

In Times of War

by acciobook7

After being captured by Lord Voldemort, Hermione finds herself in the middle of the War to end all Wars. Can she assist The Order in defeating the Dark Lord with a little help from a certain Potions Master? AU after book 7.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 4

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Author's Note:

This story is actually nearing completion. I will be uploading several chapters at a time until it is up to date, and then I will post the new additions. It is currently in the middle of being beta'd from the beginning, so, please, bear with me. I expect this fic to conclude within the next couple of months. I would like to thank my readers on its previously posted sites for their lovely and inspiring reviews. Without them, this story would not have become what it is. Big hugs to my beta, Soul Bound, for her prompt and brilliant scrubbing of this story.

The air was rough and damp, making it difficult for her to breathe. Sweat was beading down her forehead in the sweltering August heat. This was it. This was what she had trained for all those nights with the others. She let out a hollow chuckle under her breath. *Dumbledore's Army* they had called it. They had trained for almost an entire year with Harry as their instructor. *Harry...*

If ever there were a braver soul than Harry Potter's, she had never known it. Six times he had faced Lord Voldemort, each instance narrowly escaping death *What a crime that someone so young should grow up so fast...*

In the end it had seemingly been for nothing. After years of guarding Harry in every way that he thought feasible, Albus Dumbledore, Harry's protector, had been killed. No, not killed. He had been murdered.

A hot tear streaked down her right cheek at the memory of her former Headmaster. What a waste.

Shortly after Dumbledore's death, Harry had been sent away to train with Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks. Training, she assumed, for a final battle with Lord Voldemort. Even now, just the thought of that...*thing...* running through her mind was enough to send shivers up her spine. Somehow, even on a night as hot as this one, his name alone produced goose bumps on her arms.

Harry had been away for a full three months before she had finally been able to see him again. He hadn't looked at all like she'd remembered him. He'd looked tired. Weak. Broken...

Three months of training for a battle during which he would ultimately be killed or forced to commit murder had obviously taken its toll on him. Still, he had risen to the occasion. He'd explained to her that he had trained day in and day out for an entire quarter of a year. How had they expected him to risk so much for those around him? But they did. And he would.

Now, as she stood next to Harry on what could be the last day of her existence in this universe, she was afraid. She was afraid, not for herself, but for him and for their friends. What would happen to the world if Harry Potter failed this task... if Lord Voldemort triumphed and was allowed to reign over the wizarding universe unhindered and unopposed? The possibility, she recognized, was too horrible to contemplate.

She felt a warm, strong hand cupping her own. Its owner whispered something in her direction that was inaudible in the breeze. He wanted her to look at him, but she could not bring herself to meet his gaze. Not with doubt in her eyes. Not crying. Not like this...

She hoped that he would let die whatever he was trying to say to her. She was too weak, mentally, to listen to encouraging sentiments of hope right now... too doubtful to offer such words to him in return.

She felt a second squeeze from his clammy hand, this one firmer and longer than the first. Evidently he felt that whatever he had to say was necessary for her to hear. She hesitated, trying to regain her composure before returning his gaze.

"Hermione," came the soft, gentle voice that she had heard oh-so-many times over the course of the last seven years. "Hermione, look at me."

She tilted her head to her right, causing a few stray, curly hairs to graze her open eyes. She smoothed them aside in order to see her converser clearly. There was so much pain in those eyes.

"Hermione," he whispered. "Listen to me carefully. Things are not as they seem. When this is over, we will prevail. We are going to win, 'Mione, but it will be at a terrible price."

She could do nothing but nod her head silently in response to his statement. She dropped her gaze to his lips...those eyes were just too hard to look at now... at a time like this.

"Hermione, look at me!" he whispered urgently.

Startled, she raised her eyes to meet his. She was bemused. He did not look afraid, timid, or sad. He looked, if it was possible, excited. Anxious would describe his countenance well.

He opened his mouth ever so slightly and continued to whisper, "Hermione, things are not as they seem. Remember that after tonight is over. Promise me."

A dawning realization overcame her. He wouldn't...no, he definitely *would not*. But then again, he had been gone for three months. Surely he would have been filled in on any precarious changes in the plans.

Fear filled her heart as she imagined what he might be alluding to. Could he be *that reckless*? Was it possible that he planned to sacrifice himself for the good of the Order of the Phoenix?

She opened her mouth, intent on dissuading him. He was crazy. This was madness. They needed him to live *She* needed him to live.

As the breath filled her throat whilst the words made their way to the tip of her tongue, she felt a lone finger approach her lips.

"Shhh," he warned. "I'm not going to do that, Hermione. I will live, and so will you."

Her eyes clouded over in bewilderment. She hadn't said anything about him dying... not out loud at least. She stared hard into his eyes and felt a sudden minute pressure at the back of her retinas. His mouth remained closed, but she was able to hear his words nonetheless.

'Hermione...'

They were his words, his voice, somehow reaching her ears from inside of her mind. She now realized what was happening. He had, in the end, managed to learn Legilimency.

'Yes, I have.'

He smiled at her. *'Everything will be okay, Hermione. Things are not as they seem. Remember that.'*

She projected her thoughts powerfully back towards him. *Harry, I don't understand. What do you mean?*

No sooner had the sentence crossed her mind than she was answered once again.

'Never mind that. I will explain everything to you when this is all over.'

She stared at him for a moment longer before answering. *Harry, I-'*

'Not now.'

She was at a loss for words. There was, seemingly, no point in arguing with him. She would have pondered the past few moments' events in great detail if she hadn't been abruptly pulled out of her reverie by a sudden wave of fright.

A high, malevolent voice filled the air. It was distant at first, making it impossible for her to make out the words that the voice was so powerfully attempting to utter. A second wave of words fell dully on the air. This time, she realized, she was able to understand them.

"You dare to challenge the Dark Lord with such a small entourage? You are groundless, Harry Potter, groundless and a fool!"

She hadn't needed to hear that voice before. It was quite obvious to whom the voice belonged.

She chanced a fleeting look in Harry's direction. His face held a hardened, stony look. His eyes were narrowed as if in anger, but somehow, they were undisturbed. A look of determination encased his being. He appeared utterly fearless in the mounting moonlight.

Voldemort ceased speaking, ostensibly awaiting an answer from the boy who had already defied him on six occasions throughout his past. When no such answer came, he continued.

"It is over, Harry Potter. Subsequent to this evening, the Boy Who Lived will become the Boy Who Did Not."

A heavy silence fell over the field in which the opposing armies stood. Facing one another, one faction exposed to the world, one hidden behind masks and robes of terror, they waited.

What they were waiting for, Hermione could not be sure. All she knew was that once Harry gave the order to fight, she would do just that.

As if reading her mind (which very well could have been the case), he gave the command.

"NOW!" he shouted as he charged forward into the enemy's vicinity. Immediately, faithfully, the rest of them followed.

Hermione was thrust back into reality by Harry's call. Instantly, her survival instincts took over. Adrenaline coursed through her body as she ran towards her enemy, wand held steadily at the ready in front of her, aligned with the center of her breastbone. A fury of spells erupted around her as she shouted various hexes at the Death Eaters who were gradually surrounding her. "*Stupefy! Expelliarmus! Impedimenta!*"

She leapt out of the way just as a Cruciatus Curse flew by her left shoulder. The battle raged on for what felt like hours but, in reality, could only have been minutes. Exhaustion was overtaking her at an alarming rate. The Order members were tiring quickly, and they were losing. Panic engulfed her as she fought for what she now believed would be the last minutes of her life. Just as she felt her courage start to waver, she felt a hand tugging at her elbow. Ron was dragging her into the forest up ahead, shooting Stunning Spells from his wand at anyone around them. They stopped when they reached the edge of the clearing.

Hermione doubled over, hands placed firmly on her knees as if searching the ground for a mislaid object. She gasped for air, attempting to catch her breath before discussing with Ron their next move. When she looked up at his face, she was horrified. Ron was hurt.

"Ron! What happened to you?"

The injuries were ghastly. Ron had sustained a deep slice to the right side of his face. The cut began at his temple and concluded just under his chin at his jawbone. His left eye was bloody and swollen. Where the top of his right ear should have been, there was only an empty crevice, patterned lightly with freshly dried blood.

"Oh, Ronald," she said with a sigh.

The two looked out over the battlefield as a deafening cry of "*Avada Kedavra*" reached their ears. Hermione's heart sank as she spotted what appeared to be the limp form of Alastor Moody falling to the ground. She was shaken back to reality at the sound of Ron's desperate voice.

"Hermione, we have to leave. We have to get out of here! We have to run!" he screamed. And run they did.

A plethora of twigs and thorns scratched against the already raw skin on her face and arms as she ran through the thickly gathered brush. Pain struck her right eye as she took a sharp branch to the cornea. Weary and half-blind, she pushed on with as much speed as she could muster until she reached a clearing at the end of the wood. If they could just get far enough to Apparate...

