

Consequences of Meddling with Time

by beawasley2

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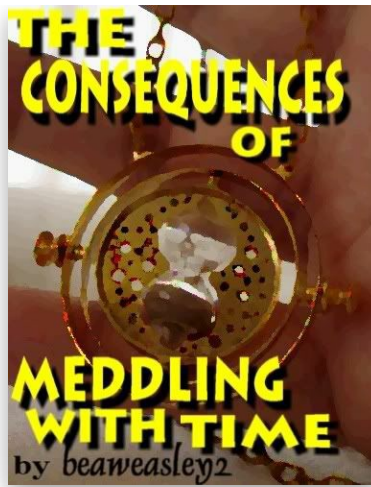
Chapter 1

Chapter 1 of 54

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Hermione pulled out her Time-Turner as she entered the corridor, trying to avoid being banged into by the other students scurrying from the classroom. She tried to adjust the rings, cursing when a Ravenclaw accidentally slammed into her.

"Sorry," he said as he continued on his way.

"No problem," she said to his retreating back.

Okay, she thought as she ducked into a doorway. She needed to go back two hours so that she could make Ancient Runes on time. Hermione stared at it and carefully aligned the rings on the tiny hourglass. The door opened behind her and made her stumble just as she'd turned the hourglass for one rotation. The corridor and everything around her spun in a dizzying speed, and she found herself getting sick.

When the spinning stopped, Hermione fell to her knees and her hand slammed on the floor to prevent her from falling on her face. "Bugger!" She scrambled to her feet and picked up her bag to fling it back over her shoulder. She looked around wondering if she'd miscalculated the alignment. "What the...?" The corridor was dark and eerily quiet.

Hermione looked at her Time-Turner and tried to figure out what went wrong. Idly, she started to walk toward Professor McGonagall's office, adjusting the rings and setting the Time-Turner to return her to when she'd left. If she could return to the right time, everything would be fine. *One back rotation of the outer ring and the hourglass the other way, I will return to the time I left from...*

"Twenty points from Gryffindor, Miss..." a silky voice said from behind her.

"Granger, Professor," she said automatically, wondering what infraction she must have committed this time. "Curfew! Drat, I'm...it's...oops!"

"Very well articulated, Miss... Granger." Professor Snape stepped out from the shadows. He held his wand casually in his fingers as his eyes roamed over her suspiciously. "Who are you?"

Hermione gasped, wondering what he was on about. Maybe he couldn't see her well in the dimly lit corridor. "Miss Hermione Granger. I'm a third-year, sir. I have Potions with you on Tuesdays and Thursdays."

"Yes, I have third-year Potions with Gryffindor and Slytherin on those days, but you are not a student in my class," he said coolly, crossing his robes across his chest as he crossed his arms. His wand stood out against the dark robes even though it was nearly as dark. "So I will ask again. Who are you?"

Hermione stepped back in shock. "I'm not...but I am!"

"No, you are not," he sneered.

Hermione gasped. "I need to see Professor McGonagall," she said, trying to control the panic in her voice.

"No. You are coming with me, and then I'll send for Professor McGonagall." He grasped her arm and pulled her with him down the corridor, all the way to his office.

Hermione complied, knowing that once she spoke to Professor McGonagall everything would be straightened out.

He thrust her into his office and ordered her sit. "Now tell me again, and do not lie to me, Miss Granger," he said in a cold menacing drawl. "Who are you, and how did you get in the castle?"

"I-I'm a student, sir. Your student. I am a third-year," she repeated, wondering why he didn't recognize her.

He glared at her, and Hermione was actually beginning to fear him. "Do not toy with me. I know every student in this castle by name and face, and you are not one of them. Tell me the truth."

She sat in stunned silence momentarily. Surely the Time-Turner didn't take her so far back that she was at a time before she started Hogwarts, but that was the only explanation that made any sense. "Professor McGonagall will know me," she said, knowing that she was lying.

He glared at her and then smirked. "We shall see about that." He turned as if to go and then stopped. "Stay here. If you try to leave, I'll know. The wards will not let you out." He spun on his boot heel and left her in the room.

Hermione swallowed her fear and withdrew the Time-Turner, turning the hourglass in hopes of getting to her own time. The room spun so fast that all she could see was pitch-blackness with flickers of light. When the spinning stopped, Hermione stumbled again, and she grasped at the chair. The office was completely unfamiliar to her. The bookshelf was crammed with objects, jars, and books in a hodgepodge manner, and the desk had papers stacked in piles. Even the quills in the quill cup looked ruffled.

Hermione slipped from the office easily enough and stared down the corridor. It was deserted. She'd only gotten a few steps before she heard an unfamiliar voice, shout, "Stop right there, you filthy Mudblood!"

She turned around and saw two very gruff Slytherins approaching. She turned to flee, but her path was blocked by three more Slytherins who seemed to be a bit older than the boys now behind her. "Looks like we caught us a Gryffindor," one of the larger boys said.

"I don't know her," a skinny boy on her left said.

"Doesn't matter," a dark-haired boy who had spoken first replied. "You can tell Potter that hexing Slytherins is not to be tolerated."

"Yeah," the dirty-blond haired person said as he pulled his wand.

"Nah, I wanna do this personally," the dark-haired boy said, pushing up his sleeves.

"Please, don't. Just let me go," Hermione pleaded.

"No!" he said. Before she could move, he punched her in the face. She stumbled backwards, and her eye felt like he'd hit her hard enough to make it explode from its socket. "You Mudblood scum, you have no right being in this school."

"Yeah," the skinny boy with a crooked nose said. He grabbed her arms, and the dark-haired boy slugged her in the gut.

Hermione tried to struggle from the grip of the boy holding her, but he was surprisingly strong. She was helpless as two of the boys took turns punching her or casting curses at her. She sagged to her knees, but her arms were still held behind her in the boy's firm grip. The large boy punched her once more, knocking her loose from the one holding her as another cast a hex. He hit her hard on the side of the head, making everything around her spin as she was literally knocked to the ground. The skinny boy kicked her on her side, making her curl into a fetal position and hexed her again. She fought to draw breath, forcing her lungs to work against the pain in her body.

"That is for Potter and Black hurtin' Snape," one of them snarled and kicked the low of her back. "Remember this, Mudblood: Rosier, Mulciber, Thortenson, Hurshiser, and Rowe." The ones in front of her turned and left, all five of them laughing as they walked away.

It hurt to breathe. She couldn't move. Her face, ribs, and body throbbed with intense pain. The ringing in her ears grew louder and the corridor seemed to get fuzzy. She closed her eyes and gave into the darkness.

Coming around, Hermione wondered how long she'd been on the floor. Not long, she figured, since no one seemed to have seen her. She tried to think clearly *Years. I went back years, not days.* She shifted, the pain nearly making her pass out again, and pulled out the Time-Turner. Ignoring the queasiness of her gut, she adjusted the outer wheel to match up with the inner ring so that the runes aligned for return. Taking a breath and pulling her bag to her, she set the Time-Turner in motion, praying that it would work. The revolving sensation in the position she was in on the floor made her throw up. She checked her surroundings. *I'm back to the first stop. When Professor Snape didn't recognize me.* Hermione saw a girl approach. "What year is this?" she asked, barely a croak.

The girl stopped and knelt down, her brow furrowed in both concern and confusion. "It's 1984. Are you all right?" she asked, her hands hovering over Hermione as if she was afraid to touch her. "I can go get Professor Snape?"

"Yes, please," Hermione said, nodding. *Nine years, I'm off by nine years.* As soon as the girl hurried off, Hermione opened her hand and adjusted the Time-Turner's rings for a return of nine years. She heard the girl talking to someone, presumably Professor Snape, pleading with him to hurry. Hermione quickly activated the device before they could see her. The spinning made her head ache unbearably. She had no idea if it worked or not; she'd blacked out, barely breathing when the Turner stilled in her palm.

Severus left the Great Hall and headed to his office to collect the essays he wanted to grade during his fifth-year Potions class. He rounded the corner, and his heart stopped for a second before he ran to the student lying on the dungeon floor. It was Hermione Granger, the princess of Gryffindor. *Shite!*

He knelt down beside her and drew his wand, watching the tip glow a bright blood red, signifying internal injuries. He looked up, wondering which of his Slytherins had beaten her so badly. *Surely Malfoy wouldn't? The boy wasn't the fighter type. Goyle maybe? Crabbe? Flint? One of the older ones?*

He brushed her hair from her face and frowned at the discoloration. Something gold attached to a very long gold chain slipped from her hand as he gently rolled her onto her back. Severus picked it up, recognizing her Time-Turner. *At least none of my Slytherins got hold of this* He gently removed the artifact and slipped it in his pocket.

He summoned a chair from his office and Transfigured it into a stretcher. He levitated her onto it and heard her moan. That was a good sign.

He levitated the stretcher, carefully maneuvering it all the way to the hospital wing, wondering how the girl had gotten to the dungeons so quickly. She'd been at lunch, sitting with Potter and Weasley.

He stood by as Poppy healed her wounds and gave her restorative potions. "Don't give her the sleeping potion yet," he said softly, trying to push the worry from his tone. "I must ask her a few questions."

"Severus?"

"If one of my Slytherins did this, I need to know now, not later," he said in a tone that booked no argument.

She nodded and stood back.

Severus knelt and gently touched the girl's face. "Miss Granger, can you open your eyes?"

She stirred and he gently cupped her head. "Look at me, Miss Granger," he said as encouragingly as he could.

She opened her eyes. "You know my name?"

"Oh, yes, I know your name," he replied, smirking at her delirium. "I've known it for years. Who did this to you?"

"I don't know, sir," she answered, trying to raise her head to look at him properly.

"You didn't recognize them?" he asked, pleased that it wasn't Malfoy but concerned because that meant it was one of the older students.

"No," she said, trying to shake her head. She swallowed. "Wait, I remember, I think." She swallowed and looked like she was trying to recall. "Oh, Rose... Rowe, and McCulver, no, something like that."

Severus' brow creased as he tried to match the names she gave to any in his house. Certain that her injuries were what was causing her confusion, he opted to use the most efficient means of obtaining the necessary information. "*Legilimens*," he said softly and plunged into her mind. The boys' faces came to him easily. Severus gasped, breaking contact. *That's not possible!* "Thank you, Miss Granger," he said, rising to his feet.

"Severus, did you see who did this?" Poppy asked from over his shoulder.

"Yes, I did. I'll deal with my Slytherins. You just make her well," he said and turned his head before she saw the concern in his eyes. *Rosier, Mulciber, Hurshiser, Thortenson, and Rowe. There is no mistaking them. It was them... Rosier, Mulciber, and Thortenson as they were in their sixth year... Rowe and Hurshiser were in seventh.* He looked at the severely injured girl, the swollen eye, bruised jaw, the blood coming from her right ear from a left hook, and her bloody nose. *Rosier is left handed.*

Poppy nodded and picked up a flask, pouring out a small amount of bluish liquid into a cup. "Don't worry, she'll be fine," she said, bending down to help Hermione drink the potion.

Severus nodded and backed away, not wanting to leave, but knowing that he couldn't stay. Finally, when Poppy finished giving Hermione the Dreamless Sleep, he turned on his heel and strode from the room.

Severus walked toward the Great Hall for dinner several days later, having just come from the hospital wing. Miss Granger remained in critical condition. She suffered damage to her kidney and liver, plus a concussion that caused swelling of her brain. He'd brewed potions for her all afternoon, but so far nothing was helping Miss Granger, and she was slipping away.

Not only that, but Potter and Weasley had found out and were demanding that the ones responsible be expelled. Severus couldn't expel them...they were adults now...Death Eaters. In fact, Rowe and Hurshiser had been Death Eaters when Miss Granger had been beaten, seventeen years ago.

A loud, angry ruckus was coming from the direction of the Entry Hall as he descended the stairs. Nearly all of Gryffindor and most of Slytherin house were fist fighting and casting spells at each other as Professors Flitwick, Sprout, and Lupin along with the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff prefects were trying break up the fighting. Several of the students had been Stunned and some were locked in Body Binds by the professors to gain control. Apparently more fighting was going on in the Great Hall as well.

Severus was forcing Mr. Wood off of Mr. Flint when Dumbledore appeared, his eyes flashing and his power raging visibly from his person.

"STOP THIS NOW!" Dumbledore's voice echoed off the walls, effectively stopping most of the students from fighting.

"Those who were engaged in this brawl, sit on the floor NOW," Dumbledore demanded. Many of the students sat, with the exception of Mr. Potter, three Weasleys and Mr. Colin.

"You five, up here on the stairs," Dumbledore ordered, and then he looked at Severus. "Professor Snape, please have your Slytherins who are not immobilized or injured wait in the first classroom down the corridor. I'll be there shortly. Professors Flitwick and Lupin, I would like you to help the injured to the hospital wing. Professor Sprout, assist the professors in the Great Hall to stop the fighting in there."

Severus nodded and grabbed Flint by the collar as he ushered his Slytherins to the classroom, many limping, staggering, or leaning on a friend for support. He allowed the grumbling and sneering, listening to the varied complaints. As soon as the door closed, he rounded on them "What in blazes are you thinking? Brawling in the Entry Hall like Muggles!"

Several of them started talking at once, the loudest saying, "They said we killed Granger."

"They accused us of beating..."

"None of us touched that..."

"... as if it was one of us who did that..."

"We didn't touch the girl!"

"Silence!" Severus snapped, scowling as darkly as he could. "I am well aware that none of you touched her." He waited only a second before speaking again. "But that does not excuse you from brawling."

Many of the older boys look murderous.

"They said it was us seventh-years," Mr. Runyan growled from the back, his arms crossed and sporting a split lip. "Them Mudbloods and blood traitors all accused us of beating that third-year to death."

"Miss Granger is not dead. Yes, she was beaten rather badly, but she was not beaten to death, and it was not a seventh-year who did this," Severus said coolly.

"But then who?" Malfoy snarled. "She was found in the dungeons, wasn't she?"

"Did it ever occur to you that it might have been Sirius Black?" Severus asked, hoping to waylay blame.

None of the older boys bought the ruse.

Severus spoke sternly. "I do not know who did this, but I know beyond all certainty that it was none of you, and I will stand by you, even against the Headmaster."

Hermione Granger died only a week later. The animosity between Slytherin and Gryffindor escalated to what it had been when Severus was a student. Strict curfews were in effect and all the professors were on alert. Skirmishes broke out frequently. Fights continued to happen in empty classrooms and in the corridors. All unused classrooms were magically sealed so that no one but the Headmaster could open them. The professors carefully warded each classroom as soon as lessons were over, and a portrait was assigned to the inside to alert the Headmaster if anyone broke into any of the classrooms after hours.

Aurors patrolled the corridors.

And Severus noticed that his Dark Mark was getting darker.

The following year things were nearly disastrous.

Three weeks into term, Severus received an owl from Lucius Malfoy. Over the summer, many of the young men who had been so furious at being accused of killing Granger had declared that they wanted to pledge themselves to the Dark Lord. Rumors were that the Dark Lord had achieved a rebirth and lived somewhere as an infant. Severus had no idea how this could be true, but it was undeniable that his Dark Mark had appeared on his arm again and occasionally itched or stung.

Potter somehow became a Tri-Wizard champion. His first task, stealing an egg from a nesting dragon, nearly killed him. The second task, which involved saving Weasley from the merpeople, the idiot boy nearly drowned because he insisted on saving all the hostages. The third task, Potter returned clutching Diggory's body while proclaiming that the Dark Lord had returned.

By that time, Severus already knew that the Dark Lord was back. He'd recreated his adult body from his infant one. But what really unsettled him was the number of Slytherins from his house who were talking about joining, and he was aware that there were Ravenclaws who were of the same mind.

When Severus returned to the castle to report to Dumbledore, he had very bad news to relay to him. The Dark Lord's numbers were already staggering, and Severus recognized the faces of the junior Death Eaters who'd knelt to receive the Dark Mark. Even Flint, Pucey, Warrington, Montague, Bole, and Derrick were among them, all of whom that had been accused of beating Miss Granger to death.

Severus stood in the small unused classroom holding Miss Granger's Time-Turner on his palm. The battle at Godric's Hallow still raged, and things looked really grim. Nagini had successfully coaxed Potter upstairs, away from Weasley, and the Dark Lord had been summoned. Thankfully, Severus was able to send Phineas Black to headquarters in time to have the Order respond the same time that the Death Eaters arrived to see the Dark Lord kill Potter. There was no hope now.

Severus reread Miss Granger's daily planner, as he had repeatedly over the last few years, reviewing the notations she'd made regarding the use of her Time-Turner. He'd

go back. He knew when, the particular day was etched in the mind of the Death Eater lying unconscious on his office floor, as well in his memory. The guys of his house had bragged about 'defending his honor' on a third-year Gryffindor Mudblood when he'd returned from the library after he'd spent a week in the hospital wing. At the time Severus hadn't cared, he'd been too furious at Potter and Black to give it any further thought. But when he saw images of his housemates beating Miss Granger in her mind, everything had clicked into place.

Still, Severus hadn't done anything. Meddling with time was dangerous.

His gamble hadn't played out well and he'd lost...they would all lose.

Severus looked at the gold artifact on his hand and fingered the box in his pocket. If things worked out, everything would be fine. He aligned the rings, matched up the miniscule runes and took a deep breath before setting off the device. The room spun at a disorienting pace, a dark blur, until he found himself standing in the same room.

The room's occupant jumped to his feet and drew his wand. "Who are you?" the boy demanded.

"That is going to take some explaining," Severus said softly.

~ T. B. C. ~

Author's Notes:

Ready for a few twists and turns?

Prompts used:

9. Hello, It's Me

a. Snape has a Time-Turner, and he 'bumps' into a later/earlier self as he's going about his day-to-day business. What happens next? What do they get up to?

8. Fix a Wrong, See a Right

a. Someone is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. (Hermione) Only once when using it, a mistake is made in counting or a slip of fingers, and he/she goes forward/backward in time. Who does the person meet/see? Your choice. How would he/she fix a wrong once back in the right time?

1. Suggestion: You could have someone steal a Time-Turner.

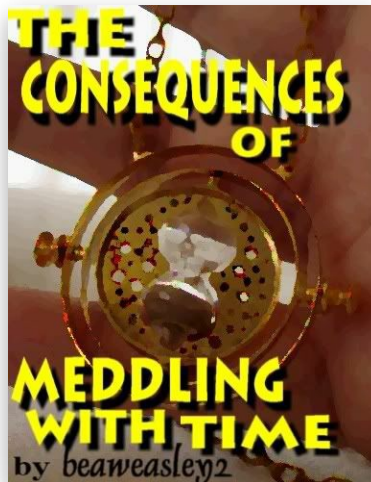
Chapter 2

Chapter 2 of 54

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The sixth-year stood staring at him, wand drawn and ready to attack. It was a fabulous sight, his young self in a fighting stance, instincts trained from years of defending himself, alert, wary, determined.

