

Hades In Flight

by Deathofme

[Post DH, not epilogue compliant] Hermione gets more than she gambled for after tricking Death into releasing its hold on Severus. For one, he does not want to be alive, and for another, he does not want to be found.

Gambling

Chapter 1 of 2

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A/N Big thank yous to my betas Vaughn, who edited chapters 1-2 (though she may not recognize them now), and Writermerrin, who picked up the hat after her. Any mistakes are my own.

CHAPTER ONE...Gambling

"He was fiercely possessive, gloated over every new arrival, and demanded a head-count from Charon at the close of each day. Never did he allow any of his subjects to escape. Nor did he allow a mortal to visit Tartarus, and return. There were only two exceptions to this rule, and those are other stories."

- "The Greek Gods," Evslin, Evslin and Hoopes

Hermione knelt on the floor of the Shrieking Shack as if she were before a sacred altar. Instead of a deity or a shrine, she was in fact gazing upon the pale corpse of Severus Snape. A pool of viscous blood surrounded him, shining black in the moonlight.

Hermione felt a hand on her shoulder.

"Come on, 'Mione, let's go."

She shrugged his hand away. "*Don't*, Ron."

"This is getting scary. Let's go."

"We have to take his body back."

Ron looked at her incredulously. "What? You've gone mad."

"We have to. It's only right."

Harry had declared Snape's innocence and true alliance to the survivors of the war. It had caught many off guard, and some were still finding it difficult to let go of their suspicions. However, Snape was easily forgiven dead and as a martyr. Harry had only shown Snape's memories to Ron and Hermione. Hermione had run from the room, sick, with Ron following close behind.

"He should be buried with all the others."

Ron rubbed his arms, looking around nervously. "Can't we get someone else to do it? Can't it wait 'til morning?"

"You're such a coward, Ron!"

He looked at her indignantly. "Well do *you* want to touch him?"

He saw her waver, uncertainty written all over her face. Ron nodded triumphantly.

"See? Even you don't want to do it, and you're the one who's so keen on this notion anyway. Come on 'Mione. If you can bring him back up to the castle, I'll help you, but if not, then let's just go."

Hermione looked at the still body, trembling. She reached into her robes for her wand and breathed deeply through her nose. *Mobilicorpus. Mobilicorpus. Mobilicorpus...* The incantation was on the tip of her tongue, but her throat was closed up, and she couldn't find her voice. Ron watched her expectantly, and she noticed her hand was beginning to shake.

"Someone will get him in the morning, 'Mione, I'm sure."

Her nerve shattered, and she backpedaled away from the corpse, tripping over her legs. She grabbed Ron's proffered arm, quickly hauled herself to her feet and ran out of the Shack. She was still shaking beside the Whomping Willow when Ron caught up with her and laid a protective arm around her shoulders.

"Come on, let's go back up."

"Don't *touch* me."

Hermione threw his arm off of her, ignoring the hurt look in his eyes. She suddenly found all thought of human contact hateful. The cheerful noises of celebration from the castle, faint, but persistent, grated at her ears. Hermione didn't want to go back to the ruins of Hogwarts where people were reveling in their victory. She could almost feel the smothering of bodies pressing in against her.

"Hermione, what's wrong with you?"

Hermione backed away from him, her wand out and pointed at him. He looked frightened and didn't make a move towards her. She especially couldn't stomach his touch tonight.

"Just go. Go, Ron. I want to be alone."

Hermione hugged her arms and began to trudge across the school grounds. She heard Ron's lumbering footsteps behind her and whipped her head around with such a fierce look that he froze on the spot. Reassured he wouldn't follow her, she continued on her way again. He let her go.

Hermione walked blindly for several minutes, numbly watching grass and dirt roll by under her feet. She was forced to stop and look up when she felt something scratch her face. Hermione brushed away the sharp twig and realized she was standing at the boundary of the Forbidden Forest. It inspired no fear for her; she pushed onwards.

The actions of picking her way through foliage and gnarled branches were soothing in their monotonous repetition, and Hermione found herself calming down as she walked deeper and deeper into the heart of the forest. She was left undisturbed, and she almost forgot there were wild, magical creatures that lived in the forest. Only once was the tranquility broken by the sound of centaur hooves drumming against the leafy floor.