The thought had barely crossed her mind when she was struck hard in the fissure of her lower back. Simultaneously, she heard a woman's voice command "*Crucio!*" as she fell, writhing, to the damp, slippery earth. An excruciating pain coursed through her limbs. The feeling of a hundred serrated knives against her flesh and muscle tore through her to the very center of her bones. A high-pitched cackle met her ears through a haze of sights and sounds encircling her. It was agonizing, unbearable. She could not take the spell much longer.

As abruptly as the pain had come, it stopped. Her body shook fiercely as her nerves attempted to regain control of her writhing extremities. She sensed someone approaching her from behind but was unable to react. This was it. This was the end. As Bellatrix Lestrange advanced towards her, she surrendered to the inevitable fact that she was going to die.

She shut her eyes tightly, allowing one hot, stinging tear to escape her injured eye and streak down her cheek. Just as the salty taste of her tears reached the corner of her mouth, she breathed the words, "*Forgive me, Harry.*"

She felt Bellatrix's presence to her rear and saw a moonlit shadow on the ground, mirroring the woman's wand being raised outwardly towards her still-shaking body. The same high-pitched voice met her ears in a cold, even tone, completely devoid of emotion.

"*Avada Ked...*"

The fourth syllable was as far as the witch was able to get. At that precise moment, Hermione felt an invisible arm wrap around her waist and pull her in tightly. Suddenly, she was being pulled into a cyclone. She felt a sharp, outward tug on her navel as if someone was trying to Summon her about the waist from across a room. Dizziness soon consumed the inner workings of her mind. She felt nauseous, insecure, and yet safe all at once. A falling sensation overtook her. She was reminded of her third year at Hogwarts, constantly drowsy from the Time-Turner she had used as her study aid, when she would drift into an unsteady and barely detectable sleep during classes. It was then that she had experienced the same unnatural feeling that she felt now. She felt as if she were falling deep into a chasm...only to realize that it was the desperate ploy of her mind trying to summon her back into reality.

Gradually the dizziness subsided. She imagined she heard someone calling to her...a distant, ghostly voice. The spinning had stopped completely, but the falling sensation had marginally increased. She had Apparated. Someone, though she was completely unaware of whom he or she might be, had rescued her. With an immense thump, she felt her head smack against the cold, hard ground, and then...darkness.

Chapter One: The Awakening

Chapter 2 of 4

After being captured by Lord Voldemort, Hermione finds herself in the middle of the War to end all Wars. Can she assist the Order in defeating the Dark Lord with a little help from a certain Potions master? AU after Book 7.

Author's Notes:

Huge hugs and sticky kisses to my beta, Soul Bound, for once again sorting out the mess I've made of this story's grammar and sentence structure.

"She's yet to rouse, My Lord," said a smooth, even voice from somewhere outside the room.

In retort, a high, calculating voice spoke next. "It has been far too long, Severus. The girl possesses knowledge that may prove useful, but it is not essential to our cause. I will allow you one more week, Severus. If she is not revived by then, dispose of her."

The first voice spoke once more. "Yes, My Lord."

Hermione winced at the conversation taking place just outside of where she was lying. She remembered nothing of how she had come to be where she was. *As a matter of*

fact, where am I?

She shut her eyes tightly as the door to her right creaked open. She could see a bright light streaming into the room through her thinly layered eyelids. She lay still, feigning sleep. The door shut quietly with a click, followed by the swishing sound of a deadbolt being driven into place. Hurried footsteps became louder as they made their way towards her bed.

"Miss Granger, wake up. Do not make a sound."

She knew that voice. It was the voice of her former Potions professor, the man who had abandoned the Order, the man who had killed Dumbledore. The voice speaking to her was none other than Severus Snape.

Fearing what he would do to her should he find her awake, she lay still, pretending she had not heard a word.

"Miss Granger, I know you are awake. I gave you a reviving potion this morning. The timing is precise. Open your eyes."

Again, she tried fruitlessly to pretend she had not heard him.

"Miss Granger!" he whispered urgently. "I am not here to harm you. However, if you do not open your eyes and listen to me this instant, the Dark Lord *will* kill you!"

Something about the worried tone in his voice caused her to believe him, and she opened her eyes.

"What," she began, but she was halted before she could say anything further. His hand flung forcefully to her face, covering her mouth completely. She could taste the dirt and sweat that had accumulated on his palm as he placed a mild, yet constant pressure on her lips.

"Ssshhh!" he warned. "Do not speak. If the Dark Lord discovers you are awake, you will not be safe. You are to serve a purpose, Miss Granger. When he is finished with you, he will discard you."

Her eyes shone meaningfully with the unspeakable realization that came with her former professor's words. As if sensing her alarm, he continued.

"Yes, Miss Granger. By that, I mean he will undoubtedly kill you. You are no more valuable to the Dark Lord alive than you are dead."

Her eyes grew wide with fear. Panic coursed through her, and she began to perspire above her brow. Snape's hand felt clammy and warm about her lips. Despite the uncomfortable feeling of the appendage on her face, she felt relieved he had decided to keep it there. She had an uncanny desire to scream.

He continued, "The Dark Lord has granted me permission to remove you from his lair. You will come with me to another location. Once there, I will inform you further."

He reached dolefully into his robes with his free hand and pulled out a small, clear vial filled with orange liquid. "Drink this," he instructed. She shook her head violently in protest.

He forced his hand roughly down onto her face, pressing her head hard onto the pillow-less mattress that was her foundation. A muffled squeal escaped through her nostrils as she recoiled from the pain building at the base of her skull caused by the exposed springs in the mattress.

"Foolish girl!" he uttered through clenched teeth. "I have already told you once that it is not my intent to harm you! Drink this potion, or you *will* die at the hands of the Dark Lord!"

He slowly removed his palm from her lips and moved it to the vial still being held in his left hand. He offered it to her, and hesitantly, she brought the solution to her lips and drank. A cool sensation ran down her throat as she consumed the mysterious liquid. Instantly, she fell into a slumber once more.

* * *

She awoke hours later in a daze. The room surrounding her was not the same one in which she had first roused. The walls were draped in a deep, hunter green. The floor was a rich mahogany color—probably hard wood. As she attempted to process her surroundings, she realized that she was no longer in a bed at all. She looked down to find herself on a gray, musty smelling couch. There were tears in one of the arms and rips in the fabric behind the cushions.

She attempted to stand and faltered. She fell forcefully onto her backside, her body falling dully onto the seat cushions behind her. She was far too weak to walk. She managed to sit upright in her seat while her eyes adjusted to the dimly lit room. A smooth, deep voice sounded from somewhere to her left. She whipped her head towards the sound and, as she did, realized that she had a terrible headache along with a lovely stiff neck.

She opened her eyes wide and frowned at the figure standing before her. The man, in his solid black robes that hung loosely around his Victorian-style black collar, was obviously Professor Snape. He glared down at her as he approached the area where she was sitting.

"Do not speak, Miss Granger," he stated smoothly. "I shall explain everything," he paused, "that you need to know."

He took a seat next to her on the sofa, folding his hands loosely in his lap and catching her gaze.

"Miss Granger," he began, "for the past thirteen months—"

"Thirteen months!" she exclaimed in utter horror.

"Miss Granger! I have instructed you *not to speak*. You would do well to heed my instructions and listen to the information that I am about to bestow upon you. Now, as I was saying..." He glared down at her through narrowed eyes over his unusually large nose. "You have been kept at the Dark Lord's lair under the pretense that you are, essentially, a prisoner of war. The Dark Lord believes you to have information pertaining to the Order of the Phoenix that, without you, would go undiscovered. As you have been unconscious for the duration of your time in captivity, the Dark Lord has been unable to use Legilimency in order to extract said information from your mind. Naturally, I know there to be nothing in that mind of yours."

The cheek in his comment did not go unnoticed by Hermione.

He took a deep breath before concluding his monologue. "Miss Granger, do you remember anything at all from your night on the battlefield?"

Hermione considered his question for a moment. "Yes," she began. "I remember fighting the Death Eaters and running into the forest with Ron.— Then I remember...— I...— I..." She attempted to choke back her tears as the remembrance of her painful torture by means of the Cruciatus Curse flowed back into her mind. A heavy ball had formed in the center of her throat, making it hard for her to swallow. "I was hit with the C-Cruciatus C-Curse. It was Bellatrix L-Lestrange."

The realization that she had almost been killed suddenly dawned on her. Tears fell rapidly from her cheeks now, forming clear, white streaks in her dirt-encrusted skin. "She made to kill me. She started to say Ava—the Killing Curse. And then, someone rescued me. At least, I thought they had."

Snape paused for a moment, apparently collecting his thoughts. "Yes, you are correct, Miss Granger. When I saw what Bellatrix meant to do, I grabbed you and Disapparated us out of the forest. Unfortunately, Bellatrix informed the Dark Lord of what had happened. He found us before I could Apparate you to a safe location. I convinced the Dark Lord that you retained valuable information regarding the Order and informed him that I felt it would be," he paused, "wise to keep you."

Hermione lowered her eyes and feigned interest in a spot on the floor. "Was I hurt?" she whispered, her gaze unfaltering.