Severus patiently waited for him to take in his appearance and ask the obvious question that he'd asked years ago.

"Are you me? What trickery is this?" they both said in unison, the teenager suspiciously, the adult with a tone that bordered on boredom.

"And before you ask, Polyjuice would not disguise me as an adult version of yourself. It would have made the drinker into an exact copy, and as you can see, I am not sixteen," Severus said smoothly, still standing in a relaxed pose, one hand still clasping the Time-Turner with his other arm at his side.

"You could have used an Aging Potion," the boy said, still aiming his wand at Severus' chest.

"Which is at best unpredictable and will not be perfected for another ten years," Severus said smoothly. *By me actually.* "The Aging Potion also has a dangerous side effect when used with the Polyjuice Potion in that it weakens the internal organs, especially the liver, which turns to mush since the Runespoor venom of the right head counteracts with the boomslang skin." His younger self looked rather impressed. "You already know this. You've been arguing with Slughorn about it for a week."

His young self smirked. "If I substitute the female for the more passive male the Aging..."

Severus smirked. *Damn, I forgot that I'd solved that very problem in my sixth year!* "Look, it is very dangerous, my being here." He opened his hand, letting the Time-Turner fall against his chest, knowing that the gold would stand out clearly against his black frockcoat. "I am from the future. I have come back in time to thwart a wrong...one you have to correct, actually, if I am to achieve my goal for coming here to see you. Th..."

"Oh, that's rich," his young self sneered, interrupting him.

"Don't interrupt," Severus said sternly. "You know very well I did not take Polyjuice Potion with the Aging Potion. I am you, only from the future from your perspective, and if you know yourself at all, you know that I wouldn't have risked this meeting if it wasn't important. Now, listen up. Tonight you will be attacked by Potter and Black, but Lily will be harmed in the crossfire. Tomorrow they will exact revenge. You will be in the hospital wing for a week. Madam Pomfrey will be acting too conservatively... You must leave the hospital wing on the sixth day."

The teen narrowed his eyes and glared at him. "What are you, a Seer?"

"No, I remember it happening," Severus said calmly, enjoying watching his younger self struggle with the apparent.

"I don't believe you," the boy said, his arm relaxing and standing up straight, although his feet remained planted firmly in first defense position.

Severus grinned. The trick was to give his attacker a false sense of security, to make them think that he'd lowered his defenses. "Obviously," he said, watching the boy with an amused smile. "Look, I have to tell you some facts, but I cannot tell you everything. Something happened that shouldn't have, and I...that is, *you* are the only one who can ensure that it doesn't happen."

"Why me?" the boy asked, his posture unchanging.

"Us," Severus corrected him.

"Okay, why *us*," the teen version of himself replied, smirking.

"What do you know about causing a paradox in the timeline, the time continuum, time dilation, or time loops?" Severus asked, remembering that he'd asked the same. That had caught his attention years ago...that the older version of himself had known about his interest in the subject. "I know that you are...were...fascinated with time travel. I know that you own H.G. Wells *The Time Machine*, and saw the movie with Rod Taylor, Alan Young, and Yvette Mimeux twice. You also read *Paris Avant les Homes*, in the original French, Twainright's *The Time Traveler*, Enrique Gaspar y Rimbau's *El Anacronópete*, and deAngelo's *Memoirs of the Anachronism*."

"So?" the younger version of himself sneered.

This wasn't going how Severus remembered it; he had been more cooperative than this. Severus scoffed at himself *I have to be more careful of how much I tell him. I'm affecting my own past too much already. Well, if this works my timeline will not have happened. That is what I want.* "Time is a tricky thing. Awful things happen to witches and wizards who meddle with time. Anything I tell you now can greatly affect what happens in my time...your future. This is very important; you must not interfere with the timeline, but you *must* protect a young witch who will."

"This is over a girl?" young Severus sneered accusingly.

Severus was getting fed up with himself. "A young girl who will make a huge difference in the world...should she live. It's imperative that she live."

"I don't understand," the boy asked, crossing his arms. "You want me to protect a girl from whom?"

"Your house mates will kill her. She will arrive in your time in the dungeon corridor outside the Potion professor's office at seven o'clock the day you would have been released from the hospital wing. That's why you must only stay for only six days..."

"Why not tell me where to avoid Potter and Black so that Lily won't get hurt and so that I don't end up in the hospital wing at all?" his younger self asked.

"Do you really think that would change anything? So, you miss one confrontation, Lily doesn't get hurt, and Potter and Black don't retaliate! Will that prevent Miss Granger from coming back in time? No. Will that prevent Potter and Black from hexing you or worse and send you to the hospital wing anyway? No. What will happen is that Miss Granger will come back in time and will get beaten to death by your housemates in retaliation for Potter's and Black's attacking you."

His younger self looked thoughtful, apparently mulling over what Severus said, so he continued, "You know as well as I do that they attack you without provocation at any given opportunity. That won't change, will it? But Miss Granger is the concern. If things go as I remember them, you will be able to save the girl...if not...she'll die. And the consequences will be severe."

"So why should I care about this girl?" the teen asked, glaring at Severus with distrust.

"Your future depends on her," Severus said. It wasn't a complete lie, but it wasn't the whole truth either.

"But you said that Lily gets hurt," the teen said.

Severus smirked. *That would be my greater concern, yes!* "Lily gets hurt, but not seriously, Madam Pomfrey sets her right in no time, and Lily only spends the night for observation. But Potter and Black retaliate on principle...nothing new for us, as I remember it. Since when did Black ever need an excuse to bully you?" He knew that he'd hit home, but the young wizard still didn't look convinced. "Lily is now best mates with Miss MacDonald and Miss Vargas. MacDonald is currently seeing Black, and Lily, by default, spends her time with Lupin...as much as you hate seeing her with that werewolf. So her being around the Marauders puts her in harm's way anyway. It's not your fault and unavoidable." He suddenly knew what would synch the plan. "At least this time she'll blame Potter and not you. She will even apologize to you in the hospital wing."

His younger self seemed to like that idea, and for the first time he truly relaxed. "All right, I'll think about it."

Severus nodded and showed the boy a small box. He knew that he had done it; he'd protected Granger *His plan worked.* "Her name is Hermione Granger..."

"The daughter of Menelaus and Helen of Troy, the most beautiful woman in the world... You have to be kidding me? Or is she Queen Hermione of Sicily, Shakespeare's

"The Winter's Tale?" the boy asked, interrupting him again with his cheek.

"A witch," Severus corrected the boy. *Damn, I forgot I'd read that over the summer before my sixth-year* He made a slight shake of his hand to draw attention back to the box he held. "This has charms on it to help restore the Time-Turner. Put it in here until the crystal sands cool from her trip. It should take about a week or so, unfortunately. The sands in the hourglass will look transparent, as if they were melting into glass. This box will cool the sand so it won't fuse, and it will prevent the setting to change so she can get back to the same place and time she'd left. That's important...she must return to the same place and time that she left. Keep it in your pocket."

He set it on the desk next to him. The boy simply stared at the box and then looked him in the eye. "You're assuming that I've agreed to do this."

Severus smiled as he set the Time-Turner to return him to his own time. "Yes, I am," he said as he activated the Time-Turner.

Severus stared at the spot where the wizard vanished. *Time-Turners?* It was unbelievable that they even existed. Scranton's law of time forbade the possibility of them, which Severus believed more than Valerian's romantic version of time travel. But he'd seen proof. His older self had appeared and vanished right in front of him, and that gold thing around his neck, the tiny hourglass surrounded by rings...that was the Time-Turner. He'd seen it...actually seen it. But if the wizard was right, Lily would get hurt, and he'd spend a week in the hospital wing. *No six days; I am to leave in six days. If I decide that this is for real and I believe that man* But he did say that Lily would apologize to him. That was a good thing. Severus realized that his older self didn't tell him when or where the skirmish with Potter and Black would occur. *Bugger. It's going to happen then, won't it?*

Severus' mind warred within him, unable to *not* believe what the wizard had said, and not buying it either. It was maddening. Severus gave up contemplating the theories of time travel and went back to his dorm. Avery would still be in the room with Victoria, but hopefully they'd be done by now. If he was quiet enough, he could slip in and maybe go unnoticed.

He stood in the corridor, nonetheless, at the exact time the wizard said to be. He'd left the hospital wing at seven-thirty, ignoring Madam Pomfrey's protests that he should stay another day under her care. If he was right, this Miss Granger would appear, and he'd have to pull her to safety before his house mates saw her. Severus leaned against the wall, hidden by a Notice-Me-Not Charm. So far everything the wizard had said had come true, exactly how he'd said it would. Even the visit in the hospital wing when she'd come to apologize, which wasn't an apology that made Lily and him get back together, but one in which Lily had said she was sorry that Potter attacked him without provocation. But at least she *had* visited him.

Suddenly there she was, a girl he'd never seen before, walking out of Slughorn's office. She stood where the wizard said she'd be, looking around nervously and confused. Severus jumped forward, grabbed her arm, and pulled her to him. She immediately started to struggle and hit him. "If you want to live, stop fighting me," he snarled as he dragged her back into the doorway and cast a Notice-Me-Not, Disillusion Charm, and a sound deafening charm to conceal them. "I'm Severus Snape, you're Hermione Granger, and this is 1976. Now be quiet." He could hear Thortonson, Rosier, and Mulciber talking as they approached, grumbling about the Mudbloods and blood traitors in Gryffindor house and what they'd do if they saw one alone.

Hermione stopped struggling and listened, sucking in her breath at the vehement declaration from Rosier. "Oh how I'd love to make an example out of one of those little Gryffindors," he said as he smacked his fist into his palm.

"Yeah, would serve them right...let them know what's it like to be attacked for no reason. POW," Mulciber said, swinging his fist in the air. "Right in the face! I wouldn't even bother with any of these little hexes we learn in school. Nah, do some real damage."

"Face to face and personal," Rosier said and laughed. "Oh, yes, just haul off on one...wham! Just like Black did to Snape."

"Yeah! Oh, what I wouldn't give to tear one up right now," Thortonson declared equally as vehemently.

The wizard was right so far; his house mates wanted revenge, and this girl, Hermione Granger in her Gryffindor school robes, would have fallen prey to their vengeance. Neither of them would want to be seen as all talk and no action if the situation had presented itself at that very moment. Even Mulciber had a malicious gleam in his eye when he spoke. Severus crossed his arms and took the time to examine her face. "So you hear them, right? You understand that they mean what they are saying?"

She nodded mutely, and he was glad that she caught on quickly. "Do what I say and you'll be all right." His house mates passed right on by, still grumbling and sneering about Mudbloods and Gryffindors, not making any indication that they saw or knew that Severus was hiding in plain sight with a Gryffindor. A third- or fourth-year girl if his guess was right.

"If they had found you instead of me, they would have attacked you. Trust me on this," he said bluntly. He opened the door and shoved her inside! *I'll take good ol' Slughorn a few minutes to get down here. I should have enough time for my house mates to reach the common room, at least.* He lit his wand tip and ignited the wall scones so they'd have light. "Let me see it," he demanded.

She looked at him as if she still hadn't realized what was going on.

He rolled his eyes. "Bright one, aren't you? The Time-Turner, let me see it."

"How did you?" she asked, opening her hand, and the Time-Turner dangled from her fingers.

"I knew. I saw you and I know them... Don't ask questions." He hooked his finger on the chain so that he could examine it without changing the setting. "Good, the sand isn't fused or melted, but it's too hot to use. Until the sand cools and turns back to normal, you are stuck here...with me." He let go and fished out the small box.

"I'm stuck here...with you?" she asked, frightened and apparently nervous.

"Yes," he said sharply. "Put it in here." He opened the box and held it out to her.

"How long am I going to have to stay with you?" Her expression took on one of panic. "But I can't just stay here, can I? I have to see the Headmaster, or Professor McGonagall, don't I?" Hermione asked, looking up at him with huge doe eyes. "Why are you helping me? You don't know me, not yet any..."

"Look, you can't be seen. *No one* is to see you. I knew you'd be here, okay? Put the thing in here," he interrupted her impatiently. He smirked as she set the Time-Turner carefully inside and he closed the lid with a snap. He stared at her, taking in her school robes, which looked like the ones the girls wore, except that hers had a different type stitching, a double row of stitching on all of the seams. But the red lining in the hood was the same fabric as the Gryffindor robes. She had a bag in her hand, probably full of her school things. "Salazar's ghost, what am I going to do with you?" he asked, looking at the door and back. "I don't suppose you have anything in your pockets other than parchment and ink."

Hermione scowled at him. "I have loads in my pockets," she snapped. "What happened?"

"How should I know...you're the time traveler," he snapped and held up a hand to quiet her. "I mean, I don't know about Time-Turners. They are not even invented yet...I checked. I knew you...I cannot tell you anything, or more importantly you are not to tell me *anything* about your time. Understand me?"

"Yes," she said, letting her bag fall to the floor with a heavy thud. "If I say too much to you, it can and will change my timeline and what I return to will not be my time but a changed variation of the time continuum based upon variables of events that I alter... I do understand."

"Awful things happen to wizards who meddle with time, Hermione," he warned her. "I'm surprised that you're meddling with it."

"I didn't!" she denied vehemently.

Severus felt amused by the flash of indignant fire in her warm brown eyes. "And yet, here you are, and I'm supposed to make sure you don't meddle in my time line or expose anything of yours." He grabbed her bag and turned to go. *The bag is damn heavy for a third-year, so she's probably a fourth-year.* "Okay, follow me, and stick close."

He led her to an unused classroom, an old one that had a dozen, old fashioned table-top desks, the kind that sat four students to a desk and had benches instead of chairs. He transfigured the large professor's desk into a reasonable bed frame. "I'll bring you a mattress and bedding. Wait here."

Avery, Thortenson, Rosier, and Mulciber were all sitting around the fireplace when he entered. They tried calling him over, but Severus said he had to catch up on his essays. The dorm room was empty when Severus entered. 'Oh, thank, Merlin,' he breathed in relief and pulled out Pettigrew's wand that he'd filched right after Potions. The signature would implicate the rat nicely. 'Serves him right for snitching on me,' Severus muttered to himself. He shrunk his bedding and a lamp and pocketed them. Grinning maliciously, he took the bedding from Townsend's and Rosier's bed, shrunk Mulciber's mattress since it was new, having had burnt his previous one, and took Avery's robes since they were nicer, and shrunk them all too.

Avery asked him where he was going as he left. "The library," he said, relieved when Avery shrugged and turned to answer Thortenson.

He left Pettigrew's wand in the corridor a few steps from the Potions classroom, tucked in a crevice at the base of the wall and hurried back to Hermione.

When he returned to the small classroom, he was pleased to see that Hermione had been productive. She'd stacked the benches against the wall, enlarged one of the desks into a sizable writing desk and made two comfortable chairs. Only nine desks remained, shrunken and moved over against the wall. "I assumed that this is to be my bedroom until I can go back to my own time."

"Yes," he said, pulling out the pilfered stuff from his pockets. "Here is bedding and robes. It gets cold down here. Use one of the desks to make a trunk. Do you know how?" He started enlarging everything to its normal size.

"Yes," she said, nodding, but looking at the small desks apprehensively.

"I'll bring you books," he suggested. He hoped that she'd keep to this room and not wander. If she liked to read, and if he brought enough books, she'd not get too bored.

"May I make a list of ones I've been wanting to read?" she asked hopefully.

"Sure," he said, cringing at the thought of going to the romantic novel section. "Are you hungry? I'll bring food and... I'll be back. Don't wander, Hermione, it's not safe for you."

"No, I'll wait here for you, and yes, I'd appreciate some food," she said softly, crossing her arms about her. "How is it that you know me?"

"I'll tell you later," he said, grabbing a pillowcase and turning to go. Severus ran all the way to the kitchens and back, hoping that no one saw him carrying a pillowcase of food or heard the clink of the cutlery, cup, and plate.

By the time he'd returned, the bed was made, one quilt hung on the wall by the bed, and a desk had been reformed to serve as a kind of trunk on legs. Hermione was folding the extra blankets and stacking them on the benches. He set the food out on the desk and removed the Anti-Spilling Charm on the pitcher of pumpkin juice. "It's not much: sandwiches, cheese, fruit, éclairs, some carrots... I have no idea what you like."

"No, this is fine. I really appreciate it, thank you," she said, seating herself in one of the chairs. "Will you stay with me a while, or do you have to go?"

"Yeah, okay. We probably have to work a few things out anyway," he said, sitting across from her and picking up a carrot. "I don't know how long the sand will take to cool, and if it takes a while, I assume you'll have to bathe and such, huh?"

"Well, yes, that will become necessary," Hermione said between mouthfuls.

Severus watched her slyly so that she wouldn't catch him staring. She was famished, judging by the way she ate, but she still tried to eat with some decorum. Her napkin lay on her lap like the girls in his house did...the ones from the better families, so he assumed she came from a good home. "It will be tricky, but I suggest bathing at night. I always do anyway. I can't get you into the girls' bathroom, so you'll have to use the boys. I can ward the last stall so that no one will go near it while you're in there. I can do a Disillusionment Charm on you to get you in and back, but you'll have to trust me."

She simply nodded and took a sip of her juice.

"And you cannot be out in the corridors during the day...of course, you can't be out at night either. It's not that I'm trying to confine you, but I have no idea how long you'll be here and..."

"I cannot be seen," she said. "I know that. Even though I'm not known, if I'm seen by a professor they will instantly become suspicious and want to question me. There is a war going on, You-Know-Who is out there leading the Death Eaters and... Well, it's not safe for a girl like me."

"So, I'll bring you food and such. What do you like to eat?" he asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I'll eat whatever you bring me. I suspect I'll be trouble enough for you without being overly picky."

Severus sighed in relief. *At least she is going to be cooperative* He noticed Hermione watching him as he ate his carrot, demurely sneaking glances from under her lashes as she ate. It was amusing. Her obvious curiosity about him bordered on uncomfortable.

"I've got revision to do," he said finally. "Will you be all right, here?"

She looked up and a flicker of sadness crossed her features. "Yes, I'll be fine."

He could detect the remorse in her voice. *Well, given the situation I suppose she really doesn't want to be alone* "Let me get my books and I'll come back." The look of relief on her face was comical. *Damn, this girl is used to being around people all the time*

When he came back, she had cleaned the dishes, put a stasis on the leftover food, and had it all placed neatly on a bench by the wall. She was sitting at the desk, her book bag lay empty on the floor by her, and she had stacks of books, parchment, quill and ink out, busily revising an essay. He found it amusing that half of the desktop lengthwise remained bare in anticipation of his return. Severus took his seat across from her and pulled out his Potions books to finish his own essay. He glanced at her writing, noting the precise neat script that was a small as his own slanted script.

They worked in silence until she stifled a yawn. "You're tired. I should go and let you sleep," he said, closing his books.

"I'm fine. I usually stay up late anyway," she replied while checking something in a large red book. "If you're tired, you should go get some sleep though. I assume that you have classes tomorrow."

