L'egilimens.*"

Hermione barely had time to brace herself, but it didn't matter. By now the castle in her mind was as well organized as her old habit of placing things in books had ever been, maybe even better. He pushed and shoved, trying to navigate, finding only her everyday activities and emotions, but nothing that she knew that he didn't already know. "Where are the memories of the conversations with your friends?" he snarled. "Where are the private talks?"

"*Hidden*," she said as he entered her mind again, and she fought against him. They struggled for what seemed the longest time, Cillian pushing and delving through her mind for anything he could find while Hermione impeded his search, keeping him out of any of the secret 'rooms' in her palace.

All the things she didn't want him to know were completely segregated away, hidden: all the private times with her friends or Severus, the use of the mirrors, anything related to the Horcruxes, seeing Ron and Harry everything related to the Order and the DA. Hidden. She could tell he was getting frustrated because she knew that he knew of certain memories, moments of which he was aware of but couldn't find. She smiled smugly, knowing that his inability to find anything would only prove her ability.

"Where are the conversations with Ginny in her dorm room?" he snarled, pulling and following images of Ginny and Hermione talking either in the corridor or in the common room, but her memories involving Ginny went no further than the common areas. "The day Jenny Wang talked to you in that compact mirror, where is it? What

were you doing?"

Flashes of Jenny's image in the common room, in Charms Club, in the library, at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall, flickered quickly in Hermione's mind with each demand, infused with feelings of friendship and happiness... but Cillian's anger grew the more he searched.

"You were crying that day... Your eyelashes were clumpy *what were you doing?*" he asked, and she saw herself looking up at him in her mind, feeling relieved and happy about seeing and talking to Harry and Ron, but fortunately, her memories stayed focused on Cillian's face and his expressions.

"You and your little friends, you were up to something... and you*lied* to me about it." His onslaught hurt, like something tearing through her mind, but the rooms of her memory castle held firm, a solid fortress for her thoughts, emotions and memories.

Finally, he pulled back, the force like a fist that made her fall back in her chair.

"How why? How can you keep those things hidden from me?" he demanded.

Dianne was watching with a look of absolute bewilderment as her gaze flicked back and forth between Cillian and Hermione.

"Why do you think?" Hermione snapped back, and Dianne looked at her, then at him in confusion. "I know things and if you want me to tell you I will have to know that I can trust you. That you are finally on the same side and not a threat!"

"Insolent wench," he snarled angrily, but Dianne put her hand on his arm again.

"Cillian, you told me it can't be done, that nothing can be kept from the Dark Lord... but what if she has? What if it can be done? She said that she's defied him."

"It can't be done! I know! I've seen what happens to people who try," he said, stressed, aggravated. "The last to try was fed to his snake."

Hermione stood her ground. "Do you really think that I amsooo exceptional that I'm the only one who is able to hide things from him?"

"You can't hide things from the Dark Lord," he said his voice raised, but the conviction wasn't as strong as before.

"I just hid everything from you! Everything I didn't want you to see it's hidden."

"I am not the Dark Lord," Cillian countered. "He has powers far beyond my own..."

Hermione snorted. "Do you really think that I would be still alive if the Dark Lord knew how much I still hated him and was fighting against him?"

He glared at her; she stared imploringly back. Merlin's balls but she wanted to tell him that Severus defied the Dark Lord that he was actually on the right side in all this.

She was getting nowhere. "All right... What happens if he wins? How long will you be able to keep Dianne safe?" she asked, the same argument, but one she knew he was concerned about. "How will she feel when you have to take an acceptable witch as your bride so you can produce proper pure-blood offspring?"

His expression darkened, his body became even more rigid as he turned his head away. Dianne pulled at the corner of her scarf, looking down at her hands, her expression somber.

Oops, that had struck a nerve. "Or are you willing to stand up and fight for those you love, for what you think is right and help the right side win?" she asked. Again. "I'm not saying to desert him you're right that's suicide. But think about this: you're clever; Slytherins are cunning and prudent..."

His eyes narrowed again as he interrupted her, "Defying him is not smart."

"Well, no, you're right, not overtly," Hermione agreed. "All I'm saying is help me." She leaned forward slightly. *Help us!* My friends are fighting to keep the students out of Filch's chains, out of his torture devices. You know that he hangs kids up to his wall with his shackles. Filch even set up a pillory in the Entrance Hall and hung three gibbet cages from the ceiling, and it's only a matter of time before he uses them. Or before Alecto starts flogging students with her riding crop, and Amycus uses his curses on us. Or worse! Unforgivables."

"No! They wouldn't," Dianne gasped in shock. "Cillian? Tell me they don't."

"Torturing students is now condoned at Hogwarts," Hermione persisted.

"No, Cillian, tell me it isn't," Dianne stammered.

"It is not condoned," Cillian said through clenched teeth.

"Alecto does it all the time!" Hermione snapped, and Cillian turned his head away and a tick showed in his jaw as Hermione turned to Dianne. "I've had my hands beaten with a ruler, the metal side, until they bled. Amycus and Alecto have knocked me backwards out of my seat with curses. Cillian stopped them when it got too bad, but they are mental!"

Cillian's head turned back sharply and he snarled, "Stop this!" but she continued anyway.

"Alecto is malicious and inexorable, Amycus is just as malevolent, and Filch is sadistic! Who knows what the Carrows would do if allowed to what they'd allow Filch to do? And the Dark Lord knows and does nothing about it. Many of the parents have to know, and they don't do anything about it. I've seen the hospital; it is three times the size, has over thirty to forty beds now, and it's always full."

"But, no, you can't be right," Dianne said and turned to Cillian. "Cillian, she can't be telling the truth?"

"I'm not exaggerating! The hospital expands to accommodate the needs of the school, right, Cillian? You told me that," Hermione said, drawing him back into the conversation. "All I'm saying is that right is right and wrong is wrong, and turning a blind eye makes you just as guilty as the malicious sadomasochists torturing and killing children all because they are considered undesirable by some narcissistic megalomaniac tyrant."

Cillian got up fast, making the chair almost tumble over. He set his fists on the table as he leaned forward. "So what would you have me do? Turn a blind eye while you deface the school walls and let you wander around the school, spouting all this to the other students, recruiting for an army whose leader is dead? I can't."

"*Harry* is the leader of Dumbledore's Army he always has been! There are a few of the members still in the castle carrying on, but beside writing slogans on the wall and posting flyers, what exactly are they doing wrong? Is saving kids from shackles and chains wrong? Really? You know that those kids end up in the hospital!"

"Cillian, is this true?" Dianne asked, her eyes wide with concern.

"Yes, it's true, damn it, but I can't do anything to..." He stood, and ran his hands over his face. "It's impossible. What she wants is impossible."

"No, Cillian, it isn't," Hermione said, standing up. "There are others, good people like yourself who are finding ways to help those who are being hurt. There are those who are in the same situation and hoping that Harry and the Order win so that life can go back to the way it was before *He* came back. I'm not saying it's easy, but it is being done and..."

"Who? Tell me one person who is?"

"If you really think about it, I think you already know," Hermione stated.

He glared at her, his eyes searching her face for the answer. She knew he knew, just as Severus knew that he was wavering, that he wasn't a staunch supporter of the cause. *Damn, why can't Severus just tell him? It would make all the difference.* But still she could not say the words; Severus had specifically ordered her not to reveal his true loyalties. Cillian pressed forward, looming over her, his brown eyes boring into her own, scrutinizing her, evaluating, and she knew he was wavering she could see it in his eyes.

He hit the table with his hand. "NO! I will not help you defy the Dark Lord and break the rules. Forget it." He stormed out of the room with Dianne running after him.

Bugger. Hermione collapsed back onto the chair and covered her face in her hands. His loyalty to Dianne and his need to protect her and her family stood in his way. It was a risk that he simply would not take. *Bugger, bugger. I almost... Bugger.* She felt an overwhelming sense of dejection. That was her best shot and she had almost had him before he had pulled away. Once again she had failed, failed Severus, and the effort had exhausted her. She sighed. Severus would be so disappointed in her.

Abruptly, there was a noise in the doorway, and she jerked back in her seat to see Severus framed in the doorway.

~S~

Severus frowned at seeing Hermione's slumped shoulders and crestfallen expression, but he understood her frustration and disappointment. He stood somewhat awkwardly for a moment, making up his mind, and then he held out his hand to her. "Come with me," he said.

Hermione sighed dejectedly and quietly followed him up to their room. Her blouse, jeans and the jumper she'd worn during her time with her friends and a black coat, one he'd had at Spinner's End in his wardrobe from the seventies that he had altered magically to fit her, lay on the bed. She examined the left sleeve of the jumper and blouse, quirked her mouth at how Ella had tried to mend them.

He wondered what she was thinking. The slight smile on her face, didn't hide the disheartened look in her eyes, solidified his decision.

"Change. We're going out."

She looked at him but did as he asked. She dressed quickly, keeping her back to him. She turned to reach for her boots she'd been wearing the day she returned to him, and he smiled appreciatively at the way her jeans hugged her bum. After lacing the boots, she stood and put on the coat, then looked at him in anticipation, ready to go wherever he wanted to go.

~H~

Severus had whisked her away to Keswick, in the Lake District of Northern England. Of all the places he could have chosen, she was utterly delighted to be here. She'd been here with her parents, and it was such a lovely town, one of the most picturesque lakes in the Lake District. Its buildings were mostly constructed from the rich, grey granite stone found in the area. Her mum had loved Keswick, and Main Street had a variety of shops, tearooms, coffee houses and galleries on the pedestrian market square. Hermione smiled happily as they walked through the snow-lined streets toward the central Market Square, avoiding the snowdrifts and icy patches.

She squeezed Severus' arm as they walked casually down Main Street. "Did you know that Keswick is home to the world's largest pencil?" she asked, giggling at his incredulously raised eyebrow.

"And in the Keswick Mining Museum, they have exhibits that show how the Lake District was formed, how the mineral veins occurred, how Fossils formed and what life was like when Dinosaurs walked the Earth. They even have a Crystal Cave where the glowing rocks of the fluorescent minerals are displayed."

His disparaging response, "Insufferable know-it-all..." was almost inaudible, but he squeezed her arm and his lip curled up slightly, and she knew he was joking.

Hermione and Severus walked down Main Street like a typical Muggle couple. He'd changed his frockcoat for a shorter, heavier leather coat, and Hermione had on her new scarf over her jumper and his retro-style coat, not that it helped with the cold much, but she didn't complain. He'd asked her how things were going with Cillian, frowning at her lack of success, but refusing her continued pleas (if turning his head and clenching his jaw counted as refusing) to divulge his true loyalty to his best friend. It just seemed crackers that he refused to speak with Cillian when he was so close. What was he afraid of? Certainly his best friend wouldn't turn him over to the Dark Lord.

Of course they went into Bookends Bookshop and browsed the shelves. Most of the shelves were waist high, the room walls lined with taller shelves, all crammed with books. Although Severus stayed close, keeping her in sight most of the time, he was clearly as engrossed in his book hunting as she was. She'd smiled at his display of trust. He obviously knew that she'd not run from him again there was too much at stake and she knew he had to remain as Headmaster.

He offered to let Hermione chose three new Muggle novels for light reading, *The Pillars of the Earth* by Ken Follett, *Caribbean* by James A. Michener and *The Fourth Estate* by Jeffrey Archer and selected several novels and books for himself. Out on the street he shrunk their books and slipped them into his pocket.

She paused again as they left the bookshop, looking longingly across the road at Fat Face. He stopped, watching her as if reading her face. "Yes?"

"I..." she started to say, wondering how much he'd allow her. His eyebrow rose, so she went ahead and asked. "I'd like to replace the clothes the Dark Lord ruined."

He nodded, crossed the street and walked to the door. He opened it for her, and she sighed in relief. He waited patiently as she looked about. She found several blouses: a practical white Chambray shirt, a long-sleeve champagne blouse with pretty stitching and mother-of-pearl buttons and a long-sleeve shirt with embroidery embellishments. Severus looked over her shoulder at the two she held up as she decided. "I can afford them," he said softly.

"But, one is more practical than the other," she replied, "and I can wear it at school." He simply raised his eyebrow again, so she asked the shop assistant where she could try them on, walking to the back where he'd pointed.

Severus handed her two blouses as she stepped from the fitting room. "Try these," he said, taking the three she'd tried on.

Her brow furrowed as she looked at the blouses. They were pretty and somewhat dressy: the red one had a scoop neck and small ruffle at the wrist, which wasn't her usual style, and the aqua blue one had a keyhole neckline, flared sleeves. Both fit her nicely, but she liked the red one better, so she put the aqua one on the return rack.

She tempted fate and tried on several things, finally relaxing and even tried on a few items merely for fun. She discarded most of them, keeping a long-sleeve blue and white Henley T-shirt and the two shirts and two blouses in her dressing room, not sure if she should be considering so many Muggle clothes.

She liked one pair of black jeans quite a bit; they were comfortable and fit so well, and she liked the tan waffle knit long-sleeve T-shirt with the tiny daisies and even tried a russet fleece lined hoodie.

Severus watched her admire the fit with an indiscernible expression. "Get those too," he said with a nod.

"Are you sure?" she asked, uncertain if she should.

"Yes. Are you finished?" he asked, handing the two shirts, two blouses, two long-sleeve T-shirts, the jeans and the fleece hoodie to the sales associate.

Hermione nodded and waited as he paid for her clothes, taken aback by his generosity. She almost felt guilty with all her new clothes, considering that only yesterday he'd been angry with her, but she had to admit, she'd enjoyed herself. He'd been so patient with her, watching as if detached, yet reading her as if using Legilimency, and

buying all the items she'd really wanted to have.

They strode casually up Main Street, Hermione clutching her bags. As they approached the Market Square, Hermione could see Moot Hall up ahead; with its grey stone walls outlined with pale quoins and the famous one hand clock on its bell tower, it stood out like a beacon in Keswick's pedestrianised shopping area.

The day was bright but cold; a sharp breeze caused her to shiver as she walked beside him, and her steps faltered as her eyes were drawn to the warm looking jumpers and coats in the window display of the Edinburgh Woolen Mill shop.

Severus looked at her and smirked. "Might as well ask?"

"You've bought me so much already," she replied, turning to go.

"But you like the sweater?" he asked softly. "Hermione, if you need a sweater to replace the one he severed, tell me."

She nodded and shrugged, not wanting to be too extravagant. "I think Ella did an okay job repairing this one," she replied, touching the wool knit of her jumper.

His eyes narrowed in annoyance. "That's not what I asked you," he said.

"But these are Muggle clothes," she said, clasping her bags in front of her. The deep burgundy Duffel coat with the wooden toggles on display was lovely as was the Scottish Arran knit jumper. Hermione wrapped her arms around her to fend off the chill.

"And the Henley's are Muggles. We are going to be there for the week, and you need to have clothes. I told you I can afford them," he said, getting impatient with her. "Besides, you normally wear Muggle clothes when you're revising on the weekends, don't you?"

Her lower lip slipped out from under her teeth as she smiled. "Yes, normally. Okay."

He opened the door and she preceded him in. She looked around, fingering the sweaters, judging the quality of the knit as her mum used to do. Thinking of her mother, Hermione had to bite back the tears that threatened to fill her eyes. She wouldn't cry; she had to believe they were all right, but she missed her parents terribly.

Moving slowly around the display of knitwear, she saw a very nice Scottish Arran jumper in a dark oatmeal color, and on another display table, a lovely brown cardigan with carved wood buttons that she liked as well.

"Which will it be, Miss?" the shop assistant asked.

Hermione handed the shop assistant the jumper, but was torn between the Duffel coat and the brown cardigan. In the end, she chose the coat. She turned in surprise when Severus handed the cardigan to the woman as well, saying, "She'll take this as well." Hermione gratefully put on the coat as they exited the shop.

Further up the street, when gazing at the window of Charles Clinkard Shoes, Hermione saw a pair of black Mary Jane shoes she really liked. They looked comfortable yet dressy, with a low heel and silver buckle, and she wished that she had her Muggle money. Her own pair was getting quite worn, and she could use a new pair since she hadn't had time to do any shopping before her incident with that bloody cursed parchment. It was one of the things that had been on her to-do list before she went into hiding with Harry and Ron right after Harry's insistence to pick up 'supplies' at Fred and George's shop and buy books shop for warm clothes and new shoes.

"Do you want them?" Severus asked and smirked at her when she looked up.

She did want to at least try them on. "... could use a new pair, if it's all right?" she asked tentatively, remembering what Severus had said about providing for her since she was his wife. Would he really?

"Might as well," he added and indicated the door as if it was an inconvenience, but he opened the door for her and followed her inside.

Hermione looked around the shop. They had nice shoes, and she saw a more practical pair of black leather loafers for school and a pair of boots she really liked, but she still preferred the Mary Janes in the window. She asked the shop assistant about them, and he brought her her size. Severus had the assistant bring the soft black loafers as well as the boots, and then paid for all three pairs without comment as she looked at the others on sale.

Hermione looked at Severus shyly as they left the shoe shop, her feet crunching on the frosty cobbles of the precinct, her shopping bags even heavier in her hands.

He looked down at her and quirked an eyebrow. "Hungry?" he asked.

She blushed and nodded, juggling her purchases a little in her arms. Severus reached over and snagged a few bags out of her hands to relieve her burden, shrinking them to fit in his pocket.

They turned down Lake Street and bought lunch at The Lake Street Inn, a little wedge-shaped pub around the corner.

They chatted amiably about books and compared Muggle authors to magical ones, getting into a lighthearted debate on their writing styles and cultural significance while they ate. Severus drank a dark beer with his meal, and Hermione accepted a glass of wine with hers, happy that he was being so considerate and charming.

After lunch, they left the pub and continued to explore the town. Hermione had thought about buying her friends some novelty things she saw in the gift shops, but changed her mind. While Severus was choosing the particular blend of whiskey for Cillian in a little off license, she enjoyed the art pieces in the window of Treeby and Boulton next door.

They walked to Keswick Bookshop on Station Street and enjoyed another leisurely perusal of the Muggle books. Hermione strolled through the shelves, perusing through the books in pure bliss. Naturally, she had no trouble finding literary treasures and intriguing novels, but considering how much Severus had spent on her so far, she was hesitant to hope for more. He found her sitting crossed-legged on the floor, happily reading *Chesapeake* by James Michener.

"What did you find?" he asked softly.

She held up the book so he could read the title.

"And the others?" he asked pointing to the short stack beside her.

She shrugged, hoping not to seem too expectant, but wanting the books anyway. "A few that interested me," she replied, looking up at him with a smile.

He set down the four he'd found and picked up her first two. She was amused that Severus would be so interested in Muggle literature. He read the titles, and the descriptions on the covers, then set them beside her foot, and picked up the next two. "I'll buy four," he said, handing them back to her.

She put down the one she'd been reading and sorted through her stack, deciding on which she truly wanted while he stood over here, arms crossed, and waited. There were three she definitely wanted, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, *Parade's End: The Complete Tetralogy* by Ford Madox Ford and *Chesapeake*; she'd read Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* before, an old favorite that she set aside, and contemplated which of the other two she could do without. With a sigh, she set *Here Be Dragons* by Sharon Kay Penman aside and picked up *Silent Honor* by Danielle Steel, which she had decided to keep.

He nodded, taking her selections without comment, and went to the sales counter to pay for them.

Back out on the street, she sighed when Severus pulled her in between two shops and told her it was time to go back.

~H~

It was too quiet in the large house the next day. Dianne was still upset with Hermione due to the row Hermione and Cillian had yesterday and, well, every day since Boxing Day.

Cillian was keeping his distance; he'd missed breakfast, nor had he been around at lunch, and she had no idea where he'd gone. Mr. and Mrs. Henley spent the morning alone up in their rooms, and Severus had been summoned by the Dark Lord and missed lunch as well, which left Hermione all by herself.

She considered practicing shifting into her Animagus form, but since she'd only had one lesson with Professor McGonagall before the holiday, she didn't feel confident in her ability of changing back. Of course, she understood the theory, and she'd been able to effect the change in front of her professor, but it had taken her an embarrassing four tries to get it right that day; she'd only managed an incomplete transformation back her sixth attempt, which was not good odds in her book.

She picked up the novel, *Chesapeake*, which Severus had bought her in Keswick, and walked downstairs, through the formal Drawing Room and into the Long Salon on the west side of the house. Hermione sank down on one of the padded wicker chairs and stared out of the windows. Even though one side of the long room was mostly glass and there were two paned windows on either end, the room was surprisingly warm. The view from the windows showed literally half of the estate, according to Severus, but all she could see were thick trees and an expanse of snow-covered grass, but if she stood at the north-facing window, she thought she could see a Druid circle through the trees just beyond the magical boundary that surrounded the house. The stairs that Dianne said led up to the Long Gallery above her were warded so Hermione couldn't pass, although she had no idea why, unless the view from the gallery would enable her to know where Cillian's house was located.

Hermione was half way through the ninth chapter when she felt a presence in the room. She lowered her book as she turned, surprised to see Cillian leaning against the doorway watching her. She watched him, wondering what he wanted, waiting for him to speak first.

"Do you know what your friends are doing," he said, his voice carrying a hard edge.

She shrugged. "Depends which friends you're referring to."

"At the school," he said sharply.

She nodded. "I have a good idea what they've been doing, yes."

He looked at her thoughtfully. "And presently?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I know where they intended to be over the holiday. Ginny invited Tinko to stay with her; Jenny and Janilynn were going to Ireland, and I think Luna and her father were traveling to Austria to visit family over there."

"And do you know where Potter is?" he asked, his tone sharp.

"Not at the present, no," she replied.

His chin jutted upward as he inhaled, then he looked squarely at her. "But you've heard the prophecy."

Hermione turned her head and settled back into her chair. "I may have."

She heard the thuds of his boots as he walked over to her. "Answer me."

"Now why would I confess that to a Death Eater?" she replied casually.

His glowering stare bore into her as if he was ready to use Legilimency on her. "Tell me or I'll tear it from you," he snarled.

"The Identifier, the Dark Lord, has been identified, and the one who meets the qualifications as the other Identifier specified in the prophecy has been named Harry, the Boy-Who-Lived, the Chosen One take your pick. The Qualifiers and the Conditions have been met," she said as calmly as she could under his trenchant stare, "and all that is left is to wait for the outcome for Harry to defeat the Dark Lord."

A deep chuckle escaped his throat and he gave her a nasty smile, "You are so overly confident that the Dark Lord will be defeated so easily by a half-blood whelp who is currently hiding from him?"

Hermione turned in the chair, bending her leg so she could face him fully. "Yes, Harry is an orphan, a half-blood, and he's in hiding as you call it. But that doesn't mean he won't have the power to defeat the Dark Lord. Being a pure-blood means nothing; it doesn't make you stronger or superior to half-bloods or Muggle-borns. But remember, the Dark Lord is a half-blood orphan as well."

Cillian crossed his arms, his feet planted firmly as he looked down at her. "A half-blood orphan don't be ridiculous."

"Yes, he is. I know the truth about his background. The Dark Lord was born Tom Marvolo Riddle in Wool's Orphanage, I believe. His mum, Merope Gaunt, fell in love with a Muggle, Tom Riddle, in the town of Little Hangleton where they lived. From what Harry said that Dumbledore told him, Tom's grandfather, Marvolo Gaunt, claimed to be a direct descendant of Salazar Slytherin, and both Marvolo and Morfin Gaunt, Tom's uncle, were parselmouths. Tom worked for Borgin & Burkes after he left Hogwarts, and I know Tom applied to teach Defense Against the Dark Arts sometime in the fifties, but he was turned down. Tom then cursed the teaching position, or at least that's what Dumbledore believed, although since that day, no teacher has lasted in the position longer than one year, many becoming hurt, maimed or killed at the end of the school year. Tom then disappeared from society and then reemerged as the self-proclaimed Dark Lord V O L D..."

"Stop!" Cillian shouted. "Don't even spell his name. You should know better he'll hear you."

"I'm sorry, I thought spelling... I won't do it again. Anyway, what I said, about Tom Riddle, I'm sure all of this can be verified if you were inclined to do so. His name his real name is anagram of 'I am Lord...' she held up her two fingers in the shape of a 'V', "the V-name. If I had my wand, I could show you."

"How do you know all of this?" he asked, his tone softer, less angry.

"From Dumbledore of course," she said offhandedly. "Did you know that Gellert Grindelwald and Albus Dumbledore were best friends as young men? When both of them were sixteen, they planned to establish a new world order, wherein wizards would rule over Muggles 'for the greater good' as they called it but Gellert took their plans one step further to include eliminating anyone who opposed him thousands of people, Muggle and magical, were killed anyone who opposed him. That's why Dumbledore fought him, to put an end to the slaughter of the innocent. And now the Dark Lord has picked up Grindelwald's obsession and is blaming the Muggle-borns for the fall of the wizarding world."

He sat down on the chair to her right, facing her. "And you think Potter can defeat him?"

Hermione nodded. "It's what the prophecy said, the part that Severus overheard, 'the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord' would be born on the thirty-first of July, 'as the seventh month dies.' Just ask him Severus, I mean," she said, wondering if she'd finally convinced him. "And if everything to date, the outcome of every altercation between the Dark Lord and Harry to date doesn't convince you it's possible that Harry *can* defeat him, then what will?"

He hung his head, his hands clasped together.

Hermione waited, letting him think about what she'd said.

Suddenly he hissed, his left hand clenching into a fist, just as the Mark on her own arm burned, making her cry out in pain. She looked down at her arm, biting her lip, wanting to press her hand over her forearm, tears forming in her eyes. "Is that the Dark Lord summoning me?" she asked, her voice shaky. "Is this what it feels like?"

"It's not a Summons; the awareness is sharper and you'd feel where he wants you to be if it were," he said as he stood up. "This is nothing he's angry, that's all. I'll get you something for the pain." He took a few steps and stopped, turning to look at her. "Once a Death Eater always a Death Eater, Hermione."

"Our character is defined by the choices we make, Cillian, and it's never too late to make amends," she said in response, flexing her fingers and trying to ignore the pain like hot needle pricks from her Mark. "In the end, what side do you want to be on? Choose Harry, and if we win I'll stand up for you, as will my friends. If the Dark Lord wins, be cunning and tell him you were only trying to thwart the foolish miscreants from inside the castle."

"You'd have me be a renegade? A turncoat?"

She smiled sweetly at him, despite the burning in her arm. "You wouldn't be the only one," she replied.

He frowned. "I'll get your salve," he said and walked away.

~~o0o~~

Author's Notes:

No, I don't think Hermione would normally read Danielle Steel's books, but considering her circumstances in this story, I think *Silent Honor* is a book she'd be intrigued by. *Silent Honor* is a fiction novel by Danielle Steel that made the best seller lists in 1996. The plot follows Hiroko, an eighteen year old who leaves Japan to live with her uncle, aunt, and cousins in California, United States, after making a difficult decision based on her needs and her mother's beliefs. However, when Pearl Harbor is bombed, she becomes an enemy in the American community. Ordered to stay in America by her father, she remains occupied in California; however, the military are ordered to remove all Japanese citizens, and she ends up being put in a detention center, having to fight to stay alive.

The book was published by Delacorte Press in 1996, which is perfect for the timing of this story.

Death Eater's New Year's

Chapter 40 of 43

Double, double toil and trouble, fire burn and caldron bubble. By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes! Cillian and Severus prepare for the Dark Lord's New Year's Revel, and Hermione is anything but pleased.

Warning: adultery and sexual theme that you may not like

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, ArabellaBloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick, and to Lady_Rayne and Phoenix for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate the all the help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.

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~o40o~

Death Eater's New Year's

Cillian felt the wards on the island trigger the arrival of a wizard and knew it could only be one of two people, his Grandfather Riorden, which was highly unlikely, or Severus returning from the latest summoning of the Death Eaters. That meeting, the decisions made, still rankled heavily with Cillian. He excused himself so as to leave the house quickly and hurried out to meet Severus, meeting up on the path near the old Druid circle.

Severus tilted his head, indicating the old stones and turned, and Cillian followed silently. Severus set the crate he'd been levitating alongside him on a large stone and then cast his Sound Dampening Charm on the ring of old stones, the protection hardly necessary, unless what he had to say was something he didn't want Dianne knowing. Cillian felt a stone drop in his gut. "Do I still have to participate?"

Severus nodded, the disquiet in his expression only noticeable because Cillian knew his friend so well. "You'll be matched up at the revel," Severus said softly, clearly as disgusted as Cillian felt.

"I don't want to do this," Cillian said, his eyes downcast, watching the pattern of the sunlight on the ground. The snowfall was light here, the dark brown old leaves sprinkled lightly with snow.