"No, Miss Granger, you were not touched while in the Dark Lord's custody," Snape stated with an air of certainty. "I, personally, took the responsibility of ensuring your health and safety while you were incapacitated."

She spoke again, this time in a slightly deeper voice. "Then how was I unconscious for over a year?" Upon ending this question, she raised her eyes to meet those of the man sitting before her.

He answered her quickly, his voice somewhat more appeasing now. "As I was unable to successfully extract you from your secure location, I have been feeding you a mildly diluted form of the Draught of Living Death. You received one vial per month in order to keep you in a severely subdued state. The Dark Lord was under the impression that you were in what Muggles would call a '*comatose condition*.' You have been fed a nourishing potion twice per day for the last thirteen months, allowing you to maintain your health to the farthest extent possible. I convinced the Dark Lord that, in time, I would be able to revive you from your cataleptic state, allowing him to discover your memories through Legilimency. Thankfully, he agreed."

As she pondered his words, a fresh batch of questions formed in her mind. "Why did you rouse me? Why now? Why not sooner?" she asked in three short breaths.

"You were not roused earlier, Miss Granger, because the Dark Lord would simply have tossed you aside once your knowledge, or lack thereof, was extracted. Rescue efforts would have been futile. The Dark Lord's lair is unplottable, and its location is held by a Secret Keeper, the Dark Lord himself. Recently, the Dark Lord has grown tired of waiting. He has given me one week to rouse you from your faux sleep and has agreed to let me bring you to my home in hopes that I will be able to completely devote myself to your speedy recovery. That is why you are here."

She glanced around the room that surrounded her, subsequently returning her gaze to Snape. "This—this is your house?"

He sneered coldly at her before answering her question in a loud, irritated voice. "Yes, Miss Granger, this is my home. I realize that it may not be quite as lovely as the Muggle accommodations to which you are accustomed, but it serves its purpose while I am here."

Hermione suddenly felt embarrassed by her previous statement. "I didn't mean—"

"That is not important," he interrupted sharply. "We should be discussing the progress of the Order over the past year and deciding on a future course of action."

"Yes," she replied softly.

He stared intently into her eyes, his expression unflinching. "Would you like some tea, Miss Granger?"

A minuscule smirk appeared at the right side of her mouth at the mention of tea. She was incredibly thirsty. "Yes, please, Professor."

Snape rose from the ancient sofa, walking in long, smooth strides to the opposite side of the room. He entered what she imagined to be the kitchen through a two-way, swinging oak door and disappeared from her sight. He reappeared moments later balancing a tray on his left palm, which contained a plain, copper teakettle and two white china teacups. As he approached the sofa, he raised his wand with his right hand and muttered "*Inanimatus Conjurus*" in the quietest voice possible. A small, oak coffee table magically appeared before the sofa. Snape settled the tray on the stand and proceeded to pour the steaming beverage into the two waiting cups. After placing the kettle down onto the tray, he reclaimed his seat on the couch next to his female guest.

As they met each other's gazes once more, Snape spoke again. "I suppose, Miss Granger, I should allow you to ask some questions of me."

She sat, pondering her words for a moment before responding. "Professor, what about Harry, and Ronald, and, well, everyone else?"

Snape's glare did not weaken. "There were certain... casualties of war, Miss Granger. In spite of this, those comrades that you no doubt care for most were unharmed. Potter and Weasley remain intact. They are being concealed at the new location of the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix. Several additional battles have ensued since your capture. During these battles, we lost many valuable Order members. Among them, Alastor Moody, Elphias Doge, Sturgis Podmore and Bill Weasley."

At the mention of Bill's name, tears sprung back into her eyes. No, he's not—he can't be!" she squeaked, fervor leaving her voice completely.

"Yes, Miss Granger, I am afraid so. He was a talented wizard. His death was a terrible loss for the Order."

Her mind moved quickly to Molly Weasley, sympathy for the woman's loss engulfing her heart. She pictured the mourning woman sulking sorrowfully around the Order's headquarters, desperation encasing her being at the void left in her heart from the loss of her eldest son's life.

She leveled her eyes with Snape's and questioned him with a tone of assertiveness and determination. "What do we do now?"

"Now," he replied, "I will make contact with the Order of the Phoenix. The Head of the Order will need to know that you have been extracted safely."

"Dumbledore?" she questioned, mostly to the empty space in front of her. She swung her head around to face Snape once more. "Dumbledore? He's alive, then? But, how?"

Snape gave her a puzzled look. Her heart sank as she realized she must have misunderstood.

"No, Miss Granger. Professor Dumbledore is, I am sorry to say, no longer among the living." An unmistakably regretful Snape lowered his gaze to his lap. His brow furrowed, and his eyes fell as a hollow sigh escaped his lips.

After a period of uninterrupted silence, Hermione chose to continue the conversation. "Professor," she said, then paused for a moment, contemplating her next words. "You didn't want to kill Professor Dumbledore, did you? I mean, the Order—they would not still be in contact with you if it was your fault, right?" The sentence ended more as a statement than a question, sounding wholly rhetorical.

Snape sat in silence for several more seconds before answering her. "Miss Granger, there are some actions that must be taken during times of great turmoil, times of war, that we can neither be proud of, nor remorseful for. Some day you will be informed of everything that took place during the time of what we are now calling the Second War. Now is not the time for you to be enlightened with that information."

Understanding him perfectly, she continued her questioning. "Who is the new Head of the Order, sir?"

"Minerva McGonagall has taken over organizational duties for the Order of the Phoenix." He paused, taking a sip from his teacup before placing it softly back onto its saucer and continuing. "She is aware that you are alive and well, but that is all. My communication with the Order is quite sparse. As of yet, I have only attended three Order meetings since the first battle. My loyalties must continue to go undiscovered by the other side. It is imperative to our cause."

She took in all of the information carefully. Snape was still in the Order. He regretted Dumbledore's death. The Order of the Phoenix did not know where she was. She had been unconscious for the past thirteen months. She could still die in a week's time—

It was all too much for her. She felt her breaths growing shallow and her fingers beginning to shake. Her big toe, balancing itself on the bare wooden floor beneath her, bounced up and down whilst she tried to calm her steadily worsening nerves.

Snape looked up at her, mystified. He flung his left arm over her shoulders as she began to hyperventilate. "Breathe, Miss Granger!" he urged her as he forced her shoulders downward, causing her to place her head between her knees as she attempted to restrain her tattered breathing. "Count backwards from one hundred, Miss Granger," he instructed calmly.

"Ninety-nine, ninety-eight, ninety-seven—" As she approached eighty-three, her panting stopped, and color returned to her cheeks. She sat upright once more and brushed the sweaty, matted hair away from her forehead.

She brought her gaze upwards to meet that of Snape's. She thought she noticed a hint of compassion in the man's eyes. However, if it was even there to begin with, it quickly dissipated. The indifferent, sneering glare that was Snape's signature look was staring back at her in full force.

"I shall assume," he droned, "Miss Granger, that that was the last of your nervous breakdowns for the evening? Or shall I fetch you a paper bag and a calming potion?"

"I'm fine, sir," she added tersely.

His right brow rose in a high arc as he stared at her over his pointed nose. "Very well," he said flatly.

The two continued to converse for over an hour. Snape informed Hermione that three additional battles had taken place following the one that she had attended. The most recent battle, which had taken place at the former sight of the Quidditch World Cup, was the one that had claimed the eldest Weasley's life. According to Snape, Harry had "performed adequately" in all four of the Second War's battles. Knowing Snape's dislike of Harry, Hermione assumed this to mean that Harry had fought brilliantly. It also appeared that the Death Eaters had greatly decreased in number. Unfortunately, the most essential and capable Death Eaters were still alive and quite active with the Dark Lord's biddings. Lucius Malfoy and Bellatrix Lestrange had taken over management duties for the remaining Death Eater troops. Between them they were able to devise new and powerful curses to use to their advantage. One of which, the Indigo Curse, caused someone to lose all feeling in their upper and lower extremities. The paralyzed sensation was enough to immobilize an enemy for an extended period of time. Unfortunately, the Order was still yet to discover a counter-curse.

As their conversation began to dwindle, Snape stood slowly and lifted his wand with his right arm. He pointed it to the space in front of them and muttered *Evanescio*. "Instantly, the coffee table, along with the tray, teakettle, and cups, disappeared.

"Miss Granger, you need to rest. I have prepared a room for you upstairs. You will climb the stairway and turn to the third door on the right. If you require use of the facilities, the washroom is located across from your quarters. After you have retired for the evening, I will lock your door as a precaution."

She gave a weak nod signifying that she understood and rose up off of the sofa, heading in the direction of the stairwell. As she placed her left shoe on the initial stair, she turned around and faced her professor once more. "Thank you, Professor," she stated in a hushed, yet audible voice. Snape, without speaking, gave an acknowledging nod in response.