"I don't sleep much, but I'll be missed," he lied to her.

She smiled and pulled out a list, handing it over to him. "Here are some books I'd like, if that's all right."

He read down the list. He was stunned by her choices. "If there are any on the list you can't find, it may be that the library hasn't acquired them yet, so if you'd substitute something for me, I'd appreciate it."

"Sure," he said, thinking that Landry's *Transfiguration of Animate to Inanimate Objects* was really a bit advanced for her just before he looked up. "What subjects do you want?"

"Any...all, whatever you bring will be great," she said, smiling.

She really did have a nice smile, even though her front teeth were a bit large. But who was he to besmirch anyone on having overly large features? Certainly not he. His large nose and big ears, which were like his father's, had drawn enough attention over the years.

The next morning, Severus piled his plate as high as he could, grabbed his cup, and carried it to her room. He did the same at lunch and dinner, careful to add a Notice-Me-Not Charm on the plate because Avery had commented on his increased appetite. He'd spent his second break between lessons with Hermione, plus most of the evening until really late. Just as he was about to leave, Hermione asked when she could have the promised shower. Severus snuck her into the boys' bathroom at midnight and waited until she finished. He had slumped down against the wall, anticipating her to take a long time of it, but had been immensely pleased that she'd only taken a quick shower.

He got her back safely, pleased with himself that he'd pulled it off. He took the plates to the common room before he went to bed, although she'd asked to keep his cup. He hadn't thought to ask why she needed two; he'd just shrugged and left it with her.

The third day, he spent the first break compiling books both for himself and for Hermione. He'd been surprised that she was as voracious a reader as he, more so, he assumed, as she had little else to occupy her time.

He found that he liked revising with Hermione. She wasn't chatty like other girls and enjoyed getting into discussions with him, even heated ones, and although he was a few years older, she did know a lot. Nevertheless, he kept their discussions on academic subjects, refusing to answer any questions of a personal nature and avoiding asking her any questions of her time.

The only problem was that Avery's increasing suspicions about what Severus was up to. If the sand in the Time-Turner didn't return to normal, things were likely to get difficult. *She described it as glittery sand with an iridescent white sheen. It still looks like ground glass to me, but it is changing...*

"Severus?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"Hmm?" he mumbled, trying to decide if he should've asked the Headmaster to help him with her in the first place *She isn't exactly a problem, and she is keeping to the room, but she...*

"What are you thinking about?" Hermione asked innocently enough.

"My Potions assignment from this morning," he lied, leaning over his book so that his hair obscured his face, absentmindedly tapping the same word on the potion directions.

"Oh, I see. It's just that neither your eyes nor your finger has moved for a while now," she pointed out with a hint of concern in her voice.

He glanced up at her and found her looking at him with her big doe eyes and her hands laced together on her book.

"Is anything wrong?"

"No, everything is fine," he said and returned his gaze back to the potion directions in front of him.

She laughed softly. "You definitely become a better liar in the future," she said, returning to her own book.

"And what exactly does that mean?" he snapped.

"Oh, nothing," she said, casually turning the page. "It's just that something's bothering you, and you've been ignoring me tonight."

"Nothing is bothering me," he said, adjusting the book in front of him and bending over the page *Bloody Gryffindors*.

"I heard that," she chided him.

He sat up and looked at her. "No you didn't," he snapped.

"Erm, I was wondering," she said, fingering the page as if she was about to turn it.

He put his elbow on the desk and placed his head in his fingers. "What now?" he asked, rubbing his forehead.

"Don't get testy with me," she snapped and glared at him.

"What is it now?" he asked, unmoving. He didn't want a scene. If she felt stir crazy, he couldn't help it; she had to say here.

"Never mind," she said, flipping the page.

"Fine," he said, returning to his mental debate of informing the Headmaster that he had her in this room. His older self had been insistent ~~that~~ she help her. He hadn't said anything about not getting help, only to keep her away from his house mates.

"I have to change my bedding," she announced nonchalantly.

He looked up at her again. "Why?"

"It smells," she insisted, refusing to look at him. "The housekeeping doesn't come in here and refreshing charms only do so much."

"Of all the bloody...why didn't you..." He looked at her then shrugged. "You could wash it here and hang them up. You do know how to make water come out of your wand, don't you?"

"Yes, thank you, and I know how to make it hot," she said with a smile. "But it's not the same."

"Bloody girls!" he sneered, packing up his things to leave. "I'll exchange it tomorrow okay?"

"Thank you," she said to him as he rose to his feet.

~T. B. C. ~

Author's Notes:

Actually, Severus is being right gallant so far, don't you think?

I'd love to know what you think. Reviews are like chocolate, and much appreciated.

Prompts used:

9. Hello, It's Me

a. Snape has a Time-Turner, and he 'bumps' into a later/earlier self as he's going about his day-to-day business. What happens next? What do they get up to?

8. Fix a Wrong, See a Right

a. Someone is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. (Hermione) Only once when using it, a mistake is made in counting or a slip of fingers, and he/she goes forward/backward in time. Who does the person meet/see? Your choice. How would he/she fix a wrong once back in the right time?

1. Suggestion: You could have someone steal a Time-Turner.

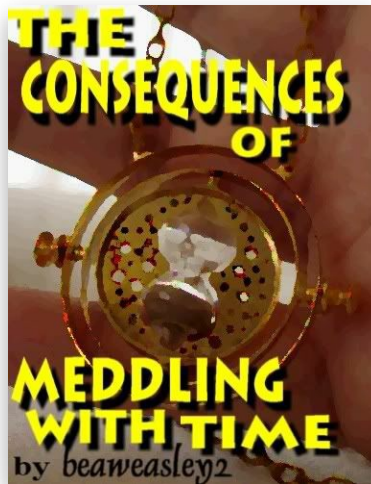
Chapter 3

Chapter 3 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique for combing through this to point out my numerous errors and help me make this presentable for reading. You're the best, thank you!



Severus entered the room, surprised to find it still dark. He lit one of two wall sconces and walked over to the bed to see if she was still there. Hermione was asleep, rolled toward him slightly with one hand placed by her cheek, and the blankets pulled to her chin. One strand of hair lay on her cheek, and he thought about brushing it back for a second. She looked almost pretty when she slept: her eyelashes in two delicate fans against her skin, tiny freckles on her nose, and her lips slightly parted. She had a dreamy kind of smile on her face. He turned his head, contemplating leaving the sheets on one of the benches when she stirred, her head moving slightly.

He held his breath, not wanting to wake her. Hermione seemed to settle back down, and he expelled the breath he'd hadn't realized he'd been holding for so long. She moaned, shifted subtly, sighed contentedly, and inhaled deeply. It was nearly hypnotic watching her. He swallowed and forced himself to breathe. *She's only a kid. A little kid*, he reminded himself. Hermione inhaled deeply again as if in response to his thoughts, rolled onto her back and stretched, both of her hands rising up to the head of the bed, her legs out straight, and her breasts straining upward against the blankets, which slid down to reveal bare shoulders. His heart skipped a beat. *She's naked? No! She wouldn't...couldn't!* He swallowed again, fully aware now that she wore next to nothing under the covers, and the part of his anatomy that shouldn't have reacted to a thirteen-year-old girl did. *Or fourteen...she might be... Oh, shite! Get a grip! She's just a little girl who will leave at the end of the week!*

She relaxed again, and he willed his body to do the same. He stepped forward about to dump his sheets and blanket on her bed when she stretched again, making the blankets slip a bit further, revealing the top curve of her breasts. He nearly choked. Her eyes fluttered open and she mumbled, "Good morning," huskily with a yawn, making his penis stiffen even more.

He dumped his bedding on the foot of her bed and turned quickly before she could notice his shameful reaction to her. "Morning," he said and hurried from the room, praying that no one was in the corridor and would see him. *Good, Mother of Merlin! I'm not a pervert! She's...she...oh shite! Gods, I hope she didn't see* He hurried to the

loo. It's still early. Everyone's asleep, I hope.

As he'd promised, he'd brought new bedding for her and had hurried off to breakfast. Hermione had stretched and looked up at him, greeting him with a groggy, yawn slurred "good morning," but he'd turned quickly and had dashed away, barely mumbling "morning" back at her. She'd risen, stripped her bed, and replaced the sheets. When she tucked the pillow under her chin, she noticed that the pillowcases had been used, although this time they smelled nice, not rank. There was an herb and smoke scent to his sheets, mixed with his own scent, which she found quite appealing. She inhaled the pillowcase before setting it down. *Nah, not bad. His sheets must have been exchanged yesterday.* She wondered how often housekeeping exchanged the sheets at Hogwarts. She'd never seen anyone but Mr. Filch doing any cleaning and wondered how the staff managed to move about so efficiently. *They must do the dorms while everyone is in classes.*

Hermione knew that she'd have to dress quickly. She'd apparently had a bit of a lie in since he'd already been by to see her. She hoped that he'd return soon with breakfast. The robes he had given her smelled different than the sheets he'd just left and were of better quality than he usually wore. *He wears second hand ones like Ron does, so whose are these, I wonder?* She shrugged, performed a Refreshing Charm on her robes at the foot of her bed, and dressed. He'd found her a brush and a toothbrush, or made them for her since they looked unused, but Hermione found brushing her teeth in a cup of water unsatisfying. Maybe tonight he'd take her to the bathroom again. *What I wouldn't give for a sink! Even one like in the Potions classroom.*

She went to the desk to sort out the books she'd read from the ones she hadn't and sat down to wait him with *Physical Shapeshifting Through Transformation* by Phaedrus Goldschlager. She opened up the page to the author's preface and began reading. His take on techniques and the essentials of concentration of purpose was fascinating, if not a bit dry. He reiterated, numerous times, on maintaining one's focus on the desired effect, having unwavering determination to make the change, a firm concentration of the image desired, understanding the foundations of the shape to be transformed into. Nevertheless, Hermione found that he had several good points, which he was obviously trying to drive home. The suggestion that one must know the anatomy of the creature or object not only being changed but that of the desired shape made sense. Professor McGonagall had said that numerous times. But it made Hermione aware that she was woefully ignorant of the anatomical structure of animals, even though she was well versed in her own anatomical structure.

"Thinking of changing your appearance?" Severus asked, frightening Hermione momentarily so that she nearly jumped out of her skin.

"It was on the desk...I didn't hear you come in!" she quickly stammered her explanation.

"Obviously," he said, setting down an enlarged plate of food and crossing his arms as he waited for her to join him. He seemed upset about something, distant. Hermione stared at the impressive amount of food and he frowned. "I still have no idea what you like for breakfast, so I brought a little of everything."

"Toast and jam is usually enough for me," she said, getting up to retrieve her plate and cutlery. "I occasionally have a bit of egg and sausage or bacon." He was sitting, waiting for her when she turned around. "But you must be starving."

He hadn't moved, still sitting with his arms crossed and staring blankly at her. "No," he said, waiting until she took a Scottish egg and slice of toast. "That's it?"

Hermione nodded as she sliced the egg in bites. "It's enough. I don't think I'll be getting loads of exercise over the next few days, so I won't get as hungry as I would normally."

"Oh, right," Severus replied, pulling the plate towards him and picked up his fork. "That's a poorly written book," he said after a while, pointing his fork at the book by her.

"He has some good theories," she replied, still perplexed by his cool attitude.

"How far did you get?" he asked, filling the pitcher with water.

At least he was talking to her. Maybe someone said something to upset him earlier. "Up through the author's notes and into the introduction," she said conversationally, hoping he'd get into a discussion about the book.

"It goes downhill from there," he said dismissively, pouring water into her cup. "Black had the book for ages his fifth year."

She sighed. Apparently he didn't feel like talking about it this morning. "Thank you. I was wondering if you'd be going to the library today?" she asked, looking up at him hopefully.

He smirked at her in a way that was all too familiar but friendlier than his older version. "I go there every day, sometimes twice. It's where I am during the day when I'm not in class. Why? Have you read everything all ready?"

Hermione indicated the books at the end of the table. "Those, yes."

His eyes widened in surprise for a second. "I'll exchange them. You like to read, don't you?"

"Very much," she replied.

"Good," he said, bending over his plate as he ate.

Hermione stretched and yawned, wondering what time it was and how soon Severus would come to see her. He'd said yesterday that he'd have to eat occasionally in the Great Hall or his friends might become suspicious of his absence so he'd been gone most of the day. He'd brought her food at breakfast and lunch but had left shortly after. She'd only seen him at dinner when he'd worked on his essays at the desk with her until his bedtime.

She got up, dressed and made her bed, then looked around. There wasn't much to do. She walked over to the benches and wistfully caressed his cauldron. "I'll ask him if I can use them," she said softly to herself. She looked at the food still under stasis and selected a chicken leg, apple, and cheese for breakfast. She scanned the titles, choosing *The 1000 Year Leap: The 100 Great Ideas That Changed the World* and walked back to the bed. She settled down to read, her feet swinging in the air as she bit into the apple. She was reading about Ignatia Wildsmith's discovery of Floo Powder in 1291 when Severus came into the room. He tossed a grey wad of cloth next to her extra robes and picked up his cauldron.

"Hi," she said cheerfully, scrambling from the bed to greet him.

"You might as well read," he said grumpily.

"Why? What are you going to brew? May I help?" she asked, walking over to him.

"Everlasting Floral Fresh Potion and Blue-Eyes Color Change Elixir," he said gruffly. "And no. These are sixth-year potions...way above you."

Hermione bristled at his comment. "I was only offering to help. I am quite capable to follow directions, and I could brew them if I wanted..."

"I don't need help," he said sharply.

"What's got your wand in a knot?" she asked softly, placing her hand on his back.

He stiffened and shrugged her off. "Nothing."

"Nothing?" she asked, bewildered.

"Yeah, nothing," he snapped again, picking up a box from under the bench she'd not noticed before.

She fought back the angry tears at his curtness. He was the only one she could talk to, the only one who even knew she was here. "So why are you snapping at me over nothing?" She was so bored, and she'd looked forward to seeing him, just to have someone to talk to... and he was being a prat.

"I'm not snapping at you," he snapped again, turning to set the box on the desk they shared.

Hermione quickly averted her face so that he wouldn't see the tears that threatened to fall.

"Oh, of all the... Fine," he said exasperatedly. "But if you ruin my potion, I'll spank you."

"You'll what?!" she gasped in shock, whirling around to stare at him, tear-filled eyes forgotten, hardly believing that he'd said 'spank.'

"Oh, for the Mother of Merlin," he said, turning away from her and pulling out indigo leaves from a pouch, and then taking several Phoenician sea snails from his pocket. "Do you know how to extract the mucus secretion from the hypobranchial gland?"

If he thought that by giving her the more disgusting ingredient preparation she'd change her mind, he was sadly mistaken. "Yes, but I'll have to borrow a brass borer from you. I obviously don't have mine."

He handed her the tool with a smirk. "Be sure to get as much as you can."

Hermione suppressed a smug smile and turned the snail over in her hand. She carefully stimulated the lower third of the snail's underside to encourage the creation of the secretion. It would take an hour at least to get him enough secretion to fill the small measuring spoon he set in front of her. She looked up and saw a bottle of saline in his kit. "May I use that, please?"

"Why?" he asked.

She looked at him in surprise. "Because you...I mean my Potions instructor told us that using tiny amounts of saline induces the snails to produce more secretions," she explained, thankfully catching her slip in time. It was true that he'd told her that, but in her time, not his, and she had no idea if he knew that fact yet or not. *Oops! Now he does! I have to watch what I say! Damn it. Well, maybe he made the discovery anyway.*

"Salt will harm the snail and ruin the secretion," he said, reaching out his hand to take the snail from her.

"No it won't!" Hermione exclaimed as she jerked her hand holding the snail away from him. "Salt...yes. Saline in a teeny amount, won't."

His eyes narrowed suspiciously, then widened. "Blimey, you were told that?"

"Yes, in Potions," she admitted and sighed as she sank a bit in her chair. "I'm not supposed to tell you anything about my time."

He handed her the saline. "Well, you did, so you might as well show me."

Hermione poured a small amount out on the cap and touched just the tip of her tool in the saline, flicked her wrist to eliminate the excess and gently rubbed the tip on the snail's underside. The secretion oozed out around the borer. She held the tip of the tool over the measuring spoon and softly said the spell to make the secretion slide off and into the spoon. Severus watched her without any hint of expression to give away his thoughts, nodded once and turned back to his shredding of the indigo leaves.

An hour later when the potion was finished, he set it to cool and walked over to pick up his bag. "I have class," he said and turned to go. "I'll bottle the potions later."

"I can do that for you, if you like," she offered sweetly.

Might as well. "Fine," he relented. He reached under the benches and pulled out an old crate. Hermione's eyes went wide when she saw it materialize. "What? I use this room to brew my potions because my dorm mates don't like the smells."

"No! I just don't remember that being there when I stacked the benches," she said, accepting the crate of bottles.

"It was under the desk. I moved them to the wall before I made your bed," he explained, wondering why it would surprise her that he had extra bottles in his potions lab. "Look, no one comes in here because I'm willing to brew potions for them. The Everlasting Floral Fresh and Blue-Eyes Color Change Elixir are for two of the girls in seventh-year. They're paying me for them."

"Okay," she replied with a shrug. "I didn't ask you or expect you to explain. I was just amazed, that's all."

He shook off her remark. "I cannot come back until late. Avery wants some help with something, so I can't come back until tonight."

"That's fine, I'll read or something," she said with a smile.

The 'or something' bothered him. So far, she'd been cooperative and had stayed in the room as he'd asked. "Look, you cannot go out and..."

"Be seen. I know, I was only teasing you," she'd finished his sentence, although that was not what he'd been about to say.

"I'll exchange the books you read for others tomorrow," he offered, hoping it would keep her from going crazy. "At this rate you'll have read every book in the library."

"That is my personal goal," she replied, smirking at him.

Somehow he actually believed her. "See you later."

"Bye."

He shook his head and left. He hoped Avery believed that he'd brewed both potions in an hour and a half, but he doubted it. So far Rosier and Mulciber hadn't noticed his absences, but that was pure luck, and Severus knew he was rarely this lucky. Thortonson was starting to talk to Severus more, but Miss Linnet kept him sufficiently occupied as of late. No, the only one noticing, was Avery.

Hermione woke that morning and made her bed quickly. She'd found the grey flannel nightshirt Severus had left her and was once again struck by his thoughtfulness. He'd been right; the room was cold, especially at night. She'd started using his robes, since hers were a bit rank after wearing them for a few days. She tried washing her knickers, and they were drying on one of the desks in the corner. A draft wafted up under the robe when she'd moved around, and it made her feel naughty, but it couldn't be helped. She only had the one pair. She'd changed his cup into a chamber pot that she'd stashed under her bed and cleaned it after each use. At least he'd thought to bring her a roll of toilet paper and an old cauldron. Which reminded her, she'd need another roll if she had to stay much longer, and neither of them seemed to know how long she'd be here.

She sat at her desk and waited for Severus to arrive after breakfast as had become his normal routine.