"Oof!"

Hermione tripped, falling to the forest floor and skinning the heels of her hands. She looked behind her to see what she had fallen over and shrieked.

It was a body.

Hermione scrambled away from the body, grasping frantically for a branch to pull herself up with. When she had calmed down from her initial fright, she realized it was the body of a Death Eater. The man lay still, his hands contorted in gestures of pain.

Looking around, she realized the forest was in tumult here: branches were snapped off from trees, dead leaves and dirt kicked up on the ground, and general signs of chaos. Hermione realized this clearing must have been the ground for the final battle between Harry and Voldemort. She made her way cautiously around, as if afraid that any sudden movements would resurrect an evil being.

She saw a few wands scattered about on the forest floor and ripped pieces of cloth stuck to pointed branches. Curious about the wands, Hermione crouched to the floor and pushed aside the dead leaves and debris, hoping to see one of the abandoned wands in its entirety. As she brushed away some of the dirt, her fingers skimmed across something smooth and polished. Intrigued, Hermione dug around and saw a glimmer of black and an engraved vertex.

Her breathing quickened.

Reverently, Hermione teased up the object from the packed dirt and, having freed it, let it rest in the palm of her hand. Although it had some dirt caked on it, it was still recognizable. The Resurrection Stone.

Hermione's hand shook with the temptation to turn it three times. She curled her hand into a fist instead, so she wouldn't give in. Clutching it to her chest, Hermione walked away from the battleground, thinking of making her way out of the forest, and taking the stone back up to Hogwarts. However, with every step she took, Hermione felt her eyelids grow heavier and heavier. Soon she found herself leaning against a tree and then curling up at its base among its roots and falling asleep.

The Stone was still clutched tightly in one hand.

Hermione opened her eyes, and at first was not sure she had succeeded in waking or if she were in a dream.

Hermione turned on the spot, looking left, right, up and down. She was surrounded by blankness, an indomitable white and absence of form. It was hard to tell that she was standing, or that there were directions, when there was truly nothing where she was. Hermione looked around hopelessly; she didn't understand... and yet, she knew perfectly well where she was,

You weren't supposed to come with that stone.

The sound came from nowhere and everywhere, resounding from the nothingness around her and echoing inside of her chest.

Leave it behind when you leave. You will be able to leave.

Hermione's hand clenched over the Resurrection Stone. For some reason, every fiber of her being was telling her *do not let go, do not let go...*

No? Why won't you leave it behind? Why aren't you leaving?

Hermione looked around her, licking her lips nervously.

"I can't."

Can't?

"Won't. Not empty-handed."

She could feel it, whatever it was, pondering. The blankness around her seemed to shift, as if a figure were stirring the white mist. She clutched the stone to her chest, daring to peek at it through her fingers.

Very well, you'll have one favour granted you in return for the stone, and then you will leave.

Hermione's mouth went dry. This was it. This was why she had held onto the stone. She needed to do this right. She had to do this correctly.

"O-okay."

What will you ask for?

"I..."

Hermione squeezed her mouth and her eyes shut, thinking hard. She had to do this properly; if she revealed too much, then all would be ruined. She had to show her cards one by one, revealing her trump at the end. Otherwise, she would leave with nothing, or worse yet, she could be stuck in the blankness.

"I wish to be able to repay all my debts."

It was almost as if the white mists chuckled.

Very well then, though everything you require, you already possess within your own resourcefulness.

"Is it granted? Will you grant it?"

Yes, you will be able to repay all your debts.

"Then you have to bring Severus Snape back to life."

Everything stilled. Hermione almost wanted to cry out in shock at how static everything became, and how bold she had been. This had to work, this had to work...

That is impossible.

"Why?"

Hermione clutched the stone harder, afraid invisible hands would try to take it by force.

He has been avoiding his own imminent end for far too long. He is long overdue for collection.

"But then, you'll go back on your word, your favour."

Everything was silent. Praying she was doing the right thing, Hermione pressed on.

"I owe him. I owe him a life debt. I can't repay him unless he's alive."

A life debt.

"It's a binding magical contract! When one wizard saves another's life, then the other..."

Spare the details. You have been very sly, but very clever. Leave the stone behind. Go back to the waking world. Your favour is kept.