Hermione climbed the staircase to the second floor, taking in her surroundings as she ascended. The mahogany railing on the right side of the stairs was unattached, simply floating in hollow air inches away from the wall. She placed a hand on it and noticed that it was as sturdy as she would have expected it to be if it were held in place with one-inch bolts. The engraving on the railing began above the first step and appeared to run the entire length of the woodwork. The etching was that of a long, slender serpent. The body was straight in some areas, gradually building into waves and, at points, circular coils. As she leaned closer to the railing, she noticed that the impression appeared to be moving in an almost unnoticeable slither.

In any other household, the overwhelming amount of Slytherin-styled paraphernalia would have been greatly unsettling. In Snape's house, she reflected, the atmosphere mirrored his personality perfectly.

She reached the top of the stairwell and turned down the hallway to her right. She stopped short of the door leading to *her quarters*, as Snape had referred to them, and opted to visit the bathroom first. She opened the tall, oak door that separated the washroom from the hallway and entered, flipping on the light switch as she walked. Her mouth dropped promptly in surprise. The room was *incredible*.

In contrast to the rest of the home, the bathroom was, in no way whatsoever, Slytherin. The room itself was massive in size. She imagined it to be at least twice as big as her bedroom at her parents' Muggle home. The walls were a bright, golden yellow, and the floors were tiled with what appeared to be marble—white and bronze in color. There was a double sink against the left wall with swan-shaped faucets dangling over each basin. The sink handles were twisted in a helix shape and matched the faucets' shiny, golden appearance. There was a bathtub in the center of the room that sunk into the tile floor. The tub, she mused, was definitely large enough for two people. She stood in the doorway a moment, admiring the beautifully un-Snape-ish facilities.

Eventually, she stepped into the room and shut the door behind her. After all she had just been through, she felt that a long, hot bath was certainly in order. She approached the bathtub first and turned on the hot water. After placing the stopper in the drain and making sure that the water was of an adequate temperature, she turned to her left and made for the sink. She looked at her reflection in the mirror for a short moment before immediately regretting the decision. Her hair was, in a word, unruly... not the usual array of frizzy, mustered curls that she was used to, but generally and intensely disheveled. After over a year of not being brushed, her hair had grown a considerable amount in length. Without a comb to tame it, her hair had become riddled with knots that had entwined themselves in her thick layers of twisted strands. Her face was caked with dirt and grime, causing her skin to appear brown and wrinkled. She raised a hand to her cheek in an attempt to wipe away the dirt beneath her eyes, and she noticed that her fingernails had grown exponentially.

"That's easy enough to fix," she reflected as she took up her wand from beneath her robes.

"*Manico*," she said clearly while pointing her wand at her left hand. At once her nails reduced themselves to a short, manicured condition. She repeated the incantation once more, holding her wand in her left hand, performing the spell on her right. Not hesitating to look away from the mirror, she opened the cabinet beneath the master sink in hopes of finding some body wash and shampoo. She was sorely disappointed.

Beneath the master sink stood a large number of bottles, though not one of them contained a label. Knowing Snape's unusual obsession for strange and dangerous potions, she decided to continue her search elsewhere. Her exploration of the second set of cabinets was much more rewarding. There was a large basket of assorted guest soaps and shampoos. It appeared that none of the soaps or shampoos had ever been opened. Clearly, Snape did not entertain company very often.

Sinking into a tranquil bath, she let her mind wander peacefully. After several moments of uninterrupted relaxation, she slipped into a shallow, restful sleep.

She and Ginny were sitting on an old, worn-out, wooden bench slid partially under a shabby picnic table. The weather around the Burrow was unusually warm for the time of year. Although the leaves had long since turned a mixed shade of red, yellow, and brown, the bright sun felt sweltering on her exposed shoulders. All in all it was a perfect day for a Quidditch game, she mused. She lifted her chin to the sky, using her left hand as a visor to shield her eyes from the blinding afternoon sunlight. Ron was floating around his goal hoops while keeping a keen eye on Fred and George, who viciously insisted on using real Bludgers in place of the oft-used rubber ones. Harry was hovering high above the others, sneaking glances at the players below him while cautiously looking for the sought after Snitch.

She laughed as Ron was knocked to the rear of his broomstick by a stray Quaffle, accusing George of hitting him on purpose. She noticed that Ginny was staring avidly up at the sky, eyes fixed on Harry, with a blissful look on her face. 'Those two were clearly meant for one another—that much is obvious,' she thought to herself.

As she reached for the pitcher of lemonade that sat in the center of the table, she saw Harry break into a rapid dive for the Snitch. The airborne, golden golf ball made straight for her face and rested itself on the tip of her nose. She felt her eyes dry out as the breeze from the rapidly flapping, miniature wings hit her face. Harry was still descending. He was getting closer, but not slowing down. He was coming at her too fast.—They were going to collide! She was frozen in her seat, unable to move. He reached his hand out to grab the Snitch—

"Miss Granger!"

She was yanked from her dream by the sound of Snape's voice slicing anxiously through her clouded mind. She looked up at his unusually pale face while she attempted to slip back into reality. She was still lazily attempting to open her eyes when—

"Aaaah!" she screamed as she realized the only thing separating Snape's eyes from her exposed body were the bubbles floating atop the bath water.

Snape promptly averted his eyes from her, focusing on a water spot on the floor next to the tub. "Miss Granger, now is no time to be bashful," he stated, still not removing his eyes from the water spot. "You must get into bed immediately. I will give you a potion to help you sl—"

"NO!" she interrupted, causing him to take a fleeting glance at her face before returning his gaze to the floor. "I *will* be put to sleep again! I have been asleep for over a year now. There is no reason fo—"

"Foolish girl!" he yelled over her. "Unless you wish for the Death Eaters to torture you into divulging what you know, you will follow my instructions instead of continuing to be an insufferable little know-it-all!"

Her eyes grew wide as she processed his words. She realized exactly what he was saying, and she lifted her hand to his robes, pulling his face to within inches of hers. Startled, Snape stood still, nose-to-nose with his former pupil, staring at her questioningly.

"What the bloody hell are you talking about?" she asked, boldness facilitating her voice.

He glared at her, clearly taken aback by her menacing tone, before answering, "Lucius Malfoy is on his way here."

Chapter Two: The Art of Manipulation

Chapter 3 of 4

After being captured by Lord Voldemort, Hermione finds herself in the middle of the War to end all Wars. Can she assist the Order in defeating the Dark Lord with a little help from a certain Potions master? AU after Book 7.

"What do you mean he is on his way here?" she yelped, panic overshadowing her confusion.

"What I mean, Miss Granger," he sneered, "is that Lucius Malfoy, Death Eater and elder follower of the Dark Lord, is on his way to this house. He has owled me a message stating that the Dark Lord has recently become aware of certain plans of the Order of the Phoenix, making your revitalization all the more important. He is coming here to see if there is anything he can do to... *speed up the process.*"

Hermione looked at him through narrowed eyes before speaking. "What do you mean, 'speed up the process'?"

"What I mean, Miss Granger, is that Lucius believes any individual, comatose or not, will respond rapidly and successfully to certain...*persuasions*. To put it bluntly, the Unforgiveables."

Her nervousness was showing in her body language. She shifted uneasily in her bathwater, bubbles waving to and fro around her submerged shoulders. Gradually, her face contorted with anger.

"Unforgiveables? You're saying he means to torture me into waking? That's absolute madness!"

Snape glanced down at the floor for a moment before facing Hermione once more.

"Yes, Miss Granger, madness is quite an appropriate word for Lucius Malfoy and many of the other Death Eaters. Regardless, your being tortured would indeed work, seeing as you are awake. If it did not, Lucius would do it anyway, if only for fun. You must retreat to your quarters immediately in order to feign your condition and, well..." his voice trailed off.

He was right. Fearing for her safety, she rose instantly from the water to her feet, knees locking in place before she realized what she had just done. Snape's eyes opened wide in a stupefied glare as her exposed body appeared before him. It took all of about three seconds for the two of them to realize the only things covering her nude form were water and a (thankfully) large gathering of bubbles. She froze for a moment, noticing Snape's eyes on her, before she crouched back down, narrowly submerging her chest beneath the water. In one fluid crouching-and-reaching motion, she grabbed a towel from the floor to her left and placed it in front of her body. She lifted her head to notice Snape's body was about-face, eyes staring forcefully back at the door so as not to look at her. His head was twisted to face the sealed aperture, partially exposing the right side of his face. She could have sworn she could detect a hint of pink in his cheeks.

Smirking despite the grim circumstances surrounding her, she rose while she wrapped the towel around her entire body before tucking the corners in at the front.

"Ok, Professor," was all she needed to say. He did not look back at her. He opened the door to the bathroom and walked them swiftly across the hall into her bedroom. She made her way to the bed and was about to get in when he grabbed her wrist to stop her.

"Were you planning on entering your bed in a towel?" he asked in a mocking tone.

She flustered a bit, realizing the brainless mistake she had been about to make. He lifted his wand to her hair and grumbled the Drought Charm incantation, drying it instantly.