Severus was so different from what she'd expected. Whereas Professor Snape stood tall and erect, exuding confidence, his younger self was usually stooped, wary, and suspicious. Well, maybe the suspiciousness wasn't all that different. This Severus seemed more affable, but he still didn't like to talk about himself. He did, however, quote books and references when they talked, especially when it became a heated discussion. And he liked to debate, frequently taking a devil's-advocate position on the subject. He was so well read, so smart, and, in a way, funny. He was snarky, had a sharp wit, and a dry humor. He was guarded around her unless they talked about academic things or when she told him about things that had gone on in London during his time...her past. He was greatly amused that she loved the Beatles, Chicago, Elton John and Fleetwood Mac. They both liked the Rocky Horror Picture Show, and he had laughed at her because she'd refused to see Jaws.

Hermione tried so hard not to add to his burden, but each day when he'd look at the Time-Turner, he'd scowl and put it back on her makeshift shelves.

Severus watched her from between the curtains of his hair. Hermione had her head resting in her hand, the other one holding the edge of the page ready to turn it as soon as she reached the end. She had a cute, pert nose and soft, curving eyebrows over her warm, brown eyes that were so trusting they reminded him of a doe's. She was smart...too smart...and liked to show off what she knew. She was a voracious reader and read everything and anything he brought her. Twice now, he caught her trying spells that were way above her level, managing to accomplish the difficult charms.

He casually wondered how many of the spells she'd tried from the books he'd brought her. She was quite good at Charms and Transfiguration, loved Arithmancy and Runes, even Alchemy. He wondered what other subjects she was taking in school. Knowing the wide selection of books he'd brought her, there wasn't a subject, discipline, or practice of magic that didn't interest her, except for the Dark Arts. He'd been careful at first to bring her books that had the number three and four on the shelving code, but he'd seen her frequently reading his books he'd left in the room.

Not for the first time he wondered how his older self knew Hermione. She was Muggle-born; she'd confessed that to him her third day. Magic simply enthralled her. She had spent the summer hols with her parents, Christmas hols her first year skiing, and her last Christmas at Hogwarts. She'd gone on and on describing the decorations: everlasting ice cycles, mistletoe, the Christmas garlands, the Christmas trees, and the magical crackers as if he'd never seen any of these things. She was also quite fond of Hagrid, the Keeper of the Keys and grounds keeper. Nevertheless, he'd enjoyed the way her eyes had lit up as she'd talked.

Truth was that if she was a few years older and not from another time, he'd have really wanted to get to know her. She was bright, but way too trusting and far too open. She was bossy, but smart and fun to rile up. She wasn't conventionally pretty, but he wasn't anything to look at either, so they complemented each other. Her hair was always an unruly mass of curls, and she had stains on her fingers from the ink she used... Her fingers were long and straight though, and her nails were nice, but her front teeth were really big. Of course, he had horrible teeth, so he shouldn't have cared about hers.

He scowled and forced himself to read his book. She was most likely leaving tomorrow anyway. The sands in the Time-Turner had finally started to look like she'd described them, just not as shiny as she'd remembered them being. So, if by tomorrow the sands looked right, she would leave, and that was that. He'd fulfilled his promise to himself, and his life could go back to normal.

He looked at her again. *It's too bad you are not from my time*, he thought again. *No, this is best.* She wouldn't survive the war anyway. She'd never submit to being subservient to pure-bloods and certainly considered herself equal to them. She was due for a rude awakening someday. *Not today though.*

Hermione's hand moved to reach for her cup, and he immediately lowered his eyes to his book. He flipped the page so that she wouldn't know he'd been woolgathering about her.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Prompts used:

9. Hello, It's Me

a. Snape has a Time-Turner, and he 'bumps' into a later/earlier self as he's going about his day-to-day business. What happens next? What do they get up to?

8. Fix a Wrong, See a Right

a. Someone is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. (Hermione) Only once when using it, a mistake is made in counting or a slip of fingers, and he/she goes forward/backward in time. Who does the person meet/see? Your choice. How would he/she fix a wrong once back in the right time?

1. Suggestion: You could have someone steal a Time-Turner.

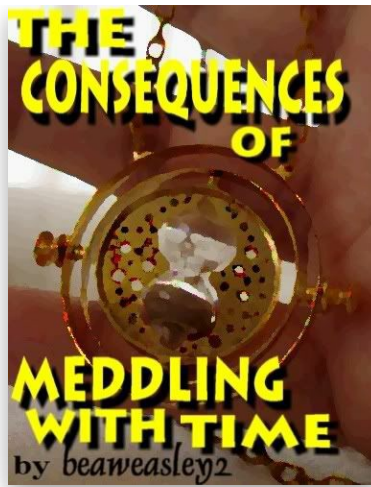
Chapter 4

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Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this to help me make this presentable for reading. You're the best, thank you!



By noon, the sands in the Time-Turner looked normal. Hermione sighed sadly, put it around her neck and looked up at Severus.

He stood patiently, his expression neutral and nodded at her. "It's time, Hermione. You have to go home."

"I know," she said softly. "It'll be good to be back." She meant it, but in an odd way she'd miss this Severus Snape. But much as she'd have liked to stay with him and really get to know him, she couldn't, and he couldn't come back with her. So this was good-bye.

She grabbed her bag, slung it over her shoulder and looked up at him expectantly. She wanted to hug him good-bye, but his posture was so stiff and aloof that she knew it wouldn't be welcomed. "Thank you. You did so much for me this last week. I'll never forget it."

He huffed. "It might be best if you did."

She turned away and sighed.

"You're welcome. Now, go," he muttered softly, dropping his head so that his hair obscured his face.

Hermione set the runes to 'return.' Severus watched her with a resolute air. There was so much she wanted to say to him, but he refused to look her in the eye. She let the hourglass spin, and he vanished as the room spun out of focus.

She arrived back in the little room and wondered what time it was. As she walked up to the common room to change, she realized that lessons were about to be let out. Curious, she hurried to get to her Ancient Runes class. She arrived in the corridor a few paces from watching herself being knocked over when several fifth-years exited the door behind her. Her other self vanished before she hit the floor. Hermione pulled out her Time-Turner. The hourglass felt hot, and the sand looked almost like liquid. *It'll have to cool, but I can't be seen. It took a week the first time for it to cool... Would a week still be enough? Or should it be two? I'll start with one.* She quickly turned the ring back for a one week jump and prayed. The Time-Turner nearly burned her hand, but it still made the jump. Hermione carefully checked the corridor before running to find Professor McGonagall to tell her she'd miscalculated so that she could be hidden for a week until time caught back up to her.

Cronus Latimer examined the Time-Turner in his hand. "It's been over used, I think. It's still quite hot." He looked up at Albus from across his worktable with a worried expression. "You say she went back a week? Is that all?"

Albus rested his elbows on the workbench from his perch on the padded stool. "Minerva informed me that Miss Granger miscalculated and went back a week instead of an hour," he said, steepling his hands in front of him, watching Cronus turn the hourglass to examine the sands. "She took Miss Granger to her sister's house for the duration of her overlap, and Miss Granger will be back at Hogwarts on Wednesday."

"Odd, very odd," Cronus mumbled. "How many times has she miscalculated?"

"I am unaware of any other miscalculations," Albus stated. "But then I have had many other concerns as of late: Sirius Black for one, the Dementors surrounding the school for another, Minister Fudge's concerns and many interferences, and, of course, many parents who are highly concerned for the safety and welfare of their children. I am pleased to say that Miss Granger herself is apparently in good health and of sound mind."

"Well, Albus, this needs to cool down...but not too quickly... and at the correct temperature. Humidity is of concern...there cannot be any condensation..." Cronus began to stroke his beard as he paced, rambling his thoughts quickly, and Albus smiled. "I'm concerned that the device reset itself..." Cronus stopped and faced the black board that took up an entire wall of his workshop. "And that must be done with...I've never calculated for misuse...Einstein's principle of time relativity... Galilean's invariance of time in Arithmancy principle... to Pilsners' equivalence of rotational time," he said as he waved his hand to make the formulas appear on his blackboard. "I may have to consider Haughton's theory of collateral parallel time dimensions... The setting must be noted so that Miss Granger doesn't return to the time she left. She is waiting out the week in the Highlands. The Time-Turner will have to be reset..."

Albus stood and walked around the workbench to watch the wizard as he added in the runes and numbers that represented the setting of when Hermione returned.

"She disappeared Thursday, approximately at two o'clock. Just after her Ancient Runes lesson. We might add three minutes to compensate for her need to find a suitable place in which to utilize the Time-Turner unobserved," Albus said, adding in the additional information where it was needed for the calculation. They worked together on the calculation for an hour, adjusting the time of Miss Granger's departure time twice, before they determined the equivalent denominator. "Well, yes, the Time-Turner must sit in stasis and cool for a week and a half," Cronus admitted. "But the cooling...that is not my forte."

"Ah, but I can help you there," Albus said with a smile. "I have been mulling it over while we were talking, and I think I know just the spells needed. Of course, it will take two wands and preferably someone with an oak wand with a Dragon heartstring core...the magical complimentary wood to my own wand. Luckily I know just the wizard, and I can ensure you that he is most discrete."

"Whom?" Cronus asked. "There are very few who are allowed within these corridors and halls, Albus."

"Mr. Kingsley Shacklebolt," Albus replied with full confidence in his voice. "I can vouch for the man myself."

Cronus stroked his beard as he considered the suggestion. Albus waited patiently, knowing that his friend would have to consider all the implications of allowing Kingsley down into the Department of Mysteries to assist Albus in Charming the small blue box that rested on the workbench. "All right, Albus. I'll send for his assistance," he agreed at least.

"Excellent," Albus said, his blue eyes twinkling, and returned to his stool to wait the arrival of his Order member.

Severus sat at his desk and watched Hermione work on her potion. Every once and a while she nudged Longbottom or quietly hissed directions at him. "Miss Granger, kindly do your own work, and stop instructing Mr. Longbottom. That's my job, you insufferable girl," he snapped at her. "Ten points from Gryffindor. Mr. Weasley, shred the lemon grass, do not mangle it." *Oh yes, a typical Potions lesson with the third-year Gryffindors.*

It had worked. The mishap had been avoided and all was normal again. Or seemed normal. Only time would tell if everything worked out. The good thing was that Miss Granger was back, hand spring up to every question he asked, rhetorical or not, coaching Neville at every opportunity, and following Potter and the sidekick Weasley, breaking every school rule possible. He'd had to maintain a fierce acerbic tone whenever he was around her, but so far she hadn't demonstrated any inappropriate familiarity with him or made any innuendo regarding the week they'd spent in each other's company.

He stood and swept around the room, observing the students' progress on the simple Burn Paste. It wouldn't be the superior quality that he produced, but if any of them in the future received a minor burn at least they...well, most of them would be able to relieve the wound. Hermione's was perfect; in fact, he realized that she'd used the same directions they'd used when she'd jumped back, not the one on the board. He frowned at her, and she had the audacity to look up and smile at him, giving him a slight nod. He merely raised an eyebrow at her and tried to look disdainful before he turned to check Longbottom's. His was useless; it would barely receive an Acceptable. Goyle's was dismal, barely passing as was Crabbe's. Malfoy's potion was slightly off color but would turn out adequate enough unless he quit trying to whip it with his stirring rod. Potter's was passable, and Weasley's was... puce.

"When you are finished, bottle the potion in the large flasks on the side table and bring it to me," he said smoothly returning to his desk. "Weasley, don't bother bottling that concoction, it's abominable." He sat down, ignoring Potter and Weasley's complaints about fairness. *Yes, everything was back to normal...thankfully.* He glanced over at Hermione and their eyes met. Severus stared at her, keeping his expression as neutral as possible. Hermione turned her attention back to her potion where it belonged.

Severus cursed himself. The girl had another mishap with the Time-Turner and had gone back to his time again, not once but two more times!

As he remembered it, she nearly got caught in the cross fire between him, Potter, and Black the first time, and the second time she ended up in Gryffindor tower for a month. A bloody month! Then she disappeared without a trace. She had lived with Lily Evans and Potter...she could have changed the timeline! Who knows what events the girl had changed.

He knew that she'd come back to his time, even knew when, roughly.

"Minerva, give me the Time-Turner and I can fix this," he said, knowing that he'd have to convince himself to take care of the insufferable girl for the additional two times she'd gone back in time.

"No, Severus," Dumbledore said, shaking his head sadly. "This is a problem that is best dealt with in this time, not in the past. Besides, we aren't even sure when exactly Hermione went back to."

"I know where she went, or more acutely, when," Severus said firmly, placing his hand on Minerva's desk. "You don't remember the first time because I hid her. I even remember the second time. I was unable to intervene because the girl showed up right in the middle of a duel between Potter, Black, and myself. I could not prevent her from tampering with anything because your golden boys sent me to the hospital wing."

Dumbledore looked up at him with fire in his eyes. "Explain what you mean by 'the first time,'" he said forcefully. "And why wasn't I told?"

"Because, by limiting her contact so that she only interacted with me...my younger self...and no one else, I was able to ensure that the girl didn't expose anything or disrupt what should have happened, and thus stopped the events that resulted because of her death, that's why," he said dryly.

Minerva placed her hand over her heart as she inhaled in shock. "Her death, surely...?"

"Yes, her death. She died. That timeline was apparently erased because I went back and told my younger self to keep Miss Granger out of sight until she could return, thereby erasing that timeline and creating this one," Severus stated. "I did it once; I can ensure her safe return again."

"Severus, you cannot meddle in time..."

"And what exactly is she doing with a Time-Turner in the first place? Were you even aware that it is apparently as easy to go back a decade or two as it is an hour or two? Each time the girl has gone back, she miscalculates and goes back two decades instead of two hours. So, until she learns how to control the device, I will have to hide her each time until she can return. And each time it takes longer." Severus stood and paced a few steps. "It's not easy you know, keeping her away from everyone. She cannot be seen. My relationship with my housemates is stronger in my sixth-year; I start to be accepted... and Avery, Mucliber, Thortenson, and Rosier become protective of me. They start fighting the sixth- and seventh-year Gryffindors. Even Hurshiser and Rowe... Don't you remember?" He stopped and turned to face the old wizard. "I managed, each time, to keep her a secret. But if I don't go back and tell myself to, it might not happen."

Dumbledore watched him thoughtfully, but Minerva looked outraged. "You hid a thirteen-year-old girl in your dorms?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Severus snapped. "I used an old..."

"Enough, Severus. Minerva, are you listening to him? He has changed his arguments from probability to that of fact. He did go back, and will again," Dumbledore said and sat down on the chair in front of Minerva's desk.

"But, Albus..."

"No 'buts.' You heard him. He said that he was unable to prevent Miss Granger from being hurt when she'd arrived in the middle of a duel, and then he claimed that he was able to ensure that Miss Granger didn't expose anything or disrupt the events of this timeline, just as if it had already happened. I do not think it was a slip of the tongue. Although, Severus, that claim is, in fact, not entirely true. Likely, you prevented a worse wrong by your actions. But, Minerva, I believe that Severus did in fact go back in time to speak to his younger self." He looked up at Severus. "You said that each time it took longer. Explain?"

Severus sighed. "The first time, the sand in the hourglass took a week to cool and return to normal, the second time it took almost two and a half weeks, the third time it took a month."

"You hid her for a month?" Minerva asked in startled disbelief. "What did you do with her?"

"Yes, Minerva, it took a month. We revised together, she on her schoolwork, me on mine. I fed her, snuck her into the bath when she asked me to, and left the soiled bedding on my bed for the house-elves," he explained. "But she was cooperative, mostly. Thank Merlin, she likes to read."

"Which room did you use?" Dumbledore asked, steepling his hands in front of him. "I don't recall seeing her, so apparently you successfully kept her hidden. Did this by chance have any relation to Mr. Pettigrew being accused of ransacking the Slytherin boys' dorm?"

"It may have," Severus replied evasively about his use of Pettigrew's wand the first time.

"I thought so. Very ingenious of you..." Dumbledore smiled. "So where *did* you hide her?"

"I used an old classroom to hide her where I used to brew my potions as a student," Severus stated.

"Ah, yes, I know the one. Very clever, my boy." He rose from the chair. "Minerva, give him the Time-Turner. Severus, come with me. There is a storeroom in the dungeons I apparently need to show you. Miss Granger should have a proper bed."

On the way to the dungeons, Dumbledore was eerily silent. That could only mean one of two things: either the old man was upset with him or he was mulling everything over.

"Tell me how you accomplished it, my boy."

Severus smirked. *Mulling it over.* "That timeline doesn't exist, none of them do. When I go back, when I tell my younger self the facts, what little I can tell him, I change the timeline...again. I can tell you that I saw myself appear and disappear as if I'd Apparated, which we both know is an impossibility. However, since the Time-Turner that Miss Granger is using has the ability to return one to the time in which she'd left...a most convenient feature...I would assume that I did the same. However, I know that is an improbability. It took a week for the Time-Turner to cool enough for Miss Granger to return. So, if I'd waited a week in my house while the device cooled, then used it to see myself, and then adjusted the device to return me to my natural time... Of course, I'm speculating."

"Sounds, feasible, though, to go back in time far enough to allow the Time-Turner to cool and then return," Dumbledore mused over. "Still, little is truly known about these devices, since they are so new an invention. The original Time-Turners could only go back in time, and only by a few hours. When I went to retrieve Miss Granger's Time-Turner, I was intrigued by Cronus Latimer's use of combining Runes and Arithmetic calculations in conjunction with the device. I thought that with Miss Granger's love of the two disciplines, she'd be able to prove the piece's use, and Cronus and I could then compare notes." He looked up at Severus with that damnable look of intrigue in his eyes. "I don't suppose you'd care to indulge two old men in what you know? I'm sure Cronus would pay handsomely for your knowledge."

"No," Severus said flatly.

"Ah, well," Dumbledore sighed. "I'll just have to talk you into it."

Severus picked up the plain, brown leather diary and its older, slightly used twin and stuffed them in his pocket. He'd made entries in the older book with what details he could give himself regarding Hermione's bounces back in time. He wrote a letter to himself, explaining why he'd come back in the first place, Miss Granger's death and her staying with Lily, thus causing a castle wide hunt for her after she'd disappeared, warning himself to take the task of hiding Miss Granger seriously. He hoped that this time the plan would work, but he was counting on his younger self to carry it through. As it was, he'd have to spend a month in his house before he could approach the boy. *No matter, I feel like I've done this a number of times.*

Severus arrived at Spinner's End and looked around. The place was, just as it had been every time he'd returned home, dusty, musty, and dank. Someday, he'd have to dispose of the house. For now it suited his purposes. He cast a series of cleaning and Dust-Lifter Charms on his books. The Dust Repellent Charm had done well; the dust that had collected fell away easily and vanished. He went upstairs to remove the stasis on his bedroom and freshen up all his bedding and curtains. Once he'd finished, he'd see about stocking up the cupboards in the kitchen and check on how overgrown and wild the back garden had become.