"Nor I," Severus sighed heavily, turning to look out at the lake through the gaps in the trees. "But it's our duty. The Dark Lord has ordered it. At least you don't have to marry either witch."

"No, I simply get to have meaningless sex to impregnate a pair of half-blood girls who are only there to avoid Azkaban," Cillian sneered as he turned his head to look out at the lake as well. "God, I wish there was another way out." He waited to hear more, but Severus seemed marred in his own thoughts. "So, what was decided for you?"

Severus stood stone still. He knew his friend, the thought of illegitimate children, born to an unknown witch to be raised in a maternity house didn't appeal to him either. When Cillian had heard the plans, he'd been upset, to the point of feeling physically sick. Dormer and Baddock had been delighted at the announcement of the Dark revel,

and Gerund, Malburke and Amycus Carrow had been equally delighted, since their social status didn't lend well for good matches. Wroithesley, deFay and Mulciber had even gleefully volunteered to help select the girls and escort them from the MRC cells, but Mengele and Vorster had said that the girls had already 'volunteered' a week ago and were at the Manor being prepared. Cillian assumed that meant bathed, groomed and drugged on potions.

Severus looked at the ground. "I'm supposed to assist Narcissa to have another and impregnate your sister."

"What?" Cillian exclaimed, astounded, and Severus nodded, sighing deeply. No wonder he put up the dampening charm. "Butfuck. *Belinda*? She will love that! At least Horrance will take it in stride."

Severus' head snapped to glare at Cillian. "It's not my choice; it's an order."

Cillian shrugged. "She has to become pregnant, and Horrance is sterile. He wouldn't want his sons to do it, and he knows another Death Eater will be chosen. It might as well be you. Horrance will look for the advantage of the situation and exploit it, but he won't try to kill you like Malfoy will want to."

Severus' expression hardened.

Cillian knew that he didn't want to have sex with either witch. "Good thing Malfoy is wandless."

Severus turned to face him, his expression stony.

"All I'm saying is that you at least have women who like participating in the Dark Revels."

"Narcissa has never liked them she tolerates the inconvenience," Severus stated. "She was pregnant with Draco during the Dark Revel in 1979, nursing in 1980, and she was excused from participating in the previous two rebirth celebrations."

"Oh, right," Cillian said. He himself had only been to one recruiting party before the Dark Lord fell in 1981 when he foolishly took the Mark, and this would be his third Dark Revel since the Dark Lord's rising. He knew that Narcissa had been allowed to miss the one in 1996 to celebrate the Dark Lord's restoration due to her husband's incarceration in Azkaban, but it had also been the same night Draco took the Dark Mark, bypassing the normal six-month probationary period to prove himself worthy. She had been present at the New Year's Eve Revel in 1997, a noble goddess in white, but she'd been absent at the Dark Lord's rebirth-restoration revel that June due to her deception and disgrace. But no one was exempt this New Year's Revel at Malfoy Manor, jokingly called the Dark Lord's Hall by his fellow brethren.

"Too bad you can't simply get Hermione pregnant and be... What?" he asked when Severus looked away. "You're not going to have children with Hermione?"

He turned to look at him. "I'm not *allowed* to with Hermione so *no*," he said, then looked away.

Cillian was at a loss. Severus loved Hermione, and they were good together, all things considering, alike in so many ways. Maybe under different circumstances it would have worked out between them. Too bad they were on the side that hated Muggle-borns. "Has Macaulay created the conception potion with Mengele?" he asked cautiously.

"Yes, but there is no way I trust a potion made by those crazed dunderheads," Severus spat. "I procured the ingredients to make the Luteinizing Potion and the Priapus Potion here." He motioned to the crate resting on stone nearest the path. "Which I must attend to. By the way, I will have a delivery tomorrow. Dobby has been told to deliver it as soon as it arrives at the castle. The Dark Lord is having Narcissa serve every aphrodisiac known to wizardkind, and she has asked me to prepare pufferfish and grindylow tentacles for the revel."

Cillian sucked in his breath. "Pufferfish and grindylow tentacles? You will be what do you need?"

Severus levitated the crate with a swish of his wand. "Clean rags, running water, a new cutting board, which I have, and privacy," Severus said, walking along with Cillian toward the house with the crate floating behind him. "I'll be sharpening my knives tonight, and I don't want any distractions tomorrow."

"Consider it done," Cillian promised.

~S~

Severus checked his potion again. Normally the process of creating or improving on a potion intrigued him, but he was distracted by the threat of his own impending involvement in Mengele's breeding program. Every Death Eater, single or not, would be expected to father at least four children, and any female of breeding age related to or married to a Death Eater was expected to offer herself up for 'implantation.'

The revel scheduled for the Dark Lord's New Year's party would be a masked ball, and those of the inner circle *His* favorite chosen, were to engage in an orgy, treated as a quasi-religious sexual ritual in which young women, most likely half-bloods, would be brought in for entertainment and impregnation. He'd already been told the password for the gate: Fidelio, from the Latin word for faithful. The antilogy was both horribly derisive and boorish as those attending the party would be anything but.

Severus hated these parties; having sex surrounded by many other couples doing the same, many of those men and women laughing at the idea of their fellow Death Eaters watching them with their sexual partners or joining in. Many of his brethren wore only their robes, masks and boots, their 'manly assets' fully and proudly exposed, some even having taken endowment enhancements.

He would be expected to...

No, he would not dwell on it now.

Severus had spent the morning carefully beginning the meticulous preparation of the pufferfish, efficiently and with exceptional care and precision with his *ugu hiki* knife. Pufferfish and stripped burrfish could be deadly poisonous due to the lethal amounts of the poisonous tetrodotoxin in the fish's organs, especially the liver, the ovaries, and the skin; therefore, it had to be carefully handled to remove toxic parts and to avoid contaminating the meat. If the fish was contaminated, the potent neurotoxin would shut down the conductivity of the nerves of the victim, which caused paralyzation the muscles, low blood pressure, respiratory paralysis and cardiac arrhythmias, while the victim lay immobilized and fully conscious.

The standard treatment for tetrodotoxin poisoning was to use the Sleeping-Beauty Enchantment with both the Respirator and Circulatory Charms to keep the body in stasis until the poison was metabolised and excreted by the victim's body, but this was not always suscesful.

Likewise, the burrfish had the toxin in its spinny fins and in the short, pointed immovable spines that covered its body. If he wasn't careful, the sharp spines could cut his fingers, poisoning him.

Severus was one of the very few wizards in the United Kingdom who had underwent the rigorous training under Master Yuichi Matsumura in order to be qualified to properly prepare the dangerous fish something Severus did not let on to many.

Pufferfish prices rose considerably in autumn and peaked in winter, the best season, because the fish fattened up to survive the cold. Usuki, a Japanese town in the in Ōita Prefecture was still the best place to buy the pufferfish, and the wizards of the Calusa Shell Indians of the southwest coast of Florida were the best source of the stripped burrfish, but at a considerable expense, since it had to be shipped by international Portkey under a magical stasis.

He added the four ounces of pufferfish, cut into translucent slices and soaked in Mollusk milt, to the stewed Mandrake in his cauldron, then stirred his potion slowly twenty-one times.

Beside him, Hermione was slicing sugar toads. He'd already cleaned the fish himself that morning, but since the sugar toad was a non-poisonous species of blowfish from the Chesapeake Bay in America, he was confident that she wouldn't be harmed in any way as she carefully prepared the fish.

Cillian had been summoned to the Dark Lord, and Dianne had gone for a walk around the island, so Hermione, apparently bored from being left alone, sought Severus out in the basement where he'd set up a fairly reasonable potions lab. At first he'd been unhappy about the intrusion, but she was proving to be an amiable, yet thankfully quiet, work companion.

He watched her as she added the fish to the stewed Mandrake in her cauldron and began stirring the potion twelve times.

He added the ground porcupine quills, then the parsley, letting them soak into the potion. He checked her potion, pleased that it was a perfect shade of persimmon, although at a later stage, if stirred properly, the potion would turn a light shade of peach. She smiled at him, making him smirk at her need for his approval. He gave her an affirming nod and began pulverizing his burrfish livers, careful not to get any of the toxic organs on his hands.

Hermione dumped in the finely chopped helonias root and then chaste berry powder into her cauldron, stirring the potion twelve times clockwise each, letting the potion whirlpool. He tried not to get distracted from measuring exactly two-hundred-and-eighty grams of cleaned tuna lattume as she poured in her highly purified equine urine as she stirred. If added too quickly, the potion would sputter, and students always liked watching the potion whirlpool in their cauldron, which was what Hermione was doing as she waited for her potion to stop swirling. Thankfully, her skills at potions were sufficient enough that it didn't sputter in her face.

"Is this the potion for Sherri?"

Severus cocked his eyebrow at her use of Cillian's nickname for his sister-in-law *So much for silence*. "Yes," he said as he softened the tuna semen sac with the lemon juice. *As well as for a few other ladies of my acquaintance who are in the same predicament* He added fifteen grams of powdered moonstones before putting the mass carefully into his cauldron, stirring only five times to blend it in. His potion hissed, a large bubble emerged in the center, but his potion remained stable. He had only minutes to peel and dice the shrivelfig and dice a bouncing bulb.

"The problem could be biological. Has she tried biorhythm?" Hermione asked, carefully grinding fifteen grams of powdered moonstones with six star anise seedpods and one dried six-inch Hippocampus.

He looked at her briefly in disbelief. "There are spells to determine the precise time of a witch's ovulation," he said, carefully dropping the diced shrivelfig and bouncing bulb into his potion and then stirring seventeen times counterclockwise. The Ovulation Detection Spell was repeated every month for several months until a pattern was established, but Sherrilyn didn't have that kind of time; the Dark Lord expected her to be pregnant within the month. He added nine bay laurel leaves into the brew and waited for the potion to change color.

He added his two monkfish spleens, set the timer to let it simmer, and checked her potion.

"The Luteinizing Potion it's used to induce ovulation."

"Yes," he said rather dismissively, hoping to end the conversation.

"And yours? I don't recall reading pufferfish as an ingredient in fertility potions: the Faunus' Lupercalia Potion, the Min-Virilous Elixir, or the Tutunus's Awful Philter. And using shrivelfig in a sperm building-fortifying potion? That's amusing," Hermione said with a certain amount of incredulity, dicing three sugar cane rats' tails.

"The Min-Virilous is for erectile dysfunction and the Mutunus Tutunus Potions is for engorgement of the penis, not for fertility," he corrected her. "This is the Priapus Potion. The Faunus' Lupercalia Potion works better, but I can't begin brewing it until after the winter aconite blooms, so it wouldn't be ready until the thirteenth of February."

"Hence it's more common name, the Casanova's Valentine Elixir," she said amused, and he glared at her impertinence quickly before returning to the work at hand.

"Yes," he snapped as he efficiently sliced his rats' tails. He added the tails and began stirring the potion thirty-nine times.

She looked at what was left of the three-foot-long tuna gonad with a grimace. "And they have to drink a half pint of this?" she asked, pointing at his cauldron.

"Eat," he corrected her as she dropped her tails into her potion while stirring. "It has the constancy of a bisque. It will be served at the New Years feast." Severus cringed inwardly; he intended to miss the feast. He looked at her. He certainly didn't want to take her with him, and the thought of locking her up in the Malfoy's dungeon New Year's Eve rankled him. He could tell the Dark Lord he'd trapped her in his house. He'd changed the wards when he went to get their bags so the Rat couldn't get in, and it was a reasonable ruse to the truth; Hermione would be essentially trapped here in this house.

The blue color of his Priapus Potion faded to white and then turned celadon green. *Excellent*.

"What about in vitro fertilization?" she asked, perched on a stool while her potion simmered.

"What?" he asked.

"In vitro fertilization it's where..."

"I know what it is, Hermione," he snapped, setting down his hand still holding his knife.

"You do?" she asked, dropping her twelve quills into the mortar.

He cocked his eyebrow as he frowned at her, then realized exactly what she was on about. "That idea has merit *Not in the Muggle sense, but magically*, "insertion of the sperm into the uterus would greatly increase the odds, and I wouldn't have to..." *have sex with the witch*, he finished his thought silently.

He wondered if the Malfoy's Healer, Bertrand Trankner, or Healer Pushpa Bastula had ever performed in vitro spells. *It would be a simple matter of trans-relocation of an object, in this case a mass of ejaculate, into a specified space, a uterus, and no harm done really, right?* Narcissa would agree to this, but Belinda would most certainly squawk.

He moved his cauldron to the cooling rack and turned to check Hermione's potion. He held his breath as he leaned over her shoulder. He could smell the distinct odor similar to anise and Vieux-Boulogne cheese wafting on the translucent yellow-colored stream as it rose in a softly swirling plume, and the potion was a perfect shade of shimmering pale peach. He nodded to her, acknowledging her accomplishment with the difficult potion, and she smiled in pure happiness from his approval, making him chuckle to himself as he turned away.

Severus picked up another sheet of parchment and read over the list of ingredients as he considered making the Sperm Stagnation Tonic. Taking it was risky. He glanced at his supplies. It called for most of the same ingredients. He'd have to add five sea urchin ovaries and the purified equine urine instead of the mollusk milt and the tuna semen sac, but the risk was worth the deception.

Did he dare defy the Dark Lord so blatantly? If Mengele were only examining the women at the revel, he might get away with it.

~C~

Cillian offered to take Sherri's and Ling's fertility dose to them, an excuse to see his sisters-in-law and check up on how they were doing. Sherri and Marc lived at Grouse Hill House near Robin Hood's Bay, Whitby, but when Cillian arrived, the house-elf said she was with her 'sister' in Chinatown. He hoped that they were visiting Ling's

parents in Chinatown in Manchester. The Manchester Chinatown was the second largest Chinatown in the United Kingdom, the third largest in Europe, bounded by four streets, and trying to find two women there could be nearly impossible without a tracing charm.

Ling's parents, Shulan and Kang Lai, still lived in the flat above their shop in the heart of Chinatown. When Cillian arrived at the shop, Shulan, informed him he'd just missed the girls and to try Ling's house. Hoping he wasn't on a wild white heart hunt, he slipped out the back and Apparated for the brick house on Broadoak Road in Worsley, Manchester. Thankfully his sisters-in-law were enjoying tea in the sitting room.

"You've just missed Justin," Ling informed him as he entered the room.

"Grandpa Riorden was here, and he and Justin had a real row about something most likely because your sister still has your mum and dad under the Imperius, and he wanted Justin to help him release them," Sherri said, her soft blue eyes showing her disapproval as Ling bowed her head slightly to hide her displeasure. It was one of the things he liked about Sherri; although normally discrete and carefully guarded, once she and Cillian were better acquainted, she was quite open with him as she was with those few she considered close personal friends or with family the exception being Belinda. Sherri had never warmed up to Bell. "You remember that awful mess last August when Grandpa Riorden broke in and rescued Tannis, and Ben stole the vault key and skirted off with all of the house-elves?"

Cillian nodded, wondering if he'd have to go find Justin.

Ling looked up, her dark, straight hair framing her face, and her almond eyes looking at him with sincere concern. "Justin went to see Belinda about letting your mum and dad off the Imperius, but Belinda said that Tannis will only run away again. It was bad enough when Belinda caught Tannis trying to save Elspeth last November, then to have to watch Tannis and Marc being tortured for disobedience it was horrible. But to have Tannis and Elspeth just sitting around like rag dolls..."

"I remember that she came by the school to gloat, saying how it would keep our good standing with the Dark Lord," Cillian said, hating the fact that he had to maintain his Death Eater persona when what he really wanted what he wished for was that they could all run off to America or New Zealand or anywhere. Not that *that* was at all possible. But Ling would never leave her parents, both well-respected Herbalists in Chinatown in Manchester.

Justin warned Cillian several times to stay in line, play the part, but Cillian was starting to hope that Hermione was right, that Harry Potter could somehow, by some holy miracle, Circe's favor or by the Fates, defeat the Dark Lord. But then he, Justin, Marc and Belinda, if they survived the war, would most likely end up in Azkaban. *If it comes down to that, I'll leave immediately and take Sherri and Ling someplace safe and support the girls however I can.* Thankfully, he and Justin both had accounts in banks other than Gringotts. He shook his head. "There is nothing to do for now if they run, the Dark Lord will mark them as deserters. Marc barely avoided death the first time Dad split."

Sherri bit her lip, her eyes downcast, nodding solemnly, remembering, and Ling inhaled as she squared her shoulders and sat up stiffly. He agreed with their views; he hated having his parents Imperiused, but there was nothing he could do presently. His grandfather was on the Dark Lord's deserters list. *Maybe siding with Hermione isn't such a bad idea... if she doesn't expect me to get involved with the misbehavior in the school. Who am I kidding? I have the Henley's to consider... and my sisters-in-law, mum and dad... Gods, it was all too much sometimes.*

"Oh, here," he said, remembering why he'd come. "Severus said you have to take one dose before dinner, one at midnight and another in the morning, that way not only will the potion be most effective but when Mengele examines you, the detection spell will pick up the effects of the potion, so you will not have to undergo his treatment."

Both women accepted the vials with soft smiles and sad eyes. "We were hoping to wait to start a family, but now is as good a time as any," Ling said, the corners of her mouth drawing back as if trying to smile but it looked a little more like a grimace. "Will you stay for tea?" she asked, her smile become more genuine, and her house-elf appeared with a fresh cup and a plate of tiny sandwiches.

"For a while, I'm expected elsewhere in an hour," he said, sitting down.

"What are we going to do about Tannis and Elspeth, Cillian?" Sherri asked.

"I really fear that Grandpa Gwynek may try to save his son and daughter-in-law again," Ling added. "And Justin said that your sister hopes to catch the old man and force him to return the vault key."

Cillian shook his head. "I don't know. Granddad is eluding everyone. He owns several properties, here and abroad, and if he's abroad, he has an account in Munich and one in Zurich." Where he hoped he'd taken ol' Ben. If he stashed ol' Ben in his London house, there was still the chance that Bell would find him and turn the beloved old caretaker over to the MRC. The thought made his gut clench.

~S~

Severus donned his simplest black trousers without underwear, knowing what was required of him, and tucked in the white silk shirt. While putting on his black dragonhide boots, Hermione asked him about the party again. "I don't want to discuss it," he said curtly. It's not that she wanted to go; she wanted him to stay here with her.

"But you're..."

"Hermione, the less you know the less you'll be upset," he said, cutting her off. He pulled on his other boot.

"Then why go?"

"It's an order, not a request," he stated, sitting up and looking at her. "I have no choice."

"And he doesn't expect me to be there *at* his New Year's party?" she asked for the second time, sitting crossed-legged on their bed.

"No," he said and reached for his hooded robe.

"What is it like, a Dark Revel?" she asked, scooting closer to him.

He put the robe on, leaving the front open and picked up his mask, staring at the hateful thing. "You have an imagination, think your worst." The newer silver masks, although more comfortable than the half scull masks they used to wear, sickened him more. However, tonight they were required. Her question reminded him of a book Cillian mentioned once just before his second revel. The descriptions in the book were not exactly the same, but close enough. "Have you read Arthur Schnitzler's 1926 novella *Dream Story*?" he asked. He regretted mentioning the book the moment he'd said it.

Her gaze wandered as she said slowly, "Nooo..."

"I have to leave," he said, getting to his feet. He picked up the small vials and cup on the bedside table and slipped them into his pocket. "Be good and don't give the Henley's any trouble."

Hermione slumped back on the bed with a heavy sigh and crossed her arms.

He turned and walked purposefully from the room, dreading the evening's entertainments.

~C~

Cillian buttoned up his black cassock style robe with a nonverbal charm, ignoring the reproachful look on Dianne's face. He actually wished she'd join her parents. The

cassock he'd bought at J. Wipple Wizard Wear was practical since it was either this or go nude under his Death Eater robes. At least the cassock was warm. "What?" he asked her.

"I didn't say anything," she replied, her focus now intently on him.

"You are I know that look," he stammered. "I have to go, you know that."

She nodded with a one-shoulder shrug while toying with a strand of her hair.

*Gah!* He hated it when she became quiet and sullen. He pulled on his engineer biker boots and stood up. When he reached for his Death Eater robes, she reached for his mask. "No, Dianne," he snapped, grabbing the mask before she did. "Don't touch it."

"It's just a silver..."

"No, it's not," he hissed, closing his eyes to calm himself. Although the thought was completely irrational, he didn't want it to sully her, as if the darkness it represented would taint her simply by touching it. "I've asked you before, don't."

She looked away.

"I told you, I don't want this," he said, holding his mask tightly as she turned to look at him and it, "to be between us you are not part of this. Look, I have to go."

He pulled on his hooded Death Eater robe with his mask in his hand. Thankfully, Andrew and Juliet were sharing a quiet New Year's together in the Long Gallery, enjoying the spectacular view of the lake from the windows so they would not see either him or Severus leaving the house in their Death Eater garb. Severus met up with Cillian in the hall and followed him down the stairs.

Severus stopped in the entry hall, tucked his mask under his arm and withdrew a handful of small vials from his pocket. A smirk played briefly on Cillian's face as he looked at them in bewilderment and secretly hoped the pale blue ones were the Min-Virilious Elixir. He might need it to 'perform'.

"Here," Severus said, handing three of the vials to Cillian, two containing the pale blue potion and one a greyish-green potion.

"What's this?" Cillian asked, examining the larger vial of greyish-green liquid. On close inspection the potion appeared translucent grey with a green sheen. He still didn't recognize it though.

"Protection," Severus said and uncorked his vial.

*Protection? He must be joking?* Cillian raised an eyebrow at him. "From what? What is it?" Cillian asked, uncorking his vial. "Clearly Mengele gave them potions to clear up any... thing..."

"The Sperm-Stagnation Draught," Severus said and swallowed his dose.

Cillian paused. *Sperm contraceptive male contraceptive...* "Is it...?"

"Permanent? No," Severus said casually.

One side of Severus' mouth pulled back in a crooked smile, making Cillian pause. "Did you really want to sire two unwanted illegitimate children out of wedlock?" Severus asked softly with a cocky smile.

Cillian's eyes narrowed at the comment, his mind whirling for a second in disbelief. *What the...? Hell no.* "It's what is expected of me," he stated, holding the answer to his problem, well one problem in his hand, wondering if he dared. The Dark Lord had been very clear about this; he was required to sire four bastards in as many years, more if humanly possible, beginning tonight.

It was Severus' turn to raise his eyebrow.

*If I didn't know better, I'd swear that he's implying but defying the Dark Lord's orders?* It's not that he distrusted Severus' abilities or questioned that it wouldn't do exactly as his friend claimed, but the risk. Severus was an amazing potioneer, creating some variations that even surprised the best brewers he knew. Even the Dark Lord preferred Severus' brews. *Hermione... could she possibly truly mean that Severus Severus is... really?* "Mengele..."

"Will be examining the women, not us," Severus said in a flat tone.

He'd offended him, but this was serious. *I did say we talked about this, but why? Is he implying... Would he dare?* If he swallowed this, he'd be defying the Dark Lord. If he didn't, the girls he'd be matched up with would, in all likelihood, get pregnant. He hated cheating on Dianne, even if he was being forced to do so, but he was going to have to submit and do it. He did not want to sire unwanted children.

Cillian swallowed the potion. For a second nothing happened, but then he felt a cold tingling in his gonads followed by a sharp tightening. Cillian stood firmly, watching Severus, forcing himself not to grab his crotch, even though the discomfort increased. The next second, there was a cooling numbness and then nothing; everything felt normal again. He forced himself not to adjust himself just to make sure.

"Time to go," Severus stated as if he'd not felt a thing.

The wizard's control of his features and his endurance for pain frequently amazed Cillian. He wished that he had such control; he almost did, but not to the level Severus could. It probably had to do with Severus' upbringing; Cillian's father had never beaten him, and the bullies in school hadn't tormented Cillian either. His brother Justin saw to that, and Cillian had always been a bit of a lad, even at twelve.

He looked up and saw Dianne watching him from the landing, a sad, resolved look in her eyes and a somber smile. He looked down as he turned around and walked out of the door ahead of his friend. He hated it when she had that *understanding* look.

~H~

Hermione entered the room that passed as a library in Cillian's home and started to look around the collection of books on the few recessed bookcases, more to appraise the collection and to see what books the Henley's and Cillian liked to read. She was surprised at the number of novels, fictional and non-fictional, and histories in his collection as well as the knitting and crochet books. She checked the next bookshelf and sighed: geography, biographies, biology, zoology... myths and mythical beasts. She slid her fingers across an expanse of wall between two of the recessed bookshelves, and she felt a tingle in her fingertips and the distinct feel of bookbindings, not plaster. She faced the space and tried to remember what she knew about wandless magic, and focused her intent tightly on the 'wall' before her. "*Aperire*," she said determinedly, trying to cast a revealing charm, frowning when it didn't work. She tried it again with the same result.

"Try, *Exponere*," Dianne said softly behind her, making Hermione turn sharply. Since Dianne had been keeping her distance these last few days, Hermione was surprised to see her standing in the doorway. "What are you looking for?" Dianne asked, moving into the room.

Hermione shrugged. "Severus mentioned a book; I thought it might be in here."

"Which one? I have read most of them and know this collection well," Dianne said, standing in the center of the room, watching her curiously.

Hermione felt her face flush as she replied, "Arthur Schnitzler's 1926 novella *Dream Story*." She considered what to tell her. "Dark magic it might be erotic." She felt her face heat up even more.

Dianne shook her head. "Don't recognize the name, but the novels and old novellas are over there," she said, pointing at the shelves to Hermione's left. "Unless it's a Romance novel, then they are down there on the shelf with my mother's books."

"I don't think it's a Romance novel." Hermione felt like a fool. *Why suggest the book if it's not here? But then why would Cillian have need of erotic literature?*

"Try the hidden shelves on the other side of the window, over there," Dianne said, and Hermione turned to look at her, to see where she was pointing to. Dianne's expression was guarded, and Hermione thought that maybe Dianne assumed that she and Severus were into erotica. No, there was a sadness in her eyes and listlessness to her posture. "It's where the darker subjects are kept. I don't read Cillian's Dark Arts books, so I couldn't tell you if the book you want is there or not. They are not usually my taste, but there are some, er, racy books on the hidden shelf on the other side of that window, but I think those may have belonged to Crydeyrn Mordaunt. He was into some rather sick... things."

Hermione moved to the section of 'wall' Dianne indicated, held her hand up and said, *Exponere*," pleased when it worked. Apparently the wards on the shelves were set for wandless use. The shelves were packed with magical books, many subjects she recognized and some she did not, but these were clearly Dark Arts books.

"Just don't let my mum see you reading the wall so intently. She doesn't know about the Dark tomes, and it would frighten her."

"No, I'll be careful," Hermione promised, kneeling to read the titles of the books on the lower shelves.

"Thank you," Dianne said, turning to leave.

Hermione turned to thank her and managed to mumble "Bye" as Dianne closed the door. After a long search, Hermione finally found the thin book crammed in between a few eighteenth century Libertine erotic novels.

Thinking about Dianne's warning about her parents, Hermione took the book up to her room. She read the book in very little time, it only had a hundred and twenty-eight pages after all, but she found herself reading the parts about the masked ball twice. The first time she'd read it, she'd been furious.

Fridolin, the main character of the book, learned about an exotic party from an old friend, Nachtigall, a piano player. Fridolin, dressed in a mask and costume, gained access where the party was taking place and was shocked to find several masked men, either nude or in costumes and naked, masked women engaged in various sexual activities, a quasi-religious sexual ritual of voyeurism and exhibitionism. When Fridolin was found out as an intruder, he was brought before a group of the men and questioned, told to reveal himself and to strip. The woman in the mask who warned Fridolin to leave appeared and offered herself to the gathering as a sacrifice if they let Fridolin go. Fridolin was then escorted out.

She remembered how stiff and formal Severus had been before leaving; she almost cried, thinking he was being forced into the same situation into participating.

The second time she read it, Hermione realized he wouldn't be in the position of Fridolin, he was more likely to be one of the men in masks and costumes only the masks were Death Eater masks and the costumes were robes over silk shirts and trousers worn without underwear! Her Severus was engaged in a sexual orgy.

She tossed the book down in anger with a loud, "Humph. Bigger, bigger to hell!" She closed her eyes as unnoticed tears slid down her cheeks. She could hear his voice, firm but resolved, smooth and deep, 'It's an order, not a request. I have no choice,' echo in her mind. *Cillian keeps saying, 'No one defies the Dark Lord and lives,' he's said it over and over, she thought. Even he obeys. He went. He's there. With Severus!*

She rolled over and buried her face in her pillow to muffle her scream *Damn him. Why can't he disobey even once? Damn him. Damn the Dark Lord. Damn him... damn him.*

~S~

Severus saw Belinda almost the moment that he arrived. She wore a peacock mask, the iridescent plumage matching the elaborate embroidery design of her long dressing robe that the Death Eater wives were permitted and high heels, making her appear taller than Severus' six foot. Nevertheless, he'd have recognized her dark curly hair and swaying saunter from across any room, possibly even a Quidditch pitch.