Hermione stood for a moment in shock, she couldn't believe her ploy had worked, and in a daze, she dropped the stone from her hand. It fell, cutting through the blank white like an obsidian knife, and Hermione could not see to which depths it had fallen. She found the mists thickening around her, blackening, and her heart seized in terror.

But then her eyes opened, and she hit her head against the trunk of the tree, jerking it back in surprise. Groaning, Hermione felt the back of her head and the ridges of tree bark. She looked at her hands and saw the stone was gone. Morning's light peeked in through the treetops and bathed her in soft light.

A thrilling cocktail of triumph and terror sent an electric *frisson* through her, and she leapt to her feet. She had to go back! She had to go and see!

Hermione tore through the trees, ignoring the branches whipping in her face, and frantically tried to find her way out.

TBC

Paying Our Dues

[Post DH, not epilogue compliant] Hermione gets more than she gambled for after tricking Death into releasing its hold on Severus. For one, he does not want to be alive, and for another, he does not want to be found.

A/N Thanks to my betas WriterMerrin and Vaughn (who may or may not recognize this chapter). Unbeta-ed chapters are up at fanfiction.net

CHAPTER TWO...Paying Our Dues

"Although she never forgot how he had frightened her when he came charging out of that hole in his chariot, she admired the lofty set of his black-robed figure, the majestic shoulders, the great impatient hands, and his gloomy black eyes."

-*"The Greek Gods,"* Evslin, Evslin and Hoopes

Her greatest fear when she first received her letter from Hogwarts was that her parents would not believe her. It had been founded at first, they looked at her a little stunned, but then glazed over with condescending understanding. Such a brilliant child, their daughter, they almost forgot children had such whimsical fantasies. But when a representative from the Ministry of Magic had Apparated onto their doorstep, the Grangers had to accept magic into their lives.

Hermione looked a little hesitantly at the Leaky Cauldron, but with a determined breath, she drew back her shoulders, lifted her head up and walked confidently in. Her parents went shopping somewhere nearby, having arranged a time to meet her again outside of the Leaky Cauldron. The Grangers fretted the first ten minutes, anxiously watching their daughter leave, and then decided they could do no more than wait, and tried to calm themselves. They had to let her go.

Diagon Alley had, suffice to say, frightened her. She was used to being independent and going places on her own, but Diagon Alley was so *different*. It was so strange, and the people crowding around her were eccentrically dressed and conversed with terms she was unfamiliar with. What was a Puffskein or Pepper-up Potion? Hermione tried to battle her way through the crowd, there were so many people, and only succeeded in getting lost.

Flourish and Blotts... Flourish and Blotts... she had to find the wizarding bookstore. Hermione could barely see any storefronts, and so she didn't know where she was or where to go. Biting back a frustrated scream, she felt sharp tears spring to her eyes when someone elbowed her in the side. Not so much as a "sorry, love" or backwards glance. Hermione furiously rubbed at her eyes and tried to find a break in the mass of people.

She found her break a few more steps to her left. There was a road in between two stores that lead to what looked like another shopping district. No one had gone down there. Hermione neatly sidestepped and breathed in relief. Finally! She had some space to herself and a breather in which she would be able to reorganize her thoughts.

Hermione had absentmindedly walked down the dingy old road, puzzling over how she could find the store, and thinking she should find someone and ask for directions. Maybe the storeowners in this quieter place might know...

"You look lost, dearie."

Hermione turned to the voice beside her, beaming. A godsend! The smile quickly faded from her face once she saw the person addressing her. An ugly, filthy crone eyed her greedily, chuckling during her scrutiny.

"Wandered away from your dear mum, have you?"

"N-n-no..."

Hermione shrieked with fright when the crone grabbed her wrist. The old witch cackled just like they did in picture films, but Hermione felt her situation was more perilous than any Hollywood concoction. She could feel the odious creature's breath smothering her face. Hermione tugged, trying to get back her hand, but the witch laughed harder and her grip held firm. Hermione's mouth opened in a silent scream. She frantically looked at her surroundings for help and realized her grievous lapse in judgment. The alleyway road she had walked down was the seediest, most suspicious looking alley she had ever seen. All the buildings looked as if they would crumble, and most of their windows were boarded up. The few stores that existed looked highly distasteful and the few wizards walking about were cold-mannered or drunken.