That night, Severus took the chance and dined out. Afterwards, he took a stroll down a beachfront walkway. It was odd, having all the time in the world at his leisure. The next morning, he chose to see the Salisbury Plains and have dinner in Romalldkirk.

Over the next few days, he put his back garden in order. But mostly, Severus took the time to visit places he'd always wanted to see but never had. Unfortunately, once he'd spoken to himself, this timeline would vanish as if it never happened. Still, as he watched the seagulls over the rocky cliffs of Scotland, he felt at ease with himself.

One month to the day, Severus pulled out the Time-Turner and snuck into the castle for his self-made appointment with his younger self.

Severus still had a bit of a limp. Whoever taught Black how to turn someone's feet into crab legs should be killed on the spot, and using the Avada Kedavra would be too kind. Madam Pomfrey had put him right in no time, but the awkward angle had strained his tendons and ligaments. Now he had a week's worth of work to catch up and three potions to brew. At least Slughorn allowed him to make up the potions. *Right smart of the berk, considering that it happened in his class right under his nose* Severus had the Burn Paste for Slughorn and the Sprain Emulsion for his ankle simmering in his secret room. They would be done and ready to bottle tonight. *One down, two to go.*

He pushed open the door, surprised to see the room lit. He cursed himself for not having set his wards on the door. He quickly drew his wand and entered, hoping that no one had messed with his potions. The desk he'd made into a bed for Hermione was back to its original form. His potions simmering away in his cauldrons on the heat resistant pads on the desk just as he'd left them. However, in his chair with his boots up on the desk was the wizard, his older self, as bold as you pleased. "Oh, it's you," Severus snapped. "You're back."

"Apparently," the older wizard said smoothly. "I do hope you're brewing this for sale rather than for Slughorn?"

Severus crossed his arms and regarded the wizard, wondering to what he owed the pleasure of his return visit. "I did as you asked. The girl left and no one saw her."

"Oh, I'm very well aware that you were successful," he said, drawing a fresh stem of dragonwort through his fingers, smoothing the spiky-looking leaves.

"And yet, you are back," Severus said warily, never taking his eyes off the man.

"Slughorn burn his hand again in class?" the older man asked with a slight quirk of his lips. "This is beneath you. It's at best a fourth-year potion, hardly worth your efforts."

Severus smirked at him. "Nah, he wants it for the hospital wing, and I get credit for making it."

His older self laid the stem he'd toyed with on the desk next to Severus' ingredients. "Use a common coffee filter to sieve off the comfrey preparation. It'll refine it, and use the dragonwort right after the comfrey oil. It will strengthen your potion."

"You were reading my book," Severus snarled, his eyes narrowed and his jaw set.

The man laughed. "Of course I did...I wrote the annotations myself, years ago. Check the book yourself, the marker will be exactly where and how you placed it."

Severus crossed the room and picked up his book, opening it to the page he'd marked. The piece of green ribbon lay under the same line in the directions where he'd put it. "I was considering adding the dragonwort, but before the oil, and increasing the aloe."

The wizard smiled and set his feet on the floor. "Each time you added the dragonwort before, the potion curdled. Add it after the oil, and the potion will change to a darker shade, but will be stronger and thicker. As for the aloe, I'd increase the calendula if the user has second or third degree burns, but yes, increase the aloe if it's only a first degree burn," he said assuredly. He pointed a finger at Severus' feet. "By the way, how are the ankles?"

"Both are sore," Severus said, clenching his jaw in annoyance that his older self remembered his humiliation.

The older wizard continued to watch him with a calm, relaxed pose, and then pointed to the other cauldron. "*Addrushed* pineapple before the witch hazel, and include the onion skin when you dice the onion. I also suggest you use lavender oil with the buckhorn," he suggested.

Severus' head tilted slightly, his brow creased as he considered the suggestion, and then one side of his mouth curled as he scoffed at him. "You're daft. You cannot use that with shredded Menkle skin! The lavender oil would soften the buckhorn and change its property..."

"Exactly. Fine, don't trust me," the man said with an offhanded air.

Severus' sneer disappeared. "So why are you here? I took care of the girl as you told me to," he said, walking to his workspace. The potions were fine. Once he removed the Stasis Charm, he'd finish them and start the Burn Paste over, this time using the dragonwort as his older self suggested.

"She'll be back," he said bluntly, and Severus looked up barely able to keep his mouth from falling open.

"She'll what? I thought...when?"

"Two days," his older self stated.

"You sure like to give a guy enough notice, don't you?" Severus snapped. *Damn, again?*

"Don't get smart with me," the man snapped back.

Severus slammed his hands down on the desk. "Hey, you're the one asking me to stick my neck out for that little girl," he snapped.

"She's important," the wizard insisted, his dark eyes meeting Severus' gaze.

"I know. That's what you said last time," Severus sneered, pressing his hands on the solid wood. "So I have to babysit her another week?"

"Two," the wizard said, nodding once. "Possibly two and a half."

"What?" Severus exclaimed, leaning forward slightly.

The other wizard crossed his ankle on his knee and rested his hand on his leg. "Each time back, it takes the Time-Turner longer to cool down. She uses the device every day."

"You're kidding me?" Severus said, pushing away from the desk and taking a step back.

"You know very well I'd never kid about something like this," the man said calmly, and Severus knew that it was the truth. "There's more."

"Terrific!" he exclaimed, throwing up a hand and rolling his eyes.

"You'll have to keep a diary..."

"A diary, you're full of it if you think..."

"Don't interrupt me," the wizard snapped.

Severus leaned against the desk where he and Hermione had revised together, crossed his arms, and glared at his older self.

"Yes. You'll have to keep an accounting of when she shows up in your time," the wizard said, a tick flicking in his cheek from agitation, "because, unfortunately, I don't remember the exact date and time of each occurrence. I know approximately when and where... What I was doing, but on one of the bounces back, Lily found her. That mustn't happen, as it proved to be disastrous."

Severus' arms fell to his sides and his eyes widened. "Lily finds her? Wouldn't that be better all around? She's a girl..."

This older self glared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "Yes, Lily found her and took her in. Then Miss Granger vanished, unfortunately, the same day Mary MacDonald and three other Muggle-borns were seriously hurt, and a castle-wide search was conducted for the Death Eater who broke into Hogwarts disguised as a little girl." The older wizard pulled out what looked like a pair of diaries. "This one is for you for to write in, especially noting the times when Hermione arrives, dates and places, any notes that will help yourself find her and hide her before she is seen. The second is the one I filled out with what I remember. It's vague, mostly notes and... If you write in this one, you'll have more to give the younger version of yourself when you come back as I have done in this time loop. If you don't, then you are doing this blind. I cannot keep coming back here."

"It's a girl's diary," he sneered, looking at the soft brown covers and snap enclosures with distaste.

"It's small and brown," the man insisted. "Easy to hide and identical. I bought them at a shop near Harrods. Since they are Muggle, there is no magical residue to make anyone suspect them. You know how to conceal your writing without leaving a magical trace on the pages. Once you have finished the year, put it in a safe place that you'll remember, but where no one will look."

Severus crossed his arms and refused to accept the diaries. "Tell me again, why is the girl entrusted with a Time-Turner if she can't use it properly?"

His older self put them on the desk with a soft thud, clearly agitated. "They are relatively new in my time. They are tricky. Going back in time, the rings have to be aligned correctly and the hourglass turned in conjunction with the rune alignment. Miss Granger is a bright girl, usually responsible, but she's an over achiever and trying to prove herself in our world. She wanted to take nearly every subject that Hogwarts offers at the same time, and her Head of House let her."

"Good lord!" he exclaimed, his arms falling to his side of their own accord.

"From what I remember, when I was your age, I started writing in this book and kept it," he said, picking up the used diary. "You kept it faithfully, but you will need to keep the new one in this timeline so that this older, used book will have already been filled out. I'd found it where you hid it...part of the time loop problem. It's a paradox, but will help. That's why I'm giving you my diary and a new one. After the end of your year, burn the old one, and you'll have the new one to bring back to you. You can copy down whatever I wrote that you think you should know."

"This is confusing," Severus said, placing his hands on the desk and leaning forward with his head bowed.

"Tell me about it," the other man said.

Severus raised his chin to look at him. "And why exactly am I going through all this trouble?"

The older wizard crossed his arms. "Believe me, Miss Granger *is* needed. You can talk about any subject with her or even brew potions with her. She's very bright. Only under no circumstances is she to be seen or to meet Potter, Black, Lupin, or Lily. You got that?"

"Yeah, I got that," Severus said, feeling like he'd been given a heavy assignment, one that he'd have to repeat each time this girl made her miscalculations and thus was dropped in his lap. "Well, at least she's not a brainless twit."

"You have no idea," his older self scoffed.

Severus looked up, dark eyes meeting identical but slightly lined dark eyes. "Wanna bet?"

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

To clarify some confusion: the Time-Turner in this story is more complicated than the book version. Hermione is testing it out for Mr. Latimer, and Dumbledore is just as curious about the new device as is its creator.

I also tried to show a shift in the time paradox in the way Severus' wording changed because Dumbledore changed his mind and Severus did go back.

Okay, I'll try to clarify the jumps just in case you got lost. (Heaven forbid! I can't let that happen):

The jump in which Hermione died was the first mishap. (Hermione's 1st double jump) Professor Snape went back to six years later. (Severus' 1st jump when he spoke to his teenage self TeenSeverus1) So, Hermione's 1st jump is cancelled out. As in didn't happen. So TeenSeverus1 waits for Hermione like he's told and hides her. (This is Hermione's 2nd jump2) But because jump1 is erased, only Professor Snape1 remembers it he told himself about it, TeenSeverus1, that it happened; that's why Professor Snape remembers it later on. But he also told his teenage self about Hermione's 3rd and 4th jumps.

With me so far?

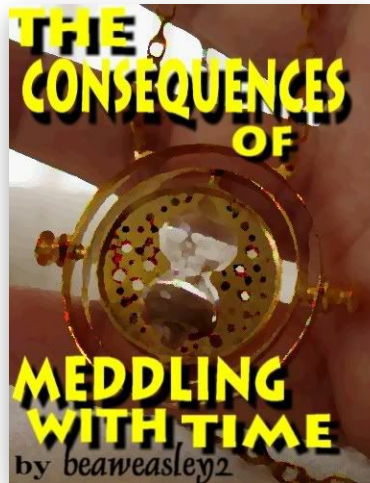
Chapter 5

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Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this to help me make this presentable for reading. You're the best, thank you!



Because of the diary, Severus knew that he'd been in a fight with Potter and Black after Ancient Runes on his way to Herbology. He knew where, right after he turned the corner to head for the stairs, but not precisely when, just approximately. *So, if I wait, if I stall for time, maybe the fight wouldn't happen. Maybe I'll get to Hermione before either Potter or Black see me, or her, and I can avoid the fight altogether.* He checked the corridor to see if any of the Gryffindors were around as he exited the classroom and walked as casually as he could, given that his nerves were on high alert for an attack. *Merlin, I hate second-guessing this.* That thought alone made him determined to take better notes than his older self did. In fact he'd write down all his 'encounters' with Potter and Black and maybe avoid them all... *Who am I kidding, a lot of good that would do me now!*

He saw Danny Wang in the corridor, apparently catching up with his friends. "Wang, wait up a moment," Severus called out, holding up a hand to get his attention. He'd rarely spoken to the guy and never outside of class, so it was no wonder that the guy looked back at him suspiciously. The four Ravenclaws stood together as Severus approached.

Now he had to ask the guy something without sounding like an idiot. "I was wondering if I could ask you something about the essay assignment for Arithmancy," he lied. It was the best he could think of.

"Okay," Wang replied, his eyes still narrowed suspiciously. All four guys looked at him expectantly, two with their arms crossed defiantly.

They all took the subject, so he'd have to come up with something quick. *Now what?* "On the length, did Professor Goddard mean that the assignment was to be a total of four feet or are the individual questions to be four feet each?"

All four looked at each other in confusion as if Severus had announced a new theory. Wuhin shrugged, Wang looked at Severus with wide eyes, and Cox shook his head and shrugged. It was Daniels that answered, "All four total, I think."

"Oh. Well, er," Severus pretended to stammer as if that wasn't the answer he'd expected.

Wang took the bait. "What? Is that wrong? Is it four feet per question?"

Severus could see Black waiting at the junction of the corridors, pointing in his direction. He turned his attention back to Wang. "I thought it was four feet per question, and I have finished the first three questions, but I can only get two feet of material on the third, Ferris' theory, including a comparative to Wentworth's equation of equal congruent probabilities." It was a lie. He could write a book on the improbability of Ferris' theory since he thought the wizard was a dunderhead.

"Well," Wang stretched out the single word as his mind went into gear. "There is the obvious hole in his theory about using triad equations... and Kincaid's principle..."

Severus snuck a quick glance and noticed that Black was moving away. "Great, because I was going to factor in parallel versus congruent probabilities with multiple vectors," he said, resisting the smirk when Wang, Cox, and Daniels looked impressed. It was hardly a stretch as the theorems were compatible anyway. "Okay, thanks, I have to go."

He walked to the junction of the corridor and knelt to retie his shoe, slyly checking his watch *She is due any moment...unless the wizard was wrong.* But then his older self had said that Hermione appeared in the middle of the duel and had been hit. No telling how long the fight had gone on in the old wizard's time, but in his time, the fights with Potter and Black were usually rather quick. Neither Black nor Potter wanted to be seen firing a spell at him by a professor...but if he was seen firing a spell at them...that was a whole other matter. He adjusted his sock and glanced down the corridor. Lupin was coming, which didn't bode well. Severus switched position to retie his other shoe. Lupin nodded as he passed and kept going. He couldn't wait any longer. He opened his bag as if checking something and saw Potter walking up to Lupin. Severus stood, backed into the corridor out of sight and collided with a stunned Hermione Granger.

"Ouch!" she exclaimed and then smiled even though she still looked a bit confused. "Oh, hi."

"Quiet," he hissed, taking her hand in his to make her run with him. "This way. C'mon." He took off for the end of the corridor, dragging her along, dropping her hand when they reached the statue of Anugard the Stout. He had to get her to the dungeons from the fifth floor and not run into the Gryffindor bullies that were still in the corridors on their way to Charms or run into any of his house mates.

"Why are we running?" she asked softly enough.

"Because I have to get you safely tucked away before I am late to class," he said, leading the way down another corridor. He was going to be late to class anyway. At least she was keeping up with him, or trying to, considering the bag she carried. He knew from experience it was really heavy and full of books, and not just her school books either. He pulled his wand out and charmed the bag to be lighter so she could keep up with him better.

"Thanks," she said, picking up her pace. "Why don't I hide in the library until...?"

"Are you daft?" he asked, nearly breaking stride from turning his head too quickly to look at her. "You cannot be seen. Remember?"

"When's lunch?" she asked.

He silently swore. "Had it," he snapped, willing her to be quiet. "Dinner is in four hours." He didn't want to attract any more attention than could be helped.

"Oh," she said, and he could hear her disappointment.

"Yeah, oh." He stopped and turned to consider the fact that she might have missed hers. The book told him what time she arrived, not when she'd left. It could be a long time to dinner for her. "Are you hungry?"

"I can wait," she replied, shrugging and hitching her bag up on her shoulder.

He nodded once, opened a door, and hurried down a spiral staircase.

"Does this go to the Ravenclaw common room?" she asked, her voice carrying loudly in the stone staircase.

"I have no idea, but it goes down to the first floor. I...the only ones I know are Slytherins' and Gryffindors' common rooms," he answered her, growing a bit impatient with her questions.

"Why is that?" she asked, stopping on the last step as Severus stopped to the opened the door.

"Always good to know where the vipers nest is," he said. He pulled out the small blue box and opened it. "Put it in here again. That way the setting won't change, unless it has while we were running."

She pulled the chain over her head and dropped the Time-Turner inside. "It should be all right," she replied with a frown as he pocketed her Time-Turner.

Severus checked to see if the coast was clear, ignoring her apparent disappointment. So far they'd lucked out; they hadn't been seen by any of the professors and very few students.

When they got to the main stairs, Severus hesitated and held his wand ready in case he had to make a diversion. "Okay, make a nogtail and run for the dungeons. Don't stop. I'm right behind you." She took off running, and he easily caught up to her, smirking at her nice, even stride. She ran like a deer: she maneuvered quickly, was sure footed, and her footfalls made only light thuds on the stone floors.

Once they'd made it to her room, Hermione gasped at the changes Severus and Snape had made that his older self had suggested. They had done as much to the room as they could to give her a comfortable living space. "I made a few changes," he said as he pulled out her Time-Turner and checked it carefully. "Good, no damage. But the sand is clear, and it's really hot."

"How is it that you know when I'm going to appear?" she asked, crossing her arms as if cold.

"I can't tell you that," he said and turned to go. "I'll be back after Herbology. So don't go anywhere."

"No, I'll wait for you," he heard her say before he left. He ran all the way to class, hoping he wasn't too late and that Professor Sprout would buy the excuse that he'd been trying to avoid a fight with Black.

Hermione looked around the small classroom. What had caught her eye upon entering were the Slytherin four-poster bed in the corner and the tapestries on the walls to cut the cold. The green drapes of the bed were tied back, and she could see an extra quilt folded at the foot of the bed. A bedside table with a lamp stood against the wall and a rug lay on the floor so she'd be able to slip from the bed and not freeze her feet on the stone floor. The desk she'd transfigured into a kind of trunk had been modified and now stood a few steps from the bed at the edge of the carpet, making a definite sleeping area. He'd placed a large pitcher and wash bowl with a few hand towels on it for her use. There was even a comfortable chintz chair next to a reading lamp near the foot of the bed. Her gaze swept across the room, noting that the teacher's desk still stood next to the enlarged student's desk she and Severus had used to read and revise the last time she had been here. She wondered where the bed had come from, then assumed that he'd found the bed and moved it in here for her.

The benches were stacked just as she'd left them, and the blankets were still stacked neatly on them along with her plate, cup and cutlery. His two cauldrons, some potion ingredients, a pile of books and some utensils, scales, and a set of measuring spoons and cups took up one bench. She touched the old scales reverently with a soft smile on her lips. *I wonder what he'll brew while I'm here...or if he'll brew anything?*

She walked over and peered under the bed. Her chamber pot was still there as well as six rolls of toilet paper. Hermione stood and laughed. She sat on the bed and gazed around again. *He has really tried to make this as comfortable as possible for me.* Such consideration astounded her. Sure, he had been really thoughtful the last time she'd accidentally bounced back to his time, but that time he'd really only seen to her needs. He hadn't gone all out for her like this. She ran her hand on the green and black quilt, smiling at the feeling of the velveteen. The drapes were a heavy, green damask with sheer white curtains underneath. They would be perfect if she wanted privacy but still wanted to have some light while sitting in bed.