"You will need to dress in your clothing from earlier. I will delay Lucius for as long as possible. *Accio*," he stated loudly, pointing his wand in the direction of the bathroom.

Her crumpled clothing flew through the air and landed in a heap at the foot of the bed.

He reached beneath his robes with his left hand and extracted a clear vial of orange liquid. After unscrewing the cap, he handed the bottle over to her and motioned for her to drink it.

"What is it?" she questioned, apprehension creeping into her voice.

"It is a Dreamless Sleep potion, Miss Granger. Drink only half. I will wake you in the morning after you've had a full night's rest."

He turned to leave and paused, facing her once more. "Dress quickly," was all he said before leaving the room and closing the door behind him.

She heard a massive groaning noise as the wood from the door forced itself against the doorframe. After a short creak and several small clicks, the door was sufficiently

sealed.

She did as she was told. She searched the pile of soiled clothing located on the floor at the base of her bed. She dressed as quickly as she could while making as little noise as possible. Just as she pulled on her left sock, she heard a loud *crack* sound from the floor below her. Someone had just Apparated downstairs. She quickly downed half of the vial Snape had given her and slipped under her covers and into unconsciousness once more.

"Severus, how lovely to see you," Lucius drawled as he appeared in the living room of Snape's home. He glanced arrogantly around the room, sneering at the humble accommodations set before him.

"Really, Severus," he scoffed. "Could you not entice a house-elf into decorating for you? I suppose a woman's touch would be *entirely* out of the question."

Snape glared at Lucius as though not at all offended by his comment. "Some of us are far too busy serving the Dark Lord to worry about such trivial matters, Lucius. Then again, I suppose some of us *are not*..."

Lucius' sneer was replaced by an indignant frown. "Yes, well, Severus, I suppose we should get on with this, should we not? Now, where is the girl?"

Snape replied, sporting an indifferent expression. "She is upstairs. May I ask what precisely you expect to accomplish this evening, Lucius? As we both know, an unconscious mind is hardly susceptible to the Imperius Curse."

A broad grin formed on Lucius' face. "Severus, I must say I am a bit surprised by your inability to recognize a good time when one is handed to you. The Imperius Curse may not help us much, as the Mudblood is currently unable process thought. She will, however, react quite amusingly to the Cruciatus Curse."

Snape raised his brow as he considered Lucius' statement. "There is no point in torturing her, Lucius. She will not wake, and therefore will not confide in us any information that she may be privy to."

A deep, barking laugh escaped Lucius' mouth. "This is not *for information*, Severus! This is for *fun*! What is the point of taking prisoners if you cannot have a little fun with them?"

Snape paused, inwardly at a loss for what to say. After choosing his words carefully, he spoke again. "Lucius, as much as I would like to help you torture the little brat, I must decline. I have quite a bit of work to do if I am going to revive the girl by the deadline that the Dark Lord has given me. The potions I will need, unfortunately, are not within my grasp at the moment. I was actually about to depart when I received your owl. Now, if you will excuse me..."

Snape waved an open palm towards the front door, motioning for Lucius to leave.

"I *believe*," Lucius grumbled, "that I am quite capable of doing this on my own, *Severus*."

Snape gave a shrill laugh before answering him. "I *believe*, Lucius, that this is *my* home. No one, present company included, is welcome when I am not here. I have already sealed her door in preparation for my absence. I have no intention of unsealing it for *you* before I leave."

Defeated, and clearly annoyed, Lucius made for the door. With a last aggravated glare in Snape's direction, he took his leave from Snape's house.

Hermione awoke the next morning to the sun blazing through the partially open window in her bedroom. She threw off the covers and remembered that she had gone to bed the previous night wearing the same clothes that she had been for months. What she wouldn't give for an unsoiled t-shirt and a clean pair of sweatpants...

She looked around the room for a dresser of some sort. The closest thing she could find was a half-open door to her right, which she assumed to be a closet. She made her way across the room, taking in her surroundings as she walked. The walls in this room were very much the same as the majority of the other rooms in Snape's home...deep, Slytherin green. The only difference in this particular room from the living room was the floor. The flooring was not the same rich mahogany she had seen when she had first awoken in Snape's house, but a plush, dark brown carpet, laid wall-to-wall within the room. There was but a single picture on the wall. The photograph was of a young girl staring off into the sunset. It was encased in an oversized gold frame with a rope-styled etching. *Slytherin green and gold... what a surprise.*

She reached the closet on the opposite side of the room to her bed, taking notice that it was quite large. A walk-in, it had one single laundry bar spanning the length of the inside, along with several shelves on the left and right walls. For a closet big enough to hold the wardrobe of a supermodel, it was surprisingly empty. There was only one shelf with anything on it, and even the contents of that shelf were sparse. She sorted through the six or seven items of clothing and selected a plain white t-shirt and an oversized pair of blue running shorts that she had to roll several times in order to get them to stay put on her hips.

Dressed in her newly acquired attire, she proceeded to make her way towards the staircase. She was somewhat surprised to find that the door to her bedroom was unlocked. Apparently, someone had opened it for her sometime during the night. Hoping that that person was not Lucius Malfoy, she proceeded out the door and down the stairwell.

When she reached the landing, she looked out into the living room for any signs of Snape. There were none. Cautiously, she crossed the room and entered the two-way swinging door that Snape had used to retrieve tea only hours before. The room she found on the other side was much more typical of the Snape that she remembered from Hogwarts...boring. The deep maroon floor tiles were cracked and uncared for. The kitchen cabinets were worn and tattered, and many of them were missing knobs or handles. The sink was plain, cold steel (*well that sure seems a lot more like Snape*...) and had a long, coiled faucet hanging over the basin. Upon closer inspection, she realized the faucet was actually a hollow metal sculpture of a serpent. The refrigerator mirrored the walls perfectly...a deep, Slytherin green.

She had been in the room for several minutes before she remembered that she was still yet to find Snape. She looked around and noticed a single oak door at the far end of the kitchen. She crossed the room and attempted to turn the door knob, only to find that it was locked. Eager to find where Snape had gotten to, she pulled her wand from her waistband and muttered "*alohomora*" in the direction of the door.

Instantly, the door flew open in the opposite direction. The room before her eyes was dark... too dark, in fact, to see the room's contents. Once again, she drew her wand and, whispering this time, said "*Lumos Maximus*." The room sprang to life as she gazed at walls upon walls of various works of literature. She stepped in from the doorway and turned to her right, raising her fingers to the first book on the shelf in front of her, *A Potion Master's Guide to Cauldrons*. Amazed at the vast library of knowledge sitting in front of her, she ran a tempted hand over the books as she went.

The collection before her was mesmerizing. There were not only books relating to potions, but books on what she believed to be just about every magical subject ever explored. She moved slowly around the room, gasping every time she found a book that seemed overly stimulating. When she had circled the entire room and arrived back at her starting point, she stopped to take in the rest of the room's contents.

There was a long, black couch against the far wall opposite the door. The couch sat upon a deep green rug marked with gold and silver circles. She found the picture in the center of the rug especially intriguing. It was a miniature imprint of the constellation *Orion*... far too philosophical for a typical Slytherin. Beside the long leather couch stood a small end table, wrought iron base with a plain glass on top. All things considered, the room seemed quite comfortable. Seeing as there was still no sign of Snape, she decided to partake in his enticing collection of tomes. She chose a piece entitled *101 Major Medical Maladies and How to Cure Them* and took a seat on the plush leather sofa. Three pages into the selection, a deep, smooth voice interrupted her reading.

"I suppose manners would be too much to ask for," Snape sneered from the doorway. "I should have expected as much from a *Gryffindor*."

Hermione frowned at the affront on her House. "I apologize, sir, but I was unable to find you. I thought that maybe you had gone in h..."

Her face quickly morphed into a sharp scowl as she was, yet again, interrupted by Snape.

"You thought that maybe you would intrude upon the private rooms of my home. As I said before, how very *Gryffindor* of you..."

"I apologize, sir, but I was only..."

"Enough, Miss Granger," he droned smoothly. "Seeing as you have made it your business to explore my home uninvited, you may as well make yourself comfortable. I have something to discuss with you."

Hermione sat still, waiting for Snape to continue. He glided across the room and chose a seat beside her on the couch. He smoothed his robes across his thighs before turning his head toward her and continuing their conversation.

"Miss Granger. The time has come for you to learn a skill that few wizards and witches have been able to master. The Dark Lord will be attempting to break into your mind using the honed tool of Legilimency. Our wisest course of action, therefore, would be to have you learn the only known safeguard against it. That is to say, Occlumency."

She looked up at him with doubtful eyes. "Professor, as much as I would *like* to learn Occlumency, I'm not sure that it is entirely possible for me to do so. I'm not like Harry, sir."

Snape scoffed at the comment. "Indeed, Miss Granger, you are *not* like Mr. Potter. Therefore, it should not take you all of two years to be able to block out a simple memory. You will do fine."

Was that a compliment?

She smiled at the words that had just escaped her former Potions professor's mouth. If Snape thought her capable of such a task, perhaps she had a chance.