"You're still so young...I wonder how old you are? Tell me, pet, have you started your moon cycles yet?"

Hermione looked frantically at the witch, still tugging at her hand.

"Let me go!"

"So much I could do... with your mooning's blood."

Hermione let out a horrified gasp.

"My blood?"

A shadow passed over Hermione and the old witch. The witch's eyes looked upwards to a spot somewhere above Hermione's head. Hermione could see the witch scowl and felt an ominous weight on both her shoulders.

"Let go of the girl's hand."

An even, deep voice from somewhere above her head intoned in a sibilant rumble. The voice was commanding and dangerously patient. The witch sneered up at the voice daringly, but at a second glare, quickly let go of Hermione's hand and skulked by the wall.

Hermione felt her rescuer's hands tighten, painfully, on her shoulders and was forcefully steered back up the road in the direction of Diagon Alley. She twisted her head behind to see a tall man with black hair that hung to his shoulders. He scowled back at her, his eyes flashing dangerously, and her heart gave a startled jump.

"Idiot girl, what were you doing in Knockturn Alley?"

His voice had not softened one iota from their encounter with the old witch. If anything, it had grown more menacing, and Hermione's mouth went dry with fear. His black eyes bore into hers mercilessly, as if demanding an explanation to her foolish behavior. She could only gawk back at him silently. She didn't understand any of this. Was this evil place Knockturn Alley?

She realized the confusing, raucous din of people had grown louder, and turned to see she was back at Diagon Alley. She looked back to her rescuer, frightened, and his face displayed no warmth or sympathy for her plight.

"Muggle-born."

He muttered unkindly, as if it explained everything. He gave her a contemptuous sneer and was about to walk away, releasing his hold on her shoulders. Hermione stared, stunned, before she unwillingly croaked, "Flourish and Blotts?"

He glared at her, a dramatic eyebrow quirking upwards into an elegant bow. When she wouldn't, couldn't, continue (her face was chalk white), he gestured to the street in front of her with a sharp nod of his head.

"Three stores to your left."

He gave her one last curious look, the eyebrow still inquisitive, before disappearing back down Knockturn Alley. His black robes swirled around him, lightly kissing the ground as he left. Hermione tore her eyes away a few seconds afterward, still a little too stunned to speak, and plunged headlong into the crowd. Sure enough, after counting three storefronts to her left, she found herself on the cheery, welcoming threshold of Flourish and Blotts.

Needless to say, Hermione was properly gobsmacked when she discovered her dark saviour was her school Potions master. There seemed to be no acknowledgement or recognition when she first saw him at the school, and it quickly quelled any desire within her to speak to him. Or even, to thank him.

She learned he was of an unpleasant disposition during their first Potions class. From what she learned from her fellow students, Slytherins didn't like Gryffindors and Gryffindors didn't like Slytherins. The Boy Who Lived couldn't seem to do anything but aggravate the prejudice further, and the Potions Master got nastier and more irascible with each lesson. Still, Hermione worked as hard as she could to prove herself in that class. She wanted Professor Snape to know she was intelligent and that she wasn't the stupid girl he had taken her for when she had wandered into Knockturn Alley. Every essay or assignment she received, grudgingly graded with top marks, was a small victory.

It hurt the first time he called her a 'little know-it-all.'

The scathing remarks and unfair treatment escalated when she befriended Harry. It seemed Professor Snape dragged her into every incident of his Neville-baiting, docking off points for either helping or hindering him. Harry and Ron always looked at her mutinously when she defended Professor Snape, and sometimes she wondered if it was indeed worth her time. He could be so unfair! And so *hateful* but she then remembered how he had helped her in Knockturn Alley, and it always gave her pause to think. She read up on what sort of magic could be performed with a young girl's "mooning" blood and it was all very dark and very disturbing. Professor Snape had saved her from a sticky encounter to be sure.

She stopped feeling kind towards him after an incident in her fourth year when Draco Malfoy hexed her teeth to rapidly grow. Snape had cruelly said...oh, she could even remember his exact words now...

"I see no difference."