She walked over to look at the items in the trunk. The robes he'd given to her to use were neatly folded inside along with three pairs of socks and two nightshirts, one grey and the other white. Her hairbrush and toothbrush were in the trunk as well as shampoo, conditioner, soap, toothpaste... even flossing mints. Severus had thought of everything.

She walked over to set her bag down on the table and wished she'd had her books to write her Potions essay for Professor Snape, then chuckled at the irony of her situation.

Severus ducked down the stairs to the kitchens after Herbology. He still had Charms, but if he hurried, he could make a quick stop at the kitchens and then see Hermione for a bit before class.

His older self had suggested enlisting the help of Mystery, one of the house-elves that took care of the Slytherin dormitories. He had no idea how he could convince the elf to help him, since they didn't like to get involved in students affairs and wouldn't keep a secret from Headmaster Dumbledore.

All the elves gathered around him the moment he entered the kitchens.

"Is sir wanting something?" a female in a tea towel-toga asked as a male who had his towel tied around his waist asked, "How can we serves you, sir?"

"I was wondering if I could have something to eat?" he asked, not sure of what Hermione would like. "You know, snacks."

Several of the house-elves sprang into action, bringing all kinds of food, from sweets to a variety of fruit, corn, chips, chicken legs, cheese and crackers. Another elf handed him a platter as Severus started selecting various foods for Hermione, and the eager elves helped him pile on the goodies.

As he turned to go, a female elf handed him a pitcher of pumpkin juice. "Does sir want anything else, sir?"

"Ah, no. Thank you. This is so much... more," he said, trying to open the door with his hands full, "than I expected."

A small elf pushed the door open for him, grinning with a huge smile. "Thank you, sir. We is glad to haves served you, sir. Bye, sir."

He set the pitcher down and cast a spell to keep the food from falling and added a Notice-Me-Not on himself, the tray, and then the pitcher. He made it to the dungeons without incident and kicked the door to the old classroom with his toe. "It's me, let me in."

"Severus?" Hermione asked as she opened the door with her wand held ready in her hand.

"Well, who did you think it was?" he snarled as he carried the overloaded tray and pitcher to the desk.

"Well, I dunno, Filch, maybe? One of your house mates, possibly? Even Professor Dumbledore," she rattled off with her hands on her hips. "It's not like we have a secret password or a code or anything."

"All right, I'll use Menelaus," he said sarcastically, turning to face her.

"Funny," she snorted and put away her wand. "You are not my father, and although my father says my mum is the most beautiful woman in the world, she never sank a thousand ships."

"So you are up on your mythology," he said, impressed despite himself *Interesting*. Well, she had a Muggle background, and her father liked reading historical stories to her. *If she was from a wizarding family, she would know her wizarding mythology as well...* "So you've read the stories of Helen of Troy."

"I've read all the stories of the Greek legends and mythology. My father loves history and mythology, so he'd read it to me as bedtime stories," she stated.

"I remember you saying something about that last time. So, now, what to do with you?" he asked, leaning against the desk he used as a workbench. "Last time you managed to stay in here pretty well, but this time the Time-Turner might take longer to become usable. As I recall, you got a bit stir crazy at the end, and I have to know that I can trust you."

"I couldn't help it. I'm sorry," Hermione apologized and looked at the floor as her face flushed a bright pink. "Why do you think that it may take longer?" She looked up, the blush still present, tinting her cheeks. "And how did you know me, last time? How is it that you knew when and where I would show up? Why are you hiding me and not the Headmaster? Does the Headmaster even know I'm here? Or Professor McGonagall? Shouldn't I be under their supervision?"

Severus let her get all her questions out. He'd rolled his eyes at the second question and had ran his hands over his face into his hair at the fourth one, and his hands fell to his sides at her last. "Are you through, or are there more?" he asked, exasperated by the endless questions that he couldn't answer. "I cannot tell you how I know you or how I know any of this. I assure you it isn't by Divination. As for the Headmaster, I dunno. I didn't tell him anything. But I think that since I'm apparently the *only* one to know, its best we keep it that way, all right? The fewer who know about you or see you, the less influence and interference there is on my...your timeline. This...us...it's risky enough, but if you mess around, I'd hate to think the consequences you'd cause."

She sighed heavily and looked at her bag on the floor. "I don't have enough work to keep me occupied for a week, let alone longer."

"I'll bring you books. We can brew together, if you like. We can... I dunno, practice spells," he suggested, remembering what his older self said. He doubted he'd enjoy brewing fourth-year level potions, but it would keep her occupied. At least she seemed to cheer up at his suggestions, and he could give them to Slughorn to fulfill Madam Pomfrey's request list. "I usually spend my time in the library when not in classes. I think I can come here at least one break a day without notice. I'll bring food, and I can come here in the evenings, like last time." *Although, Avery was getting pretty curious last time.* "But if my house mates start getting suspicious and start looking for me...at least none of them come in here. They know I come in here to brew, though. The bed can be hidden if that becomes a problem..."

"I appreciate that, and I'll keep to this room as much as possible." She turned to look at his potions kit on the benches. "What were you brewing?" she asked, sounding hopeful.

He smirked. "Whatever I damn well feel like, actually. You know that I sometimes brew potions that my house mates want for money. Lately, when Pot-er, Madam Pomfrey needs something for the hospital wing, Professor Slughorn gives me extra credit to help out." He cursed himself mentally. He almost told her that he'd been brewing his own potions to relieve whatever Potter and Black did to him. He even kept a journal of counter curses and hexes in his pocket, but he didn't want to tell her that either.

"I'd love to learn Healer's potions," she said enthusiastically.

"All right, we'll do Burns, Sprains, and Fever Potions after dinner for the next few days. Madam Pomfrey is always glad to have those on supply. We can do Pepper-Up and Pain Potions as well, if they aren't too difficult for you," he suggested. "Of course, you did all right last time we brewed together." Besides Madam Pomfrey had already said she'd pay him for his potions. The improvements he'd made alone on the Burn Pastes had really impressed her. He wanted to try and improve the Anti-bacterial Salve for cuts so that it stung less when it was applied.

That night he showed her his directions for the second and third degree Burn Paste.

"You write in your books?" she asked, looking up at him as if he'd committed a mortal sin.

"Yeah, I write in my books. Don't you make annotations while revising?" he asked, knowing that all of his books were covered in his handwriting.

"I use a journal or a notebook," she stated, fingering the page with a look of regret. "I suppose I respect and treasure books too much to deface them."

He scoffed at her and pulled his book away from her. "You sound like Madam Pince."

"I like her," she stated as if talking about a long lost friend.

"No one likes her," he scoffed at her and started to pull out the ingredients he'd need from his cauldron.

She tipped her head to the side and smirked at him. "You do...well, you will, and the professors get along with her well enough." She picked up the coffee filter and furrowed her brow in confusion then set it down. "There is a rumor that she and Mr. Filch are a couple."

He laid the filter on the spouted glass jar. "Okay, that's a visual I didn't need, thank you very much." He passed her the comfrey. "Do you think you can press the sap from the stems and then dice the leaves?"

"Sure," she said, reaching for the trenched cutting board and pestle he'd borrowed from the Potions classroom. He watched her carefully as they worked, only having to correct her technique a few times.

By the time the second potion was simmering, he was even slightly impressed. She was quite proficient at following his directions. She had only needed to be told or shown things once and had only asked pertinent questions while they worked. *Maybe this won't be so bad after all.* He looked at his watch. "Damn, it's late. It's past curfew already!"

"I can finish up here, if you like?" she offered.

He quickly gathered up his utensils. "I have to clean my utensils and there isn't a sink in here." The potions needed to sit for a few hours.

"I'll watch the potions. The first is nearly done and the second still needs an hour to simmer according to your directions. Since I'm here anyway, I'll take care of them. Really. It's not like I have anywhere to go or anyplace I have to be tomorrow."

He checked the timer and the potion.

"When the timer goes off, lower the flame until it's barely visible and let it sit another half hour," she said as if reading his mind. "Then turn off the flame, and let it cool another fifteen minutes before bottling. You said we're using the clear, brown jars for the Burn Paste."

"You're sure?" he asked, not wanting to trust the potion with anyone but himself, even her. He was getting six Sickles per cauldron for these potions.

"I'm sure," she said, looking up at him with pure sincerity in her large, soft brown eyes.

He hesitated, lost for a moment in her gaze, then turned his head and grabbed his utensils. "Thank you."

"No problem," she said as he hurried for the door. "Good night, Severus."

"Night."

The next day, Severus collected a mountain of books on all subjects, still not sure which ones Hermione was taking. He'd simply grabbed at random from each section. Madam Pince raised an eyebrow as he set the pile on her desk. "You are certainly becoming an avid reader," she sneered. "You have a twelve book limit, Mr. Snape."

"Some are for Avery," he lied, wondering what Avery's book limit was.

Apparently, Madam Pince didn't know either as she had to look it up. "He never checks out more than three."

"He's in the hospital wing for a week, Ma'am," Severus stated, mentally crossing his fingers. He was in the hospital wing, recovering from a bad reaction from being hit by two different spells. "I thought it would help him keep up on his class work."

"Very well, but you'll have to sign for them," she replied. "And you will be responsible for their return...and their condition."

"Absolutely," he agreed, knowing that someone who loved books as Hermione did wouldn't deface them. Hermione's delight at seeing the books made carting all twenty books down to the dungeons worthwhile. "I had no idea what subjects you take, so I grabbed something from each subject..."

"Oh! This one was lost...and this one had been off the shelves forever!" she exclaimed, picking up the top books and reading the titles. "This one was in the card catalogue as missing... and you have Mortensen's *Aquatic Botanicals*! Oh, Severus, thank you!"

"Oi! That's for my Herbology! I need that one!" he said, taking it back. "It's about class level six... I can't believe you're reading sixth-year Herbology books!"

"I wanted to know about the coral of the lophelia in the Darwin Mounds of Cape Wrath," she said, eyeing the book wistfully.

"It's a potions ingredient for Nail Strengthening Potion," he said, placing the book in front of him as he separated the books he'd gotten for his own essays from the ones he'd checked out for her.

"Used in hair and nail strengthening potions, actually," Hermione stated, still eyeing the book hopefully.

"Figures a girl would know that," he scoffed. He'd not taken her as one of the type of girls that worried about their appearance. She sure didn't while she'd been here, except for requesting regular trips to the showers.

"My dorm mates, Lavender and Parvati, are into all that girl stuff. I'm interested in the coral, how it's harvested and its properties..."

Severus snorted a laugh and handed her the book. "We'll share it," he said. "Well, happy reading. I have class. I'll be back at lunch."

Hermione picked up the book and hurried over to her chair by the bed. He shook his head as he left her to her amusements.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Do you see much of Professor Snape in young Severus' actions?

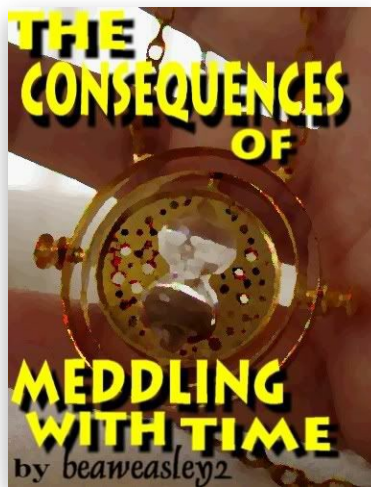
Chapter 6

Chapter 6 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

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Severus slipped into the classroom after exchanging the books from his morning classes for his books for his double Defense class after lunch. Since his essay for Professor Molina was finished, he had a break. So, he decided to spend it with Hermione. She was sitting crossed-legged on her bed, practicing charms to make a book move about the room. "I see you've got the Summoning Charm down."

"I'm still not able to control the Repelling Charm though," she said, her expression one of intense concentration as she tried to return the book to the table. It fell with a thud. "Bugger."

"You're trying too hard. Relax and it'll come naturally," he suggested as he watched her Summon the book back to her.

"You're really a good teacher," she said as she caught the book easily with one hand.

"I hate teaching," he said, dumping his bag on the worktable.

"I know," she said with a smirk as the book sailed back toward him. "But you're good at it. So, you have a break now?"

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Do you always state the obvious?" He turned around to grab his cauldrons before she could answer and saw the book land on the desk beside him. "If you're done playing with the book, do you want to help me brew something?"

"Sure!" she said exuberantly, jumping from the bed.

He laughed at her enthusiasm as he pulled out his *Comprehensive Compendium of Draughts and Potions* and *The Healer's Elixirs and Decoctions* to get his *Advanced Potions Making* out of his bag. "Okay, I just need to go get some parchment to write out the directions," he said, realizing he was down to his last few sheets that he'd need for Defense later.

Hermione picked up her bag and withdrew a sheet for him. He was surprised by the quality of the parchment. "You gave me your good stuff," he said, handing it back.

"It's what I use for my essays," she replied, looking at him curiously.

Severus looked at the sheet and shrugged. "Thanks. I'll pay it back," he said, setting his bag on the floor.

She started to laugh. "No, it's fine. My dad bought me a ream of it for school," she said as he opened his book to the Sprain Paste and started copying down the directions for the potion, adding in the variations from his annotations. Hermione watched him, apparently amazed.

"What?" he asked, not bothering to look up.

"How can you read that? You've scribbled on every available space on the page!" she said in a tone of disbelief.

He pulled his book closer and bent over it as he copied down the directions. "It's not scribble...they're my notes. I experiment with the potions, try to improve them," he said coolly, glancing at her through his hair. She knew that he wrote in his books. It wasn't like he could afford journals to write his thoughts and annotations in or use medium weight parchment like she apparently could. He had to make do with what he had.

Hermione blushed and toyed with her thumb. "That's not what I meant! I just...I can't see how you can decipher... sorry."

His head jerked up. "I just know." He slid the directions he copied to the middle of the table between them. "I'll crush the pineapple, and you can dice the onion and the witch hazel." Hermione nodded and picked up the cutting board and his knife. "Don't peel the onion; I want the skin, too." She nodded that she understood him and set to work.

When the potion was half-way done, he showed her how to slide the knife to cut the Menkle skin. He had to correct her twice before she managed to get her slices thin enough and at the right angle. He then showed her how to do the cross-cuts so they'd be just as thin. He watched her to make sure that she had the cutting technique down and turned his attention back to the preparation of his buckhorn shavings. He coated them lightly in lavender oil, mentally crossing his fingers that they didn't soak up too much oil. When the timer went off, Hermione added the skins and began to stir.

Severus waited until she was done. "Okay, now back up." She took only one step back, clearly wanting to watch the process of the potion. Severus took a deep breath and mentally prepared for the worst. He pushed the buckhorn to the rim of his dish and then carefully pushed it into the potion. He cringed as the oily mess landed with a plop. He increased the flame under the cauldron and held his breath. Hermione watched in anticipation. The potion began to turn, coming up in the middle and rolling back under on the sides within the cauldron, and a large bubble slowly erupted on the surface followed several seconds later by another. He waited, watching the surface for signs of the color turning brown not purplish.

"What is the problem?" Hermione asked softly.

"The shaved buckhorn absorbs the lavender oil, which changes its magical property," he explained. "Menkle skin reacts violently to lavender oil, so it's generally never added one right after the other. Normally, the buckhorn would act as a stabilizer if I had added it first, then the oil, but this way the potion comes out better...if I do it right. The problem is that if there is too much excess lavender oil on the buckhorn or if it absorbs too much of the oil the buckhorn can't or won't act as a buffer. The other problem is that I have to increase the flame for the buckhorn to blend with the Menkle skin. Plus, the buckhorn has to be added all at once. That's the tricky part...I can't just dump it in...it has to be placed in carefully. Too quickly and it explodes. Too slow and it throws the balance off so the increased heat will make it start to boil, which will make it turn to a noxious sludge."

Hermione looked at her bed, deep in thought. "Have you considered using a slotted spoon, spatula, or even a frying spoon?"

"A frying spoon...spatula...this is Potions, not cooking," he said, one side of his mouth pulling back in a grimace.

She was still staring at the bed hangings, deep in thought. "A frying spoon is used with a fryer... Or a spatula...it's flat with slits...and both have long handles." She turned to look at him, ignoring his smirk. "You could use one of them to lower the buckhorn into the cauldron closer to the surface. They would also let the excess oil drain from the buck... horn," she explained, and then blushed as his expression changed to an incredulous stare. "Sorry, rambling. Don't mind me."

"No, that has merit. I know what a spatula is," he said, making a notation on his directions. "Where did you come up with that? But what's a fryer?"

"A hot oil deep fryer? My mum has one. It's a kitchen appliance," she stated. He shrugged and she continued. "Mum loves to experiment in the kitchen. She really gets creative with hors d'oeuvre, appetizers, and desserts." Hermione bit her lip as if waiting to see if he'd understand what she was saying.

He shook his head and shrugged not getting the connection. His mum never made desserts, and he had no idea what or-derives were.

She released her lip and continued. "If you make pastries or appetizers in a fryer or a pan of hot oil, you don't want to drop them into the oil...you want to place them in carefully, just over the surface, so that the oil doesn't sputter or splash."

Severus looked at her, catching on to what she was saying, and grinned. "Exactly. How can I get one?"

Hermione bit her lip again. "I'm not sure. Under normal circumstances, I'd ask my mum to send me one. But it's not like I can send her an owl and ask her get it for me...I mean, I'm in my past, right? She might not know who I am, and I can't give you one once I'm back in my time. Well, I could, but that won't help you now."

Severus nodded, feeling disappointed, and turned his attention back to the potion. He added the comfrey and stirred seven times, then added the anti-clockwise rotation of the rod at the end while running over any possible way of getting a spatula or a fryer spoon in his mind.

"Do you know any Muggle-borns?" Hermione asked, tilting her head as she regarded him.

He snorted. "Loads. Just have to ask around the common room. 'Anyone got a Muggle parent who can send me a spatula or a frying spoon?' I'd be hexed for even asking."

Hermione exhaled loudly and crossed her arms at his snarky answer.

He smirked and cocked his head. "Hermione, I'm in Slytherin, remember? Pure-bloods...or related to pure-bloods. No Muggle-borns."

"And no friends in other houses?" she persisted, a habit that was getting annoying.

Severus turned his head and exhaled, thinking about Lily. "Not anymore." He started cleaning up the workspace. "I have to get to class. I'll see you after dinner."

Hermione sighed, but helped him tidy up. He knew that she wanted him to stay with her, but he needed some space. He didn't want to be reminded that he and Lily were not talking to each other anymore...well, not as friends anyway. He checked the potion and lowered the flame to let the potion simmer.

"When should I bottle it?" she asked, indicating the potion.

"It's a paste. This has to sit for an hour, and then put out the flame. Let it fully cool, then scrape it into the jars. I have double Defense. I'll see you at dinner, if not sooner," he said, grabbing his bag and hurrying off to class.

"Have fun," she called out after him.