Severus normally wasn't very social at these events, preferring to be on the sidelines, but not tonight. He'd have to participate, not just make a showing and slip into the shadows before leaving as soon as he dared, his normal routine. He saw Graven and Avery smirk at him as Belinda approached utterly unembarrassed as to her blatant intent. *Damn the witch, Severus thought ruefully. A few nights' mistakes and...*

From where he stood he could see that other Death Eaters were already pairing up for the night, some with their wives, others, the single men, with young girls wearing only high heels and masks. He saw Yaxley and Jugson, their Death Eater masks both familiar to Severus, standing a short distance away, both with young girls, less than half their age, on the Death Eaters' arms. The girls were smiling, laughing at something said, but they also kept shifting their weight as if uncomfortable. He knew why. Across the hall, McFaul, easily recognized by his mask with its Egyptian eyes and fangs, and his wife were talking with Malburke and Pettigrew. Pettigrew, easily distinguished by his short, stocky build and a silver Death Eater mask that looked very much like a demonic rodent, was eyeing Mrs. McFaul appreciatively. Pettigrew held the wrist of the girl he'd been paired up with as if she'd skirt away at any moment, and from the way the girl was standing, keeping a few inches distance from him, he was probably right.

"I was beginning to wonder if I'd see you," Belinda cooed, snaking her arm around Severus'. The men's smirks changed to full knowing grins, and they backed away.

"I do believe that I am on time," Severus replied coolly.

"But surely you've been eagerly anticipating this as much as I have?" she asked, leaning into him.

He wanted desperately to push her away. "I must make my presence known to the Dark Lord," he said and disengaged his arm from Belinda's grasp. He could read her effrontery even behind the mask. "I will find you shortly," he added as she protested. "Enjoy the activities."

He walked casually down the Great Hall. He knew that Rowle, Travers, MacCavish and VanHalal would be here, somewhere, but since they were not married, they would be matched up with young girls for the evening. It sickened him. Already a few of the couples were engaging in recreation: kissing, petting and sexual acts. The entire ground floor of the manor was open to the guests. The larger drawing rooms would be 'vanilla' trysts or some mild levels of depravity as others stood by and watched, but the harder, more erotic activities would be in the more secluded rooms.

As far as he could tell, judging by their naked bodies, nearly all of the half-blood girls looked to be anywhere from eighteen to their late twenties, but their fancy feathered and sequenced eye masks hid their real age if not their identity. He fought the repulsed chill that ran down his spine. He should be grateful to Belinda; if not for her persistence at having him again and asking the Dark Lord for the match, he'd be matched up by Mengele as well, possibly with two girls he'd taught at some point. That thought sickened him even more.

He saw Narcissa approach, wearing a white peacock mask and sparkling white silk dressing robe. Her long platinum hair hung down her back and, like Belinda, the sleeves of her dressing robe was beaded to resemble the wings of the majestic bird. She nodded once at Severus, her light blue eyes visible behind the white mask.

"Narcissa," Severus said, holding out his arm.

She gracefully placed her hand gently on his and gave him a sad smile. Severus led her down the great hall, nodding in acknowledgement to those who greeted him and feigning interest in the acts happening in the drawing rooms, parlors and sitting rooms. He led Narcissa to the library and into a quiet corner.

"Dark corners, Severus?" she sneered. "Not out in front of everyone to..."

"Hush," he hissed, barely above a whisper. "Do you really want to have sex with me?"

"Of course not," she replied softly as he stepped closer to her. "I'm sorry, no, but I..."

"...or carry my child?" He cut her off since he already knew the answer. "Or would you like to carry your husband's?" He could see her eyes widen, then narrow through the eye slots of her mask. "I may have found a way to spare you humiliation and you're husband's anger."

"But he's blond and you're raven haired," she replied coolly.

"Quite a few people in my father's family were fair-haired and blue-eyed. My maternal grandmother was Birgitta Gustafsson of the Swedish Gustafsson families, and my great grandmother's name was Gertrud Westerberg of the Swedish Östergötland Westerbergs. Both women had hair the same color as yours, and my grandmother's eyes were silver, as were most of her family as I recall. I believe that Abraxus Malfoy married my grandmother's cousin, Märet Gustafsson," Severus stated, knowing that Lucius was quite proud of his Swedish ancestry. "So if the child has blonde hair and blue eyes or even blue-grey eyes, I can easily claim it is due to my ancestral lineage and the child's mother's coloring."

"I hope your right," she said and smiled weakly.

He pulled out a small cup with a twist off cap and handed to her. "Find Lucius. Enlarge this to its normal size, have him ejaculate in the cup and bring it to me. I'll use a charm to do it a simple spell I hope I can do right and it will be his sperm in you and not mine."

She glanced down as he pressed the shrunken cup into her hand. "Why would you do this?"

He leaned into her and whispered in her ear. "We've been friends for too long to have me force myself upon you," he said softly, much more kindly. "Once Lucius has ejaculated into it, shrink it so you can hide it carefully in your fist."

She nodded, letting him lean over her, hiding them both with his robes. "Thank you for what you did for Draco when Hermione escaped," she said after a short while.

He nodded. "I made you a promise to keep the boy from harm."

"A vow you completed a long time ago," she replied, her voice so soft he had to strain to hear her. "Why did Hermione come back to you?"

"Hermione thought it would protect her friends, since she still believes that I am in Dumbledore's Order, carrying on the old man's last wish to protect the students and the school. If I am removed as Headmaster, Alecko will take over the school, and her brother will replace Professor McGonagall as her deputy." It wasn't too far from the truth. If the Carrows did take over, they would dispense with half of the staff. Alecko would kill Minerva outright; he was certain of it she hated the woman. "I've made her fall in love with me and convinced her to play along with the Dark Lord's wishes. It's all going according to the Dark Lord's plans. She's even befriending Draco; well, she's trying to convert him to save him from what she sees as his big mistake. They argue a lot, but I think it's because she's starting to care about your son."

"That's what Draco thought," she whispered.

He looked up at her.

"I know about their arguments and her attempts... Draco is clever; he'll do what is right. He told me that despite the problems, everything considered, you're an excellent Headmaster," she said with a small smile. "Under better circumstances, if the students weren't rebelling..."

"Go, find Lucius, get him to comply," he said, standing back from her.

She nodded and hurried out. Damn, now he had to contend with Belinda.

He pretended to clean himself off and made a show of adjusting his robes as he walked out of the library. He paused outside the door, surveying the hallway. Knowing he had no choice, he walked slowly and stopped to peer in the first room he came to.

As his luck would have it, Severus found himself cornered by Horrance Morederk. As expected, Horrance was quite aware of his wife's infatuation with Severus and that the Dark Lord agreed to her request to carry Severus' child. As Cillian predicted, Horrance was being very diplomatic about the situation; however, he wanted to be involved in the coupling. Severus agreed, not that he really had much say in the matter, and it did irritate Belinda quite a bit to be so outmaneuvered.

Horrance had chosen one of the medium drawing rooms with a comfortable lounge seat, adjusting it slightly to accommodate the three of them, and directed the action. Normally, Severus hated threesomes, avoiding them if possible at these types of Dark Revels. But knowing how angry it would make Belinda, he submitted.

The men stripped off their trousers magically, their trousers collected by the house-elves, and Severus opened his shirt, baring his front to the spectators who chose to watch. Thankfully, the Min-Virilious Elixir was working; Severus was stiff as a bone. Horrance forced Belinda on the lounge, on all fours, having Severus fuck her from behind while she sucked on his penis. As soon as Severus came, the lounge altered so Horrance could fuck his wife comfortably, and Horrance allowed his wife to suck on Severus' penis.

This was one thing Belinda could do well, fellatio. And even though Severus hated being on display, the woman did have a way with her hands and mouth that brought Severus back up and fully erect by the time Horrance had reached climax. Apparently, the old fart didn't have much in the way of stamina.

But Horrance wasn't done humiliating his wife. He softly demanded a belt, barely heard above the noises in the room, and one magically appeared in his hand. He folded it in half and brought it down firmly on Belinda's bum with a loud whack. Belinda cried out in surprise. "Did you really think I'd let this go unpunished," Horrance said, slapping her bum again.

"No, don't you dare," she cried out as the belt landed on her bum again. "Horra-ance!" she cried out, struggling.

Severus realized that her husband had stuck her hands to the lounge with a Sticking Charm.

Belinda cried out as Horrance smacked her until her bum was reddened. BDSM wasn't something Severus liked or participated in, but it did give him some measure of satisfaction to see Belinda being spanked. The Death Eaters watching smirked, a few murmuring comments. Wroithesley groped the tits of the young witch with him, and the young witch with deFay stroked him.

When he was done, Horrance turned to Severus. "One last time, then I think you should go."

Severus nodded in understanding and stroked himself to try to get his semi-softening penis fully erect, thankful for the Min-Virilious Elixir. Somehow he managed to get hard enough to penetrate the sobbing witch. Horrance moved to face his wife, ordering her to give him fellatio like she had Severus. Severus thrust into Belinda from behind, trying to drown out those around him and the moans Belinda made, and thought of anything but what he was doing and who it was, hating having to perform like an animal. He wished he could fake an orgasm the way he'd heard that women claimed to be able to do. Eventually, Horrance began to come again, and Severus thrust into

Belinda hard, baring his teeth while grunting and snarling, hoping that it was convincing.

While Horrance recovered, Severus cleaned himself up wandlessly and walked away. He paused on occasion as if watching the couplings going on with feigned mild interest and moved on. He saw Narcissa approach as he exited the red drawing room. He took her arm, moving casually toward the library again and led her inside. Unfortunately, the room was occupied by a burly Death Eater and Mulciber, both spanking two women tied to a table in the center of the room. The other occupants, Wilkes and Travers, were watching, enthralled by the demonstration, Travers pawing the tits of the brunette girl in front of him. Severus feigned interest for a while and then slowly backed Narcissa away to a dark corner again.

"What is the spell?" she asked as soon as he turned to face her. She handed him the cup, placing it carefully in his palm with both hands.

Severus enlarged the cup wandlessly, and he forced himself not to cringe. It was still warm. "A simple Trans-Relocation Charm. I've used it in potions, same principle, but different, er, receptacle. But first I have to cast a detection spell to know exactly where your uterus is." Thank the gods for the mask; she couldn't see him blush.

She cocked her head at him. "You've not done this before?"

"No, only occasionally when brewing when the potion requires it," he admitted. "But it shouldn't be hard if I know where I'm putting the mass of ejaculate. The worst-case scenario is that I place it in your bladder or abdomen. Either way it won't hurt you, and if Mengele casts a detection charm for semen, you'll be 'implanted', so he shouldn't get too suspicious." He hoped.

She nodded. "What do you need?"

This section of the library had little to offer, only a wall sconce for light and a stepladder. "Lean against the stepladder and open your robe, if that's all right?"

She did as he asked, and he looked away for a moment, fighting back his momentary embarrassment for her. He drew his wand, casting a few detection charms he'd read about, until one of them made her abdomen seem to turn transparent. He angled his wand, and her organs appeared. He identified her uterus easily and made an estimate of the distance. "Take the lid off," he said, holding the cup up as he maintained the spell, trying to mesmerize the exact location of her uterus. It wasn't as big as he'd expected, but then she was slender for a woman. He used his wandless Trans-Relocation Charm quickly just as the detection spell began to wane. His Trans-Relocation Charm worked, the mass 'relocated' into where he'd visualized; he only hoped it was in the right place. He looked up at her and shrugged.

She smiled weakly. "I appreciate it," she said softly.

"O' course she does," Mulciber said, cuffing Severus playfully on the shoulder. "Ah, you ol' bat, why you hidin' in the corner?"

"Never was one for showing off," Wilkes said gruffly.

Severus vanquished the cup and turned to face his old housemates from his school days. "You were otherwise occupied," he said to Mulciber, deflecting the conversation off of Narcissa. He made a show of cleaning her and then himself off with wave of his hand and a verbal cleansing spell. "How did she enjoy your ministrations?" he asked, indicating the girls still tied to the table as Narcissa quickly tied her dressing robe closed and moved closer to Severus.

"Handled it well, but I don't think she enjoyed it," Mulciber stated, looking at his girl for the evening. "Somethin' sweet though, she's a real sport. Let me do anythin' as long as I don't really hurt her. But she pinks up real nice."

Severus held his arm out for Narcissa. "I could use a drink," he said and smirked at his fellow Death Eaters.

"Yeah, does take a bit out of you, doing two in one night," Wilkes said with a smirk.

Mulciber laughed. "Yeah? I have to go find my other girl. I left her in the main drawing room." He turned to Severus, jutting his chin out toward Narcissa. "Be sure to find Mengele or Vorster so they can verify it."

Narcissa lifted her chin slightly. "Of course," she said imperiously. She turned serenely to Severus. "How about that drink?"

Severus nodded as he forced back his smirk. "Gentlemen, I'll leave you to your sport."

Narcissa laid her hand on his arm and walked with him from the library, her head held high, never even glancing at the scene at the table. He had to admire her attempt at dignity. "It will be over soon," he said softly.

"It doesn't seem to end," she sighed. She turned to face him. She lowered her head slightly. "I'm technically yours for the evening unless you need to return to Belinda?"

He raised an eyebrow at the comment. "No, she's with her husband now," he said, noting the odd glint in her eye. Narcissa didn't care for Belinda, apparently. "I'm sure she's being entertained."

"Lucius wanted to thank you," she said, indicating the end of the Grand Hallway with a tilt of her head. "I have things to tell you," she implored, "private things." They walked in silence. At the end of the hall, she led him up a staircase to the first floor and then opened up a passage behind a statue in an alcove. He followed her inside and up to the next level. She led him quickly to the old nursery and closed the door behind them. Turning to face him, she removed her mask. He was surprised to see heavy makeup concealing a bruise.

"I want you to know that the Dark Lord wants Professor Vector brought here to serve him. He is not happy about the uprising of the students last term and will grant Alecto and Amycus power to implement punishments for any insubordination they see fit if it continues. Professor Grubbly-Plank was mentioned, but I didn't hear what she should leave, Severus. And Vincent Crabbe made some accusations about Professor Slughorn it was backed by Millicent Bulstrode and Blaise Zabini."

"Why are you telling me this?" he asked. If she was right, things in the school would become even more difficult for him.

"You've just helped me; I know you still help Draco, even though you've fulfilled that vow," she replied sadly. "Now I want to return the favor. I hear things, see things..." She looked away. "And beware for Granger, she's in danger. Alecto and Bella, they... hate her. Alecto is furious that Hermione is allowed to finish her schooling when she will only be killed at the end of the war when she's no longer useful." She looked at him, her eyes pleading. "And watch your back, too. Alecto wants to be Headmistress."

"Thank you for the warning," he replied.

Narcissa sank into a chair, put her elbow on the armrest and stroked her lip with her thumb.

He watched her as he moved closer and reached down to touch her face. Her Concealing Charm undulated slightly, and she inhaled sharply at his touch. "If you want I can brew you a Bruise Paste?"

"Draco offered," she said with a shake of her head. "He likes to see the discoloration." She looked up at him. "Lucius is across the hall. I know he wanted to see you."

Severus nodded, backing away slightly. "If you need anything, don't hesitate to ask."

She smiled wanly. "Thank you. I'm fine."

He smiled at her, understanding, then slowly turned and went to find Lucius.

~\*~



Severus waited in the Large Drawing Room that the Dark Lord presided in as his throne room as Belinda confirmed her obedience to the copulation; naturally Mengele's wand tip turned light blue, indicating the presence of sperm. "I'll check again in two weeks, if it turns pink you're pregnant," Mengele said with a false smile at Belinda and made a notation on his clipboard.

Belinda's smile morphed into a smug grin as she turned to wink at Severus.

Severus nodded. He knew that in two weeks, Mengele's wand tip would be white.

Mengele looked up and waved Narcissa forward, and Severus moved aside to let Narcissa walk up so Mengele could perform his test. The tip glowed a bright blue tinged slightly with a pink hue, eliciting a raised eyebrow from the Healer. "Odd," he said, trying the spell again with the same result, then repeated it again, each time with the wand glowing the same bright blue with the subtle pink hue.

*Only an idiot does the same experiment three times expecting a different result* Severus thought ruefully.

Behind him in the queue, McFaul grunted about it taking too long.

"Fine, fine, he has implanted his sperm," the Dark Lord said in a bored tone as he waved his hand in an offhanded manner, although he was anything but; he was as interested in the outcome as Mengele was, maybe even more. His red eyes had been riveted on the wand tip with each result. "Of course Severus did his duty, probably even enjoyed it, didn't you, Severus?"

Severus inclined his head. "It was everything I'd expected it to be, possibly more," he said, remembering Belinda's outrage and Narcissa's grateful compliance. Narcissa's face flushed slightly, but he simply winked slyly at her with the slightest nod of his head.

She looked away, casting her eyes downward as she did.

"Move on," the Dark Lord said dismissively.

"Two to three weeks, ladies. I expect you to come see me to have your pregnancy verification done," Mengele said as Severus turned and left with Narcissa.

"Severus?" she asked softly.

He turned his head to look at her.

"Thank you," she replied. "What if when the baby is born what if he suspects..."

"He won't. Just insist that the child is mine, and make Lucius play along," Severus stated, giving her hand a light squeeze before he turned to leave.

He strode through the Hall as casually as he could, sneering at the congratulatory and snide sexual comments and innuendos. He could care less what these men thought; he'd done his duty and was ready to leave. As the revel started to wind up in the eleventh hour, Severus made his sly escape.

He walked down the path through the garden, heading for the groundkeepers gate. The waning crescent of the moon did little to illuminate his way, but he refused to light his wand tip, not wanting to create a light that could be seen by anyone from the Revel.

He was not at all eager to return to the island, knowing he'd have to face Hermione's questions, not that he'd answer them anyway. He would not tell her who he'd been paired with. He wanted to forget this night, not have her pout petulantly because he wouldn't satisfy her endless inquiries about the revel and what she would now assume was his role in it. He shouldn't have told her about the book. He knew she'd look for it; he'd hoped at the time it would answer all her questions.

But even if she could guess the truth, or if she'd assumed he'd had to fuck one of the girls brought in to play the role of the 'sacrifices' from the novella neither scenario would come to anything good. He'd committed adultery, and he was certain she'd have a hard time forgiving him for it, regardless of the reasons he'd complied. He was not his father he didn't want to be the man who beat his wife and slept with the bints in the bars.

He stopped and turned to face the Malfoy estate.

No. He was tired and in a foul mood.

Sighing, he decided to return to the castle for the night and face Hermione in the morning.

~oOo~

Author's Notes:

What I envision as the Druid's circle on Cillian's island is similar to the Druid's Circle, The Edge at Alderley Edge: <http://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/43508> or the Druid Circle at Close Rock, Blarney Castle, Cork, Ireland, because I like that it is open, visible from two sides, that way you could see a bit of the lake: [http://www.123rf.com/photo\\_4045270\\_druid-circle-close-rock-blarney-castle-cork-ireland.html](http://www.123rf.com/photo_4045270_druid-circle-close-rock-blarney-castle-cork-ireland.html)

Luteinizing hormone (LH, also known as lutropin) is a hormone produced by gonadotroph cells in the anterior pituitary gland and triggers ovulation.

In Greek mythology, Priapus or Priapos (Ancient Greek) was a minor rustic fertility god, protector of livestock, fruit plants, gardens and male genitalia. Priapus is depicted with an absurdly oversized, permanent erection, which gave rise to the medical term priapism. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priapus>

The Lupercalia was a pastoral festival observed on February 13 through 15 by the ancient Arcadian Lycaea shepherds. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lupercalia>

The Roman god, Faunus, is the Greek god, Pan, was a fertility god most noted for his many sexual exploits. Other names for the god were: Fatuus and Fatulcus. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faunus>

Min is an Ancient Egyptian god of male sexual potency, fertility and possibly orgiastic rites. In Egyptian art, Min was depicted with his penis erect (supposedly held in his left hand) and a flail (referring to his authority, or rather that of the Pharaohs) in his upward facing right hand. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Min\\_\(god\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Min_(god))

The Tutunus's Awful Philter is a play on the phrase, Tutunus's 'awful phallus.' In ancient Roman religion, Mutunus Tutunus was a phallic marriage deity with a very large penis. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutunus\\_Tutunus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mutunus_Tutunus)

The Calusa Shell Indians lived on the sandy shores and along the inner waterways of the southwest coast of Florida. In the late 1700s entire villages were wiped out when diseases, such as smallpox and measles, were brought into the area from the Spanish and French explorers, and were slaughtered by enemy Indian tribes from Georgia and South Carolina who invaded their territory. It is believed that the few remaining Calusa Indians left for Cuba when the Spanish turned Florida over to the British in 1763. In this story, the Calusa simply spread out across the Caribbean and went 'underground' much like the European wizards did. <http://fcit.usf.edu/florida/lessons/calusa/calusa1.htm>

The description of the Dream Story comes from Wikipedia, since I haven't read the book; but I did see the movie based on the novella *Eyes Wide Shut*, and the idea of the Dark Revel came from that movie. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dream\\_Story](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dream_Story)

As usual, the Latin used comes from the Norte Dame Latin translation site I always use and with a little help from Proulxes:

Aperire means to: to uncover, lay bare, to reveal

Exponere means: expose, show, open, accessible

## Rescue and Predicament

Chapter 41 of 43

Severus gears up for the new school term and hears some bad news: well, a lot of bad news. Mostly, though, something has happened and Cillian is asking for some time off of his bodyguard duties. Will this be the final straw that will help pull Cillian over to the right side?

*A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick, and to Lady\_Rayne and Phoenix for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate the all the help. Thank you very much.*

*Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.*



~o41o~

### Rescue and Predicament

Although it was risky, Cillian quietly slipped away from the revel around eleven-thirty after having dutifully performed his obligatory duty with the two witless girls he'd been paired up with and having been verified to the satisfaction of Mengele and the Dark Lord.

It made him feel like a cad.

He didn't wish to hear any more congratulatory or snide comments from the other Death Eaters.

He didn't particularly want to be at the island, partly due to his feelings of guilt, but also because he wasn't really ready to face Dianne, and there was a good chance she'd be up waiting for him. Oh, she'd be accepting of the situation, putting the blame on the Dark Lord rather than on him, and she would even forgive him for his transgression, knowing he hadn't had a choice, but Cillian couldn't forgive himself that readily. Not yet anyway.

He practically ran for the gate and Apparated home well, his childhood home.

He arrived at the lode bridge near Wicken Burrows and walked down Burrows Road, paying little heed to the sounds and scents of the fens at night. The walk had always been one of his favorites, even in the winter months, but his thoughts weighed heavily on him as he followed the road by the blue-white light from his wand.

As much as he tried not to dwell on it, the events of the past few hours were roiling about in his mind. He had been utterly shocked when Mengele's wand tip had turned the palest blue, which had verified his copulation. He'd trusted Severus that the potion would make him sterile, but he'd expected his sterility to show up during the detection test in some way. And, even though Cillian had braced himself for an interrogation or Legilimency invasion, the Dark Lord had only given Cillian a perfunctory glance when he made an indifferent inquiry about the revel as he'd watched Mengele perform the second verification.

Cillian's illumination spell flickered as his realization hit him; he'd lied, well, deceived the Dark Lord and his minion Healers, and he was none the worse for it. He hadn't been cursed, or tortured, or fed to the Dark Lord's snake.

The toe of his boot caught a crack or a rock almost tripping him, and he strengthened the Illumination Charm from his wand. The cobbled road was under the Fidelius so only the dozen or so magical families who resided in the small village tucked along the edge of the fens near Wicken, Cambridgeshire, knew about it. Since all of the properties were under the Fidelius as well, the Muggles didn't know the houses were even there either. And a few were really quite large. In fact he could see the rooftop of his parent's home from where he stood.

The sight of the house wasn't as calming and reassuring as it normally was. For some unknown reason, he simply wanted to be in his familiar room even if he hated seeing his mum and dad Imperiused and drooling on the sofa.

His stomach churned as his thoughts turned back to the events of the evening, and he tried not to think about the perfunctory sex acts that he had engaged in. He had not paid attention to the names of the two girls that Mengele had put before him. Both girls had been willing, even enthusiastic, but it had been a struggle even to maintain an erection, let alone see each one through to completion.

He started walking again, dividing his attention between where he was going, maintaining the charm and the turmoil of his thoughts. *Merlin's pants this is a mess.* No, he hadn't wanted to sire unwanted illegitimate children out of wedlock as Severus had so casually said it, but Cillian couldn't believe what he'd done. Just the day before, Severus had said it was their duty, a direct order at that, and then he'd made the Male Contraception Potion. Severus had secretly defied the Dark Lord.

Cillian swallowed. And so had he! When neither girl passed the pregnancy verification, he'd be screwed.

Of course, he'd wished he hadn't been required to have meaningless sex to impregnate the half-blood girls, and he was glad that there wouldn't be children, but he hated being forced to have sex, on display for his fellow Death Eater's amusement, with girls who had only agreed to be there to avoid being sent to Azkaban. Naturally the two girls, both at least ten years younger than he was, had been accommodating and responsive quite so but they'd most likely been given lust potions as well as fertility potions.

It was like the time he'd had to Crucio that defenseless boy an orphan with magical abilities only because the boy had no idea who his parents were. The raid happened the week after the Dark Lord returned. Cillian had cursed the lad until his screams began to annoy the Dark Lord, and then the Dark Lord had fed the boy to his snake. All

to prove that he, Cillian, was still loyal. His test. One of many.

He stopped short, realizing that he'd arrived. He paused, staring at the impressive grey stone manor. *Greyfen Hall. Home.*

He opened the gate, strode up the garden path and entered the house. The house was silent. No house-elf greeted him, not that he expected them too. They'd all escaped when Grandfather Riorden raided the house last August.

His Mum and Dad were not in the parlor, nor in the sitting room. He took the stairs two at a time and checked upstairs in the larger guest suite. His parents were in the bedroom, lying side-by-side, sleeping. At least they looked like they were sleeping. They could've been given an Imperius suggestion to sleep, which meant Bell was here, since she was the one who usually 'tucked them in' like this. *Damn.*

He went to his room, but couldn't sleep. He wasn't tired at all; his mind was too riled up. He changed into an old pair of well-worn trousers, a warm shirt and thick socks, and stood by the window, staring at the few points of lights of the neighboring town of Wicken in the distance. *I've defied the Dark Lord. And when it's discovered, I'll be in deep shite.* He stifled a yawn and wondered if there were any sleeping potions in the house, then dismissed the idea. He pulled on his boots and his casssock and went down to the kitchen to make himself a mug of Horlicks.

The kitchen was not as clean and tidy as he'd remembered, but the fridge and cupboards were well stocked. He found everything he needed easily enough, putting four teaspoons of Horlicks into a mug, stirring it into paste with a little water and then warmed the milk like ol' Ben used to do, slowly in a saucepan on the stove. Merlin, he missed the old fart. He'd been with the Gwynek family, taking care of Greyfen Hall, for over eighty years, or so the old wizard had told Cillian ages ago.

Marc entered the kitchen. "Oh, it's you. Where's Bell?"

"Last I saw her she was at the revel with Horraine," Cillian said as he stirred the hot milk into his mug. "If she's not upstairs, try her house."

"Did she reinforce the Imperius on Mum and Dad?" Marc asked.

Cillian shrugged. "I suppose so; they've been moved upstairs to the large guest suite."

Marc crossed his arms as he leaned against the counter. "So, Bell is in the master suite tonight?"

Cillian shrugged. "Not surprising; I remember her complaining that Horraine plans on going back to Grosseto tonight, and Anesidora doesn't like her much. Want one?" Cillian offered. Anesidora was Horraine's daughter-in-law, a strongly opinionated witch, who never liked Bell.

Marc scoffed at the Horlicks. "You still drink this shite?"

"Would you prefer a butterbeer?" Cillian challenged.

Marc turned his head, ignoring the jibe. Cillian set down his spoon and took a sip, enjoying the warm, malty flavor.

Suddenly there was a sound, like something or someone falling against the wall.

Then another, like something being bumped.

Marc walked out of the kitchen to go check. Cillian set down his mug and followed after Marc, thinking it was probably Belinda.