Wounded to the core, Hermione ran into the hospital wing and had to try her very best to fight back her tears. Madam Pomfrey shrunk her teeth, and Hermione resolved to give Professor Snape no more respect than he was due as a teacher.

Although, she couldn't help gloating and saying "I told you so" when Snape was revealed to be a part of the Order and didn't turn out to be the evil Death Eater Ron and Harry had expected him to be.

It was because of her encounters with him during the summer of the Order of the Phoenix's rebirth, however, that she started to regret his close involvement. It was one of the most confusing summers of her life.

It had taken some convincing, and fast-talking on Hermione's part, for Molly to allow her to leave Grimmauld Place. She insisted that she needed some fresh air, having been cooped up for the first few weeks of summer. Molly had protested, saying that things weren't very safe, but Hermione managed to break her down and allow her a small trip to Diagon Alley. Just for fresh air and the chance to visit the apothecary. Molly finally relented, and Hermione cheerfully set out for the day. Poor Mrs. Weasley probably thought Hermione was getting potions supplies for school. Actually, she was on Fred and George's errand. She had been looking for something to do in Diagon Alley and overheard them discussing ingredients they needed to purchase.

"Mum would kill us if she knew what we were up to!"

"And what *are* you up to?"

Fred and George both startled, whipping around to see Hermione regarding them dryly from the doorway. They breathed sighs of relief and regarded her suspiciously as she made her way over to them.

"Training to be a prefect already, are you?"

Hermione glared at George, and then stuck out her tongue at him childishly.

"Pooh to you. No really, what are you up to?"

"Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes!"

Hermione groaned, of course...

"We've been experimenting, and we've run out of some ingredients. Don't know how we'll get them into the house though."

"Don't tell me it's illegal!"

Fred rolled his eyes and put on airs of being hurt.

"Why, Hermione, we would never ever break the rules. But frankly, it's not illegal, it's just that we wouldn't even be able to bring in celery tops into the house without mum confiscating them, because she thought we were up to something."

"Shouldn't she be used to it by now? You two are always up to something..."

George slung a comradely arm around her shoulders and put on an effected swagger.

"Aye, that's the spirit, give'em bally old pepper and vinegar, that's the ticket!"

Hermione tried to suppress a giggle and failed.

"Look... I'm going to Diagon Alley!"

Fred's eyebrows jumped up.

"Blimey, George! She's consorting with us!"

"Perfect *Prefect* Granger!"

"Oh shut up you two, I don't have to help you, you know-"

Fred threw himself at her feet, desperately clinging to her arms and trying his best to sound like one of Mrs. Weasley's paperback romances.

"Dearest, fair Hermione, comeliest witches of all the land, I am not worthy to even kiss the tops of your shoes..."

Hermione wheezed with laughter, tears coming to her eyes. She spluttered, "Comely? Oh, really..."

"... I shall fling myself from the highest cliff for the mere whiff of your perfumed hair-"

"Now really, stop it. What do you boys need?"

Fred jumped to his feet, dusting off his robes. He and George were back in business mode, guns blazing, and mischievous grins on their faces.

"Ashwinder eggs, a half dozen. Off you go now."

Hermione allowed herself to be shooed out the door by the Weasley twins. She stopped at the doorway, giving them a highly amused and curious look, before they shooed her into the hallway and closed the room door. She looked up to the heavens, as if for help, and then shook her head, chuckling.

"Ashwinder eggs... of all the bloody things..."

Hermione walked into the apothecary and took a moment to close her eyes and slowly drink in all the smells. She loved this, about the apothecary and the potions stores cupboard at school. The air was dry, slightly dusty and held the myriad of sour, tangy, delicate and subtle musks. She let her gaze roam around the bins and barrels full of ingredients happily, before going over to the eggs. She might as well enjoy the small outing as much as she could.

Fully engrossed in admiring the twooper eggs, some bright pink and some neon lime, Hermione didn't notice the tinkling of door chimes as someone new entered the store. The slight displacement of air and space registered in the back of her mind, but she only moved some misplaced hair out of her eyes in acknowledgement.

"Ah, your package, sir."

Severus Snape hadn't expected anyone else to be in the apothecary and was mildly surprised to see a girl by the far wall. His eyes narrowed when he realized it was Hermione Granger. That bushy hair would be the end of her. He scowled at nothing in particular, waiting for the storeowner to come back with his order. She was one of the last persons he wanted to see.