Hermione rummaged in her bag until she found a bent quill. It was a nice one she'd gotten from her dad last Christmas, and she'd been heartbroken when it had bent. She pulled out her Transfiguration book and looked up the spell to make a spoon. She'd changed rabbits into slippers, a tortoise into a teapot, a hedgehog into a pincushion... and a mouse into a teaspoon. The spell to turn a mouse into a spoon was her best bet, but she needed a mouse and hopefully not someone's pet. Only she'd never seen a mouse, or a rat for that matter, in the castle that wasn't someone's pet. She tried using the spell to turn the quill into a spoon and only managed to make the quill melt. She paced the room and decided to try the Summoning Charm to get a mouse, hoping she'd get a pest and not someone's pet.

She picked up a cauldron and her wand, walked over to the door and opened it about two inches. *Accio mouse*, she whispered with as much determination as she could. Nothing happened. She tried again, speaking clearly and determinedly. This time a soft squealing could be heard as a mouse sailed through the air toward her. She grinned as she caught the brownish-grey mouse in the cauldron and closed the door. The rodent didn't have a well fed, cared for look and certainly wasn't tame. "So, I'm going to assume you don't belong to anyone," she told the mouse.

The rodent scurried in panic, and it tried to bite her fingers when she reached in to grab its tail. Smiling, Hermione turned it into a teaspoon, turned it back and then tried changing the mouse into a larger spoon. It looked like a slightly enlarged soup spoon. "Easy enough, but not the right shape." She pictured her mum's frying spoon in her mind and tried again. It didn't come out right at all. She tried several times, each time failing at recreating the desired spoon. "So, I can turn you into a teaspoon or a soup spoon, even a serving spoon...just not a frying spoon. How about just making a long handled serving spoon, only wide and flat with slats?" Two tries later, she had

something that would serve Severus' needs.

She put the cauldron back on the bench and laid the spoon next to it, eagerly anticipating Severus' arrival at dinnertime.

Severus picked up his spoon, examined it for a moment, and smiled, catching an odd look from Avery. They were having Shepherd's pie in individual crocks that had appeared at every place setting on the table. Severus loved Shepherd's pie...especially the ones at Hogwarts since they had chunks of meat and loads of peas and carrots. He had wanted to simply grab two and leave, but his friends had stopped him, wanting him to stay. So, he'd relented, opting to eat hurriedly and leave for the classroom.

He was actually looking forward to seeing Hermione. She was corker, Hermione. She'd defied him two days ago and had gone out into the corridors to find a mouse, although she'd denied it adamantly, claiming to only have opened the door an inch or so. At least she hadn't been seen.

But the fact was, she'd made him a spoon...out of a lousy rodent.

Right clever, too...almost like a long-handled spatula but curved, the bowl of the spoon wide and flat with holes. *She'd said she'd modified it specifically for me, to best suit my needs*, he mused as he broke the crust of his Shepherd's pie with his tablespoon.

She'd actually given him a gift, a fact that still amazed him. She'd made it for no reason other than to give him something he could use.

It was perfect though. He'd used it that night, and the Sprain Paste had turned out exactly how his older self had said it would.

He scooped up a bit of his pie and smiled at the spoon in his hand before eating the bite of crust, gravy, and peas.

He did appreciate her thoughtfulness.

She had read the entire stack of books he'd hauled down to the room in only two days. All twenty-four. Quite impressive actually, considering she'd read his books as well. He smiled as he ate his Shepherd's pie, listening to Hurshiser and Rowe across the table discuss who they were asking to go to Hogsmeade with them. Severus knew that Thortenson would take Linnet, and Avery would be with Victoria Myers all day.

Severus wished that he could take Hermione, but that would be way too risky. Still, it would've been nice to ask a girl to go who might actually want to be seen with him. *Seen*. He cringed. *Oh, yeah, that would be great...seen with Hermione*.

"So, Snape, who are you asking?" Rowe inquired.

Thankfully he'd just shoved a spoonful of pie in his mouth.

"He's taking that mystery girl, that's who," Avery stated.

Severus wanted to hex Avery's bullocks off. He didn't need Avery getting Rowe curious about some nonexistent girlfriend. Rowe might find Hermione if he got too curious and bothered to look in the old classroom.

"Nah, Snape don't have a girl," Mulciber said, shoving Avery's shoulder good-humoredly, making Avery spill a bit of his pumpkin juice on his robes.

"Watch it!" Avery glared at him as he wiped the spilt juice.

Severus took a drink of his own juice so he could speak for himself.

"I bet he holes up with a stack of books and finishes my essay for Transfiguration for me," Mulciber stated, in a vain attempt, yet again, to get Severus to write his essay for him. Mulciber grinned, ignoring Severus' scowl, and tucked into his dinner.

Severus set down his goblet forcibly, making the dish in front of him bounce. "Not bloody likely..."

"So, you do have a girl?" Avery asked a bit too loudly as it made several heads turn.

"No, I'm not asking a girl to go to Hogsmeade with me," Severus said and shoveled another large bite into his mouth.

Rowe looked up at him, his fork posed a few inches from his mouth. "You're not asking a bloke are you?" he asked, smirking.

Hurshiser snickered.

Severus gave them both a hard glare. "Did you *want* the Hair Restoration Potion or not?" he snapped at Rowe. "Because I could use the time for revision instead."

Rowe had the decency to look abashed. "Sorry, mate."

Rosier stopped laughing, looking up at Severus with awe. "So, you got it then?" he asked, his eyes wide and his mouth open. "You'll make a pile of gold!"

"Nope, still makes your nose, ears, armpit, and groin hair grow...not the hair on your head," Severus said, still disappointed with the last batch he'd tried. Mr. Rowe was offering Severus a fortune if he could make the potion work on baldness. "So if you want to look like a bald-headed mongoloth...it's perfect."

"Bummer," Avery said, grinning over the rim of his cup.

"I was thinking of slipping it to Black," Mulciber said, turning slightly in his seat to look at the Gryffindor table.

"Already did," Avery said, still smirking over his cup.

"You what?!" Severus snarled, looking up at the Gryffindor table just as Pettigrew handed his goblet to Black. "Slughorn knows about the project..." His voice trailed off as Pettigrew started sprouting hair from his nose and ears, making everyone but Lily, Black, and Potter burst out in laughter around him.

"Relax," Avery said, setting down his cup. "It's all in the..." Just then Black and Pettigrew jumped up and ran for the door, their long nose hairs looking like a walrus mustache and sporting thick tufts of hair from their ears. "Oh, that wet prat is so gullible!"

"I gotta go," Severus said, climbing to his feet.

"You ain't even finished your pie?" Mulciber protested. "I wanted to ask you about the conversion..."

But Severus was on his feet.

"He never eats," Severus heard Avery say as he headed for the door.

"You are gonna help me with my essay, right?" Mulciber called after him.

Severus shrugged as he walked away.

Lily intercepted him at the door. "What did you do..."

"What did I do, what, Lily?" Severus asked, interrupting her, knowing full well what she was accusing him of. He wanted to get to the kitchens, get another Shepherd's pie for him and one for Hermione, and go work over his notes.

"I know about your project, Severus," she snapped accusingly at him.

"And so does Professor Slughorn. Do you really think me thick enough to use the potion on Black and Pettigrew...in the Great Hall...in front of Slughorn, Headmaster Dumbledore, *and* Professor McGonagall?" he snarled at her, indicating the staff table with a sweep of his hand. "I just know Professor McGonagall is going to demand that I confess I did it so she can put me in detention for using an experimental potion on her cubs...which I didn't do...but I'll be accused of it regardless!"

"Sev..."

"No, Lily, I didn't!" he snapped at her. "I am not some dunderhead who would try that in the Great Hall...just so your Head of House can ream me *yet again*, for something I didn't do!"

"Then how did it get in their food?" she snapped back at him, her hands on her hips.

"I dunno? Ask Potter? Ask the house-elves. Ask your housemates. Maybe Pettigrew ticked off someone in your house," he sneered at her. "Slughorn had it in his office. Maybe you should ask him why it wasn't locked up." He turned and stormed away from her.

Despite his outburst in the Great Hall, the house-elves were more than happy to give him two Shepherd's pies, apples, slices of cheese, and several chocolate-covered éclairs. He didn't bother concealing the food as he stormed off to his lab.

Hermione was on her bed, reading when he came in. "Hi! I... What's wrong?"

"Avery used the potion in Black's and Pettigrew's food. That's what," he snapped at her, dropping the tray on the desk. "You'll have to drink water. I forgot the juice."

"That's fine," she said, ambling from the bed. "When did you go see Madam Pomfrey?"

"After Transfiguration," he said through gritted teeth. He'd had to spend the entire lesson with the itchy feeling of extra long hair in his armpits, arms, legs, and groin. Thankfully, the batch they'd brewed that morning hadn't affected his ears or nose.

She nodded slowly, looking at him from under her fringe with expectant eyes. "And you were late leaving Transfiguration, weren't you?"

He looked up, amazed at her perceptiveness. "Yeah, Professor McGonagall held me up after class to assign me and Black detention. I only had enough time before dinner to run up to see Madam Pomfrey and ask her about the antidote because mine didn't work..." His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "How'd you hear about that? You weren't supposed to leave the room...you promised!"

"I heard your house mates complaining about Black in the corridor. One of them was really mad, so I opened the door a crack to listen, and I overheard about how Black got you in trouble in Transfiguration," she said off handedly, waving him off. "So unless you managed to spike the food sometime between getting your detention assigned by Professor McGonagall and when you went to Madam Pomfrey to have the hair growth reversed, you couldn't have had time to run down to the Great Hall early enough to slip the potion into Black's goblet before any of the Gryffindors came down to eat."

"Pettigrew's goblet...he handed his to Black," he corrected her, remembering what he'd seen. "I saw Professor Slughorn in the Entrance Hall. He told me to stop running and to hurry or I'd be late to dinner." Severus mentally recounted his conversation with his Head of House. "I did tell him that I'd just come from seeing Madam Pomfrey, and he'd asked me what for."

"So you have an alibi, two actually," Hermione said triumphantly.

"Thanks," he said, really glad that she was there to talk to. "But I don't want you opening the door...what if one of them had seen you? Remember what they'd said the first time you came here?"

Hermione dropped her head and her face turned red. "Yes, I remember." She looked up at him imploringly. "Surely they aren't so mad that they'd hurt me now?"

"Why chance it?" he asked. "C'mon, let's eat. Tell me about which book you devoured today."

Hermione watched him slyly as he worked on his essay for Ancient Runes. It still amazed her that he took the same classes that she did. Well, mostly. He didn't take Muggle Studies or Divination, calling Divination woolly and Muggle Studies a waste of her time since she was Muggle-born. She also had Magical Arts and Literature, which he thought was for dunderheads who had to be told what art was and couldn't understand what they were reading so they had to have it explained to them. Nevertheless, Hermione liked Magical Arts and Literature, although she certainly agreed with him about Divination.

Severus checked something in one of his books, then compared it to something in another. He had an intensity about him when he studied, the same as when he brewed potions, as if nothing could distract him. Somehow, she knew he was very much aware of everything around him, at least she knew that his older self was. He also tended to look at her through his hair, a habit Professor Snape had when he was writing at his desk in class.

Unlike his older self, Severus had the habit of keeping his left elbow on the desk and either caressing his lips with a finger or resting his forehead on his fingertips as he read, then putting his head against his fist as he wrote. He also occasionally tapped his quill on his thumb when he was deep in thought over a problem. Other than that, his face was nearly expressionless, his dark eyes always intently focused. And his hands... He had the most incredible hands: long, supple fingers, quite strong, very dexterous, and always meticulously manicured without any hangnails or cuts marring his skin. Hermione really liked watching his hands...

He looked up as he dipped his quill. "Why are you staring at me?"

"I was just thinking," she replied, staring at his dark eyes and the lines of his face. He was kind of attractive in his own way...intriguing and mysterious. He had that adorable awkward 'not yet grown into his features' look that would change when he grew up. Of course, the years would weigh heavily on him and the strain of being a...

"About what?" he asked, breaking her train of thought.

Hermione jerked her gaze from his lips to his eyes. "Ah, what?"

"What are you thinking about? You're still staring," he snapped irritably.

"Things," she said noncommittally, dropping her attention to the spell book he'd brought her.

"Well, stare at the wall instead of me when you're thinking," he growled softly, leaning over his paper so that his nose barely touched the parchment.

She didn't like seeing him hunch over that way. "Why do you do that?" she asked.

He looked up again. "Do what?"

"Hunch over like that," she said, pointing at him. "You don't do it all the time, so I know it's not because of your eyesight."

"I have excellent eyesight," he said, his brow creasing as he regarded her. "What are you on about?"

"You hunch over, like when you're eating or writing, with your nose barely over the plate or parchment. But you don't do it all the time. Like you're blocking me out or closing yourself off, and you do it when you're annoyed," she explained as best as she could.

His eyes narrowed and the crease between his eyes became more pronounced, and she hoped she hadn't insulted him. "I just mean, you seem to hunch over like that when you're annoyed or something. As if I might copy from your paper or you don't want me to see what you're writing. But you don't do it all the time. I was just curious."

"Are you through?" he asked and Hermione felt her cheeks heat up. "It's a habit, I suppose. I don't really pay attention to it."

She shrugged and nodded, then turned back to her book.

"Why do you bite your lip?" he asked, looking at her through a slit of his wall of hair.

She released her lip, unaware that she'd tucked it under her front teeth. "I dunno. I do that when I'm thinking, I suppose?"

"You do it when you're nervous, when you're reading, writing, chopping or cutting ingredients, and when you're stirring a potion. You even do it when you braid your hair," he pointed out, still watching her through his hair hanging down over half of his face.

"You noticed?" she asked, amazed that he'd actually paid that amount of attention to her.

"It's... noticeable," he said, ducking his head down over his parchment again.

~ T. B. .C. ~

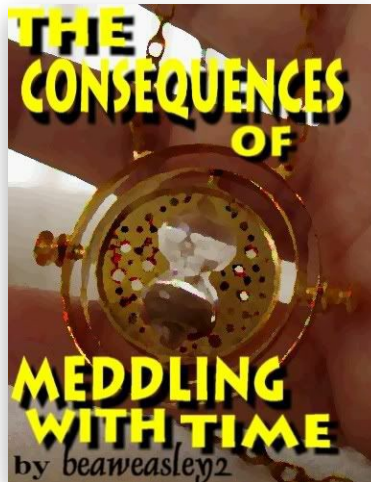
Chapter 7

Chapter 7 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

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It hadn't taken Madam Pomfrey very long to set Black and Pettigrew right. However, that didn't mean that Potter and Black weren't going to retaliate. Just as Severus had predicted, Professor McGonagall had sent a fifth-year with a note after his Charms lesson, demanding that he be in her office at the end of his last class. Severus had decided to interpret the note to mean his last class of the day, not the last class of the morning. So at lunch, he had told Avery his potion was at a critical stage as he'd rolled roast beef sandwiches and corn on the cob in his napkin and stuffed apples and oranges into his pockets before he'd left to eat in the classroom with Hermione.

He had been heading for the library after Arithmancy when Black and Potter attacked him from two sides. Fortunately, Severus had been wary, expecting something to happen. He'd managed to duck, roll, and fire on Black, thankfully avoiding Potter's hex. He hadn't been so lucky with Black's counter curse. Severus fired a Body-Bind on Potter, but Black's Severing Charm slashed across his left arm, making his blood stain his sleeve.

"*Engorgio*," Potter shouted. The spell whizzed by Severus' head and bounced off the wall behind him. Unfortunately, it hit his foot.

"Guys!" Lupin shouted as he skidded to a stop behind Potter. "Stop, he's bleeding!"

"So, did you see what he did to Peter and me?" Black snarled, still aiming his wand at Severus.

Severus scrambled to a crouched position, his eyes now focused on Black while Potter was distracted by Lupin.

"Lily said he didn't do it!" Lupin shouted at Black as Potter snarled, "It was his potion! Everyone knows he made it!"

Severus knew that as soon as he moved, one of them would attack him. He tensed up, deciding between using a Stunner or the Jelly-Brain Jinx, choosing a Stunner in case a professor showed up. He had the spell on his lips ready to spring.

"Just because he made it doesn't mean he used it on you!" Lupin said, trying to get his friends to see reason.

Black aimed his wand at him, and Severus sprang up, firing the Stunner as he took off running. "No," he heard Lupin shout as Black went flying backward into the wall. A yellow jet of light hit the wall next to Severus as he started for the stairs.

"McGonagall is expecting him in her office, and he's now bleeding..." he heard Lupin saying as he ran down the stairs as fast as he dared with his grotesquely-enlarged foot. By the time he'd made it to the Entrance Hall, he was limping again. He leaned against the wall. "Damn, bloody Potter!" he cursed as he tried to reverse the Engorgement Charm.

As luck would have it, Avery, Rosier, and Rowe appeared from the stairs that led from the dungeons. *Bugger, this is not my day!*

"Oi, mate, you all right?" Rosier asked, running up the last few steps, hurrying over to him with the other two on his heels.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Severus snapped, testing out his foot. The foot was still large, but thankfully, not sprained or broken. He tried taking a step toward the stairs, trying not to limp.

"It's Black and Potter again, isn't it?" Avery asked, his eyes ablaze with anger. Both of Rowe's cheeks had visible ticks from his jaw being clenched so tightly.

"You're bleeding!" Rosier said as he reached out a hand to touch his sleeve, but Severus shrugged it off.

"I got off easy. It's just a scratch."

"Where?" Avery asked, glaring angrily. "Where are the snots?"

Severus jerked his head toward the stairs. "Fourth floor," he said reluctantly.

"That means you were outside the library! Those wankers!" Avery snarled.

Rowe nodded as Rosier asked, "You need anything?"

Severus shook his head. "I've got Essence of Dittany in the room. I'll be fine," he said as Avery tugged on Rosier's sleeve, growling, "C'mon guys! I bet they're bragging about it already."

Rowe was already heading for the stairs. Rosier raised his eyebrow, giving Severus one last unspoken inquiry, then turned and followed Avery and Rowe.

Severus stormed into the old classroom and blasted one of the old desks to splinters, which made Hermione run and duck for cover.

"What in the blazes is wrong with you!" she shouted.

"Potter and Black...what else! I got attacked again!" Severus snarled, using the Severing Charm on one of the desks, making deep gouges in the wood. "And I still have to go see Professor McGonagall and get reamed for supposedly using the potion on her pets."

Hermione's soft, brown eyes widened in alarm as she stared at his arm. "You're bleeding!"

"It's a scratch," he replied casually, smiling inwardly at the caring expression on her face. It was nice to have someone care...really care. "I need my Essence of Dittany." He tried reducing his foot again, smiling as the swelling went down. He'd take Pain Potion later if the ache didn't go away.

Hermione ran across the room to get the potion and picked up a rag and a cup. He hoped the rag was a clean one. "Severus, take off your clothes so I can see the cut," she said and turned around. "Oh!" she gasped when she saw that he was already pulling his jumper and shirt off.

"That eager to see me strip?" he teased her. "Well, you only get to see half of me."