Suddenly Belinda's screech, "*He's gone!*" could be heard upstairs. "*Stop him!*"

"*Shite!*" Marc snarled, breaking into a run, and Cillian heard the distinct sound of a vase smashing on the floor.

"Who's gone?" Cillian shouted, although he knew exactly who 'he' was. Marc had his wand out now, running down the hall with Cillian a few yards behind him.

Cillian heard the front door bang open before Marc reached the entry hall, and there was the definite loud crack of Apparition as the door slammed closed. Cillian saw Bell as she raced across the entry for the door, followed by Marc.

"Who dropped the anti-Apparition wards?" Marc bellowed as he yanked the door open.

Cillian entered the entry hall as Marc and Bell ran out into the front garden. *A lot of good it will do them if dad was able to Apparate* Cillian thought ruefully.

Cillian caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye, a shadow moving, and ran to check. He skidded to a halt, seeing ol' Ben holding his mum up as he tried to half carry-half drag her with him. His mum's eyes widened in fear, but her head lolled as if she were drunk as she clung to the old caretaker. Ol' Ben hitched her up, getting a better hold on her, but his mum was so weak she was practically a rag doll. Cillian heard a noise in the entry hall and knew that Marc and Bell would come looking for him, and if they found ol' Ben Cillian didn't want to think about the what ifs. Hoping that neither Marc nor Bell had recast the anti-Apparition wards, Cillian lunged forward, grabbed their wrists and Apparated.

They arrived on the drive of an 1866 Victorian country house, now called the Borrowdale Hotel. He had to grab hold of his mum as ol' Ben stumbled. "I got you," he said as he lifted her in his arms, holding her securely. His mum was so thin and frail it tore at his heart. *Why have I allowed this to go on for so long?* he berated himself. "Are you all right?" he asked ol' Ben as the old caretaker climbed back up on his feet.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine," he said, brushing the snow off his robes.

"Follow me," Cillian said as he stepped forward to carry his mum to the hotel.

His family's longtime caretaker stayed stubbornly rooted to the spot. "No. Give her to me, Cillian."

"No, I will not let them take my mum," he said defiantly. "Look behind you." He jutted his chin toward the hotel.

Ol' Ben turned slightly, keeping one eye on Cillian, then stared, his mouth going slack and his eyes wide. "Where are we?"

"Safe," Cillian stated cryptically. It was a quiet, out of the way hotel that he and Dianne had stayed in once. Silly really, since they could've just as easily have stayed at the island, but this had been romantic to her.

"I have to contact Riorden," ol' Ben stated stubbornly.

Cillian wasn't surprised. "Later. I want to get my mum settled. This place will be safe as long as you don't do magic any magic." He carried his mum to the hotel with ol' Ben trudging along reluctantly behind him.

As they entered the lobby area, a lady walked up to the registration desk. "Hello? May I help you?"

"I need lodging," Cillian stated. "Two rooms."

"Check in is between two and midnight," she replied. "I'm afraid you're too late."

Cillian frowned, he couldn't wait with his mum in this condition, and he couldn't take her to the island his mum didn't know about the house, and even with all of the protection spells, if she did know, and was captured, even Belinda could get the memories of the place from her. It was too risky. That was the one loop-hole of the Fidelius Charm, if someone saw the house, or was taken inside, they could bypass the charm and Apparate directly into the place. No, *too* much of a risk. He set his mum down in a chair Ben had dragged over and then Confounded the woman behind the counter. "It's ten minutes till midnight."

"Oh, right, sorry. Yes, sir, how many rooms did you need?" the lady asked, her eyes slightly dazed. "Oh, are the computers down?"

He had no idea what she meant about the computer being down; it was right there in front of her, wasn't it, that thing she was typing on? He used the Inception Charm, a benign version of the Imperius Curse that usually went undetected, saying, "Solve it," with what little patience he had. "Give me two rooms on the same floor, preferably next to each other."

"That shouldn't be a problem, sir," the woman said. "We had a last minute cancellation... a Prestige double room with a king size bed for one hundred and twenty-two pounds, both parties. And let's see... hmmm... I do have a Prestige single room available on the same floor, a non smoking room, for ninety-two pounds. It was freshly painted recently, and we've been airing it out, but if you don't mind the smell, I can give you a twenty percent discount." The woman looked up. "How long will you and your mother and father be staying?"

*Merlin, didn't Muggles have caretakers? But they don't travel with their servants, do they?* Dianne had commented on that when he'd asked her if they should bring Ella with them. "Personal assistant," Cillian corrected her, remembering something from one of Juliet's books. "My mum, Mrs. Clark, and Ben-ley, William Bentley will be staying a week, possibly longer." *Damn that was close.* He hoped the name was different enough.

She nodded, apparently satisfied. "Very well, sir, so you'll need both rooms."

"Yes, I'll need both rooms," Cillian repeated.

"How are we going to pay for this?" ol' Ben ask quietly.

Cillian dug in his pocket. His fingers brushed the plastic card and he took it out. "With this. My Visa." It was from that Muggle bank a credit card; they gave it to him when he opened the account. It was much easier than carrying around the artfully printed paper that they called money. He showed it to ol' Ben. "See the numbers here, that's how much is on this thing. Everywhere takes the Visa, and when the money is gone, I'll just add more. We'll be fine." He handed the card to the lady.

"Do you have any luggage, Mr. Clark?" the lady asked.

"No, but I'll get some," Cillian stated. Not a bad idea but it meant that he'd have to go back to the house and pack something. Maybe Ella would go and help him *What a bloody mess.* The clerk didn't seem to care though and passed a paper over for him to sign. "I'll need a second key for my mum's assistant."

"Is your mother all right, sir? Do you need a doctor?"

He didn't know what a doctor was, but all his mum needed was few hours sleep, real sleep, and some food and she'd be more alert. "No, she's just exhausted. I just need to get her to the room so she can rest." He suddenly thought that maybe his mum might be hungry. After all, how much did one eat when Imperiused? "Do you have food service?" He remembered that Dianne had ordered breakfast delivered to their room. It was a nice service.

"Yes, sir," the clerk said. "But the kitchens are closed."

He reinforced the spell on the woman. "I'd like tea and sandwiches brought up please, and if you can, have breakfast delivered in the morning."

"I'll have something brought up and make a note to have your breakfast delivered in the morning, around seven?" she asked, her eyes still slightly dazed.

Ol' Ben nodded. "Seven's fine. I can help Mrs. Gwy Clark in the morning, master Cillian."

"Very well, sir, here are your keys," the woman said and told him how to find the rooms. "Good night, sir. Have a nice stay."

Cillian carried his mum to the room, careful not to bump her on anything. The double room was a nice room, furnished to a reasonable standard with a large bed, like the one he and Dianne had when they'd stayed here. It also had comfortable chairs for seating, a padded bench at the foot of the bed for putting on your shoes, a TV box and telephone to call the front desk, and just like the lady had said, nothing was smoking, thank Merlin. He set his mum in one of the chairs, then pulled down the covers of the bed.

"Cillian?" his mum asked, and he cringed at the sound of fear in her voice.

"Yes, mother," he said, adjusting the pillows.

"Why?"

"You're my mum," was all he could say around the lump of guilt that lodged in his throat. He should have done this ~~month~~ months ago. "Let's get you in bed. You'll feel better in the morning, but I'll get you some potions anyway."

His mum tried to stand, but he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed instead, adjusting the pillows and the covers as she settled down to sleep. "I love you," he said softly, but his mum seemed to have fallen asleep as soon as her eyes closed. He turned and took stock of the room.

There was a card on the small table that read: dinner, bed and breakfast at a supplement of £20 per person per night; Dinner included a four-course dinner in the restaurant, and the hotel offered light lunches and afternoon teas in the lounge bar and conservatory. He had already paid for the bed with the Visa, but he'd have to get ol' Ben a handful of those L-twenty slips of parchment Muggles used so they could eat in the restaurant, apparently. And there were other services, most of them he remembered from staying here before. Checking the other door he saw the en suite shower and there was a hair dryer, cup, soap, small plastic bottles of shampoo, conditioner and body lotion on the vanity and plenty of towels.

Ol' Ben knocked softly before entering.

"Is the accommodation satisfactory?" Cillian asked.

"Oh, yes, master Cillian, quite nice. I shall be quite comfortable." Ol' Ben looked around the room nervously.

*Good, apparently he doesn't mind the smell of the Muggle paint.* "Ben," Cillian said softly, and the old wizard turned to look at him. "Don't use magic here, this is a Muggle place, and if there is any unusual magical activity, the Ministry will notice. It's imperative you do everything the non-magical way."

"I have to contact Riorden," the caretaker insisted.

"No, please trust me, I'll do everything I can for you both," Cillian said, trying to assure the old wizard. "I know I haven't before... She's my mum, and Dad and Grandfather Riorden will be on the lists it's too dangerous. I'll work out something, I promise, but for now, please believe me, I'll take care of this." He handed the card from the table to the caretaker. "For now, I think you can charge everything to the room, and I'll settle the bill later. I'll bring you some of those L-twenty slips of parchment the Muggles use tomorrow." He glanced at the clock. "Well, later today, actually. Make a list of what you need on the pad of paper." He showed ol' Ben how the Muggle plastic stick worked.

"Click it so the ink doesn't dry out."

The caretaker nodded as he tested the silver clicker a few times and then started making a list.

~\*~

His mum hadn't woken when the hotel servant brought up the tea tray. Cillian and ol' Ben had conversed in hushed tones while they ate. The old caretaker would not tell him anything about his grandfather's or dad's whereabouts or by what means ol' Ben used to contact his Grandfather Riorden.

Cillian left after ol' Ben agreed to let him find a solution to hide them. So far the Ministry hadn't been alerted to his use of magic, but he hoped ol' Ben took his warning seriously. Thankfully, the caretaker hadn't asked for too much, just a few necessities and some potions.

He stood out on the grounds, looking out at the town and the view of the Lakeland fells, watching as the sun rose over the hills. The hotel was a nice one. Surrounded by low, densely-forested hills and set in two acres of peaceful, well-maintained grounds on the edge of the hamlet of Grange. The hotel was also close to the shores of Derwentwater, a second's Apparition away from the island.

*Now what?* He had no choice; he had to go back to his parent's house. He'd been gone for far too long as it was. He'd think of something to tell Marc and Bell. He Apparated to the house and walked up to the front door. Marc yanked it open before he could reach for the latch.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"I saw something and chased it," Cillian replied. "It may have been a house-elf."

"Damn those selfish little bastards!" Bell snarled. "Only good for two things, snake food and foot massages."

"What happened?" Cillian asked, although he already knew.

"Grandfather Riorden was here he ran off with dad," Marc said, which pretty much summed it up.

"Your mother is missing, too," Belinda snapped.

"She's your mother, too, Bell, and you've been really horrible to her to both of them," Cillian pointed out.

"They were making too much trouble the Dark Lord was getting angry with them!" Belinda screeched, her voice going up an octave or two. "What was I supposed to do let them leave the country? They'd be marked as deserters!"

"*They were never Marked!*" Cillian snarled.

"No, they were *supporters*, and *they were going to leave him*," Bell snarled, waving her arm excitedly, "and ruin our standing in the good graces of our Lord and Master." She pointed at Cillian. "And they have the vault key!"

"Horrance cut your allowance again, sis?" Cillian snarled, furious at the situation. His mum was so weak, so starved, that she had only weighted about six stones in his arms.

"Watch it, little brother," Bell snarled.

"WILL YOU TWO *CEASE?*" Marc shouted. "Let a wizard think! They're gone gone and we'll be punished for this."

"No, we won't," Cillian stated. "*We were at his New Year's Revel, and this is what we came home to. If we stick to that, we should only be Crucioed.*"

"Been Crucioed, thank you it isn't something I want repeated," Marc snapped.

"But if we can convince him that we knew nothing of this, then maybe..." Belinda trailed off. "I'll tell him. He favors me."

Cillian doubted that after the incident at the Winter Solstice Ball. "Fine," he said. "I'm tired and am starting to feel a hangover."

"Aren't you going to help us find them?" Marc asked incredulously.

"And where should we look?" Cillian asked, rounding on his older brother. "Granddad's London house? The villa in Italy? In Switzerland? Russia? France? You know he could afford to be *anywhere* he wants to be! We have been chasing dragon shadows since the summer, and so far we've never had a clue where he's hiding." He turned to walk away. "I'm going home to bed. Good night."

~S~

Severus woke up with a pounding headache. He had chosen to stay the night at the castle instead of returning to the island, but he'd hardly slept, and he'd been too cold. He rubbed at his temple in irritation while realizing at the same time that his discomfiture was entirely his own fault.

His mind had been too troubled for sleep to come easily, and when he did sleep, his rest had been fitful and disturbed. He had dreamt of running after Hermione as Belinda pursued him, her hands clawing at him, pulling him back even as he'd reached out for Hermione. He had turned to Belinda, shoving her off and shouting at her to leave him alone... but as he turned back to Hermione, she faded from his sight, and he had lost her...

He'd woken at that, sweating and in a panic, his hand reaching out towards her side of his bed, only to find it cold and empty. It had taken him a few seconds, his heart thumping irrationally in his chest, to remember that she was back on the island, safe in Cillian's care.

He had fallen back against his pillows and willed himself to go back to sleep, only to have another dream of Hermione choosing to go on the run with Potter rather than returning to the castle with him as Belinda hovered in the nude behind him in the snow.

He turned to look at Hermione's side of the bed. He'd become so used to her sleeping by his side, sprawled across his body, her weight reassuringly solid against him.

He had no idea how to face her, to explain his actions at the revel. He knew that he'd have a hard time doing so, and he feared her reaction. He'd never been good at expressing his feelings, even as a youth, and he was finding it increasingly difficult to assuage the guilt he felt. So he'd stayed here, to sort things out in his mind before facing her, to formulate what he'd say and to prepare himself for her reaction. That she would despise him, he was in no doubt. The fact that he cared so much about what she thought of him disturbed him. He knew now that he loved her, and he didn't want to lose her, although he was convinced he might.

Giving up, he donned his teaching robes and went to his office.

He started opening the post and saw quite a few Howlers amongst the assorted letters, bills and notices from the Ministry on his desk. He cast his Sound-Dampening Charm and ripped open each Howler, letting them all silently squawk and shrill all at once, making all the painted denizens of previous Headmaster and Headmistresses move to the frames across the room, scowling and glaring at him, some silently pointing painted fingers, their mouths moving as they pointlessly tried to yell at him. He didn't care. He knew what most of the parents were angry about: the abuses the children reported to their parents, his supposed failure to prevent it and the ineptitude of the Carrows.

He ignored the portraits and began sorting through the rest of the parchmentwork and letters he'd received over the holiday break. As he expected, several parents were upset about the disciplinary practices allowed at the school. He was hardly surprised, although as the war raged on and resistance grew, discipline would likely get worse. He truly hoped that Misses Weasley, Wang, Weston and Abbott and Messrs Longbottom, Finnigan and Macmillan would curtail their activities, but he doubted it.

Peren brought him tea and breakfast.

The board of governors was demanding a professional review: lesson observations and work scrutiny. *Great. Umbridge acting as Hogwarts High Inquisitor again, he sneered.* He growled in frustration at the imposition and turned his full attention to the missive. He sighed in relief at the list of names: Franklin Avery, Rabastan LeStrange, Sylvester Rosier, Herman Baddock Jr. and Thaddeus Nott. Not that Umbridge hag. Just as well, but two of the appointments bothered him; Rabastan and Herman were still single, and Rabastan had always felt that he was above following the rules. That was a headache he didn't want. And according to Belinda, Baddock Sr. was trying to get Mr. Patil to agree to a betrothal between his daughter Padma and Baddock's son, Cecil; the boy was quite in favor of the match, but Miss Patil was reluctant to accept it. Belinda had even gone as far as to ask Severus to speak to the girl on Mr. Baddock's behalf, not that he would, and he'd informed Belinda that he didn't interfere in the children's relationships or marital affairs even when he'd been Head of House. He'd have to slip a cautiously worded note to Mrs. Patil before the start of term, though.

Minerva had left him a note attached to the scholastic and extracurricular timetables. Most of the extracurricular clubs would have to adjust their meeting times so that the students would be back in their common rooms earlier. He had already changed the hours for the library, closing it an hour before curfew to ensure that everyone would be in their common rooms in the evenings. *That will thrill Hermione.* Severus then reviewed the end of term exam results, unhappy at the dismal ineptitude of some of the students. He'd have to make mention of them in his start of term speech to the staff as well.

He opened a letter from Narcissa, informing him that Bellatrix would be demanding a new copy of the School Registry. Apparently she'd been livid regarding her lack of progress in the Muggle-born search, and she'd been screaming at Narcissa and Lucius that the list Severus had given her at Christmas was proving to be useless. The letter had been dated the day before the revel, so apparently the Dark Lord didn't find fault with Severus yet, or he hadn't questioned Bellatrix regarding her task.

There were letters from Messrs Crabbe, Goyle and Bole informing Severus that they had permission from the Dark Lord to see their sons play against both Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff. Severus knew he couldn't refuse since they had already obtained permission to see the Slytherin-Gryffindor game, but Avery, Rosier, Nott and LeStrange had each sent missives informing him that they felt they had a right to be in the stands, too, since they would be at the castle reviewing the staff performances anyway. Several other Death Eaters, especially those living in Hogsmeade, wanted the privilege to attend as well and were claiming to already having the permission of the Dark Lord. Severus slammed his fist down, still clutching the last letter. He didn't like the idea of the school games becoming a Death Eater privilege.

He looked at the Quidditch timetables again. Slytherin would play Hufflepuff the seventeenth of this month, which could be another potentially brutal game considering that four of the members on the Hufflepuff team were friendly with or suspected of being involved with the DA group, and five Hufflepuffs, Farrah Chambers, Susan Bones, Zane Seymour, Christine Weston and Eleanor Brandstone, were among those who had been removed from the train at the end of term. Severus knew that Misses Bones, Seymour and Christine Weston had miraculously escaped, but he didn't know if their friends or housemates knew it yet. It also wouldn't help that Miss Seymour, who had been one of the Hufflepuff Chasers, would have to be replaced on the team.

Not only that, but five members of the Slytherin team were related to Death Eaters two of them who had been involved in the raid. Not that the majority of the Hufflepuffs got along any better with the Slytherins than the Gryffindors did, since some Slytherins looked down on Hufflepuff so snidely, so all of this had the potential to heighten animosity.

Tensions in the castle were high; even Severus had noticed the division in the houses, much like it had been when he'd been a student, possibly even more so.

Gryffindor would play Ravenclaw the twenty-first of next month, which should be a nice clean game, and Slytherin would play Ravenclaw the twenty-eighth of March, then Gryffindor would play Hufflepuff the twenty-fifth of April. The two teams with the top overall points would then play for the house cup the sixth of May.

Severus scowled. The Slytherin-Ravenclaw game also had the potential for trouble, if the Slytherin-Hufflepuff game turned out to be anything like the Slytherin-Gryffindor game had been, considering four, possibly five members of the Ravenclaw team were thought to be in the DA, and six Ravenclaw students had been removed in the raid on the train: Luna Lovegood, Duane Saunders, Terry Boot, Stephen Cornfoot and Marietta Edgecombe... although Michael Corner had managed to escape as well.

Severus dropped the schedule on his desk and rubbed his lip with his thumb. He'd have to cancel the games, which would incense the students as well as the Death Eaters expecting the privilege of attending the games, and that could incite more students to join the DA. Not that he wanted *that* to happen. He could announce his decision in the middle of the week, or after the second or third round of writing appeared on the walls, but he couldn't wait any longer than the thirteenth or fourteenth to do so. He needed plenty of time to inform the families of the decision, especially the Death Eater families. His excuse to the Dark Lord would be to make the cancellation punishment for the resurgence of the DA activities, and considering that the attack on the Hogwarts Express at the end of last term and the missing students, the students in the DA would definitely be incited to up the ante. Yes, he'd wait until the twelfth or thirteenth.

He pulled out a pad of parchment and wrote out his start of term speech, brief and to the point, outlining all the necessary changes.

Next, he started on the letters to angry parents reminding them that they had no choice but to send their children back to Hogwarts due to the Ministry's educational decree two hundred and twenty nine, which stated that all children had to be educated at Hogwarts, the only Ministry approved school, and that the Department of Magical Education no longer sanctioned homeschooling or private tutorial education to qualify to sit for the OWLs or NEWT exams.

He picked up the next parchment and started reading the tedious report from the trustees' meeting.

~H~

Hermione woke by herself and immediately knew that Severus had not come to bed last night; the book she'd been reading still lay on the coverlet in the middle of the bed, and his pillow showed no sign of being used.

She got up to ready herself for the day, disappointed and a little annoyed, trying not to think about where or with whom he was with. She gritted her teeth and decided to take a peek in his half of the wardrobe, thinking that it was possible he'd changed and was maybe downstairs or in his new lab. Or still at Malfoy Manor. No, she wasn't going to second guess. She checked through his clothes, but all she saw was his everyday robes, his frockcoat and his trousers, all nicely cleaned and pressed. The hooded Death Eater's robe was not hanging on its hanger. His dressy boots stood next to the black biker boots with the leather straps she'd seen him wear around the castle and the steel toed dragon hide pair he wore when he brewed, but not the engineer biker boots he'd worn to the revel, and all three in the wardrobe looked as if they'd been recently cleaned and polished. She looked in the drawers and on the top shelf, searching frantically for his mask but it was not in the wardrobe either.

She slammed his side closed and pressed her hand on it, fighting back her tears. He really hadn't come home *He is still with... whomever he is with.*

She wiped her face and dressed in her warmest top, her new Arran jumper, scarf and her boots, grabbed her coat, and headed out of the house. She knew that she couldn't go very far, but she needed to be outside, and walking in circles around the house would at least give her some exercise.

~D~

Draco walked through the Grand Hallway listening to the sounds of the house-elves trying to restore some order of normalcy to the drawing rooms. In the more secluded rooms, the slings, St. Andrews cross, the Tarquin T, spanking benches, rotation frame, pillory, and punishing supports and cages, where the half-blood whores who'd been stripped down naked, tied up, whipped, fucked and other wise humiliated for the entertainment of his fellow Death Eaters, were being removed, hopefully to someone else's house, but Draco doubted it. Aunt Bella and Belladonna Roiser had loved this part of the party. It made Draco sick.

Unavoidably, he'd had to play his part in the revel last night. The purpose of last night's revel sickened him. Normally, being given two luscious witches as entertainment to use as he'd wanted would have delighted Draco; in fact his father had paid for such diversions in the past. But last night was completely different from the hired whores

used to relieve his manly urges without complications or entanglements. The women brought to the party last night were there for one reason only to get impregnated a breeding program disguised as a party, complete with aphrodisiac hors d'oeuvres and apéritifs, fertility potions and lust potions, followed by detection spells to verify his copulation to ensure his impregnation of the women. Even the five-course feast for those chosen to dine with the Dark Lord beforehand consisted of foods designed to heighten the sexual atmosphere and mood of the revelers.

Both women Draco had been paired with had been enthusiastic and skilled, but having to perform his sex acts before sneering and goading Death Eaters had made it nearly impossible to maintain an erection, let alone enjoy it. And the women had been doused for weeks on potions to ensure pregnancy, something that made Draco's stomach churn. He'd, in all likelihood, sired illegitimate children out of wedlock two of them both potential heirs to the Malfoy fortune. He could barely recall the witch's names; one had been a blonde, the other had a soft chestnut main of curls not unlike Hermione's. He hadn't even been able to see their faces, only their bodies. He knew that they were both older than he was, although not by much.

All his life his father had warned him not to get a girl pregnant out of wedlock, on pain of disinheritance and disembowelment, and last night, he'd impregnated two women who knew who he was and relished the idea of carrying his child. And the bastards would carry the Malfoy name.

He entered the Grand Drawing Room where Mengele had performed his perfunctory verification spells. The elaborately appointed Drawing room that had one time been furnished for lavish entertaining was now a vast open space: no chairs, no ornate furnishings, no rugs and the heavy drapes were drawn closed, hiding the beveled, lead glass windows. Only the crystal chandeliers that hung from the ceiling and the empty frames of the portraits of his ancestors on the dark purple walls remained.

The only illumination came from a roaring fire beneath the handsome marble mantelpiece surmounted by a gilded mirror and the black flame candles in the chandeliers, which emitted a dim violet glow on the ceiling and made the pigments in the oil paintings fluorescence, as well as Draco's white shirt. The fluorescence effect also made the Dark Lord's eyes glow and, by some magic unknown to Draco, it made the man whiter, not violet-blue as one would suspect. The Dark Lord often preferred to stand or sit in front the fire on the dais he'd created so his head was always above his loyal followers, his frame back lit for dramatic effect. Draco knew it made him feel superior.

Draco looked at the enlarged gilded chair on the dais. The once gracefully carved cherry wood armchair richly upholstered in beige tone damask cloth that had stood at the head of the dining room table where his father used to sit was now a throne, just as its twin, which his mother had previously used, was equally transformed and placed at the middle of the long dining table, and used solely by the new lord and master of Malfoy Manor the Dark Lord.

The bare branches of Nagini's stand stood empty in its place of honor next to the Dark Lord's throne. It also stood over the secret trapdoor that led to the family's Dart Arts vaults, the original secret entrance, before the dungeons were put in. The rooms used to hold an impressive collection of Dark artifacts and Dark Arts books his family amassed over the generations. He wondered briefly if the vaults were still there, or if they had been stripped of their contents.

The drawing room was empty now. Draco wondered where the snake was. The Dark Lord was most likely upstairs in the Master Suite, but Draco knew the wizard didn't sleep much. At least he didn't sleep in the traditional sense like most humans; it was more of a state of mind in Draco's opinion than actually falling asleep, because the Dark Lord seemed to always be watching, waiting or pacing.

Draco turned and left the oppressive room, striding quickly for the door. He exited the house, planning on spending as much of his day out on the Quidditch pitch as possible. If not, he'd fly his broom to Gloucestershire to visit Goyle. Anything to be out of the house and away from the nightmare that had become his life.

~C~

Cillian never felt more tired and weighted down in his life. His mum had slept soundly, absolutely exhausted all day, waking only to allow him or ol' Ben to feed and care for her not that she'd eat much. When his mum was awake, she was incredibly irritable or lethargic. Watching her sleep, he was in utter shock to see how emaciated she'd become. She was too thin, like a skinny little kitten. Her stomach looked bloated, her skin looked dehydrated dry and crinkly like tissue paper, and her nails were chipped and broken. The skin on her face appeared gaunt and shallow, and there were dark shadows under her eyes.

He hated himself that he hadn't noticed how bad she was getting. What kind of a monster had he become that he'd let this continue for so long? How many times had he walked by her and looked away or looked down, mentally acknowledging her presence, but refusing to look at her. But then he'd hated to see the vacant expression, lackluster eyes and drool coming from her mouth, common effects of someone under the Imperius who hadn't been given a direction to carry out other than 'sit here and be quiet.'

He wondered briefly what state his dad was in, but then, he was probably in better condition if he'd Apparated that night. Unless, Grandfather Riorden had carried him the way ol' Ben had been carrying Cillian's mum.

He hated Bell for doing this to her, to them, and he was furious at Marc for allowing it as well. Justin's business in international shipping of magical spices and potions ingredients kept him busy, and he was frequently traveling out of the country, but Cillian wondered how Justin had missed the degradation of their mum and dad if even his sisters-in-law saw it.

Probably the same way Cillian had, by not wanting to go against Bell or Marc, both who were loyal extremists.

His mum needed medical help from a reliable Healer, but since the Dark Lord held control over St Mungo's, taking her there was out of the question, and if he sought help from either Healer Pushpa Bastula or Henry Dunlap, Bell could find out Cillian had taken his mum away and would report him to the Dark Lord.

His mum's house-elf, Prissy, had thankfully come when his mum had weakly called her, and the house-elf, after Cillian had explained the precarious situation, promised to not only stay hidden from the Muggles, but that she'd use no magic what-so-ever in the Muggle hotel. So far no one had noticed, but he knew that his luck wouldn't hold out if they were careless.

Now he had to come up with somewhere to put his mum, somewhere safe where she could stay and not draw attention to herself. Right now, even a rudimentary Levitation or a basic Hoover Charm would be risky. If she or Prissy did magic in that hotel room, the Ministry would know and send someone to check, and his mum and ol' Ben would be handed over to the MRC. That would be a disaster; Yaxley and Runcorn hated blood traitors, Umbridge was a bigoted hag with a authority complex, and if convicted, which could honestly happen considering his mum was defecting in a way. His mum would not survive Azkaban.