Hermione felt she had dawdled enough and finally reached for a carton of Ashwinder eggs. She ran an appreciative fingertip over their smooth shells and turned to see a tall figure standing by the apothecary counter.

Hermione almost dropped the eggs on the floor, and Severus Snape only sneered back.

"P-Professor!"

"Miss Granger."

He acknowledged icily and turned his attentions back to the counter front. Hermione cowed and slunk back behind him to wait for her turn at the counter. He was ignoring her. That had to be much better than having him pick on her.

"Interesting extra-curricular activities you're partaking in, Miss Granger?"

Ah, Merlin. She had thought too soon.

"S-Sir?"

For an awful moment she wondered if he knew about Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, but then banished the thought as ridiculous. He turned his head, his shoulders angled down towards her in a violent diagonal. He looked at her coolly, his gaze pinning her down as if he were a hawk, and she, a tiny frightened mouse. His tone was biting and sardonic.

"Your purchase, it is clearly not something required by fifth-year Hogwarts students taking potions. In fact, there is no potion set in the curriculum that requires the very item you're holding in your hands."

He then permitted himself to gaze imperiously at the bright orange and pink eggs in her hands. She had to will them not to tremble. An unpleasant smirk curved upwards from the right hand corner of his mouth. His eyes were laughing coldly at her.

"While it does not surprise me that you continue to skirt the line of appropriate conduct, unfortunately influenced as you are by your poor choice in peers, it does surprise me that you would choose such a clumsy, ham-handed method to achieve your dubious means. Perhaps I have thought too highly of you, Miss Granger. You sadly epitomize the lesser Gryffindor qualities."

Hermione felt her face colour and grow very hot. Her mouth had fallen open, and before she could say anything she would regret, she angrily snapped it shut. Her ears were burning too, now, she had never felt more embarrassed in her life. Love potions! Snape thought she was trying to brew *love potions*. Hermione looked down at the treacherous ingredient in her hands and thought they did not look so innocuous now. The main ingredient in *love potions*...

"Not very subtle, is it?"

"Professor, this..."

"As the school term has not yet started, I cannot remove house points. However, be warned that Gryffindor house will lose a pre-emptive twenty-five points the first school day, and it will be fifty points each time I see any evidence of your work. A hundred if I find the potion."

Hermione was growing angry now, and she wrenched her lips apart,

"Sir, that's not fair, I-"

"Neither is it fair to your unsuspecting victim."

The shop owner returned with a small parcel wrapped in brown paper and placed it on the counter. Snape was still gleefully watching Hermione with a sneer on his face before taking his package and placing seven galleons on the counter. He gathered his robes around him in a voluminous swirl and addressed her mockingly.

"Really, Miss Granger, *Ashwinder eggs*..."

And with a smart pivot of his heel, he left the store.

Hermione stood, shaking, her face still bright red. How dare he... how *dare* he insinuate that of her! How dare he laugh at her and say all those poisonous things and could even think she'd *do* such a thing...

"If you break those, you'll be paying for them."

Hermione looked up, snapped out of her trembling rage. She followed the shop owner's gaze back to her hands and saw they shook violently, the Ashwinder eggs rattling in the carton. She quickly placed them on the counter so she wouldn't drop them and willed herself to calm down.

Hermione numbly handed the shop owner six Sickles, watching him silently as he wrapped the eggs in brown paper and handed the package to her. She barely heard him say, "come again," and when she walked out of the apothecary and into the open street, she could hear nothing around her. There was a muffled, angry buzzing in her ears, borne from her anger and upset. How dare he? How *dare he*?

She glared resentfully at the eggs and thought that Fred and George had better have a good explanation as to why they needed them.

In the blindness of her anger, Hermione didn't realize she was walking right into someone's path, until she connected solidly with an immobile body. Her nose smarted painfully, and she fell to the ground, sprawled at the figure's feet.

She looked up and, to her horror, saw Macnair ... the executioner from the Ministry and Death Eater to boot. He had been ordered to kill Buckbeak in her third year, and in one frantic moment Hermione feared he recognized her. But no, that was impossible; he had never seen her. He couldn't know who she was.