Snape must have noticed her dreamy look, as he felt it imprudent to interrupt her lulled gaze. "We will begin your training immediately. It will not be easy, nor will it be enjoyable. Occlumency is a skill learned only through fervor and determination. Hopefully, you have enough sense to be able to exhibit at least a small amount of these attributes."

That was much less of a compliment.

"Are you ready to begin, Miss Granger?" he asked, rising to his feet and glancing down at her.

She faltered a bit, attempting to find the courage to spout the words that had been on her mind since the previous evening. "Er... Professor, I... I don't mean to be facetious, but, well, I was just wondering..."

Snape sighed in an irritated manner. "Yes, Miss Granger, spit it out. You were just wondering *what*?"

Hermione's cheeks flushed. "I was just wondering if we were going to have some breakfast."

She let her eyes drop to her feet that were now shuffling back and forth on the floor. She didn't know why she felt so guilty for asking such a simple and logical question, but she did nonetheless. She chanced a look up at Snape and noticed him staring intently down at her.

"Of course we can have breakfast. What would you like?" he asked plainly.

Unsure of whether he was being genuinely nice or simply mocking her, she hesitated before answering him. "Anything would be fine with me, sir. I suppose that I haven't really eaten anything of substance for a while."

As if he were just now realizing this particular piece of information, a sympathetic look faceted itself on his face. He held out an open hand, palm up, to Hermione, gesturing for her to take it. She did just that, and he helped her up from the couch in a very gentlemanly fashion. Once she had risen, Snape released her hand and turned towards the doorway, motioning for her to follow.

Once in the kitchen, Hermione stopped, assuming that Snape was going to extract some food for them from the cabinets or the refrigerator. She was slightly confused when he continued to walk through the two-way door and back into the living room. Perplexed, she followed after him, wondering where exactly their breakfast was going to come from.

As Snape reached the couch, he motioned for Hermione to stand aside. He extracted his wand from the inside of his robes and pointed it at the floor in the center of the living room.

"*Inanimus Conjurus*," he stated boldly, holding his wand steadily in front of him.

Instead of the coffee table that had appeared the last time he used the spell, there was now a large, green and gold checkered blanket in front of them. On the blanket were seated two plush pillows, one in deep green and one in maroon.

Snape raised his wand once more and pointed it at the center of the checkered blanket.

"*Picnis Edib*," he incanted.

No sooner did he finish his last spell than a large picnic basket appeared in the middle of the blanket, centered between the two pillows. Hermione's face glowed with amazement at the incredible display of magic that she had just witnessed. Conjuring spells were difficult enough to master in the first place, but performing them with enough skill to choose the colors of the pillows at will? Now *that* was talent.

"Sir," she exclaimed. "This is incredible!"

"No, Miss Granger," he droned. "This," he waved his arm broadly, "is breakfast. Shall we?" The sarcasm in his voice went well with the twinkle she thought she saw in his eye as he spoke.

Hermione made her way to the maroon pillow and seated herself, cross-legged, on top of it. Snape walked around her and seated himself on the green pillow, but in an entirely more distinguished manner than his former pupil had just done. His legs were strewn neatly to his right side, his robes somehow settling themselves perfectly on top of them without a single crease. He looked over at her and motioned smoothly for her to indulge in the contents of the basket before him.

"After you, Miss Granger."

Hermione reached for the basket and pulled it towards her. She opened the top and found the contents to be quite well organized. She took out two large, white plates and handed one to Snape before placing the other one in front of herself. She reached back into the basket and extracted three large, silver bowls, each covered with a thin layer of plastic wrap. After placing the bowls between Snape and herself, she reached back into the basket and extracted a fork and knife for herself, as well as a set for

her host.

She uncovered the bowls slowly, savoring the warm smells emitting from each of them as she went. The first was filled with scrambled eggs, cooked to perfection, neither too runny nor too dry. The second was filled with piles upon piles of bacon, a crisp scent emitting from the lot. The third was filled with what appeared to be French toast, dripping in what she could definitely smell was a rich maple syrup. Her stomach growled at the intoxicating scents engrossing her senses through her nostrils.

She immediately took advantage of the smorgasbord that lay in front of her, heaping forkfuls of eggs, bacon and French toast on to her plate. She raised her fork in a motion to begin consuming her meal, when she noticed that Snape had not helped himself to any of the food.

"Aren't you eating, Professor?" she questioned him.

Snape smirked at her and reached for one of the bowls in front of him. "Perhaps a Gryffindor is capable of common table manners."

Hermione smiled at the comment and began shoveling food into her waiting mouth, happily appeasing her aching stomach. It was, in a word, *fabulous*. Her senses came to life while she enjoyed the food that she hadn't known she had been missing for the last thirteen months. Halfway through the meal, her eyes searched the floor for something to quench her growing thirst. When she realized Snape had failed to conjure them any drinks, she turned back to her rations and continued eating.

Snape, apparently picking up on her glance, set down his fork and took up his wand. With a swish of his wrist and a silent incantation, two tall glasses of pumpkin juice appeared before them. Hermione smiled a full-mouthed grin as she took up her glass and drank from it graciously. When their meal was over, Snape took a handkerchief from inside of his robes and handed it to Hermione. She wiped her hands and made to pass it back to him, but he declined her gesture with an open-handed wave.

Snape rose to his feet, and Hermione followed his gesture, walking away from the blanket and back towards the couch. Once they were both off the coverlet, Snape raised his arm a fourth time and muttered "*Evanesco*." Instantly, the atmosphere that was their breakfast table disappeared. The floor shone brightly where the blanket and food had just been, making it appear as though the entire affair had never happened.

Full, and wholly satisfied, Hermione took a seat on the gray couch behind her. Snape took his place on the seat cushion to her left.

"Thank you for breakfast, sir. It was magnificent."

If she had been expecting a proper response, she would have been sorely disappointed. Snape merely nodded in acknowledgment of the compliment and promptly changed the subject.

"Occlumency, Miss Granger, is not a subject to be taken lightly. You will need to concentrate. You will need to clear your mind of all thoughts and emotions in order to keep the prying minds of others at bay. Come," he directed, standing and walking back towards the kitchen. They marched the same path that Hermione had taken earlier that morning, passing through the kitchen and into the room known to Hermione only as *Snape's study*.

When they entered the room, Snape motioned for her to take a seat on the leather sofa. She complied, choosing a spot in the middle of the couch and sitting up straight while awaiting Snape's next instructions.

"Are you ready to begin, Miss Granger?" he questioned, straightening himself up to his full height as he stood before her.

"Yes, sir," she responded.

Snape looked pleased with her quick response. "Very well, then. I want you to clear your mind of all thought and emotion. No sadness, no anger, no confusion. Very simply put: nothingness. Try to look directly into my eyes while I attempt to break into your mind using Legilimency. I will count to three."

"One..."

'Clear my mind...'

"Two..."

'Tranquility...'

"Three..."

'Empty thoughts... nothingness...'

"Legilimens!"

As the commanding incantation escaped Snape's lips, Hermione's mind went blank. For several drawn-out seconds there was nothing... open space... blank emotions... just herself and Snape's eyes.

As the seconds passed on, she felt a familiar minute pressure at the back of her retinas.

'Oh, no...' She struggled to fight it. 'No... it's ok. Tranquility... nothingness...' but the pressure ensued.

Suddenly a swarm of memories was crossing in front of her eyes: She as a baby, making her building blocks float in the air in front of her, not knowing why they were able to defy gravity like that... She, Harry and Ron in the Hogwarts bathroom as she cowered beneath a sink whilst Harry and Ron fought the unruly troll... She, in Potions class, staring up at Snape, admiring the skillful way he explained the proper procedure for brewing Amortentia... God, he's brilliant...

Her eyes snapped shut, all memories falling from her mind in an instant. Snape was staring intently at her with a look on his face that she could not quite figure out.

"Impressive, Miss Granger," he stated coolly. "May I ask how you managed to clear your mind to such an extent on your first attempt?"

"Yes, sir. My parents were avid anthropologists before my father opted to attend dental school. They studied many different cultural religions and were especially fond of Buddhism. I simply meditated to clear my mind of all conscious thought, just as the Buddhists do."

Snape arched a brow. "Interesting. Perhaps this will not be as unpleasant as I thought."

Hermione absolutely glowed at that particular comment. Maybe Snape was right. This wasn't going to be so bad after all...

Eleven hours of Occlumency practice later, Hermione's skills had not improved at all. If anything, they were worsening with the building stress of constant training. She found herself growing angry with Snape for not allowing her a break in between practice sessions. Her mind was growing thin and tired, and she had developed a pounding headache. Just as she was about to scream at Snape that she could not take any more lessons without a break, he put an end to it for her.

"That is enough, Miss Granger," he stated as he watched her catch her breath over the last influx of memories that had been brought to the surface of her mind. In this particular memory she had been in the Hogwarts kitchen, hiding hand-knitted hats and sweaters in between dirty dishes for the house-elves to *accidentally* find.