Cillian returned to the island on Thursday to shower and change clothes. He approached the back garden from the trees and smirked at the triple set of identical boot prints in the snow along the inside of the barrier. He looked up and saw Hermione bundled up, wrapped up in Severus' thick winter cloak over a heavy jumper and the scarf he'd given her, sitting on one of the patio chairs.

"Is Severus with you?" she asked as he approached her.

"No," Cillian said and stomped his boots on the flagstones. *If she is asking me about his whereabouts, then Severus isn't here. Damn.*

"Have you seen him?" Hermione asked Cillian as he turned, trying to discern what he should do.

"No, not since the party," he replied. *If Severus hasn't returned, where would he be?* Hermione was safe enough here, she couldn't leave the house. He turned heel and left, ignoring Hermione as she called after him.

Cillian went to Spinner's End, not really expecting to see his friend there either. The house was dark, and the door warded. He cast a quick, *l'habitationem humanam*, and nothing. No one was in the house.

He decided to try the school.

He'd startled Malburke and Jugson when he appeared, but they let him through the school gates without question.

Cillian saw Hagrid's hut, and he smiled at the slight wisps of smoke from the chimney and the shuttered windows. Cillian always liked the ol' grounds keeper *A professor now, Care of Magical Creatures, but what else could he teach really there wasn't a magical beast Hagrid didn't know about.* Of course, he'd favor the dangerous beasts, but then all the others were not really a problem for the large, kind-hearted wizard. Cillian secretly approved. *"Better to know the dangerous ones and how to deal with or avoid them than spend your time with the easy creatures whose handling you could get from reading a book."* he'd told Severus one night when he'd told Cillian that Hagrid had shown third-years hippogriffs and let Harry Potter ride it! Personally, he'd have loved to have had that kind of opportunity as a student. Truthfully, Cillian was sorry that Hermione didn't take Care of Magical Creatures; he'd have enjoyed the lectures and the beasts.

Looking at the hut, Cillian suspected that the groundskeeper was probably in the Dumbledore's Order of Phoenix, a rebellion consisting of old farts and an army of children. *Oh, yeah, they stood a chance against an army of Death Eaters.*

Hermione's words came unbidden to him, 'Harry is the leader of Dumbledore's Army he always has been!' But Cillian was certain that Neville Longbottom, Seamus Finnigan and Ginny Weasley were leading it now. *Unless, they were somehow in touch with Potter. Had Hermione met up with Potter while she'd been missing? She said repeatedly that she chose to come back... It was a possibility, one he hadn't considered until now. But if she did, how did she manage it? And why wasn't Severus upset that she had...? Unless he knew!*

Cillian looked up at the castle, he could see where the Entrance Hall and the main staircase were located, the Astronomy Tower, Ravenclaw Tower, the Great Hall with its magnificent windows, but his gaze stopped on the Headmaster's Tower, where Severus resided. *That afternoon when Severus had dumped Hermione on the island and then left mysteriously to go harvest a graphorn, of all things.* But he had; Dianne had the hide in the basement to prove it, which is why Cillian hadn't questioned it at the time.

*But had Severus seen Potter and Weasley when he'd rescued Hermione from the graphorn? He'd assumed Severus had rescued the girl from the beast, otherwise why would Severus have killed it for the horns and hide? Had he saved her friends from the graphorn as well? Had Hermione been with them and then chose to come back? Had he let them go? He now had so many questions about that night that didn't make sense.*

It wasn't the first time Cillian had questioned Severus' actions where Hermione and her friends were concerned. Cillian had overheard Severus and Hermione that day in the hospital when she'd been poisoned with the Crane's Concoction. Right before Cillian had stepped around the curtain and let himself be known, he'd heard Severus admit to having seen Hermione and her friends in a museum. Which museum he didn't know, and he didn't know when this had happened, but Severus had admitted that he'd seen them, knowing they were wanted... and he'd let them go.

Cillian entered the castle and ran up to the Headmaster's tower, but the gargoyle said that the Headmaster was in a meeting in the staff room. Cillian turned to go back down the stairs. On his way down, he paused to look at the door to Alecto's office. *The poisoning that was the day the students turned the corridor outside of the Muggle Studies classroom into a swamp.* The swamp was still in the corridor. Severus had not exerted his authority to have the swamp removed, so Filius had simply made a raised walkway through the swamp for the students. *In fact, Severus frequently impedes Amycus and Alecto, especially from harming the students not that I condone child abuse but I've seen him thwart them time and time again regarding Hermione and her friends, especially Ginny. None of the others would do so if they'd been headmaster.*

Thinking about it, Cillian half suspected that Severus might have warned someone about the raid on the Hogwarts Express at the start of Christmas holiday, but that was farfetched. *However... the number of students who had Portkeys could hardly be considered a coincidence especially since the students who had them were all members of Dumbledore's Army or were on friendly terms with Ginny, Neville Longbottom and Seamus Finnigan.*

He'd heard that Michael Corner had managed to escape from Goyle, Crabbe and Bole by Portkey with three Hufflepuff girls: Amelia Bones' niece, Susan, Algernon Seymour's daughter, Zane, and Christine Weston the younger sister of Charlene Weston, the girl Bole was holding.

Cillian entered the staff room and slipped into a seat in the back.

*Then there is the matter of the copies Bellatrix wanted of the Hogwarts School Registry. In November, every child whose address was copied from the School Registry had either moved or disappeared, and last month, Severus deliberately delayed giving Bellatrix the copies until two days after Christmas six days later instead of giving them to her on the winter solstice as he'd been ordered to. Of course, his excuse had been Minerva's presence in the castle and then Hermione's escape... Bellatrix had been livid. Professor McGonagall kept the book locked up, and the key was nowhere in her office. However, as Headmaster, Severus could get into her office anytime he needed to or couldn't he? Cillian was convinced he could've if he'd wanted so why lie. Another lie?*

Severus had admitted to lying to the Dark Lord on a few occasions. *The morning after Hermione escaped, Severus blatantly admitted to lying to the Dark Lord, saying it hadn't been the first time, or some such rot.* That was before he'd brought her to the island, casually dropping her off and disappearing again? *What was he up to?*

Cillian watched Severus thoughtfully while he conducted his staff meeting.

~S~

The staff had gathered all afternoon for the first meeting of the spring term. Severus handed out the timetables he'd revised for the term ahead and the extracurricular timetables. There was very little discussion since he'd made very few changes, although Alecto had insisted on being given a new office since the tree that had been planted in her floor had grown back; the branches had demolished all the windows again, the roots broke up the floor and impeded her ability to use her desk or to reach her bookshelves. "You can use the smaller office down the corridor, that is if you are incapable of removing the tree yourself," Severus offered, then he calmly turned and asked the staff to give him their supply lists by the end of the day, ignoring Alecto's outraged expression. He then quickly launched into his speech about the year ahead before Filius could call point of order and initiate a discussion.

When he'd said, "This year, it's all about standards, that we maintain a level of excellence," a few professors snorted softly, gaining an irritated look from Alecto. Severus read the midterm exam results and gave his estimation on how many students will pass their upcoming exams: the end of term exams and OWLs and NEWTs. "If you have any NEWT student in danger of failing, they should drop the class if they are OWL level, please inform the student's Heads of House as soon as possible and then together come up with a revision plan. I'd rather not have a poor academic showing. Remember, the Dark Lord is in control of the school, and he does not tolerate failure. So be warned, not only for yourselves but for that of your students."

Alecto actually blanched, Amycus looked stunned, and a few of the teachers looked aghast, but the rest of the staff was furious at the threat.

Minerva sat up straighter. "Severus, surely he wouldn't..."

"Yes, he would," Severus said flatly, staring at her, hoping she'd understand and warn the others. "Just so you all know, a professional review will be conducted by the board of governors every one of you shall have your lessons observed, and your work and the student's progress scrutinized. The list of inquisitors includes, Franklin Avery, Rabastan Lestranger, Sylvester Rosier, Herman Baddock Jr. and Thaddeus Nott."

Minerva and Filius nodded in understanding, but Alecto and Amycus looked smug.

"You'll be notified the dates and times of the review as soon as I am informed. They will also observe the extracurricular magical groups and clubs to assure the students' safety," Severus said, looking pointedly at Pomona and Filius.

"And so you're not teaching them stuff that they is not to know" Amycus sneered.



Severus made a false smile as he turned to face the wizard. "Amycus, you're not to teach the students any spell you cannot reverse yourself or Rabastan LeStrange will be joining your lessons permanently."

Amycus huffed as he leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms. "I don't need his help."

"We shall see about that." Severus turned back to his staff and informed the Head of House of the possible need of counseling concerns for the students with missing or arrested parents. "Heads of House will have to reassure the parents of the students under them that the school is still safe," again a snort, but he ignored it, "and all punishments will meet within the guidelines set by the school governors."

Alecto scowled.

Severus continued, ignoring her petulance, "All professors will continue maintaining the discipline in their classrooms and conduct their own detentions; any and all violations and rule breaking outside of the classroom will still fall to me. Is that understood?"

Alecto looked murderous. That didn't bode well.

"That is all," Severus stated, cutting off any further discussions or conversations. "Minerva, please come with me to my office," he said softly as she packed her things. He wanted to ask Minerva in private if the students' addresses had updated in the School Registry and remind her to keep the book locked, if thirty portraits interfering with annoying questions and suggestions could be considered as private. He knew she'd ask about the disciplinary guidelines and Filch's gibbet cages and pillory in the Entrance Hall as well, neither subject he could reassure her on.

"Certainly, Headmaster," she replied, if not a bit curtly.

Her curt reply hurt. He was doing his best under tremendous pressures from all sides. Merlin, he wished he could confide in her without divulging his true loyalty or his promise to Dumbledore and thus compromise position with the Dark Lord. But if the Dark Lord ever came to the school, and if Minerva was ever questioned, her openness would be a huge liability. He wished he had *someone* in the castle who knew the truth beside a bunch of painted denizens sworn to keep his secrets and advise him in educational matters among other things. He grabbed his parchments and walked with her to the door.

Cillian approached as Severus was about to leave the room. "I need to talk to you."

The look in his friend's eyes sent a chill through him. *Hermione? What happened?* "Of course." He turned to Minerva. "I need to handle this." *How long will this take?* He needed to confirm the security of the School Registry. "I will come find you when I'm done."

Her eyes turned frosty, but she nodded once sharply, her posture rigid. "Of course, Headmaster. I'll be in my office."

He watched her leave, once again wishing she could be trusted. He turned to Cillian, another he wished he could be completely open with. "What happened?"

"Can we talk privately?" Cillian asked, looking at Pomona and Filius as they followed after Minerva.

Severus kept his composure; if Cillian wanted to talk in private, then Hermione was all right, but that didn't mean she wasn't misbehaving. "Of course, follow me," he said, his bearing straight and tall as he regarded his friend. They walked in silence all the way to the gargoyle, and by the time they reached his office, Severus felt a bit calmer. Whatever it was, it wasn't emergent; his friend didn't seem to be in any rush. He led Cillian up to his sitting room, away from the prying ears of the portraits, taking his favorite chair by the window. "Now, tell me what is going on?"

"Keep this between us, will you though, you're going to find out anyway!" Cillian sat down facing him, his forearms on his thighs and his hands clenched together. "Grandfather Riorden broke into the house New Year's Eve and released mum and dad dad ran off with him," Cillian said and sat up, looking out the window.

Severus was relieved; Hermione was all right. Tannis and Riorden would be put on the deserters' list, but with their money, and since they were not marked, they could go anywhere. "And?" he said slowly, knowing by his friend's expression that there was more to the story. *What about Elspeth? Is she still trapped in the house?*

His friend turned his head, staring Severus in the eyes, but they were guarded, unsure. "And now I have a personal matter I need some time to sort out..."

Severus forced himself to relax, lowering his guard down slightly, trying to appear calm, but his thoughts went into overdrive. *What? Now?* This couldn't come at a worse time. *What the fuck am I going to do with Hermione? Lock her in a tower? How much time?* He dreaded the answer.

~~oOo~~

Author's Notes:

Uh-oh! I know, but Cillian's answer is in the next chapter.

## Quandary and Disentanglement

Chapter 42 of 43

Hermione takes advantage of some time alone with Draco and Cillian, hoping to make an effect or an impact on them.

Impinging: to make an impression; have an effect or impact (usually followed by on or upon): to impinge upon the imagination; social pressures that impinge upon one's daily life.

A huge thank you to my alpha reader, ArabellaBloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick and for being my locations scout, and to Phoenix, for combing through this and helping me clean up my mistakes. I really appreciate the beta help. Thank you very much.

Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.

And of course, anything you recognize belongs to JK Rowling. I'm not doing this for money, and am not collecting any from it; I'm doing this because it's fun.

The warnings I have listed for this chapter are implied. I chose the rating of MA (NC-17) due to the story's overall content.



~o 42 o~

~Quandary and Disentanglement~

Cillian could read his friend well, most of the time at any rate. Yes, Severus was forcing himself to relax, and Cillian could see that. He was trying to appear calm, but it was in his eyes; Cillian knew his friend's thoughts were in turmoil over his announcement, and he didn't blame him. Nevertheless, it couldn't be helped; he had to sort out things for his mum and ol' Ben before he could return to his duties here. "A few days, maybe a week..." Cillian stated, hoping not to have an argument over this. He wasn't sure at all where he could take his mum that Bell or Marc wouldn't be able to find her. She needed medical attention and every scenario he could come up with seemed impossible. Merlin he wanted he wished he could just talk it out with Severus about this situation.

"Where will you be if I need you?" Severus asked.

"How should I know?" Cillian snapped exasperatedly, getting up. He turned to the window and stared at the lake. He hated breaking his word to Severus, but family came first.

"May I ask what this is regarding; maybe I can help?"

"I don't know where I... or how..." Cillian fisted his hand hanging by his side. "Damn. I know I promised, and if I could but..." He did want help, if not just advice or a suggestion because every place he could think of Bell or Marc could find her and imprison her under the Imperius again. And he wanted to have her somewhere where he could take care of her.

Elspeth was a strongly opinionated witch, and she had tried to sway Cillian, Justin, Sherri and Ling to her views about leaving England and the Dark Lord. Neither Justin nor Cillian had told Elspeth they were Marked. It was why Bell put her and dad under the Imperius; they were starting to talk like dissidents and had tried to withdraw their support.

"Cillian," Severus said, standing up. "Tell me what's going on. Is it anything I can help you with?"

The concern in his voice almost made Cillian smile. "Bloody hell," he sighed. He'd asked Severus a number of times what side he was on, hoping for a confirmation, but each time Severus had dodged the answer, hinting at the possibility but noncommittally, and then backed off. In fact he'd done that a few times this last year. Others used the same tactic, baiting a trap to ensnare those who were disloyal, but with Severus it never felt like a trap more like Cillian was being felt out... but not baited. Then again, Severus was a master at controlling his expression and hiding his true feelings. *Merlin's saggy pants, I need his help.* Cillian felt like he was trapped, stuck in the mire, facing a nesting dragon.

"Try me," Severus said, now standing beside him.

He thought about it for a moment. He knew he'd have to Oblivate his best friend if he was wrong. Cillian decided to at least tell Severus what the problem was, he deserved at least that much. They'd been good friends for seventeen years and always kept each other's secrets. He inhaled deeply, his fingers sliding into his pocket and along his wand. "Severus, Mum and Dad broke free of the Imperius again. My mum is ill, and I have her she's fine for now, but I can't take her to St Mungo's. Bell will she's furious. It's bad enough that the Dark Lord moved out of my parent's house, favoring the Malfoy's place after the first time Grandfather Riorden broke in."

Severus nodded. "What happened to Tannis?"

Cillian shrugged, his fingers still on his wand in case. "I don't know! He ran off with Grandfather Riorden. Ol' Ben and mum's house-elf, Prissy, are with my mum. Marc's furious at Bell for not securing the house properly. He blames the escape on her. It didn't help that ol' Ben stole the vault key last August. If Bell finds them, she'll turn him over to the MRC to gain favor with the Dark Lord after torturing him for the vault key and she'll put mum back under the Imperius, and possibly kill Prissy for disobedience."

"Where is Elspeth now?" Severus asked.

That he couldn't admit. Cillian turned his head to look at the lake. "Safe. For now. But I have to move her, and it will take some time to sort it out? She's really weak, weighs hardly anything. She needs a Healer and potions."

Severus looked thoughtful for a while, but then he asked, "Why not take her to the island?"

"Not an option," Cillian stated, not believing he didn't understand that. He couldn't compromise Dianne and her parents.

Severus nodded, his eyes glazing slightly.

Cillian was relieved that Severus didn't press as to the location of his mum. "So, I have to go," he said, turning to leave. "I'll contact you as soon as I can."

"Wait, I can help. I have connections in the Ministry," Severus suggested.

"Who?" Cillian turned to stare at his friend. He couldn't believe that Severus would suggest anyone from the Ministry that's what he was trying to avoid! "So? How's that going to help? Anyone we know at the Ministry will turn them over to the MRC. Dolores Umbridge hates you, and Yaxley and Runcorn are not exactly pleased with you over the trick you played on the stairs in the Black house..."

"Umbridge was upset because I rebuffed her advances three years ago, and Yaxley and Runcorn have other concerns," Severus said with a slight smirk that didn't mask his sincerity. "But that was not what I meant."

*Not anyone in our circles you mean in Dumbledore's group, don't you?* He stared at Severus, waiting. *Gods, I hope I'm right about you. If not, I'm buggered.* Hermione's voice came unbidden to him; *you're not the only one.*

Then one side of Severus' mouth twitched, not a smirk, a smile, and what Severus said next raised Cillian hopes. "Let me make a few inquiries, but I should have the answer before school starts."

*Could I be right? Is Severus still loyal to Dumbledore's rebels? Merlin, I'm a fool for considering this!* It all made sense, the hints, the potion, his sly maneuverings, if the answer was yes. He hoped his Occlumency skills were good enough to hide this as well as his other secrets. "Yes, but I need to be with her." He wanted to get his mum some potions. "I'm going to need something to help her gain her strength back. She's been Imperiused for months now."

Severus nodded, looking thoughtful again. "Ask Madam Pomfrey to give you any potions that Elspeth will need. She will not ask too many questions, and she's discreet. Then stop by the kitchens if you want and get the elves to pack you some food. I'll send word when I have something."

Cillian nodded, wondering if maybe the school matron was one of Dumbledore's rebels, too, as he turned to leave. He hoped the Healer would help him. "Go to the druid

circle on the island, and I'll meet you there." He left the office, still deeply concerned but feeling less stressed about the situation. At least he'd have the potions he needed to help his mum recover. As he took the stairs two at a time on his way to the hospital wing, he wondered what would be the cost *if* the rebels did this for him.

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Severus waited until Cillian left his office and then turned toward the window. *What to do now?* he wondered. Severus couldn't believe it, the timing couldn't be worse, but the situation would definitely work to his advantage. Cillian felt trapped; he'd seen it in his friend's eyes. But he needed Cillian at the castle, protecting Hermione.

Severus knew he'd tipped his hand to Cillian, but Hermione had persistently insisted that he had to 'show his hand' to make Cillian sway over. This was a perfect opportunity to do that, if he played his Gobstones right.

Cillian had said that his mum and family caretaker were safe for now, but they would have to be moved. The effects of being under the Imperius for a long period of time were not too hard to reverse with the right potions and plenty of rest, but it was important that Elspeth not perform any magic until her physical strength returned. Madam Pomfrey would know that and convey it to Cillian when he asked her for the potions.

*Who would be my best option for watching over Cillian's mum, so Cillian could be here where he is needed most?* He looked down and saw Fang lolloping across the grounds. *Of course Hagrid!*

Severus sent his Patronus to Hagrid, asking to meet somewhere. Hagrid had asked for some time off away from the castle, but he'd been vague as to why, and Severus hadn't asked questions. So, the large wizard could either be visiting Madame Maxime in Beauxbatons, which would be inconvenient, or helping the Order, which would mean he was at least in England. But if Cillian's mum and old caretaker needed protection, Hagrid was trustworthy. And he could blend in with Muggles, although how an over nine-foot wizard like Hagrid blended in was beyond him, but the half-giant always managed to do it. Besides, he had to meet with Hagrid anyway about the curriculum for next term.

If Hagrid was unavailable, he would have to contact Nymphadora, she was his best bet in this situation. However, he had to be cautious when contacting her; the Aurors, those who had been with the Ministry before the Dark Lord's takeover, were constantly under surveillance by the Dark Lord's youth league, the Knights of Walpurgis.

Severus went to Minerva's office and knocked once. The door opened magically, revealing a very annoyed witch sitting primly at her desk. "You wished to speak to me, Headmaster?"

"Yes, but I've only a few minutes," he replied as he strode confidently into her office.

Suddenly, Hagrid's silvery half Irish wolfhound-half dragon-like Patronus returned just as Severus was sitting down.

"Ello, Headmaster, sir. Surprised to hear from you. I thought I wasn' expected back until tomorrow. I'm in Cockermouth, today, getting somethin' interestin' for me lessons. Can' wait till you see her. Did ya wish to have a pint at The Black Bull?"

*Bloody hell, why...?* Severus stood. "This is urgent, Minerva, I'm sorry."

Her lips pursed and her back became even more rigid. "I see. Should I wait while you go and have a pint or did you wish to summon me on your return?"

"Neither," he replied, exhaling to calm himself. "First, a warning; Bellatrix will demand another copy of the School Registry I expect you to have a suitable copy for me to give her." *I shall give you as much time as I can to warn the others, but probably no more than a week!* Franklin Avery, Rabastan Lestrangle, Sylvester Rosier, Herman Baddock Jr. and Thaddeus Nott will be with us for as long as the Dark Lord sees fit." *Or until I cancel Quidditch.* "I suspect they will be eating at the House tables preferably the Slytherin table. If Lestrangle will be staying on as Amycus' assistant in Dark Arts, it may free Amycus up to become involved in *other matters*. Regardless, Lestrangle should be seated at the staff table. I suggest that new disciplinary practices be enforced; the students shall move about the castle in an orderly fashion and must not linger unnecessarily in the corridors. Also, put a trace on Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank and inform her she is to remain on the school grounds; Macnair has brought some accusations up against her and she may be brought before the MRC. And put a trace on Professor Vector as well the Dark Lord is *interested* in her." He paused to let that sink in and all it implied.

Minerva sucked in her breath. "I see," she replied, but Severus knew that she understood everything clearly.

"Now, I must meet with Hagrid in regards to his curriculum so that he doesn't get any undue attention from our resident Death Eaters," Severus said and turned heel, walking out of Minerva's office confidently. "By the way change your password," he said from the doorway. "It's too easy."

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After sending his reply to Hagrid through his Patronus, Severus left the castle and Apparated into a rather dilapidated toilet block at the rear of the car park off the high street in Cockermouth. He walked out onto Main Street, turned to the right, heading down the river from the bridge for The Black Bull.

The Black Bull was an old pub, very traditional, and a favorite watering hole for the locals. Hagrid was sitting at a table at the back of the bar, taking up a good half of the booth. The other Muggles in the establishment were hardly paying any attention to the huge man, playing darts and dominoes or sipping on their ale. Severus, being a true Mancunian, ordered a Sneek Lifter and walked over to Hagrid's table. As Severus approached the table, he noticed a shrunken cage sitting on the floor beside Hagrid, and he eyed the cage with a sense of long suffering resignation.

"Ello, Headmaster, sir," Hagrid said with a huge smile. "Did you wan' ta meet Meredith?"

The cage rattled violently. "And what, pray tell, is Meredith?" Severus asked, his fingers gently siding on the handle of his wand as he slid into the seat facing the huge man.

"She's a Goen mêrcath yearling from Bodmin Moor," Hagrid said, his small black eyes sparkling with glee.

Severus was afraid to ask, but did anyway, "As in one of the Beasts of Bodmin Moor?"

"The very same," Hagrid said proudly. "'Merck Beaglehole sold her to me. Thought I'd show her to me third years."

*Well, it could have been much worse.* Severus thought ruefully. He pulled some parchment from his pocket. "I reviewed your course curriculum from your previous years and made a few revisions, adding in the new creatures and beasts you have in our paddocks. You must not deviate from your curriculum in any way from now on."

A crease formed between Hagrid's thick eyebrows, and Severus held up a hand as Hagrid opened his mouth.

"Hagrid, hear me out. Macnair has brought up accusations against Professor Grubbly-Plank; she has been added to the Dark Lord's list, and you'll be next unless you appear to be doing what is in *his* best interests. A professional review will be conducted at the start of term, and you don't want any *of his followers* complaining about your lessons within the Dark Lord's hearing; he'll have you hauled in before the MRC *and sent to Azkaban*. You said Meredith is a yearling, which makes her breeding age and dangerous, but since there are magical families residing in or around Bodmin Moor, I'll allow it. But I must insist you to follow this course curriculum for the rest of the year."

Hagrid nodded, apparently appeased. "All righ', Headmaster," he said, unfolding the parchment. "I still get to show 'em the dugbog, Hippogriffs and me Blood-Sucking Bugbears." Hagrid's gaze swept quickly to the door as someone entered the pub. "What about showing 'em a muscaliet?"

"A muscaliet?" Severus asked. He remembered the beasts from his school days: it had a hare's body, a squirrel's tail, and a boar's teeth and were so hot that they killed the trees they built their nests in, exactly the sort of creature Hagrid would want as a pet.

"I'm meeting Robert Hancheroff here who says he has a pair of 'em for sale," Hagrid stated, his expression hopeful.

Severus pinched his temples with his thumb and middle finger. *Of course you are.* He dropped his hand, knowing that being subtle never worked with Hagrid. "Yes, I'll allow a muscaliet *one* of them or two of the *same* sex, *not* a breeding pair. I don't want them burning down the forest. But clear any future acquisitions through me first, please. However, you'll have to have the students write essays on any beasts you want to cover in your lessons that are not on this list." He could tell that Hagrid didn't much like the restrictions. "I have to be firm on this, Hagrid," he tapped the parchment again. "You can only show them the creatures on this list."

Severus changed the subject. "You asked me for some time off for a personal matter? How did that go? Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, fine, thank you for asking. I went to see Olympe," Hagrid said, smiling. "She and I were going to track down a Guivre for me class, but we had to change our plans since she was havin' some issue at the school."

Severus smirked behind his beer. Only Hagrid would consider hunting for a Guivre, a meter-long creature similar to a dragon, as an appropriate activity for a date.

"I would have liked to see the beasts up close and in the wild, but she could only spare a few days, so we had a picnic at the Tarasque Caves in Provence, instead. Them Tarasque dragons are no' as big as the common Welch green, but they are really interesting beasts..."

Severus sipped his beer, listening to Hagrid talk about his date. *Oh, yes, having a picnic near the lairs of the Tarasque dragons was a much more romantic excursion.* He supposed that he should be grateful that the creature in the cage wasn't a Guivre or a Tarasque dragon. Neither beast would be appropriate for a school, in Severus' opinion, no matter what age, and either beast would be as problematic as the Blast-Ended Skrewts had grown up to be. Thank Merlin all that was left of the Skrewts were fragments of the creature's shells.

"... But Olympe said that if she finds a new librarian, we can go searching for a Guivre over Easter, if'en I can get a few days off, that is."

Now that caught Severus' attention. *Madame Maxime needs a new librarian?* "What happened to the one she had employed?" he asked. It was nice to know that others had staffing problems, although he doubted Madame Maxime had to deal with Death Eaters, stubborn old hens and Order of the Phoenix members in her staff meetings.

"Olympe's librarian has gone missin' her family is all in a dither about her not showin' up for Christmas," Hagrid stated.

Severus set down his beer. *Too bad Elspeth is ill, she speaks fluent French. But with potions and rest, she'd be a decent substitute for the school, and she'd be somewhere she could hide... Besides, how hard would posing as a librarian be?*

"She arrived in Kent, and... well, Olympe thinks she may have had a run in with You-Know-Who or his Death Eaters. There were quite a few raids down there this last week, I was told. Oh, an' she's also worried about her how did she say it? It's pretty how she says it... Oh yes, *soins de la zoologie magique professeur*, I think she said, too. He was visitin' family and hasn't returned ter her school, either. She wanted me to check the list of those missin' to see if maybe either of their names are on it."

Severus had heard about the raids in Kent, quite a number of families had been attacked, but he was still contemplating on what Hagrid had divulged. Beauxbatons needed a librarian *and* a Care of Magical Zoology professor. Severus couldn't believe it; the coincidence was too good to believe. It was a possible answer to both of his problems: he could send Professor Grubbly-Plank to Beauxbatons Academy... as a transfer, and have Elspeth to fill in as librarian. They'd both be safe there, at least for now. He wondered if Professor Grubbly-Plank spoke French, or if Madam Maxime would accept o' Ben in a caretaker capacity.