Just as Hermione had gathered her wits together, ready to pick herself up, Macnair's foot lifted from the ground. Everything that happened next, happened slowly, and Hermione gazed up at him terror-struck, not fully registering what was happening. Macnair locked eyes with her and, never breaking the stare, no emotion whatsoever on his face, he brought his foot down on Hermione's small hand and *crushed*. It was only when she suddenly felt the white fire of her bones breaking, did Hermione cry out. She looked up at Macnair in horror, a wet wail keening from her throat.

Hermione's wand had fallen out of her pocket, and she reached blindly for it, only to watch it be kicked away by Macnair's other foot. When all his weight transferred to the foot crushing her hand, Hermione's sob tore from her throat. A sound that was agony, pain, fear and pleading wrapped in a guttural moan.

"So, it's the Mudblood Granger. My, my, and I hear so much about you."

Macnair twirled his wand meaningfully in his right hand.

"I've always enjoyed Muggle-baiting."

"Y-you can't."

Hermione could see coloured lights dancing in front of her eyes. The only thing stopping her from screaming was the feeling that she was going to throw up.

"I can't?"

"P-people... bro-broad daylight."

Macnair lifted up his foot and released Hermione's hand. Tears were streaming down her face and she howled with fresh pain, gathering her abused hand and holding it against her chest. It sent white-hot fire emanating outwards.

"There are far too many people for anyone to notice anything. We're off to the side, completely inconspicuous."

Hermione feared Macnair was right. She had bumped into him between two stores. They were standing (in her case...sitting) in a small alcove created by the two buildings. Hermione glared back, despite her sinking heart. She could not let him win.

"P-people will sti-still se-ee. You c-can't... do... an-anything. Just you... t-try."

She glared at him and could see him turn the thought over in his mind. He was beginning to lose confidence in his assured innocence, and Hermione leapt on her chance.

"You'll b-be in... s-such trouble... "

Macnair looked up at her, at her tear-streaked face, at the hand she was cradling. It was inflamed, angry red and patches of white, flopping limply and oozing blood from some broken nails. There was no doubt she was visibly injured. She could go wailing about him to any passerby and he would look guilty. Suddenly, Macnair scowled. He'd made a mistake, not thinking this through.

Hermione's eyes widened when she saw him scowl. He was weighing his options... and she knew they were about how best to keep her quiet. Hermione tried inching away from him, trying to find a good way to rush into the crowd. Where was her bleeding wand? She had to move fast, before Macnair decided the worst.

"Don't move."

He snarled, pointing his wand at her. She could see in his eyes that he had decided keeping her silent would compensate for any trouble he would encounter in making her "disappear." Hermione's heart leapt into her throat as he roughly grabbed her shoulder. He was going to Apparate them both! Her mouth opened in a scream...

When suddenly Macnair dropped to the ground.

Hermione looked up, shocked, to see Snape lowering his wand. Red sparks still fading away from its tip. Snape gazed at Macnair's body coolly before bending down and picking something up from the ground. It was Hermione's wand. He tossed it to her and spat, "Idiot girl!"

Snape brusquely walked over to Macnair's body and hauled it up from the ground. He pointed his wand at Macnair's face and muttered, "*Ennervate*." Macnair's eyes blinked sluggishly, and before he could regain his composure, Snape then quickly uttered, "*Obliviate*!"

His wand flashed and Macnair blinked stupidly, his eyes glassy. Quickly, Snape pushed Macnair into the crowd, Macnair propelled forward by the bodies pushing around him. Snape looked at Hermione, still on the ground, still cradling her hand, and for a moment he looked defeated. He firmly grasped her under the armpit of her uninjured arm and hauled her to her feet, ignoring her protesting cries of pain.

"It will be painful, but we must Apparate away from here. Do you understand?"

Hermione was beginning to see white flashes in front of her eyes; she was close to fainting. Frowning, Snape tapped his wand against her injured arm, muttering an incantation, and the pain lessened. Hermione gulped. Her hand still felt like it was on fire and it throbbed, but some of her nausea had gone away.

"You must hold tightly onto my arm now, quickly."

The second he felt Hermione squeeze his arm, Severus Disapparated them both away from Diagon Alley and Macnair.