She glared at him through narrowed eyes and resumed her seated position on the large, black sofa. Her head was pounding, and the appetite that had been tugging at her earlier had subsided with the pain in her forehead. She had had enough for one day. All she wanted now was rest.

"As you wish, Miss Granger," Snape said out of nowhere, causing Hermione to snap out of her reverie and look up at him with questioning eyes. He sneered down at her and stated coolly, "You have not mastered the art of Occlumency *yet*."

Tired, and a little annoyed that he had felt within his rights to read her mind without her permission, she conceded defeat. She rose, looking for him to lead her out of the study. They walked single-file across the kitchen and stopped at the bottom of the stairwell.

"We will resume our efforts first thing in the morning," Snape told her matter-of-factly. "You may use the washroom before you retire. I will be up shortly to seal your door."

She nodded, happily ascending the staircase in hopes that sleep would find her quickly once she reached her heightened destination. At the juncture of her bedroom and the bathroom, she made to turn left to wash up before she turned in, but found she was too tired to do even that. Instead, she curved right and made for her bed. She removed her blue running shorts and slipped under the covers, willing sleep to take her quickly. She was, in spite of her fatigue, unable to sleep. The headache that had begun at the center of her forehead had crept slowly around to the base of her skull. She felt as if a hundred blast-ended skrewts were making a ruckus in her brain.

As she lay her head as still as possible on her pillow in an effort to stifle the pain, she heard footsteps approaching her doorway. She heard Snape begin to recite the incantation that would seal her door for the evening and called out to him.

"Professor?"

He stopped the recitation mid-sentence and opened her door a crack, just enough to see if she was decent or not. Satisfied that she was adequately covered, Snape entered the room and stood at her bedside.

"What is it, Miss Granger?"

"I was just wondering," she started, "if you had any headache potions lying around. I have a terrible migraine, and I don't think I will be able to sleep tonight without one..."

Snape arched his left brow at her before turning on the ball of his foot and leaving the room, robes billowing behind him.

Confused as to whether he had left out of irritation or to retrieve the requested medicines, she could only wait with her eyes shut tight as her headache grew increasingly worse with every passing minute.

Several moments later Snape reappeared, striding up to her bedside and handing her a small, silver bottle with a cloud etched into the side of it. Assuming it to be a headache potion, Hermione drank it gratefully and handed the bottle back to Snape.

"That should take care of the headache. How do you feel?" he asked her.

She sat very still, afraid to shift her head in case the movement caused the migraine to worsen. After several seconds of consideration and ever-so-slight head movements, she realized that her headache had disappeared completely.

She smiled up at the man before her and mouthed a small *thank you* in his direction. A minute, twisted smile met her gaze in return. That was good enough for her.

As Snape turned to leave the room once more, she called to him again.

"Professor?"

He stared at her blankly in response.

"How are we going to convince Lord...*You-Know-Who*...to allow me to return here once he is through with me?" The words sounded miserable, even *to her* ears.

Snape looked to his left for a moment before answering her. "I was hoping that I would not have to explain such things to you, Miss Granger. But, as I can see no way of avoiding it, I will tell you. Elder Death Eaters are often offered certain... concessions... after a particularly taxing assignment is completed. Though I have personally refused all offers in the past, I feel that that will only help to ensure the fact that the Dark Lord will find it suitable to grant me this *particular* request. With the understanding that I am to discard you once I am done with you, the Dark Lord should find it acceptable to allow me to... use you... as I see fit."

A horrified look appeared on her face at Snape's staggering words. "He means for you to have your way with me?" she nearly shouted, still looking intensely into Snape's dark eyes.

"Do not flatter yourself, Miss Granger," he snapped. "Yes, he means for me to have my way with you. I am sure he would find it quite amusing, in fact. I, however, have no desire to spend any more time in present company than is *absolutely necessary*. Goodnight!"

With that, he exited her bedroom and locked the door as he had done the previous night. Overwhelmed, and still very tired, Hermione shifted to her side on the feathery mattress, thinking about what Snape had just said for several moments before falling into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Chapter Three: The Art of Manipulation Part 2

Chapter 4 of 4

After being captured by Lord Voldemort, Hermoine finds herself in the middle of the War to end all Wars. Can she assist the Order in defeating the Dark Lord, with a little help from a certain Potions Master? AU after book 7.

The following morning passed miserably. After a seemingly endless number of unsuccessful attempts at performing Occlumency, Hermione had given up in frustration.

Muttering something about *that being enough for the day*, Snape excused himself from the study and left Hermione to ponder her problem.

She wanted so badly to master this craft, but so her efforts thus far were rendering little, if any, results. She was simply unable to clear her mind long enough to block Snape's mental advances. Even when she felt her attempts were improving, all he needed to do was increase his efforts ever so slightly, and her mind opened up to him.

with a waterfall of memories. It was incredibly frustrating.

The headaches...fortunately...had been taken care of. A small dose of Headache Potion before sessions was all it took to prevent the migraines from returning.

Tired of sitting alone in the room of which she had spent so much time over the past couple of days, she rose off the couch and made her way past the kitchen and into the living room.

She arrived just in time to see Snape extracting a small roll of parchment from the leg of a large barn owl, watching curiously when he unraveled the note and read the contents with interest. When he was done, he placed the roll of parchment into the right pocket of his robes and faced her with a slight scowl on his forehead.

"It appears that we will be receiving some company," he informed her dully. "Minerva has decided, as a solution to your thus far dismal performance, that you should take lessons from someone less... *intimidating*... as she put it."

With a confused look on her face, she continued to stare at Snape, waiting for more information on this Mystery Guest. When no such knowledge came, she decided to be bold and simply ask him.

"Well? Who is it?"

Apparently taken aback by her agitated tone of voice, Snape's eyes widened as he simply stared at her for a moment. Once he had regained his composure, he narrowed his eyes, crossing his arms over his chest in an annoyed manner.

"Miss Granger, I will thank you to watch your tone in my presence. And our *Mystery Guest* is none other than your celebrity friend himself. Do not fret, Miss Granger. I am sure Mr. Potter will be more than capable of *assisting* you."

Damn! He did it again! Why can't the batty git stay out of my mind for just a damn min.

"The *batty git* cannot stay out of your mind, Miss Granger, because you are *adreadful* Occlumens!" he snapped.

She flushed at the insult, a strong sense of guilt settling itself in the pit of her stomach. She made to open her mouth in apology but was forced to close it again when Snape turned his back to her and made his way up the staircase to the second floor. Frustrated and embarrassed by her choice of words (regardless of whether or not they were spoken aloud), she slumped down on the sofa, awaiting his return.

Nearly thirty minutes had passed with no sign of Snape. The embarrassment had long since subsided by now, leaving her only anxious and impatient. Annoyed, she climbed the stairs with the intent of seeking him out, making sure to stomp irritably along the way.

She turned left at the top of the staircase and opened the door at the end of the hallway. Expecting Snape's bedroom, she was quite disappointed when she found only an empty broom closet.

Strike one...

She closed the door tightly and turned on her heel, trying to discern which of the remaining doors would lead to Snape's quarters. Chancing the door to her immediate right, she flung it open and entered without caution.

A muffled squeak escaped her mouth as her hand flew to cover it, the sight of her half-naked professor nearly shocking her enough to knock her backward.

There he was, hidden only by a medium-sized, green towel wrapped around his lower torso, the material only just covering his thighs down to the tops of his knees. His hair was dripping wet, wild and tussled with the lack of a proper combing. His chest was smooth and bare, and little drops of water were still making their way down from the moist tresses toward his abdomen, eventually absorbing into the towel around his waist.

Too shocked to say anything of substance, Snape just stood there, mouth agape at the startled woman standing before him, before he realized what he was...and *wasn't*...wearing.

Snatching his wand up from the bed with his right fist, he pointed it at the door and shouted, *Diffindo homora!*

Instantly the door slammed shut, leaving a shocked and, once again, embarrassed Hermione on the other side.

She berated herself aloud as she banged her head against the wall of her bedroom...she could not believe she had so arrogantly infringed upon Snape's privacy. Unable to stop her mind from wandering, she mused over the fact that she was even more frustrated what she had seen...under those usually-donned loose, black robes, Snape actually had *quite* a body.

"I'm so stupid..."

"Stupid, no. Insolent, yes," Snape's smooth voice called to her from the doorway.

She stared up at the now fully-clothed professor, her cheeks cheeks flushed and her forehead upwardly creased.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir! You were just gone for so long, and I hadn't heard any running water, so I just thought you were..."

"Avoiding you?" he quipped. "Yes, Miss Granger, that is precisely what I was attempting to accomplish. But, seeing as you find it so troublesome to be out of my company for any period of time, I will be sure to ask your permission from now on before bathing."

She shot an indignant look at him before retorting, "Now wait just a minute! I was *not* troubled to be out of your company, I simply..."

"Whatever you say, Miss Grang..."