"Arthur mentioned something about 'Ermione getting' into a bit of trouble. Is she all right?" Hagrid asked. "I heard she ran away or somethin'."

Severus remembered Professor Jacques-Laure Martineau; he had accompanied the Beauxbatons students to Hogwarts in 1995, since he was equally gifted in Charms and Transfiguration as well as in the knowledge of Magical Zoology. He and Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank had got on quite well; the two of them had numerous animated discussions together in the Great Hall during meals.

He looked up at Hagrid and realized he'd asked after Hermione. "She's fine. You will see her when you return to Hogwarts," Severus said and was glad to see the relief register in Hagrid's expression. "She'll be glad to see you, I'm sure." He quickly brought the subject back on track. "You said that Professor Jacques-Laure Martineau is missing?" he asked, confused. "Where does his family live?"

"In Pourville on the coast, but he were goin' to see his brother and sister-in-law o'er the holiday. But when we returned to the castle after our picnic, Olympe learned that he'd missed his Portkey," Hagrid explained. "So, I told Olympe that I'd come back and check with Tonks about' who is on the list of those who are missin' or dead."

Severus knew some of the targets in the London raids, but nothing on the Martineau family. "Hagrid, I need you to do something for me a personal matter," he said, wondering how to broach the subject.

"O' course, Headmaster," Hagrid said, taking a swig of his ale. "But I made a promise to Olympe." He was about to say more when something caught his attention over Severus' shoulder. "Oh, hello, Tonks, didn' see you there."

"Wotcher, Hagrid," Nymphadora said as she slid into the seat next to Severus. "Snape."

"Nymphadora," he replied casually as if old friends, so as not to attract undue attention and forced himself not to smirk at her annoyed grimace. He hadn't known she was coming but it was quite fortuitous; at least he wouldn't have to hunt her down after his drink with Hagrid.

"Hagrid how is your French coming along?" Nymphadora asked, setting her pint of light amber ale on the table.

"Oh, it's going all righ'," Hagrid replied. "I've been learnin' the words, but me grammar is no' so good."

Severus nursed his beer as they compared French phrases. Hagrid was right, his pronunciation was passable but his grammar was deplorable, something Nymphadora found highly amusing. When the subject turned toward the beast in Hagrid's cage, Severus reminded him that the pub's patrons wouldn't appreciate seeing the Cornish panther-like wild cat.

"I'm meeting Robert Hancheroff; he has some muscaliets for me," Hagrid said.

"Oh, muscaliets!" Nymphadora said, watching Hagrid with great interest. "I always wanted one as a kid."

"Of course you did," Severus drawled. "Who wouldn't want a pet that could set your home on fire?" She turned sharply and he shook his head. "I have something to talk to you about." He drew his wand and cast a Repelling Charm so anyone walking near them would suddenly need to go to the loo. "I have to ask you to keep this just between us, strictly confidential."

"Depending," Nymphadora said, her eyes narrowing, but Hagrid readily agreed, "Oh course, Headmaster, sir, you can count on me."

Severus seriously hoped so; Hagrid was infamous for his slip-ups. "I've already told Hagrid that Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank is in grave danger," Severus stated, and Nymphadora made a sharp inhalation in surprise. "He's told me that Professor Jacques-Laure Martineau, Beauxbatons Care of Magical Zoology professor, has gone missing."

"Yes, I came here to let Hagrid know about the two Beauxbatons staff members," Tonks said sadly. "The Cotillard family is on the lists of casualties in Ramsgate, Kent. I'm sorry, Hagrid, but it's confirmed; her librarian is dead." The big man hung his head and she turned to Severus. "I checked for anything on Martineau, but the closest I found was the Marceaus in Marlborough, Wiltshire, and Simon Morisset in Presteigne, Powys. There was a horrible raid in Hebden Bridge yesterday we haven't sorted out yet. Thankfully, we were warned about the raid planned in Framlingham, Suffolk and the one in Louth, Lincolnshire in time."

Severus nodded to her. He was glad that he'd heard about the two raids in Framlingham and Louth early enough, but regretted that he'd not had enough warning for the one in Ramsgate or the Hebden Bridge raid. "I am hoping that Wilhemina could replace Professor Jacques-Laure Martineau as the Care of Magical Zoology professor at Beauxbatons."

"I'm sure that Madame Maxime will hire Wilhelmina," Nymphadora said. "Her mother is from Abbeville, France so I know she speaks French."

Severus was pleased. *One problem solved.* "There is another person I'd like to send to Madame Maxime for protection two people actually." He considered how much to tell them; Nymphadora would be discreet, but if Hagrid made the wrong comment to the wrong person... Still, it was worth the risk. "It seems that one of my friends is disenchanted with the Dark Lord," he said, and Nymphadora's eyes widened in surprise. "If I can find a place to hide his mum and caretaker, it might show him that our side is more effectual than what he's been led to believe," Severus said, glad they were listening. "But we must move quickly on this matter."

"All right," Nymphadora drawled out, and she angled her head slightly as she regarded him. "What do you have in mind?"

"Hagrid, you have just given me the perfect solution; if you can get Madame Maxime to agree, she could fill in as her new librarian," Severus stated. "The woman has been under the Imperius for some time, but if Madame Maxime agrees, she'd have a new librarian and an extra hand at the school as well."

"Does she speak French?" Hagrid asked.

Severus nodded as he set down his glass. "Yes, the woman speaks fluent French as would her caretaker. They have property down in the south of France, but it would be too risky to have her hide there."

"Especially if her son is Marked," Nymphadora agreed.

"Sons. And a daughter, so having him on our side could be beneficial," Severus stated. "He is the one who told me about the Hebden Bridge and Louth raids."

"And once his mother is safe...? You really believe he'd come around to our side?" Nymphadora asked, clearly intrigued.

Severus nodded. "He's disenchanted to say the least. This would help him, knowing his mum was somewhere safe."

Nymphadora nodded, thankfully believing him and not demanding to know who. "You said she's been under Imperius for some time. How much time?"

Severus wasn't sure. "A while. She's recovering from depletion, malnutrition and dehydration," he stated. "Madam Pomfrey is seeing to her needs." It was not an outright lie.

That appeased Nymphadora. "How do you propose to get her there?"

"I'll send all three to Beauxbatons by Portkey," Severus stated. Concern had been high since the incident on the train when a half dozen students used unregistered Portkeys to help their friends escape the Death Eaters. Everyone except those who worked in the MRC were watched for any signs of conspiratorial conduct, especially those in Magical Transportation and the Floo Network, since both of those offices had to monitor public transportation round the clock now.

Hagrid sat up straighter. "I have to go talk to Olympe, but I think she'll help out as long as I can assure her they are not on You-Know-Who's side."

"They are not; I can assure you of that. I'll make you a Portkey to France, but make haste," Severus said and turned a salt shaker into a Portkey, ignoring Nymphadora's shock of outrage about magical secrecy as he applied the spells necessary to return Hagrid to Hogwarts on the pepper shaker. "No, I'm not above using unregistered Portkeys," he said to her and turned back to Hagrid. "Have Madame Maxime activate this to port you back to the school; it will return you to your hut. I'll want to know immediately. I'll wait here and purchase your muscaliets from Robert Hancheroff. Send me a Patronus as soon as you return I'll be someplace safe to receive it."

Hagrid nodded, clasping the saltshaker Portkey in his fist and pocketing the other. "I'll let you know immediately, Headmaster."

"Too bad I can't stick around to see the muscaliets," Nymphadora stated. "I'm not sure Robert Hancheroff would be delighted to see me," she added as Hagrid's Portkey activated and he disappeared from the table.

"No more than he'll be delighted to see me. But should anyone trace the Portkey, it's wouldn't do for them to find you here with me," Severus stated and finished his Sneak Lifter.

"Good point," she said, changing her features to resemble someone else. "So what's the next step?"

"Tonks," he said, hating the nickname, but he needed her help. "This situation is delicate. The wizard in question has been my friend for years. He's only now coming to know my position in all of this. I will need you to take his mother and caretaker to France for me."

"Why? Can't he go?" Nymphadora asked. He scowled, and she held up a hand. "All I'm saying is that you are about to have me stick my neck out for a Death Eater, right?" He nodded, and she continued. "Which will put us all in an awkward position. I'm being watched, but I've been able to throw You-Know-Who's little Auror wannabes off enough to keep out of Azkaban. You're about to, if you haven't already, tip your hand to a Death Eater, who may come over to our side, and I want to know. Who's side are you on?"

Severus scowl darkened. "After everything you still question me? You were the only one who believed me after I after I..."

"Killed Dumbledore," she finished for him. "I saw the extent of the curse's destruction of his left arm and shoulder, and I believe you about the vow. You also saved Hermione's life and Harry's. I know what happened in the gorge you let him go. You do that a lot, save people who you should have killed or turned over to your Dark Lord. So yeah, I trust you about as much as I would an armed Centaur. But this... this is... How can I explain using an authorized Portkey to France and back?"

"You'll come up with something," he stated. "If you want, I can give you a lead on two French Death Eaters and their location." He chuckled when she perked up. "They are related to Dolohov."

"That would help," she said, smirking as she sipped her beer.

He dropped the Repelling Charm and rose to get himself another beer. He'd have to Obliviate Robert Hancheroff after their meeting; it wouldn't do for him to remember seeing him and Nymphadora together should her impersonation fail.

~C~

Cillian looked out the window in the Long Salon at the thick trees and an expanse of snow covered grass, deep in thought. He had no idea what Severus was doing or where he was. Severus had arrived at the druid circle, looking rather haggard and the sleeves of his frockcoat and shirt shredded by some creature. "Nothing of import," he'd assured Cillian. "A new acquisition for Hagrid's lessons."

He then told Cillian that he was pursuing a viable option for his mum and ol' Ben, but Severus hadn't given Cillian too many details, only saying that he'd sent his contact to

France, and he should hear something definite in a day or two, hopefully sooner. Even though this was encouraging news, it still left the matter unresolved, and although Cillian should have felt some of his fears lessen from the news, he still felt apprehensive.

Severus had left as soon as he'd changed his clothes.

Cillian turned to look out of the north-facing window at the place where the Druid circle stood in the trees beyond the magical boundary. Hermione sat in one of the padded wicker chairs behind him, reading a Muggle novel. Dianne was upstairs crying. He'd hated the argument he'd had with Dianne, and it tore his heart out, but he didn't know what to do, so he'd sought solitude to think things through. Now, he was waiting waiting for word from Severus waiting on Dianne to be willing to speak to him again, if she ever would. He hated waiting.

At least Hermione wasn't barraging him to turn traitor; although after these last few days, he was about ready to concede she was right. But how much he was willing to give... how much he would allow or how obvious he could let his position be known, or by whom, was still something else he had to sort out in his mind.

He was expected to be at the castle with Hermione tomorrow afternoon, to watch over her as the Hogwarts staff prepared for the students arrival. He doubted he would be. He needed to remain here until the situation was finally settled.

In fact, Hermione hadn't tried to engage him in a debate about his choices since his return, well since his fight with Dianne, which seemed odd, as he was certain she hadn't given up so easily. In fact, her silence grated on his nerves. Each time he sneaked a glance in her direction, she just sat there, reading. "How do you know so much about his past?" he asked.

"Know about whom?" she asked as she turned the page.

"The Dark Lord, who else?" he snapped as turned to face her.

"Dumbledore showed Harry, and Harry told Ron and me," she said casually, her eyes never leaving the book.

"How do you know he wasn't lying?" he asked. He had already checked; everything she'd said about the graveyard was true.

Hermione set down the book. "What's wrong, Cillian?"

"Nothing." *What is taking so bloody long? I can't stay here all day.*

"Something's irritating you, you're pacing," she said calmly, her head turning as she watched him.

He stopped and turned to face her. "Nothing that concerns you." He was irritable, but he couldn't help it, and knew he was being a git. Severus still hadn't returned. He wanted to know what Severus had done, what plans he'd initiated, and he needed to move his mum soon. He hated waiting and being in the dark.

"Is it your family then?" she asked.

He turned and faced her again. "What do you know about my family?"

She shrugged, clasping her hands together over her knee. "Nothing. I just assumed that, considering the events going on and your agitation, it must be something rather big."

*Well, that's an understatement.* "I'm not agitated," he said, turning on his heel to face her again.

"Did he threaten someone? Your brother or sister?" she asked.

*Impertinent witch.* "No he did not threaten my brother or sister," he snapped irritably. He was not going to think about what might have happened to his sister when she told the Dark Lord her news; the last time she'd displeased him, she had been chained to the Malfoy's drawing room floor and cursed till she bled.

"I have friends that can help you," she said softly.

Her words made him stop. *Same thing Severus had said.* "You're little friends cannot help me," he spat.

"Not my friends in school," she said in exasperation, "My friends *out there*. I can ask for help, and it will be given to me. You don't have to be alone. There are others."

He didn't need to hear this right now.

"I have friends people who were in Dumbledore's Order who are still on Harry's side. I know that they would help you."

*At what price?* he thought as he rounded on her. "I'm a Death Eater, Hermione. Even if I wanted to, there is no way out."

"Harry can win this," she said softly. He rounded on her again, but she didn't even flinch. "I told you the prophecy has been enacted, the qualifications and conditions were met the final showdown will be between them..."

"And your little boyfriend will beat the greatest dark wizard of all time," he sneered.

"He can. I believe it," she persisted. "He's the prophesized one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord. The Chosen One. Marked by your Dark Lord as his equal, and the one that the Dark Lord can't defeat. He's tried. He's failed."

He didn't want to hear this. Her faith in Harry Potter and that damned prophecy was completely unwavering. "And if he wins, I'd be hauled off to Azkaban."

"No, I'll stand up for you," she said, touching his arm.

He jumped. He hadn't realized she'd approached him.

"I will stand up for you. I swear. In the end, if Harry wins, I swear I won't let them take you to Azkaban."

He ran his hand over his face. He wanted to believe her.

"Please tell me what is going on," she pleaded. "I have friends, people I know out there who can help, whatever it is. I just have to send my Patronus and ask. Or a letter by owl, but the Patronus is faster and can't be fabricated. They will help."

"And why would you put yourself at risk for me?" he asked, leaning his forearm against the cool glass.

"It's what friends do," she said, coming up to stand beside him.

Her expression was so sincere. She really believed in what she was saying. "Tell me what you need, and I'll have a better idea of whom to ask."

He turned to stare out of the window.

"You're a good man, Cillian, I can see it even if you've lost sight of it. Dianne and her family see it they trust you. I know, given your word, I can trust you. Please trust me," she pleaded and swept her arm up as she added, "You've hidden all of this from the Dark Lord." Her arm lowered to her side. "I know you have. I'm sure you've hidden other things from him. It's not that different if you aide me in the castle, help us from within. Even little things, warnings, would help. But in the end, who do you really want to win? I'm offering you not only a get out of Azkaban free card but my support and my friendship. I wish I could say there were no strings attached, but in these times, there are strings. Stand up for what you know is right and undermine that which is not."

He hung his head, leaning heavily on his arm still pressed on the glass. "I need to know, is Severus on your side?"

She gave his arm a slight squeeze. "I think you already know the answer to that."

He felt her walk away.

"Why don't you ask him? I know he wants to tell you."

He turned around, but she was gone. Her book, *Silent Honor* by Danielle Steel, lay on the chair. He knew this book; Dianne and her mother had read it. It was about a Japanese girl who survived the segregation camps in America. "If she can do this, so can I," Dianne had said after finishing the book.

He turned to look out of the window. Snow frosted everything and the sky was cloudy and grey. *If she can do this, so can I* he thought. *Hermione is right; I've hidden all of this from the Dark Lord as well as countless other things. Right is right, and if I'm really careful, I can undermine what's being done to those children in the school. She's not asking me to do it, just to help her. So what if she sends letters to Potter? It's not like the Dark Lord isn't expecting her to try and help him.* But letting her send owls was really risky it was one of the things he was to prevent her from doing. *But not her girl friends, I don't have to stop them.* He couldn't believe he was seriously considering this.

Making a deep sigh, he strode out of the house and Apparated to the hotel. Prissy opened the door to his mum's room when he knocked.

"Mistress is not wanting to stay here," the elf informed him.

"The problem is, mother, you need to get your strength back before we move you to some place safer," he said, walking into the room. He was pleased to see her sitting up, but she still looked like a waif.

His mum gazed up at him with watery eyes. "Where is Tannis? What happened to him?"

Cillian shrugged and fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. Ol' Ben watched him from one of the chairs by the window with a look of pure disappointment. "Mum don't cry," Cillian pleaded, sitting on the edge of the bed. He picked up one of the potion bottles, noting that it held less than it had the night before. "I promise you things will be better. I just have to work out somewhere safe for you and Ben."

"Some place your sister can't find me?" she asked angrily, and Cillian cringed at her tone as Ol' Ben turned to stare out of the window. "Is that why you have me in this Muggle inn?"

He nodded. "Bell will not look for you here." He turned to look at the small table. "Did you eat your breakfast and lunch?" he asked.

"Yes, Prissy held my plate for me," his mum answered, but seeing Prissy ears droop spoke volumes. Her appetite wasn't back yet, but at least she was taking her potions. He knew the elf would be diligent regarding the potions. "Apparently I am not to do magic here..."

"Or the MRC will find you," Cillian finished for her sharply. "Bell is not happy with you..."

"She wants my money for that Dark Lord!" his mum snapped, cutting him off. "How can you follow someone so... so... inhuman, Cillian? I raised you and your siblings better than that!"

Cillian hung his head. "Mum, he's powerful and brilliant. He made sense; he made promises and wants to bring us out of the shadows, to let us be who we are without..." He inhaled deeply. "This is the same argument as before. Wouldn't you like to relax beside the fire in the lounge? They have a nice view of the valley and Lakeland Fells. Or how about the conservatory? We could have afternoon tea? Get some sun?"

She turned away, and he could tell she was very disappointed in him too. "How could Belinda turn on us like this," she stated, and he knew she was starting to become irritable again as more tears slid down her cheek. "Marc and Justin wouldn't listen either. You boys followed along with Marc like you always did, and now look at us."

Cillian handed her a tissue, not sure what to say.

~S~

Severus sat in his sitting room, trying to concentrate on the book in his hand. He hated waiting, but he had to remain somewhere close to the castle where Hagrid's Partonus could easily find him, uninterrupted or overheard by anyone else. As far as knew, Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank was in Minerva's office making arrangements to hide the per diem professor in a safe house. He hoped that wherever the ladies decided, Hagrid would be able to find Wilhelmina to take her to Beauxbatons.

Swearing, Severus rose and was about to leave to return to the island, when Hagrid's Patronus bounded into the room. "I'm back, Professor Snape, sir, and I have good news. Olympe is delighted to have Professor Grubbly-Plank at Beauxbatons as her Care of Magical Zoology professor. However, she was somewhat reluctant to accept someone targeted by the Dark Lord as her new librarian."

Severus opened the window and shot out into the sky in a streak of black smoke, landing behind Hagrid's hut as the furry, half wolfhound-half dragon Patronus leaped into the hut.

The back door opened forcefully, and a startled wizard lowered his crossbow while Fang barked at him from the doorway. "Startled me. I thought you were one of 'em comin' to get me," Hagrid replied opening the door wider for Severus to enter. "Oh shut up, Fang."

"What did she say precisely?" Severus asked.

"Just what I told you. Olympe remembers Professor Grubbly-Plank from her visit here. She was most happy that the professor could transfer to her school," Hagrid replied. "She was a little apprehensive of your friend's mother, but I explained what you told me, and she's willing to trust me. But she wants them in the school as soon as possible so she can orientate them before the term starts."

"So, we have to move quickly," Severus stated. He had to keep Minerva in the dark about his duplicity. He slyly cast the Inception Spell on Hagrid. The huge man's eyes glazed over. "You will not tell Minerva or anyone about my involvement, Hagrid. Inform Minerva that Madame Maxime needs a Care of Magical Zoology professor. Wilhelmina Grubbly-Plank is in Minerva's office now, I believe. Get Minerva to reactivate the salt shaker to take you back to Beauxbatons, and tell Madame Maxime, her new librarian will be along shortly." It was a long suggestion, but not too off from what Hagrid would do anyway. Maintaining eye contact, he mentally reinforced the suggestion with Innuomency. The huge man's eyes began to refocus when Severus released the connection, and he shot up into the air for the school gates, leaving Hagrid to this task.

He wasted no time, Apparating away as soon as he cleared the magical boundary. He arrived on a London street and slipped into the alleyway. He had to find Nymphadora. The hard part was finding an Auror, a specific Auror, and that wasn't an easy thing to do with the current state of the Ministry. The Dark Lord had full control of the magical government now. Aurors rotated shifts round the clock in case of emergencies which meant Undesirables detections and apprehension. He took a chance

that Nymphadora would be at home or hopefully out of the office, preferably alone... if he was lucky. She could still be in the Ministry, or on assignment someplace, or on a mission for the Order, so sending his Patronus would be too risky. "Peren. Dobby," he called out, hoping the elves would come.

He was not disappointed. "I need you to find someone for me," he told them as soon as they appeared. "I need you to find Nymphadora Tonks, the witch whose hair changes color. Have her meet me at the Derwent Lodge Hotel in Portinscale."

"Of course, Headmaster, sir," Dobby said happily as Peren nodded, repeating, "The Derwent Lodge Hotel in Portinscale."

"I's can do that's," she replied as Dobby extended his ears.

"I can hears her."

That worked out better than he'd hoped. "Make sure you are not seen by anyone but her. Tell her Hagrid returned and Madame Maxime has agreed. Tell her to come alone no back up and no subterfuge. She will not be harmed, I swear it."

"Yes, master, Peren and Dobby understands," Peren said and both elves vanished.

Severus Apparated to the island and ran to the druid circle.

Cillian appeared a moment later. "Well?"

"I have a solution if your mother will agree to it. I can send her to Beauxbatons," Severus stated.

Cillian looked skeptical. "As in the Beauxbatons Academy of Magic?"

"Yes," Severus stated. "She will have to pose as a librarian, but if she's willing, Madame Maxime will give her room and board in her school. Bell would never think to look for your mother and caretaker there."

Cillian ran his hand through his hair as he stared out through the trees. "I dunno. Mum work?"

Severus shrugged. "How hard can it be working as a librarian?"

"You're kidding me, right?" Cillian asked. He turned, his face expressionless as he considered. "You're right, Bell would never think to go there. Are you sure that she agreed? Mum's never worked as a librarian before."

"It's arranged," Severus replied. He saw Peren peeking around one of the stones. "We need to go to the Derwent Lodge Hotel." Cillian's eyebrows rose and Severus waved him off. "To meet our contact. She will escort your mother, ol' Ben and her house-elf to the school. Madam Maxime is expecting her, and it will keep our cover as loyalists."

"Loyal to whom?" Cillian asked, his eyes narrowing.

*Merlin, I hope I'm right about this, Severus thought. If I'm wrong... Nope, he was right about Cillian. No point second guessing now. "To each other and the outcome we both want,"* he said confidently.

"I'll meet you there," Cillian stated and disappeared with a soft crack.

Severus arrived on the street near the sign for the hotel and walked up to Cillian. Together they both approached the hotel, walking up the drive. Nymphadora rose from her chair as they walked up the stairs to the outside patio. "Is this the wizard?" she asked, her wand held loosely in her hand at her side.

Cillian reached for his, but Severus placed a hand on his arm. "Trust me," he said as he moved closer to Nymphadora. "Yes."

Cillian glared at him, but remained quiet.

"So, where is your mum?" the Auror asked.

Cillian turned to look at Severus. "How much does she know?"

"Enough," Severus stated. "Nymphadora, this is Cillian; Cillian, Nymphadora," he said, making introductions.

"It's Tonks," she replied, crossing her arms. "You're the one following Hermione around in school."

"I'm her protector," he replied. "Alecto and Amycus Carrow don't like her much."

"Yeah, I bet," Nymphadora replied. "So...?"

"How are we going to get there?" Cillian asked.

Nymphadora pointed to Severus. "Ask the Headmaster, he's the one planning all this."

Severus laid out his plan, and Cillian chuffed a laugh. "Mum is barely able to sit up in bed." He turned to Nymphadora. "She's been under the Imperius for awhile now."

Nymphadora nodded. "So I was told." She dropped her arms, hooking the thumb of the hand holding her wand on the front pocket of her jeans. "How bad off is she?" she asked, much kinder and quite concerned.

Cillian relaxed somewhat. "She's magically depleted. She's doing better with the potions, and she's still really thin, but at least she's not as weak as before. She suffered from malnutrition and dehydration, but I think she's better."

"I bet she was. I can't imagine being under the Imperius for such a long duration," she replied. Severus was glad that there wasn't any accusation in Nymphadora's tone. "Can she travel?"

Cillian shrugged. "Depends on the means."

"I was going to suggest Portkey," Severus stated, but Cillian shook his head.

She looked at Severus. "I can take her by airplane and then see about getting a car?" Nymphadora suggested.

Severus crossed his arms. "Quickly would be better than prolonging the trip the Muggle way."

"But if she's still recovering and weak, the Portkey arrival might harm her," Nymphadora pointed out to which Cillian agreed. "Airfare is pricy, and it takes longer, but it's perfectly safe," she stated to Cillian. "I've flown before."

In the end, it was agreed that Cillian would go with Nymphadora by plane to Tarbes near Lourdes in Midi Pyrenees and take a taximobile from there. "But if we're taking the airplane, you'll have to wear Muggle clothes."



"Might I suggest Fat Face or the Edinburgh Woollen Mill in Keswick," Severus suggested. "They have men's and women's clothes."

Both Cillian and Nymphadora looked at him with identical expressions of disbelief.

"Honestly, where did you think I took Hermione to buy her new coat and sweater?" he asked Cillian. "And you can pick up something for your mother and caretaker as well. If it doesn't fit properly, adjust it."

Nymphadora rolled her eyes. "Fine, let's go shopping."

~o0o~

Elspeth had not been surprised to see Severus enter her room, which *had* surprised Severus, but she had been surprised to see him accompanied with the Auror. It took several minutes to assure the woman that she and Ben were not being given over to the MRC, but instead that Severus had helped Cillian in regard to her plight.

Apparently Elspeth had always believed that Severus was Dumbledore's man and was certain that the *Prophet* had "*misconstrued the facts as they always do*," in regards to Dumbledore's death. "*After all the rubbish they published that year about Dumbledore and that Potter boy, blatant slander and allegations, any witch with a reasonable mind could tell the editor was off his broom.*"

In a way it was a relief. Severus carefully outlined the situation to the now rather alert witch and explained the plan in as much detail as he could.

"So, Cillian, you've finally made up your mind that I'm right," Elspeth said, looking at Severus. "Or have you finally made my son come to his senses?"

"I assure you that he came to his decision of his own accord," Severus said, ignoring Cillian's not to subtle clearing of his throat.

Elspeth, who agreed to use the name Gwendoline Clark, had not been happy with the arrangement, but Ben, now assuming the name William Bentley, had promised to do all the reshelving of the books. Severus had pointed out that school libraries now charmed the books to automatically return to their proper shelves if the students put them in the wrong places, and there would be only minor paperwork necessary for the job. The school's house-elves did all the dusting and would polish the wood.

While Tonks and Prissy helped Mrs. Clark and Mr. Bentley change into Muggle clothes, Severus found a man with a suitable vehicle who was willing, with a bit of magical persuasion, to take them to the nearest airport. He did pay the man four Galleons, which made the car owner very happy, spouting some idiocy of ancient gold and the lost city of Gringotts.

At the airport counter, Nymphadora helped Cillian purchase the tickets for one way flights to the Tarbes-Lourdes-Pyrénées Airport. Severus left as Nymphadora and Cillian escorted Mrs. Clark and Mr. Bentley into the terminal.

With Cillian gone for an indeterminate, but thankfully short length of time, Severus went to Malfoy Manor to have Draco return to the school early as Draco had done the start of term. Draco eagerly sent his house-elf to pack his trunk as Severus explained to Narcissa the need for the boy's early departure. His second surprise that day was how cooperative Narcissa was to his request.

Severus returned to the island feeling like a weight had been lifted from his shoulder. He entered the house in search of Hermione and found her with Dianne in the dining room, talking together quietly while stringing beads on wires. The conversation stopped abruptly when Hermione looked up, and her expression became deeply thoughtful with a tinge of sadness. He didn't have to guess why.

"Hermione, it's time to go," he said softly.

"Okay," she said quietly.