"STOP INTERRUPTING ME!" she shouted at him before he could finish his taunting remark. *You* listen to *me*, *Severus*! I am forever grateful to you for rescuing me from Lord VVoldemort. That being said, you cannot treat me like a child that you have saved from running off with a stranger! I am an adult, and I deserve to be treated as such!"

Clearly taken aback by her statement and her audacity at addressing him by his first name, all Snape could manage to do was look at her with a stunned expression on his face.

"And furthermore," she continued, "I'll thank you to use my proper name. I am no longer your Potions student, and it will no longer due for you to address me as such. I want to be called by my first name. Out of respect for you, I will continue to address you as *sir* or *Professor* until you find it acceptable for me to address you informally."

"Very well, Miss Granger," he answered her, still apparently in shock at her impudence.

"It's HERMIONE!" she shouted at him, wishing she could physically bash her point into his skull.

And what a thick skull it is...

"That is *enough*, Hermione," he said harshly. "You *may* refer to me as Severus. That being said, it is one thing for you to ask me to address you as an adult. It is *quite another* to expect me to put up with your childish insults, whether or not they are given verbally."

Legillimency... crap...

At the conclusion of her last thought, a loud crack sounded from the floor below them.

Snape spoke to her in a hushed whisper. "Stay here."

Hermione did as she was told, leaning an eager ear against the door to her bedroom, attempting to ascertain the identity of the person that had just Apparated into the household. Several minutes passed during which she was still unable to hear as much as a single word being uttered from the floor below her. Just as she was about to give up on her eavesdropping and retreat to her bed, she was flung backwards by the force of her bedroom door opening against her. Her buttocks hit the *not-so-plush* carpet with a hard *thump*. Her tailbone throbbed as she attempted to sit upright in order to properly view the person, or persons, that had just entered her boudoir.

"Ginny!" she beamed.

The redhead attempted to stifle her giggles over Hermione's amusing tumble. As Ginny regained her composure, she offered an outstretched arm in Hermione's direction, helping her up off of the carpet and onto her feet.

"Harry was sent on a mission for the Order, so I'm here to help you to develop your Occlumency skills."

"What do you mean? Who taught you?"

Ginny took her friend by the hand and led her over to the bed. They sat across from each other, each with one leg bent under and one hanging over the edge of the bunk, as Ginny filled her in on the events of the past thirteen months.

Apparently, Harry, Ginny, Ron, Neville and Luna had been working full-time for the Order ever since the battle that had claimed Hermione as a prisoner. The assignments varied in difficulty, some being as simple as keeping watch over the Order's headquarters and some far more taxing. Ginny regaled Hermione with the story of her last assignment, which was to assist Harry in locating a large, gold cup that was thought to be one of Voldemort's Horcruxes.

"So then," Ginny informed her, "Harry spoke the incantation we found in the book. No, I don't know what it is. A huge steam of black smoke erupted from the cup, and that was it. Bye, bye Horcrux."

Hermione ooh'd and aaah'd at the various interesting points in Ginny's tales. Finally, Ginny looked down at her hands lain limply in her lap, sighing miserably before looking back up at Hermione.

"We've been so worried about you, Hermione. Snape wouldn't tell us a bloody thing other than that you were alive...and that you were safe."

"It's alright, Gin. I'm out now. I'm safe."

She looked down at Ginny, expecting a smile to play upon her lips. Instead, she was somewhat heartbroken when Ginny raised her chin toward her, tears streaming down her face.

Ginny looked up at her with a fearful gaze.

"But you're going *back*," she whispered regretfully. "You are going to be back with that... that...*monster*. And they're all just going to let you. What if he doesn't believe you? What if he finds you aren't of any use to him? What then, Hermione?"

Hermione was on the verge of tears, both lids threatening to spill over onto her flustered cheeks.

"Ginny," she started. "Ginny, it will be alright. I promise. Severus is going to be looking after me."

Ginny's brows furrowed upward in confusion.

"*Severus*?" she cocked a brow at Hermione, an inquiring smile forming on her partially-opened lips. "Since when is Snape *Severus*?"

Hermione sighed. "We're adults now, Ginny. There's no need for us to keep referring to him as our professor. We don't even go to *school* anymore."

Ginny continued to grin. "Ok, Hermione, whatever you say."

Hermione attempted a scowl, but it lasted only a short moment before she broke out in a wide grin and the girls began to giggle madly.

They were interrupted by a cool, smooth voice coming from the doorway.

"If you two ladies are quite finished, I was hoping that we might actually attempt to accomplish what Miss Weasley was sent here for in the first place. Or am I being unjustifiably optimistic?"

The girls continued to giggle the entire trip down the stairs, through the kitchen and into Snape's Study. Hermione seated herself on the couch and stared up at the two parties before her, waiting for one of them to signal the next move.

Ginny looked impatiently at Snape, tapping her foot in an annoyed fashion. "I can handle it from here, Professor," she stated coolly.

Hermione watched in silence for several minutes as her friend and her former professor stared intently into each others eyes, not a single emotion betraying their expressions. After five or so minutes had gone by, Hermione was growing impatient.

"What..." she began, but was promptly cut off by the motion of Snape's outstretched hand being raised towards her in a stopping gesture.

Confused, she continued to sit quietly as the two squared off for several more minutes. Eventually, they broke free of each other's penetrating stares, and Snape turned to Hermione.

"I shall leave you to your lessons," he droned before turning back to Ginny. "Your Legilimency and Occlumency skills are acceptable, Miss Weasley. We still have yet to see, however, if they will translate into a teaching environment. Try not to kill her unless it is entirely necessary?"

He turned to leave, and as he was exiting the door, Ginny stuck out her tongue at him in a very first-year fashion.

"I saw that," he called to her from the doorway.

Just as his robes disappeared from sight, Ginny let out a soft, "*Batty old git*."

"I heard that, Miss Weasley!"

"*Damn...*"

Hermione chuckled lightly Ginny's boldness. The female Weasley gave a faint smile in her direction and then pulled her wand from within her robes.

"*Inanimus Conjurus*," she muttered, and a tall, wooden stool appeared before the two women.

"How did you manage to learn Occlumency, anyways?" Hermione asked. "I mean, who taught you?"

"Harry did, after the first battle. He thought it was necessary for me to be able to...you know...protect myself."

"So you two are doing okay?"

"Now, now." Ginny smirked. "We are supposed to be *working* here, young lady!"

Hermione smiled in response.

"Okay, we really need to get started now. McGonagall only gave me leave for the day. We have to accomplish as much as we can while I'm here. You ready?"

"Ready as I'll ever be," Hermione managed.

Ginny stared at her now with a serious, let's-get-down-to-business look in her eyes.

"McGonagall told me that you've been able to shut out memories for a bit. Right?" Hermione nodded. "Okay, then you have the basics down. The reason I am doing this in place of Snape is because you need to practice with someone you feel extremely comfortable with. That's how I was able to learn. Now, I'm going to count to three. After each number I want you to clear your mind a little more, eventually blanking it out completely. You need to achieve *nothingness*, Hermione. Okay?"

Hermione nodded once.

"One..." Ginny counted.

Emptiness...

"Two..."

Blank thoughts... blank thoughts...

"Three..."

Nothingness.

"*Legilimens!*"

For hours the girls practiced, each session bringing Hermione closer to her goal. By the time the clock on the wall struck midnight, Ginny told Hermione that she was confident enough in her abilities to bring in an outside tester. She left the room for a few short moments, returning confidently with Snape at her side.

"Go ahead," she taunted. "Try her."

After several attempts at breaking into Hermione's mind, Snape gave an approving nod in Ginny's direction.

"Impressive, Miss Weasley," he commented. "You may just prove yourself to be less of a dunderhead than I thought. I see Potter has been doing more with you than just *snogging*."

Ginny glared at Snape through narrowed eyes before tentatively brushing him off and turning back towards Hermione.

"Hermione, just remember what we practiced today. You'll be fine. I have to get going now. I have an assignment in the morning, and McGonagall would be positively furious if I were late."

After a prolonged embrace, the two friends broke apart, each giving the other a casual kiss on the cheek.

"Good luck, Hermione."

Ginny turned to leave and gave a courteous nod in Snape's direction. "Professor."

"Weasley."

With an evil grin, Snape called after Ginny, "Tell Potter I said hello. That is, if you two can tear yourselves away from each other long enough to attempt a conversation."

"*Git.*"

"Dunderhead."

Hermione snorted at the two of them. Snape glowered at her with a sarcastic look on his face. "It is time for you to retire, Miss Granger."

They walked up the staircase single-file, separating at the top of the steps.

Snape looked at her for a moment before speaking. "Tomorrow we will be attempting to fool one of the most powerful wizards of all time. You will need your rest." He reached into the front pocket of his robes and pulled out the same clear vial of orange liquid that he had given her the night Lucius Malfoy had shown up. "As I said before, half the bottle should more than suffice. Try not to dwell on the inevitable."

He turned toward his bedroom and she called after him, "Goodnight, Professor."

Pausing at his door, but still not turning round to face her, he answered, "Goodnight, Hermione."