"Do you have time for her to finish?" Dianne asked him as Hermione set the strand down on the tray in front of her.

Both girls looked up at him expectantly.

He shrugged. "Finish."

A soft smile spread across Hermione's face as she quickly added several more beads. Dianne took the strand and finished off the piece with a loop, and then gave it back to Hermione. "To remember me by," she said softly.

"I won't forget, thank you," Hermione said, and Severus rolled his eyes as the girls hugged. He was certain that Dianne whispered something in her ear, because Hermione nodded as she stood up to go. "I promise. You too, okay?"

Dianne nodded with a solemn but reflective look in her eyes. She looked up at Hermione imploringly and asked, "Look after Cillian, will you?"

"As closely as he does for me," Hermione promised. She turned and followed Severus from the dining room, but Hermione became pensive, biting her lip.

"What?" he asked.

"I was wondering...," she started to say and bit her lip again.

He raised his eyebrow in question, and she quickly asked if she could borrow some money until she could get her funds from Gringotts. "For...?" he asked.

She looked back at Dianne sitting at the table and resuming her beading. "Christmas gifts for my friends. Dianne said I could buy a few..."

He placed a hand on her arm. "Go ask her. I'll pay for a few," he said, hoping the beads were not expensive. Hermione ran back into the dining room.

Thankfully they were not, but she hadn't bought as many as he'd thought she would, considering the number of girls she'd befriended this year. Realizing he had plenty of time before dinner, he offered to let her shop one last time in Keswick. Hermione instantly beamed at him in delight. Severus summoned Peren to collect Hermione's trunk and took her shopping one last time. She bought something that unsnapped and opened, revealing a pouch, several novelty things in the gift shops that he thought were a bit tacky, and some hand-blown glass bottles in a glassware and arts shop, and a pair of silver earrings in a jewelry store.

Dinner that night at the castle had been an uncomfortable affair. Alecto kept glaring at Hermione all through the meal, and Amycus had mentioned something to Hermione that greatly upset her.

~H~

"To think that good, upstanding witches like Bellatrix Lestrange and Belinda Morederk should be punished so severely for only tryin' to stop you from runnin' away," Amycus sneered softly. "Don't think that you'll be given such a loose leash now you're back here, girlie. You'll be watched, and *He* has others here to see to it. You'll not get away again, I assure you. Lestrange is going to be here, too."

Hermione stilled, the hand holding her goblet up to her lips clenching slightly. *Lestrange? Which one? Surely not Bellatrix?*

"Helping me with me lessons, and *he* ain't liking you at all, neither."

Professors Flitwick and Sprout both stopped talking and turned to see if everything was all right.

"Problem, Amycus?" Severus asked in a low drawl.

"Nope, just talking to the Mudblood," Amycus replied. "Telling her that Rab LeStrange is going to be helping me with me lessons."

Severus casually resumed his conversation with Alecto and Minerva, but Hermione could sense that he was likewise paying attention to her as well. Amycus continued to talk about his lesson plans, "Teaching you things you should know," and "reversing such a waste of energy. Why cast 'em if you is going to undo it?" but even VanHalal and Travers were not listening to him.

No one else was talking to her, but then with the Death Eaters all dispersed along the table, it wasn't surprising. As soon as she finished her sprouts and pork chop, Hermione asked to be excused. "No, you'll wait until the meal is over," Severus replied somewhat coolly with a warning edge to his voice, but she could see that there was no malice in his eyes. She'd have to remain until he was finished eating.

Hermione slunk slightly in her seat, listening to Amycus drool on about his lesson plans, VanHalal and Travers' gasconade about the latest raids in Ramsgate, Kent, Presteigne, Powys and Hebden Bridge, Lincolnshire, and Alecto wanting to be given the title of Adjutant Headmistress in charge of discipline and incentives. And down the table, Draco and Goyle sat in reasonable silence, both of them eyeing her with speculative glances that were hard to read.

~~o0o~~

Author's Notes:

Want to see a great drawing of a muscaliet?

<http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition-overlay.html?seqNo=17&status=Accepted&keyword=Other&year=2009>

The Beast of Bodmin Moor (also known as the Best Goon Brenn or Best Goen Brenn in Cornish) is allegedly a panther-like phantom wild cat purported to live in Cornwall. The majority of these sightings centered on the Bodmin Moor region over recent years: mostly occasional reports from farmers in the area of their mutilated slain livestock being found on the moor, consistent with an animal attack. These reports seem to have evolved into the belief that a large wild cat was carrying out the killings. People started "seeing" the beast as well, although, no true evidence of the panther-like beast has ever been found. I made up the name, Goen mērcath: Cath or kath is Cornish for cat; goen I'm guessing is Cornish for moor. Cornish and Breton word for large or great is mēr (mur, meur).

I made up Innuomency to be similar to Legilimency only one is able to hint or suggest something, to project something into the mind of another person as opposed to seeing or reading their thoughts and emotions. I see it as harder to use, but stronger if the wizards is accomplished enough to use it. It differs to the Confundus, which a strong-willed person can throw off like the Imperius can be, and the suggestion is stronger than with the Inception spell.

In regards to the exchange rate of the wizarding Galleon, at today's gold prices, a 1 oz. gold coin (like a Galleon, Krugerrand, Canadian Gold Maple Leaf, or American Gold Eagle Bullion) is about £1,110 1.125. I don't know what the rate of exchange would've been in 1998, but I'm sure the Goblins knew. JKR has stated that a Galleon is worth about £3, but she's also said that it is worth about £5 in her interviews; and internal evidence in the fourth and later books seems to match this, however, JKR is hardly consistent in her calculations. However, evidence in the first three books could suggest that a Galleon has a value closer to £50 to £200.

In the first book, Hagrid instructs Harry to pay the owl 5 Knuts for his copy of the Daily Prophet, however, in OotP, Hermione pays an owl 1 Knut for the *Prophet*. If the price of the *Prophet* is in line with Muggle newspapers this means that 1 Knut should be about US \$0.20 to US\$1.00 (the price of a newspaper being about US\$1.00 in 1991). This makes a Sickle worth somewhere between \$6.00 and \$30.00, and gives a Galleon a value of between \$100 (£50) and \$500 (£200). Well, sort of. See this link for a better analysis:

[http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Muggles'\\_Guide\\_to\\_Harry\\_Potter/Magic/Money](http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Muggles'_Guide_to_Harry_Potter/Magic/Money)

## Herewith Draconis

### Chapter 43 of 43

First week of the new school term, and the students are back at Hogwarts. They hear some bad news, see a few new faces, and someone has some new obligations to carry out.

*A huge thank you to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, for reading this over for me, Proulxes for the Britpick, and to Phoenix for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate the all the help. Thank you very much.*

*Also, smooches and a big thank you to Jay for my banner! I really love it.*

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~o43o~

Herewith Draconis

Hermione hated being cooped up in the Headmaster's Tower all day, but until Cillian or her friends arrived, it was for the best. Severus was out again, where she had no idea, so she had decided to remain in their sitting room, as he'd asked, and read. However, since he was out, it allowed her the opportunity to look through the books on the bookshelves he'd forbidden her to read. Hermione had quickly discovered that if she reached out with her left hand, the magic on the shelf didn't affect her as much as if she tried to grasp anything with her right. She assumed it was due to the Dark Mark on her arm.

Peren had been hovering about, pretending to dust and straighten everything on the shelves and then whisked the rugs and all the cushions just in case one of the books hurt her.

Hermione nearly finished perusing the books on one of the shelves, but so far, she hadn't found anything on Horcruxes. Severus had many books on the detection of the curses or types of magic used on a person, place or thing, how to discern which spells, and how to deconstruct or break the curse or curses. His books had many small slips of parchment with spells or counter spells written on them, or his own variations. Hermione was amazed at the complexity of Severus' notes and was once again in awe of his brilliance on the subject.

She looked up upon hearing the soft thuds of footsteps on the stairs, expecting to see Cillian and hoping not to be caught reading the forbidden book by Severus. She sighed as Draco strolled in, excusing herself to get "something" from her trunk. When she'd returned, he was sitting on the sofa with his feet up on the coffee table. "I bought you this for Christmas, but with everything, it's a bit late," she said, handing him the small package.

He eyed the small gift suspiciously. He unwrapped it and unsnapped the men's leather coin purse to look inside. "What is it?" he asked as he stuck his finger into the small pouch.

"A gentlemen's coin holder," she said while picking up her book and sitting down. "When you tip it, the coins slide out onto the flap. I put an extension charm on it and one to make it lighter in your pocket."

"Thank you," he replied, closing it and putting it in his pocket.

"Did you have a nice week?" she asked as she turned the page where she'd left off.

"No," he replied sullenly as he rested his head on the back of the sofa.

She turned to face him, taking in his appearance. He was as immaculately groomed as he normally was, but he seemed wan and weary.

"Like what you see?" he asked snidely.

She tilted her head slightly. "No, you look like you've had a very rough week."

He barked a laugh. "You do have a knack for stating the obvious," he said, closing his eyes.

"Draco...?" Hermione leaned forward and placed her hand on his arm, but he immediately yanked his left arm away from her hand with a loud hiss.

"Not that arm," he snapped.

She sank back onto her part of the sofa. "I'm sorry," she said, looking at her own left arm, lying across the book on her lap. "Does yours bother you, too?"

He looked at her, his grey eyes scrutinizing her.

"Your Mark. Does it irritate you all the time as well?"

He closed his eyes as he turned his head and then stared at the bookshelves across the room.

With a mental shrug, she resumed reading, well scanning the pages for any mention of Horcruxes. When she finished the book she got up and walked casually over to the bookshelf to exchange it for another.

His eyes followed her as she walked back and sat down. "What are you reading?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Something that may be helpful at some point," she said offhandedly, hoping he didn't know she wasn't supposed to be reading the books on those shelves.

"Is that...?" He sat up straighter and tipped the book up to see the title. "Why are you reading about Dark Arts applications? Since when are you interested in the Dark Arts?"

"Ever since I got this," she snapped, holding up her left forearm.

He shook his head as he said, "You can't remove it it's permanent."

"I already assumed that much," she replied with a heavy sigh. She stared at the book in her hands.

"Then why...?" he asked, his eyes narrowing. "Unless, you...?"

She looked up at him. "Unless I what?"

He stared at her, his grey eyes boring into hers as if he were trying to do Legilimency on her.

She stared back, daring him to try.

"That, the stuff in there, won't help you here," he said, his gaze locked on hers. The pause stretched into a weighty silence.

Hermione held her ground, keeping eye contact, knowing he'd not see anything she didn't want him to.

His face began to soften as his eyes widened slightly. "You've spoken to Potter, haven't you?"

She didn't move. He couldn't have seen that! She hadn't felt his intrusion. But then Cillian had assumed the same thing. She forced herself to relax, waiting to see what Draco would do.

"You have, haven't you? You and he you're...," Draco stammered and his eyes widened again. "But you came back?"

"Yes I did," she admitted, recalling telling him that during their conversation in his dining room.

"Why?" he asked in total disbelief.

"Why?" she almost shrieked. "I told you for my friends. For Severus. For you."

"For me?" he asked incredulously.

"Yes, for you and everyone else I care about," she stated firmly. "What do you think would have happened if I hadn't?"

"Severus and Cillian would have been punished," Draco stated.

"Punished? Severus could have been killed, and then Alecto would've been made Headmistress," she pointed out. "She would make her vile brother Deputy Headmaster, and she'd do away with Professor McGonagall, and Hagrid would be sacked or imprisoned, along with any professor that stood up against the Carrows and the Dark Lord."

Not to mention what would happen to Ginny, Neville and Seamus, you..."

"She can't do anything to me," Draco sneered.

"Except make your life hell for befriending me," she countered. She remembered what Severus said about him, he was wavering as well.

"I befriended you because I was supposed to and she knows that," Draco snapped.

He's becoming defensive. Not good. She knew Severus wanted him brought to their side. If she was going to reach him, make him see reason, she had to try another tactic. "But I didn't," she said, touching him gently on the upper arm, "but I grew to like you." His eyes narrowed, and she smiled at him. "You were pretty tough to take at first, but we have become friends, haven't we? Real friends?"

"Real friends don't run away and put you in danger," he said accusingly, his feet dropping to the floor.

"I told you," she stated, trying not to sound defensive. "I was placed under the Imperius and given the impression I was in grave danger. Had I seen you, I would have run over to you so you could protect me, or to Cillian or Severus, but I couldn't see you any of you. I think it was either your aunt or Cillian's sister who put me under the Imperius."

"Aunt Bella wouldn't have done it," he said with a shake of his head.

"That leaves Cillian's sister, Belinda," Hermione said with a nod. *That makes sense; she has a thing for Severus, I know it* She pushed all thoughts of Belinda and Severus and her fear that she might have been the woman Severus had been with at the reveal out of her mind.

Draco leaned forward with his arms resting on his legs and clasped his hands together. "She and Severus had an affair for a while," he stated softly.

"I know, but I think Severus ended it last summer, well, before he was landed with me," she replied, hating the confirmation they'd been a couple. But that was before her relationship with him, and he hadn't been friendly toward her since, and he frequently rebuffed her advances as well at least when she'd been with him.

"Nah, he ended it when the Dark Lord told him to make me his apprentice." He looked up at her. "You told me you tried to find Snape, but you were gone ~~two~~ *two days! Two days!* Where did you go?" he demanded. "I know you told me the places you went to, but you were not at any of them for very long, were you? Did you find Potter? Were you with him?"

"Yes, I was," she admitted. She pushed her nagging suspicions out of her mind.

Draco placed his hand on his knee as he turned to face her. "Then why come back? Why not stay and help your friends?"

"Who is to say that I'm not helping them?" she said with a lift of her brow, but he cocked his eyebrow, looking at her with skepticism. "My strengths in all of the things that we did here at school relied on my ability to find out what we needed in the library. Books and cleverness not fighting." She scooted closer to him. "I know you have beliefs that I don't necessarily agree with, Draco, but you're not a bad guy. Well, you haven't been quite the bully like you had been before. You're prejudiced, yes, sometimes a git, but really, this year you've been a good friend."

"But you still side with Potter and Longbottom?" he asked.

She nodded. "Of course I do. I want Harry to win. *need* him to win. When it comes down to the final standoff between the Dark Lord and Harry, I will stand by Harry."

He looked away, but she touched his shoulder to make him look at her. "It's why I'm here why the Dark Lord didn't kill me that night, why he marked me. The Dark Lord is using me to try and get to Harry. He hopes that by using me, making everyone think I've come around to his side, it will shake Harry up, hurt his resolve, weaken him. I know it hasn't worked. Harry is as determined as ever," she said, hoping that Draco wouldn't tell the Dark Lord, but then even if he did, or the Dark Lord summoned her to make her tell him where Harry was it wouldn't do him any good. She knew they moved frequently and to remote places. "Draco, I've told you the prophecy I know about it, and I know that in the end, Harry will defeat him."

"How can you be so bloody certain as to believe that," he said, his eyes once again narrowing. "I remember what you said in the dining room, but my dad said you can't put any faith in prophecies."

Somehow she knew he was lying. "Then why did the Dark Lord want it so badly? Why did Dumbledore put so much faith into the prophecy he made sure it would come true." His eyes widened in shock so she set the book aside and told him about Ron's theory. Draco sat in silence as he listened to her, nodding his head, his eyes widening or clenching his fist a few times as he took it all in.

"Bloody hell," he swore when she was finished. "But I thought that you liked Dumbledore?"

"I do did, but that didn't mean he wouldn't do what was necessary to get rid of Tom Riddle for good," she replied. "Think about it, he was like a general the leader of the group that stood up to the Dark Lord the first time, and he pulled everyone together again when the Dark Lord came back. He is the only wizard the Dark Lord ever feared except for Harry." She held up a hand to forestall his comment. "No, he doesn't fear Harry in the same way that he feared Dumbledore, but he's always tried to kill Harry, hasn't he *and* he keeps failing to do so. For whatever reason, call it luck if you want to, but the Dark Lord hasn't been able to kill Harry. There was always something that prevented him from doing it. And he gets into a rage each time, doesn't he?"

Draco nodded slowly, his haunted eyes darting away from her, and she wondered how much or what he'd witnessed.

"Now the prophecy said 'the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord' that's a quote *defeat him*, and the Dark Lord keeps trying. But he can't. Your father said he doesn't believe in the prophecy? Then why does he want to know what it said so badly? I mentioned some of it to him at the party, and I saw it in his expression, I know he wants to know it, but so far he hasn't come here to ask me."

Draco turned his head. "No, he wants me to get it out of you."

"Draco, answer me this truthfully, who do you want to win, Harry or the Dark Lord?" she asked. "Given a real choice, as if saying it will make it so, ~~who~~ *who* do you want to win?"

He hung his head.

"If you can tell me honestly it's Harry, then I will tell you what you want to know," she offered, knowing he could just lie to her, but trust had to start somewhere.

His head snapped up sharply as his eyes met hers.

"All I ask is that you allow me to help Harry, if I can: information, spells, answers, tell me what you know, help me. I know you're clever, but I don't know if you're cunning. I know you're intelligent, but are you quick-witted and can you be sly? Can you occlude your mind? I can." She could almost see the thoughts turning in his head, and she hoped Severus was right about him. "I'm not asking for you to openly defy him that would be a death sentence, and I don't want you to die. But I will be looking for something information for Harry and Ron something that will help them. Help me, and in the end if Harry wins, I will vouch for you. You will not go to Azkaban for being Marked."

He stood up. "No... I can't..." He moved to walk away. "He'll know! It's too dangerous."

"All I ask is to let me look stuff up in the library and don't turn me in for it," she said, knowing this would be a safe place for him to start coming over to their side. "Is that too much to ask?"

"Let me think about it?" he said, rubbing his hands on his face.

"Okay," she replied, picking up the Dark Arts book. It was a start.

He paced the room as she read, well scanned through the book. When she got up to get another, he watched her but made no comment about it. Finally, after the longest time, he picked up a book for himself and sat in the chair by the window, staring outside with the book on his lap.

She searched through six more books before she heard Severus moving about downstairs. She set the book back and turned to look at Draco. Up until that moment, he hadn't moved. "I suspect it's almost dinner," she stated.

He rose. "I bet you'll be glad to see your friends," he replied as he walked to the self to put his book away.

"I have already spent the afternoon with one friend," she said, smiling at his surprised look. "But you're right, yes, it will be nice to see my friends."

~T~

He wore his hair long for a reason, his fringe falling over his eyes and his hair covering his ears, even though his mum always wanted him to trim it. His light brown eyes were usually downcast, although he hardly missed anything going on around him. He was tall and thin, "weedy-looking" as his father put it, though not meant as a compliment. That suited him; it meant he was usually overlooked in favor of his older brothers. But Nicholas died in a fight with a werewolf last year, and Franklin now worked in the Ministry under Runcorn in the Aurory, so his father's attention had turned to him in hopes that by becoming a Death Eater he would bring further glory to his family. Not that he agreed.

He looked up when the carriage jolted and cringed at the sight of the winged creature pulling them. He normally avoided looking at them by burying his nose in a book on the ride up to the castle. Seeing them always reminded him of his mother's death at the hand of a wizard in black robes and a half-skull mask, something he'd never admitted seeing to his father.

"Does it hurt?" Felicia asked, laying her small hand across his arm. Across from them, Glenwynn and Adriana looked upon him with sympathetic eyes. At least they knew.

It hurt, the pressure of Felicia's hand, but he didn't shrug her off. "Not so much," he lied, but she removed her hand as if she knew the truth anyway. He looked now at his left arm as if he could see the hated symbol burned into his flesh through his sleeve. He hadn't been given the choice it had been assumed he'd want it, would be proud to join. At least his had the dark bronze lion trapped in the twisted coils of the snake. He could pretend it meant something, that lion, that it could mean he protected her, not that he was a prejudiced miscreant.

"I have the same lessons the Mudblood has," he said softly as the Dark Lord aimed his wand. He didn't know what made him so daring to have spoken, but he recalled what his father said about the Dark Lord connecting Headmaster Snape's, Cillian Gwynnek's and Draco's Marks to Hermione's.

The Dark Lord paused, his wand tip barely touching his skin. "Yes, you do, don't you," the Dark Lord said sibilantly. The fearsome wizard looked up at Draco Malfoy standing to the side with his mother, then over at Goyle, who was waiting to receive his Mark next, and the thin lips curved into the semblance of a smile on the grotesque face. "Ones that Draco does not?"

It was a question, one that made Theo smile inwardly. "Yes," he replied softly, keeping his head low in a differential pose.

"So Severus would have the three of you," the Dark Lord said, looking at Goyle again.

Goyle's eyes shifted warily to the side quickly and then back down, but he didn't move a muscle.

The Dark Lord turned and looked down at Theo, smiling again as he pressed his wand down into his forearm and began the incantation that would seal his fate to a life he never wanted.

Although he was considered to be 'rabby' to some of his housemates, he was not fearful or timid or bucktoothed. He was simply a quiet person who preferred to be in the background; a clever loner who never felt the need to fit in with the crowd at school. But considering whom he shared a dorm room with, that was a good thing since he didn't hold to their beliefs. The thing was, he wasn't as sure about Malfoy's beliefs anymore; Malfoy wasn't as much of an arrogant, pretentious boaster like he used to be, and there was a strained, haunted look about Malfoy that he'd noticed for last year. It was as if Malfoy was finally beginning to see the truth, but felt trapped.

Of course, the Dark Lord had commandeered not only Malfoy's home and everything his family possessed, but the Dark Lord was using Mrs. and Mr. Malfoy like his personal slaves. That alone would open up anyone's eyes, well, any normal person's eyes.

And he knew that Goyle was also having difficulty finding his 'place' this year. With a little more persuasion, Goyle would finally come around, he knew it.

He jumped down as the carriage came to a stop and held his hand out to assist Adriana. He turned to see Crabbe jumping down from his carriage as Zabini, Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode stood up to disembark. Naturally, Crabbe walked away, leaving Zambini to help the girls.

As the next carriage arrived, he saw his dorm mate, Markus Schlinder, with sixth-years, Dwayne Hardgrave, Miles Coughtery and William Pritchard. Theo jutted his chin up at Markus, and Markus nodded in return.

"How was your holiday?" Markus asked, his German accent evident again in his speech.

"Fine," Theo said, helping Felicia down. "Yours?"

"Went to Germany to see my family," Markus said, holding his hand for Glenwynn.

Theo nodded, not surprised. Markus' family had fled to Germany in 1981, and then had moved back to England in 1990, thinking that the Dark Lord was long gone and the tribulations of the trials were over, only to feel trapped again in 1995 when the Dark Lord returned. At least Markus hadn't been around to be Marked; his family always spent their holidays in the homeland, as he called it. They walked into the castle, talking about their summer in hushed tones. Theo saw the seventh-year Gryffindors disembark their carriage when he turned to answer Glenwynn. As usual the Gryffindors were laughing and talking happily. He knew they would quiet down as soon as they entered the Great Hall.

He and Markus followed the girls to their house table. Theo slyly glanced at the Gryffindor table and noticed that Hermione's bodyguard was not with her *Shite!* He wondered what happened and what it meant for her. He liked Hermione. She was nice to everyone, smart and, yes, a bossy, walking encyclopedia, but not really a braggart, just always trying to prove herself. He assumed it was because she was Muggle-born she wanted to prove she belonged.

He looked up at the end of his table at the four men sitting there: his father, Mr. Avery, Mr. Rosier and Mr. Baddock. His father thankfully was engaged in conversation with the other Death Eaters. That was fine with him. Theo looked up at staff table as he sat down and scowled. Mr. Lestrangle was sitting between Alecto and Amycus Carrow. Theo wasn't sure what to make of that.

Headmaster Snape stood and gave a brief and to the point welcome, announcing Rabastan Lestrangle as the new Dark Arts assistant professor, then outlined the changes being implemented. There were protests at the announcement of walking in lines, no lingering in corridors, earlier curfews and shortened hours for the library. He wondered

what his father was doing at the school, but if Mr. Avery and Mr. Rosier were here too, it couldn't be good.

He looked up at Felicia, Adriana and Glenwynn, but they shrugged. *No, not good.*

Dinner progressed, and Theo and Markus talked softly, careful to stick to benign topics. There would be time later to discuss more serious matters. Across the table, the girls spoke about things girls were supposed to engage in, all carefully played out for the others in the house. He looked up at Hermione again, wondering how much of the rumors he'd heard were true: he'd heard that she had run away, joined Potter and Weasley, and then returned. It was unfathomable in his mind, to have gained her freedom and willingly return. Unless there was more to the story than he knew of, circumstances he hadn't considered yet.

When the plates cleared, he felt relieved. Headmaster Snape ordered the prefects to escort all the students to their dorm in an orderly fashion. There were protests, looks of surprise, but everyone complied. Somewhat.

As he and his friends walked into the Entrance Hall, Theo frowned. There on the wall were the words:

Welcome back!

Dumbledore's Army is as strong as ever!

Join Us. Fight for what is Right!

Theo shook his head. They had no subtlety. He heard Crabbe swear and complain to Pansy about the graffiti, and Theo looked around as Seamus Finnigan commented about the writing. Others were making comments, some in anger, some confused and a few in support.

"Move along," VanHalal shouted, and Theo could see Travers and MacCavish shoving the students to move toward the stairs. "Stop gawking. Get moving."

Theo wondered how the words got there, but shrugged. It didn't matter. They never figured out who actually did it anyway, but the same twelve students would get the blame.

Sure enough, as Hermione exited the Great Hall, Travers grabbed her arm. "And where do you think you are going?" Travers snarled at Hermione as MacCavish grabbed Finnigan's and Longbottom's arms and VanHalal grabbed two more Gryffindors.

"Up to..." she started to say but was cut off by Malfoy.

"Hand her over," Malfoy demanded. "I'll take her..."

"No. She and her friends did this," Travers said, indicating the wall, and Theo could see her wince as Travers jerked her arm.

"No, she didn't," Malfoy said firmly, staring Travers down.

Theo cautiously moved closer, but not too close, just within wandshot.

"She was with me all afternoon until I walked her down here to dinner. So unless you think I would stop and allow her to do that," he pointed at the writing, "I suggest you let her go."

"You were at the Slytherin table all through dinner," Travers snapped, still holding onto Hermione's arm with a tight grip. "She could've done it. This happened while we were eating."

Malfoy drew his wand. "And MacCavish was sitting across the table from her. Professor Snape, the Carrows and Mr. Lestrangle were sitting at the staff table," Malfoy pointed out as Travers pulled his wand out, and people began to move away. "If she'd tried to sneak out, one of them would have noticed, don't you think?"

"Unhand her," Professor Snape demanded. Theo turned to see Headmaster Snape walk forward, his face stony. "Hermione, come here," he snapped, ordering her as if she were his crup.

Travers released her, allowing Hermione to walk over to Professor Snape, and Theo saw the obedient puppy look on her face.

"Mr. Malfoy, take Hermione up to my office and wait for me there," Professor Snape said and turned to face the others.

As soon as Malfoy pulled Hermione's arm to make her go with him, Professor Snape asked, "Now, who did this?"

He's protecting her, Theo thought. Once again, the Headmaster separated Hermione from the scene before appointing punishments.

Longbottom stood taller, Finnigan had a stubborn look of defiance, and the Weasley girl and the other girl were scared but stood their ground *The fools*. Theo shook his head as he walked away. *Like anyone would admit to doing that.*

~H~

Hermione stirred, slowly coming awake as she felt herself being moved. "Go back to sleep, it's still early," Severus said as he extracted himself from her and threw back the covers on his side of the bed.

"Severus," she said groggily as she reached for him, but he shook his head.

"I didn't mean to wake you," he said, grabbing his pants and trousers from the foot of the bed.

"Don't..." she started to say, running her hand on his back, hoping to get him to lie back down with her for a while.

But he stood up, grabbing his shirt as he said, "I have a lot to do today. Go back to sleep."

She watched him dress with a sense of disappointment. Severus had been distant since New Year's, and as the start of the new term had approached, he'd become more and more irritable. She had tried to speak to him a few times about what had happened at the revel, but didn't know how to broach the subject with him when he was in such a mood. Not that she'd expected him to be the one to bring it up with her.

She'd asked Peren to take a letter to Dianne to ask her for advice, and Dianne had written back to say that Severus and Cillian were very much alike, and that he might not be ready to discuss it. Apparently, Cillian had felt very guilty about the events of that night, and Hermione wondered if Severus did too. It would explain a lot regarding his attitude towards her.

She had tried to talk to him last night, but he had been busy in his office and had stayed up very late. He had woken her when he had finally come to bed, even though he had not intended to do so, and she had taken the opportunity to kiss and caress him, to try to reestablish intimacy between them. He had responded, but it seemed mechanical, perfunctory, more need and release than love making. It was like he was distracted, and she was concerned about the amount of stress he must be under. And his pulling away from her now didn't help matters either. "Did I...?" she started to ask, but faltered when he turned to face her.

"No, it's not you," he said flatly. She reached out to him, and he clasped her hand in his as he sat down on the bed. "Why would you think it's you?"

She shrugged, not wanting to voice her misgivings and add to his burden, and he sighed heavily.

"Hermione, I wish things could be better, but they aren't. I can't..." He looked away for a moment. "I have a lot to do before breakfast." He leaned forward and kissed her, and she felt relieved at the tenderness of his kiss. "Try to sleep. I'll be in my office when you get up."

He walked out of their bedroom, and Hermione fell back onto the pillow and covered her eyes. Something was wrong, and he was shutting her out. It could be the additional wizards she'd seen in the Great Hall last night. All of her friends had been far more subdued at dinner than normal, and no one talked to her since MacCavish had chosen to sit right in front of her, glaring at her the entire meal. Or it could be something more personal, but if they didn't talk about it, open up to each other, whatever it was, it would only get worse. She felt like a coward, not being able to talk about what she assumed had happened at the revel and with whom. She couldn't just forgive him, but she also knew she'd have to get past it if they were to remain together. She still loved him, and that hurt her, too.

She heard Peren return and smile weakly. At least Peren had delivered all of her belated Christmas gifts to her friends.

Hermione finally gave up going back to sleep and opted to take a bath. When she had finally gotten herself ready for the day, she went downstairs and stopped short. "Where's Cillian?"

Severus looked up and placed his quill in its holder. "Cillian still hasn't returned," he said as he dipped the tip of his quill in his inkwell.

She didn't know why Cillian was gone, or if anything had happened to him, but she suspected it was something to do with why he'd been so irritable and anxious the last time she'd seen him on the island. Hermione hoped he was all right, but when she asked Severus wouldn't say anything except that he had a family matter to attend to. She hoped things were well with him and Dianne. She'd mentioned in her letter that they had at least talked about it again, however briefly. *If Dianne can forgive Cillian, I should be able to do so with Severus. Or at least accept it and put it behind us.* She remembered her mum once saying that sometimes her father made her so angry at times. But then arguments between her parents had been few and usually handled in private.

Severus rose from his desk. "Ready?"

"Yes," she replied, giving him a weak smile. They would have to talk about it soon, but only when she was ready to brooch the subject, and he wasn't so unreceptive.

Severus escorted her down to breakfast and then strode purposefully up to the staff table as she sat in her usual place. Hermione ignored MacCavish's glares as she helped herself to cereal and sausages. Ginny, Jenny and Janilynn came down late, but with MacCavish sitting right across from Hermione, they didn't talk to her much except to exchange a few pleasantries and to thank her for their gifts. When the *Daily Prophet* arrived, Jenny scooted closer to Hermione and held the paper so she could read it, too.

Pictures of Harry and Ron were on the top of the page as usual, and the promise of two thousand Galleons reward for information on their whereabouts. Devon Yaxley, Head of the MLE and in charge of Muggle Infiltration Defense, and Morgund Runcorn, Head of the Aurors, were both quoted, regarding the search for the *'dastardly, dangerous and demented wizards.'*

The next article focused on the Legal Guidelines for the Manufacture of Magical Apparatus and Devices which had been amended, allowing the use of any magically altered Muggle 'convenience appliances and gadgets' within *magical* households. However, all such object had to be registered with both the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Magical Objects *and* the MRC.

"Another way for the MRC to find undesirables," Jenny said under her breath, and Hermione glanced sideways at her. "Otherwise, why would they have to be registered?" Jenny added. "I mean, most magical families are not familiar with miniwave cookers and blenders and such and wouldn't know what they are for, right?"

"You're familiar with them?" Hermione asked, keeping her voice as low as possible, surprised that Jenny knew about Muggle kitchen appliances.

Jenny's lips quirked slightly. "Yes, Mum loves the blender, but it makes a horrible mess." Hermione looked at her questioningly, and Jenny laughed softly. "If she is too enthusiastic with her wand to make the..." She made a few tiny circles with her finger. "You know, the spinny part spin, the top blows off."

Hermione stifled a laugh. "We always had to hold the top down when we..." she started to say, then felt a twang in her chest. She really did miss her parents. "Well, mum and I used to."

Jenny touched Hermione's arm. "Are they...?" she asked, but Hermione shrugged.

MacCavish was leaning forward, glaring at them. "What are you two talking about?"

"An article in the paper, obviously," Jenny replied and flicked the paper, holding it up a bit higher. "I'm sure they are fine or you would've heard."

Hermione wasn't so sure. She made a small smile at Jenny and looked at the paper again as Jenny gave Hermione's arm a slight squeeze. Hermione skipped to the next article in the paper.

Ministry of Magic has deemed it illegal to use any wizard property, including attics, kennels, stables, lofts, trailers, sheds or garages, etcetera, for the use of illegally housing Muggle-borns. Any knowledge of Muggle-borns known to be residing in or hiding in a magical or Muggle residence, please inform the MRC immediately. Information that leads to the capture and arrest of violators can earn up to a thousand Galleons...

Hermione smirked at the thought of anyone living in Mr. Weasley's shed. However, the idea also saddened her since it reminded her of the destruction of his house.

"I could use that thousand Galleons," MacCavish said, shoving a sausage in his mouth.

"Except the MRC already knows she's here," Draco said, startling Hermione. "Aren't you done eating yet? I'm to walk you to our lesson, and I want to go to the library first."

"Right, okay," Hermione said and ate one last large mouthful of her cereal, washing it down with her milk. She clamored from the table and grabbed her bag. "See you later?" she asked her friends and walked out with Draco.

Once they were in the library, he shoved her toward the shelves and pulled her into a seldom-used section. "What things?"

She gapped at him in confusion. "I don't understand what you're..."

"You told me you were going to look stuff up," he hissed, bending slightly so they were face to face. "What stuff?"

Hermione shrugged. "It depends on what he needs," she replied.

"If I'm going to do this I want to know how you'll find out what he needs and how you'll send it to him?" Draco stated in low tones, barely above a whisper.

Either he's considering helping me or he wants to turn Harry in she thought, trying to discern his motives. Even to someone like Draco, two thousand Galleons was a lot of gold, and as much as she wanted to trust him, her trust would have to be earned. "Obviously we don't use owls. There are other magical ways to pass information," she watched his eyes for any hint what he was about, "but right now, it's complicated."

"You don't trust me," he stated as he stood straighter, sounding affronted by her reply. "All that talk about but you don't trust me."

"Draco, it varies. We have means, but depending on which we use, they each have certain restrictions, so it varies," she replied, hoping that would suffice.

He nodded, apparently satisfied for now. They left the library in silence and walked quickly to Alecto's classroom.

She knew he was watching her all through Muggle Studies, but when Alecto used her ruler on her hand, he didn't say anything. Like before, Alecto's mantra seemed to be, 'Muggles are like animals. Muggles are stupid and dirty. They drove wizards into hiding by torturing and killing them. And now the Dark Lord was finally going to reestablish the natural order of how it should be.'

Claudia and Geraldine tried to answer every question posed to Hermione or Lavender to distract Alecto, which only brought her ire down on them as well. Not that it stopped Alecto from punishing Hermione and Lavender anyway. Seamus tried to speak up about the abuse, but Alecto hit him with a Stinging Hex in the face, and when Neville protested, she Crucioed him. No one spoke up after that. By the end of the lesson, Hermione's, Claudia's, Geraldine's and Lavender's hands were bleeding, and Seamus' face was grotesquely swollen.

Charlene and Breanna followed Hermione, Lavender, Claudia and Geraldine into the loo after the lesson, and Parvati and Padma helped Seamus and Neville to the hospital wing. Charlene pulled out a bottle of Dittany from her bag as Hermione held her hand under the cool water at the sink.

"I wanted to thank you for the earrings," Breanna said simply.

Hermione said, "You're welcome," and thanked her for the gloves.

"I wanted to ask you..." Breanna started to say, interrupted when Charlene handed Hermione a handkerchief soaked with Dittany. Geraldine cast a sound dampening charm for privacy.

"Why did he Mark you? Did you want to...? I mean, he said you are now his," Breanna asked after Hermione thanked Charlene. All five girls looked at her expectantly.

Hermione shrugged, remembering that Breanna had been there that night. Since all of them were in the DA, they probably all knew about her Mark. "To make Harry and Ron believe that I'd changed sides, I suppose. The Mark he gave me at the Winter Solstice Ball was only a brand a type of magical tattoo with a snake coming out of a lion's mouth similar to theirs, but different." She pulled up her sleeve, and all five girls leaned in to look. "But the Dark Lord changed the mark afterwards he finished it, made it like the Death Eater's Mark. The snake seems to undulate now, and I can feel it in my skin." Lavender, Claudia and Geraldine looked horrified, but both Charlene and Breanna looked sympathetic, and Hermione hoped the others would react as calmly. "He also connected Cillian's and Severus' to mine somehow, so I can't run away again."

"After you came back to Professor Snape?" Claudia asked, and Hermione nodded as she pulled down her sleeve. "Why would you do that? Come back?"

"So it's true, you left, only to come back? Are you crazy?" Charlene asked, her eyes wide.

"Yes, I came back," Hermione replied, checking her hand, dabbing at it one last time. The cuts were healed and the pain much less. "I had to. If I hadn't, things could have gotten bad here at school. I was worried that Severus would be killed for losing me and replaced by Alecto Carrow as Headmistress. So far Severus has been able to keep control of her punishments, but with him gone..."

"Alecto in charge?" Claudia gasped as Lavender and Geraldine looked at their hands, and Breanna and Charlene both paled slightly.

"Yes! She covets the Headmaster's position and is furious that she is not Deputy Headmistress. But so far the Dark Lord allows Professor McGonagall to keep her post," Hermione explained. "I think its Severus' doing, but if things were to get too bad, he could be replaced."

"And if she got the post..." Breanna's voice trailed off. "So, you came back to save Severus?"

"I came back for all of you!" Hermione replied. "If Alecto became Headmistress, she would make her brother Deputy Headmaster..."

She was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Aren't you done yet?" Draco snapped from the doorway.

"Soon. I need a few more minutes," Hermione said quickly. "Charlene gave me some Dittany for my hand."

"Well be quick about it, I didn't want to spend my revision time standing outside a girls' lavatory," Draco said impatiently, but he exited the loo.

"How are they, Harry and Ron?" Claudia asked. "We were supposed to use the Portkeys if there was a raid on the train and meet up with them... but no knows if those who escaped did."

Hermione told them what she knew, repeating the names she remembered, being careful to only designate the locations as Outpost I and II or Main camp. Charlene took a list of names from her pocket, marking the names that Hermione had mentioned. "I know they are struggling when it comes to food and supplies, but they haven't given up."

"These are the ones who are still missing," Charlene said, showing Hermione the list. "Do you know what has happened to them?"

"No," Hermione said with a shake of her head as she read the list. She was sad that Luna's, Megan's and Mandy's names were on the list, as were Terry Boot and Stephen Cornfoot, but seeing Marietta Edgecombe's was a surprise as was fifth-years, Brianna Hamleton's and Margery Hopkirk's. *Duane Saunders, Joaquin Schmidt, Wendell Walters, Wilberforce Wodehalle...* she read silently. There were quite a few. Even some names she didn't readily recognize. "I'm still pretty isolated from things," she said sadly, handing the list back to Charlene. "I heard that you had been abducted from the train? What happened?"

Charlene sighed heavily. "My father had me abducted from the train," she said with a sense of rueful-resentment. "I was held in Malfoy Manor for a few days as punishments because I wrote to my parents that I didn't want to marry Egmont Bole and that I was seeing Gerald Summerby. Dad was furious with me, told me I'd put the family in jeopardy... But I hate Bole, there's no way I could marry him."

"I remember Bole; he played for Slytherin a few years back," Hermione said, remembering Harry and Ron complaining about him.

"Yeah, he played Beater, and he's not exactly a nice guy, either," Charlene stated. "My dad and Mr. Bole are friends though, but the Boles are in league with You-Know-Who. I thought my dad was simply a supporter, you know, doing what he had to so we would stay off the lists. Turns out I was wrong *he's Marked!* Mr. Rosenberg and Mr. Mordaunt were allowed to question me about my loyalty and informed me that I had a duty as a daughter of a loyal follower it was horrible. Apparently, Mum cried and refused to even look at my dad until I was brought home. Curity told me mum locked herself in one of the guest suites until dad relented. When I was brought home, I was placed under house arrest. Not only that, but my dad had Egmont Bole over nearly every day so he could court me properly! It was *sooo* annoying. I'm just glad I was allowed to come back to school; Mum insisted and convinced dad to let me return."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, knowing how hard that might be.

Charlene shrugged. "Old family, not bad off, it was destined we'd be sought out. I just thought Dad was trying to keep us from getting in trouble." She sighed heavily, and then smiled.

Draco pushed open the door again. "Hermione, isn't your hand healed by now? We have to get to Potions."

"All right, I'm coming," she said, and the girls all exited the loo.

To her surprise, Theodore Nott was leaning against the wall next to Draco. He had his hands in his pockets, his head down so his hair fell into his eyes, and he didn't look

up when she started to walk off with Draco, but he followed them to class. In the classroom, Nott greeted Schlinder with a jut of his chin, and the two Slytherins took the worktable to Hermione's right.

Professor Slughorn drew everyone's attention to the potion on the board. "As you can see, this potion has fifty steps that have to be made in quick succession and many of the ingredient preparations are time consuming, so you'll work in pairs and coordinate your steps with each other to finish the potion in time. You may begin," he said.

Draco nudged her arm. "Stay put, I'll get the ingredients," he said, leaving her to set up their cauldron and begin the base. When Draco returned, Hermione had everything as neatly organized as she could. "Nice," he said, passing her the cavassa roots. "Dice."

They worked well together, and by the end of the lesson, they had a reasonable potion. They cleaned up quickly, and Hermione carried their sample up for marking. When she returned, Nott was waiting by her worktable. "Well, don't you have Transfiguration next?" Draco asked, thrusting her bag at her.

"We both do," she replied. As they left, Nott fell into place behind them again, and he followed Hermione and Draco all the way to the classroom, but he took his normal seat between Zabini and Schlinder.

Oddly, Nott waited after the lesson by the door, and he and Schlinder walked behind Draco and Hermione all the way to the Great Hall for lunch. Even more disturbing, Nott was waiting with Draco after lunch to escort her to Wizing Language and Literature. She was even more surprised when Draco told Professor VanDerhauth that he was to sit in on the lesson and took the seat directly behind Hermione next to Nott. Draco quietly worked on an essay, pointedly ignoring everyone in the room. After their lesson, Nott packed up quickly and followed Draco and Hermione out into the corridor. Although Nott kept a reasonable distance, he nonetheless followed Draco and Hermione to the Headmaster's Tower and waited with Draco until she could no longer see them as she rode the stairs up to Severus' office.

Unfortunately, Severus was busy with correspondence and refused to allow her to leave the tower for any reason, even to go to the library to work on her essays.

Hermione used her time searching through the books on the forbidden bookshelf until Peren told her that Severus was walking to the stairs. Hermione hid the book she'd been looking through under a cushion and picked up *Silent Honor*, pretending to have been engrossed in the novel, before Severus entered the room. He paused and looked at her. He said nothing, watching her intently before turning and pouring himself a drink. She wondered if he knew about the book hidden under the cushion and hoped not. However, he sat in his usual chair and began reading one of his periodicals, *Theorem Alchemies*.

After a half hour, she sighed. He still wasn't in the mood to talk, obviously, since he hadn't glanced her way once. Sadly, she went upstairs to take a bath.

~o0o~

Tuesday, Hermione saw Nott in the corridor as she and Draco walked to Charms, and he joined them as Draco escorted her to Arithmancy. After the lesson, Draco and Nott escorted her to the library, sitting at the same table she did during her revision break, and then Nott walked with Hermione and Draco to Greenhouse four before taking off at a run for his own lesson. After lunch, Nott once again appeared, falling into step with Draco and the three of them went to Ancient Runes together, even though Draco didn't take the course and Nott did. Draco sat in the seat next to Nott and quietly read, while Professor Rosencruz lectured. Afterwards, both Draco and Nott hung around Hermione as she revised in the library until dinner. She'd tried to ask Draco about it as they walked to the Great Hall, but he simply told her to "leave off," and that it was what the Dark Lord wanted.

All through dinner, Hermione wondered if Nott had been told to befriend her as well, although Nott hadn't made any indication that he wanted to be friends.

Cillian returned on Wednesday, making what was normally her most hated day a whole lot more bearable, even though Alec to still tormented her, and Amycus allowed Crabbe to hex her in the corridor, giving him twenty House points.

When the seventh-years all arrived in the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, Hermione was sickened by the new décor: spaced between each window were explicit images of someone being tortured by some curse or another. Mr. Lestrangle seemed to spend his time at the back of the room, staring at the Slytherin girls and trying to engage Cillian in conversation.

Theodore Nott's conspicuous behavior seemed to stop since the only times she saw him were the few times they crossed paths in the corridor on the way to the subjects they shared, but she still saw him in the library during her revision time, and he seemed to linger in the Entrance Hall before and after meals.

And she had another lesson with Professor McGonagall, practicing transforming into her Animagus form. Changing into the form of a ferret was definitely easier for Hermione than returning to her human form; however, she did manage it on her own four times, although the second time she still had the small pink nose. But she was getting more competent at it.

Although Cillian had refused to tell her what had happened or where he'd been, he definitely seemed more relaxed, although not at all his normal self. However, when Hermione asked if she could spend some time with her friends before curfew, he readily agreed, but he was pensive and moody as they walked up to Gryffindor Tower, so Hermione chose not to try and engaged him in conversation. Once in the Gryffindor common room, Hermione quickly walked over to her friends by the fire as Cillian magically commandeered a chair to wait for her by the portrait hole.

Breanna, Charlene, Ginny, Neville and Seamus were sitting in the chairs by the fireplace with Janilynn and Jenny sitting crossed-legged on the floor, facing them at the coffee table. "Hi," Hermione said as she approached.

Ginny looked up, eyeing Cillian nervously as she closed her revision guide. Hermione recognized it as the one she'd given Ginny her fourth year for Christmas. Neville made room for Hermione between him and Seamus on the sofa as Charlene moved to sit next to Jenny on the rug at the coffee table. "So how was your holiday?" Hermione asked.

"Not as exciting as yours," Ginny stated as Hermione sat down. "Breanna told us you were Marked, but Ron said it was different than the Death Eater's Marks. But then Charlene told us it looks like the real thing, so what gives?"

"Is it really a Dark Mark?" Neville asked.

"Breanna told us what you told her in the loo. What I want to know is why in Merlin's name did you return?" Jenny asked.

"Where to start?" Hermione asked. She told them what happened as quickly as possible. Most of her friends believed her, but Seamus, Charlene and Breanna still looked skeptical. She asked after their holidays.

Jenny and Janilynn told her about Christmas at Seamus', and Neville told her about the attempted attacks on his Gran's home. "But we were at her house in Bath. Nigel Wolpert liked the museums and the Roman Central Bath, and Jack Sloper and Ernie Coppersmith couldn't get enough of the Bath buns with crushed comfits."

"You went to the museums?" Hermione asked, both envious and confused. She loved the museums in Bath; she'd been there with her parents several times. "But wasn't that incredibly risky?"

"Nah," Neville said with a shake of his head. "They are Muggle museums; wizards don't go in there, but Gran said we'd been fed so much rubbish about Muggles, she wanted to take us so we'd have a better understanding about them."

"It's a novel idea, but... I'm glad you were all right. How's your Gran?" Hermione asked.

"She's well, thank you," Neville stated.

Hermione glanced down at Ginny's revision planner as she opened the book. "I got the idea from you," Ginny said, showing her the page. "We've coordinated all the

schedules."

Hermione read over the chart. She was impressed; it was very well organized.

"Just like before, there are a number of sixth- and fifth-years who are in the DA, but thankfully, Neville kept the first meeting to just a few representatives from each house. You would've been included but... you weren't here."

Hermione saw herself on the list, and her 'house' was jokingly referred to as being the Snape Tower.

"That's if we'd be able to get her away from your bodyguard," Seamus scoffed.

Hermione smiled, making a quick glance back at Cillian. "You may be surprised there," she said softly, turning back to her friends. "He's..." She paused, not wanting to divulge things yet. "It's complicated."

Ginny's eyes narrowed, but Seamus and Neville seemed to accept her answer. "I think you'll find that certain activities over the holiday have made some begin to question their stance in this war."

"Not likely," Breanna stated and then lowered her voice. "The Gwyneck's are all on You-Know-Who's side."

"I dunno, I think there are some people who are becoming disheartened with the Dark Lord's regime," Hermione stated. "For many, their life was better before the Dark Lord came back and started to take over. It's the ones that had little or no respect, who didn't have a lot of money or high social standing, who were looked down on even though they were from once prominent families they're the ones who are happy because now they are respected and feared. Like the Carrows."

"Or those who have a dark, demented aspect to their personalities and like to cause trouble, steal, kill and break the law, like the Lestranges they would be drawn to him," Neville added.

"Look at the Malfoy's, they've lost so much," Charlene stated.

Seamus shrugged. "Still, once bad, always bad."

But Charlene and Neville both looked very thoughtful as if they both knew exactly what she was saying.

Unfortunately, Cillian cut their enjoyment short by announcing it was time for her to leave.

When Hermione returned to the Headmaster's Tower, Severus was having drinks with Mr. Avery and Mr. Rosier. "... especially from her husband. You'd think that Belinda would be preening," Avery was saying conversationally, although his cold eyes followed Hermione as she entered the office. "But she's kept a low profile."

"Who could blame her after that show," Rosier said as he tipped his glass at Severus. Avery and Rosier both chuckled, but even though Severus smiled, Hermione could tell he was anything but pleased.

"Haven't seen the two of them all week, but then she's expecting now, isn't she?" Avery asked smugly, smirking at Hermione.

She excused herself politely and hurried upstairs to get away from the men. She decided to take a long bath and soak away all her aches and worries. As she reclined in the tub, Hermione wondered if Severus had been with Belinda at the revel, then dismissed the thought. It wasn't worth dwelling on. *Besides*, she told herself, *Severus didn't have a choice: it had been a Dark Revel, the Dark Lord's party*. And Severus had told her enough times that he played the part. *Like an actor following a script*, she justified, ignoring the sinking feeling in her gut. *It was all for show, an act, meaningless, except to maintain his position to keep in the Dark Lord's good graces* In her letters, Dianne had told Hermione that she'd forgiven Cillian, well, not exactly forgiven him, but they'd had an understanding, and she'd accepted his part in it all. Hermione knew that she could do the same, accept it and put it behind them.

She closed her eyes, forcing herself to think of something else, concentrating on Hertz Laws of Animate Transfiguration.

She stayed in the bath until the bubbles disappeared, then got out, dried off and wrapped herself in a huge towel. She paused in the doorway, seeing Severus disrobing in front of the wardrobe.

His dark hair obscured his face, but his movements were lithe and fluid as he unfastened his buttons and removed his shirt. She leaned against the doorframe, admiring his physique. His pale skin glowed in the candlelight. He was still as lean as ever with sinewy muscles that rippled as he moved. She smiled shyly at the patch of dark hair under his arms and the splattering of sparse hair on his chest as he turned to face her.

"I thought you'd be asleep by now?" he said tiredly as he toed off his boots.

"I was in the bath," she replied, then scoffed silently as she mentally chastised herself for stating the obvious. She moved a little more into the room and leaned against the wall.

He faced the wardrobe again as he unfastened his trousers, removed them and tossed them aside. She liked his legs, long and well built with somewhat lanky knees. She knew that he was stronger than he appeared; he could lift her easily and could carry her as if she'd weighted almost nothing.

"You're staring."

She looked up and met his gaze, surprised to see them so dark and intense a look she'd missed seeing as of late. "Sorry, I didn't mean to stare, but..." she said. He looked away, and she felt bereft. *He hasn't looked at me like that since... before New Year's* she realized. "Severus, have I done something wrong?"

"No," he replied promptly. "You haven't done anything wrong." He paused briefly as if self-conscious before he pushed his pants down and grabbed his pajama bottoms.

Her eyes followed him, blatantly watching his semi-erect penis as he pulled his pajamas on. "You've been avoiding me," she said, hating the hint of whining in her voice.

He visibly stiffened. "I have not," he said sharply, defensively if she judged his reaction right.

Could Dianne be right, he feels guilty? It would explain why... "We haven't been... together," she said, awkwardly stumbling on her words.

He looked up, still facing the wardrobe. "We've been together every day," he said dryly.

"Intimately. You haven't touched me..." she faltered as his head jerked in her direction, his eyes narrowing briefly. "Is it because of what Avery and Rosier were saying?"

"How much did you overhear?" he asked accusingly, his suspicion roused.

"Not that much, only what I didn't eavesdrop at the door before entering, I swear," she said, hoping to reassure him. "But they were talking about the revel, weren't they?"

His jaw clenched, making a tick show. "I don't want to talk about what happened at the revel," he said through clenched teeth.

"I don't need to," she said quickly. "I understand, Severus, you did what you had to. It's all right I understand."

His gaze became hard, sharply penetrating as he looked at her, as if confused. "You understand. Really? How can you...?" His eyes widened as his expression softened. "You forgive me, is that what you are saying?" he asked, challenging her.

She shrugged, holding the towel in place with one hand. "It's not... forgiveness, per se, more like... putting it behind us. I can accept why you... I'm assuming that the reveal was like the one described in Schnitzler's novella, or why would you have told me to read it."

"I didn't!" He inhaled deeply. "I shouldn't have that's not why..."

"Yes, you did," she said, not wanting him to lie to her. "That party was orchestrated by the Dark Lord, for his amusement, wasn't it?"

"No, not for his *ours*. The Death Eaters," he said defensively defiantly, as if to put himself in their category by admitting such. "The Dark Lord wants followers, children to be raised under his ideals, his philosophy, to think the way *he* wants them to think."

It's what she'd thought what she'd told Dianne. "But still, his expectations at his orders," she persisted. He needed to understand her, and they needed to get this out in the open if there was to be anything between them.

His head dipped slightly, angled so that he could look at her, but not directly at her. "Yes."

Gods, she'd been right. He felt guilty, as guilty as she'd felt angry at him for doing it, even though she knew why he had, and that was why he had withdrawn from her to try to shut himself off emotionally. She hated the Dark Lord. "And if you hadn't, he and some of the other Death Eaters would have questioned your loyalty and put your actions to question."

He nodded once slowly, and she continued before he could respond. "I understand this, all of it. I don't like it any more than I think you liked it, well liked being forced into that... and I accept that that you did what you had to. Not exactly the same thing as forgiveness, but I can put this behind us, to move on..."

"To move on?" he asked, interrupting her. "It's not over, Hermione, I'll be *expected* to do so again, to do things..."

"I know. I get it, and... well, it's okay," she said with a shrug, keeping her hand in place so the towel didn't come loose. "Not okay *that* part, but what you have to do to you know because he makes you. I'll have to deal with that. But it's okay in the sense that I'm not holding it against you." There she'd said it. She hoped it was enough, but it's all she was capable of.

He looked puzzled but also visibly relieved.

She changed the subject. "That potion the grey one it... was a contraception potion, wasn't it? I recognized some of the ingredients, and the color is similar to mine, just with a sea green tinge instead of a pearly sheen that mine has. You used sea urchin ovaries, Silphium, neem oil and wild carrot you didn't use those in the Priapus Potion."

"No, I didn't," he said and sat on the edge of the bed. "Aren't you tired?" he asked, wearily.

She nodded. "A little," she admitted. She walked up to the wardrobe and withdrew her night slip. She let the towel drop as she raised her hands to let the silky garment slide down her body.

"You know that I'm just going to remove it, don't you?" he asked, right behind her, making her jump. His hands moved up her sides, bunching the slip under his fingers.

"I thought you were tired," she replied, closing her eyes to the prospect of making love to him.

"Not that tired," he said as he kissed her shoulder. "And you did mention that I've been negligent."

"I did, didn't I?" She turned around and wrapped her arms about his neck. "But I forgive you that," she said with a smile as he continued to pull the slip upward. "As long as you kiss me."

"Gladly," he said and captured her lips with his.

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Author's notes:

After such a long wait, yes, I'm back working on this one again. Sorry to deprive you of a lemon, but the chapter was getting too long. I promise not to skimp on the lemonade next time.