She blushed two shades of pink and then turned her attention to his arm. "Oh, my! This is bad."

"It's not as bad as it looks," he said, checking the cut on his arm, which made it ooze more.

Hermione paled slightly. She started to clean his arm with the rag and the water in the cup. "Talk to me, will you? Tell me something about yourself...anything."

"There's not that much to tell," he said, amazed at how gently she was cleaning up the blood. "Use the dittany, Hermione. I can clean off the blood later." He watched her as she examined his cut. Hermione was bossy sometimes, but she had a good heart, which he liked about her. "Just a drop or two on the wound until the skin closes."

"Do you want me to faint?" she asked as she dipped the dittany bottle on a corner of the rag.

He looked up at her, and she swallowed before touching the rag to his wound. "Not with the rag, Hermione, directly on the wound," he told her, realizing she'd probably never used dittany before. "Just put a few drops in the cut, okay?"

She nodded and held the rag under the cut and tipped the bottle carefully so only a single drop of the dittany landed on the cut. Hermione swallowed and cleared her throat at the sight of the greenish smoke that billowed up into their faces. "Oh, gods. Please, talk to me. Tell me something about yourself. Tell me about your parents."

He didn't want to.

"Please, Severus. Distract me," she pleaded and sucked her lip under her front teeth as she allowed another drop to land on his arm. Unfortunately, with her hand shaking slightly as it was, she missed the cut. "What's your family like?"

He could tell that he'd have to say something; she looked ready to faint. "I don't come from a rich family; we didn't have much when I was growing up." He looked at her as she cringed when another drop landed on his cut and changed his mind about talking about himself. "Mum's a witch; she's really good at Charms and Herbology and such. She won a Gobstones medal and a trophy when she was at school. She taught me how to play. But Dad doesn't like her using her wand. He's a Muggle," he said and looked at her hands instead of her face. "He was a doffer at the factory and became an overseer just before he married my mum. He wanted me to be a doffer. Mum didn't...but he did...until the factory closed. He doesn't do anything now but drink."

She'd added two more drops of dittany while he'd talked and was now dabbing gently at the healing flesh. He liked watching her; she had a graceful fragility, which belied the capable witch she was. She was very tender and showed her feelings easily. Her finned-boned fingers were dexterous and smooth and so gentle at times. Her wrists and arms were thin like the rest of her, but he knew that she was stronger than she looked. Just like his mum.

"Where did you grow up?"

"Manchester," he said. "It's just a mill town. Only not many people still live there anymore, at least on our side of the bridge." He flexed his arm and smiled at the job she did. "Looks good." She dipped the rag in her cup and started cleaning off his arm. "You don't have to do that. I can go to the bathroom and clean it."

"Okay." She looked up at him with her kind doe-like eyes, and her lip slid from its confinement. Her soft, bushy brown hair framed her face. It fit her.

"You know, my best mate isn't from a rich family. There's nothing wrong with not having loads of money. Some of the happiest families I know have limited means," she said as he pulled on his shirt.

He turned away as he put on his robe. "It sucks being poor." He sighed as she collected up everything and turned away. "Thank you. I appreciate you doing this."

"No problem," she said, dumping the cloth and putting the dittany away.

Severus walked over and picked up the cloth and cup, and she handed him his vial of Pain Potion. He took a swallow, handing the vial back to her outstretched hand. "Thank you. I'll be back," he said, heading for the door.

Rowe was standing in front of him when he opened the door as if about to open it himself. Severus quickly stepped out into the corridor and closed it. "I was looking for you. Avery's in the dorm room," Rowe said and looked at his arm. "How is it?"

"Healed now that I got some Essence of Dittany on it," he said as he walked past him headed for the common room. "I need to change. Comin'?"

Rowe looked at the door to the classroom and turned to follow him.

"So, did you get Potter and Black for cutting me?" Severus asked, and Rowe's look of concern changed into an evil grin.

"Oh, they'll be limping for a few days," he said, opening the door to the common room. "So, who were you talking to in there?"

Severus mentally swore at himself. "No one...myself...I was really mad. That dittany hurts when you use it."

Rowe nodded and let him enter first. "I know how that stuff stings."

Severus sighed in relief that he bought the lie. If Rowe had opened the door, he'd have to really come up with an excuse for the way the room was set up...let alone explain Hermione's presence. He was going to have to do something about the room, like muffle the sounds and hide the bed.

Hermione paced the room after Severus had gone, wondering why Harry's dad and Sirius Black hated him so much. From what she'd gathered, Sirius Black and Potter ganged up on Severus a lot. Not too dissimilar to Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, except usually only Malfoy was dumb enough to use his wand on her. Crabbe and Goyle only cracked their knuckles and scowled at her, trying to look intimidating, letting Malfoy do the hexing. Of course, Hermione also had to deal with the occasional taunts and hexes from Bulstrode and Parkinson, as well, but when Ron and Harry were with her, all Bulstrode and Parkinson did was sneer and make rude comments.

She wished that Severus hadn't taken the cup. She was thirsty. She filled the pitcher and drank from it, smirking at the thought of how her mum would've scolded her if she'd been witness. Still shaky from having to heal Severus, she lay down on the bed. She was getting so bored just staying in the room all the time. Severus was attentive enough, and he brought her piles of books on all subjects, but the small room sometimes felt claustrophobic.

She fell asleep wondering what Ron and Harry were up to.

The sound of someone rattling the doorknob woke Hermione up with a start. She had no idea what time it was or how long she'd slept.

Whoever it was on the other side of the door was having a hard time opening it, and for a minute she wondered if Severus had locked it. Finally the door opened, revealing half a body holding a pile of books topped with a tray of food. She jumped up and ran to help him. "I'm sorry, I wasn't sure if it was you, or I would have opened the door for you," she said, lifting the tray down.

"I'd rather you didn't," he said with a frown. "Rowe almost came in here. In fact, my friends are getting too curious about why I'm in here so much. We are going to have to do something about the bed." He dropped the books on the table. "Go ahead and eat, I have some things to figure out."

Hermione grabbed her silverware and sat down across from him. He'd brought her a bowl of stew and hot buttered rolls. "Is there anything I can do?"

He looked at the corner of the room that made up her bedroom. "We might have to shift things around a bit. Move the desks and bedside table to the other side of the bed against the wall or hang up blankets somehow. I dunno." He turned back to his books. "If this were a tent or a kind of fort it'd be easier." He looked up. "Do you mind if I borrow some parchment?"

She smiled and fished some sheets out of her bag for him, pulling out a quill and ink as well. She watched him flip through the books as she ate. He had that determined-concentration look on his face that was so intriguing. "I know what will work on the door..."

"What are you looking for?" she asked softly between bites.

"Ways to hide you in case anyone opens the door," he replied. "Protego and Salvio, in case they try using spells..." He drew his wand, aiming it at the pitcher *Obcaeco, Occare...* He shook his head and tried again. The pitcher vanished after the fourth try. He flicked his wand saying, *Finite*, and the pitcher reappeared. "*Invisum perlucidulus*," he said a few times, the third time the pitcher vanished. "*Finite*. Okay, maybe *Transmitto*." Nothing happened. He tried it a few more times. "No... *Tramissum caecus*...yes, that'll work. *Finite*."

Hermione watched as the pitcher appeared and disappeared. He got up, and she followed him.

"*Circumventum*," he said, making circle with his wand. Hermione didn't see any difference. *Occare inclusium, Invisum perlucidulus, Tramissum caecus...Protego totalum Salvio hexia*," he said, casting one spell in quick succession after another. The bed and bedside table vanished. He shook his head and reversed his spell work. "*Damn. Finite. Circumventum totalum*," he said, making a larger circle with his wand and added the other spells again. This time the desk disappeared as well. Satisfied he turned to face her. "What?"

"That's so amazing!" she said, walking forward until her hand touched the bed. She stepped into the space between the bed and the desk. "Hey, there're back!"

"You're in the ring of the spells," he said, unable to hide his snug satisfaction. "From where I'm standing, all I see are stone walls."

Hermione turned to face him. "So you can't see me?"

"No," he smirked, holding his wand casually. "So if anyone tries to come in here, duck onto your bed. They won't see you. I could add a Repelling Charm so no one wants to get near the bed, but you'd have to fight the effects as well. Come out, I have something to ask you."

She walked out of her magical enclosure. "Sure, what do you need?"

Severus laughed at her. "Hermione, never blindly offer to help a Slytherin unless you know what he wants and what the strings are."

"Okay," she said, nodding as if she understood. "So what did you need?"

He shook his head. "I was hoping you'd help me with the Engorgement and Reducing Charms."

"Sure!" she said enthusiastically.

He laughed and shook his head again. "Strings...remember? What I want is to try them on you. Enlarge, say, your hand and then reduce it."

She shrugged and looked at him expectantly. "Okay, but only if you are going to show me how to do it, too."

He shook his head and ran his hand through his hair. "Oh, my brave little Gryffindor, now you're talking like a Slytherin. Okay, get your wand."

As Severus rounded the corner, he caught sight of Potter and Lupin standing in the bailey talking to someone, or some ones, who were apparently sitting in an arch of the bailey wall. He caught a glimpse of a girl's leg as it swung forward. Thankfully, Potter's back was to him, one hand on the wall as he leaned over her. The sounds of two girls, Lily's laugh and another girl's giggle, rose above the other sounds of the open corridor. "I can't! I have too much revision to do," he heard Lily explain.

"But how am I to treat my girl to a day of frivolous shopping if she's stuck up here in the castle?" Potter asked, his free hand reaching toward Lily.

Severus knew that Potter was trying to convince Lily to go with him. "I'd love to, but I promised Remus I'd go with him on my next trip to Hogsmeade," Lily said.

Lupin turned his head to avoid Potter's glance at him, and his eyes locked onto Severus'.

"You know you want to go to Honeydukes and the bookshop," Vargas said with another giggle.

Severus scowled at Lupin's nod of acknowledgement, and he quickly ducked back around the corner to make a hasty retreat. *The bookshop. Lily's second favorite shop in Hogsmeade... Potter will convince her to go. But even if I hope to see her there, she'll be with Lupin and Potter.* Severus decided to forgo going down by the lake to meet his friends. He suddenly wasn't in the mood. Instead, he headed to his workroom to see Hermione. He would tell the guys later that he ran into Potter and Lupin and that they hexed him to impress Lily and Vargas.

He saw Hurshiser and Rowe talking to two Ravenclaw girls in the Entrance Hall as they walked up the marble staircase. He smirked at them, watching Hurshiser as he apparently tried his moves on the one with the long, blond braids. "One guess who he's taking to Hogsmeade," he muttered to himself as he ran to the stairs that led down to the dungeons. For the hundredth time that week, he wished that he could ask someone, well a specific someone, to go to Hogsmeade with him. But he knew he couldn't.

When he entered the classroom, Hermione was nowhere to be seen. He called out her name as he scanned the room quickly and hurried over to the bed. *Nothing. Damn it, she's not here!* He tried looking under the bed and behind it, thinking she might have gotten stuck, hiding from one of his house mates, but she wasn't there either. Angrily, he turned on his heel, thinking she'd defied him and had left the room to wander around the castle.

He took two steps toward the door and heard a tiny squeal. He looked down, wondering what he'd stepped on or if there was a mouse in the room and thought that he'd heard his name. He turned around again and saw her, squatted down behind one of her shoes. "What happened to you?" he asked, pulling out his wand as he knelt down.

"You know that annotation to the charms in your book...the one that increases the spell," she shouted up at him in her tiny voice. "I cannot undo this." She pointed to her wand that lay on the floor a few feet away. "I can't even lift my wand!"

Severus picked it up and held its tip to his wand tip, using the *Priori Incantatum* to identify the spell she'd tried. The spell she'd cast had a bluish-white tint. The tint indicated the addition of *Maximus* used in conjunction with a charm. "What spell did you use with it?"

"*Reducio*," she shouted.

Severus smirked and reversed the effect with her wand, watching in amusement as she enlarged back to her normal height. Thanks to the practice with Hermione, he'd gotten really good at it. "How in the world did you manage to cast it on yourself?" he asked, handing her back her wand.

Hermione blushed in embarrassment. "It bounced off the cauldron. It's on the floor over there somewhere by the desks. Only be careful, it's tiny now."

He stood over her as she crawled on all fours around the legs of his worktable, smirking at her cute bum. "There is an easier way," he suggested, barely able to hide the mirth in his voice.

"Oh, right," she said, sitting back on her heels. She whipped her wand out and tried to summon the cauldron. The one on the workspace rolled off and fell onto the floor next to her. Severus burst out laughing, and she turned around to glare at him. "What's so funny?" she snapped, putting the cauldron back with a *Repelling Charm*.

"Hermione, you were only twenty-eight centimeters; the cauldron will be about two, maybe three. Try the *Locator Charm* first, then enlarge it," he suggested. He pulled out his wand, placing it flat on his palm, and said, "*Point me*." The wand made a slight adjustment. "*Excussum inveni*," he said, pointing his wand in the direction his wand had indicated. The miniscule cauldron glowed a bright blue in a crack on the floor. Severus swished his wand, and the cauldron rose and expanded to its normal size. He turned his head to see Hermione trying the *Locator Charm*, making her wand swing around at different things in the room. "You're welcome."

"Oh, sorry! It's just that that was so cool how you did that!" she stammered, looking at him with amazed adoration.

"Hermione, it's only magic," he said, turning his head. He sat on the floor and leaned on the leg of the workbench. She sat down crossed-legged in front of him. "You want me to show you the other one?"

"Oh, yes! Please," she answered him, her doe-like eyes widened with glee.

Severus shook his head as he chuckled to himself. Her enthusiasm and smile were contagious enough to lift Severus' mood.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

The Latin used in this chapter is:

occaeco are [to make blind , to blind, to darken; to conceal, make invisible, to make dull or numb]

invisus [unseen , secret]

perlucidulus [transparent]

caecus [blind, not seeing; intellectually or morally blind; uncertain, objectless, unseen, hidden, obscure, dark]

transmitto and tramissum [to go across, pass through or over; to leave unnoticed]

circumventum [to come round, surround, encircle]

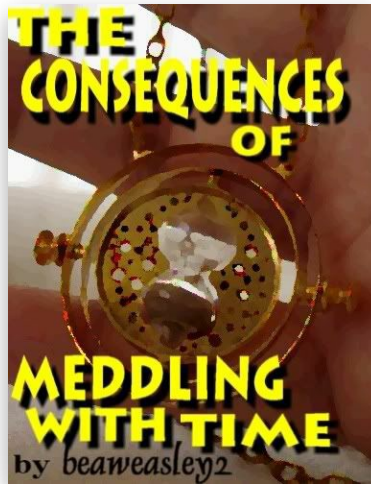
Chapter 8

Chapter 8 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this to point out my numerous errors and help me make this presentable for reading. You're the best, thank you!



Severus and Mulciber walked to Hogsmeade together. Before he'd left, he'd made sure that Hermione had enough food to hold her until dinner time. Up ahead of them on the road to the village, Black and McDonald were walking arm-in-arm next to Lily, who was holding hands with Potter. Lupin was talking with Vargas and Potter as Pettigrew ambled along behind everyone like a groupie. Severus clenched his teeth and forced himself to look away.

"Grates on you, don't it?" Mulciber asked, frowning at the Gryffindors.

"Nah, she made her choice," Severus sneered.

"Mud like her and her filthy friends. Figures they'd be chummy with those blood-traitors, Black and Potter. You'd think they'd know better than to debase themselves," Mulciber continued as if Severus hadn't spoken. "You can do so much better, mate."

"Books or Zonko's..." Severus started to suggest just before Black pulled on Potter's sleeve and jerked his head in the direction of the joke shop. "Second thought, how about the Quill Shop or Honeydukes?"

"Everyone's meeting up in the Broomsticks at eleven," Mulciber reminded him. "Honeydukes is a must, mate. Might get me a quill first, though...and I need some ink."

In the quill shop, Hurshiser was flirting with the blond Ravenclaw Severus had seen with him in the castle. Hurshiser ran his fingers down her long, blond hair and leaned close. "Pick one and I'll buy it for you," he said suggestively.

"And what would you expect in return, Slytherin?" she teased him back.

He leaned closer to whisper in her ear. "A kiss," he said, winking at Severus, and kissed her.

"Fresh," she admonished him, pushing him away.

"Possibly, but you'd like it," Hurshiser said with a smirk. "If you'd let me."

Severus spotted a very nice, black swan quill he really liked, but frowned at the price. He sighed and selected two black Canadian goose quills instead.

Rowe stepped around a shelf of parchment stock with a Ravenclaw girl following him, holding a ream of medium weight parchment in her arms. "Oi, Severus, mate."

"Hey," Severus grunted in greeting with a jerk of his head.

"This is Brenda," Rowe introduced the smiling girl following him. "Going to the Three Broomsticks at eleven. You comin'?"

Severus shrugged, selecting a pack of parchment that he could afford. "Don't feel like being a gooseberry."

"Don't be like that. Come," Rowe said, picking up a white swan feather quill. "We're all going to be there. It's not dates or anything. Well, some of us have, but not everybody."

Severus knew he meant Mulciber and himself. "I'll think about it," he said as he walked to the counter to pay for his quills and parchment.

Avery and Miss Myers passed by the window, his arm around her waist as she waved to someone she knew.

In Honeydukes, Thortonson was teasing Linnet with an elongated, cream-filled caramel pop, and Avery and Miss Myers were piling treats in a basket. Severus bought his favorites and some flossing mints for Hermione. Just as Severus was leaving, the Gryffindor four entered with their dates. He eased around the candy display of every flavor jawbreakers, butterscotch balls, and fruit juice pops in twelve flavors, angling for the door, hoping to be unnoticed.

Lily squealed as Potter opened a chocolate raspberry pop in front of her face. "James, stop that!"

"Oh, Mint tickers!" McDonald exclaimed, trying to reach for a jar on the top shelf. As Black leaned over her to get the jar down, Severus made his escape.

He heard Mulciber call him, and he turned around. "Oi, where you going?"

"Bookshop," Severus shouted back.

"Thought we was headed to the Broomsticks?" Mulciber asked as he ran up to Severus.

"After," Severus said, walking quickly toward the end of the street. The old bookshop was his favorite retreat. Within minutes, he had a pile of books next to him in one of the aisles.

"Sev, mate, it's almost eleven. Everyone will be waiting on us," Mulciber said, leaning on the bookshelf, holding a thin book in his hand as he tried coaxing him to go.

Severus looked up and smirked, knowing that Mulciber hadn't even glanced at the first page of the book he held. "Nah, go on, mate. I want to sort these out first. Besides, I'm not really thirsty."

"Should've made you wait 'til after drinks to let you come in here," Mulciber frowned and pushed off from the bookshelf. He shoved the book on a shelf. "Okay, I'll tell the guys you'll be by later."

Severus Summoned the book to him, curious to see what Mulciber had picked up. It was an old, used book on wandless magic. Severus set it on his pile. Half an hour later, he stood. He had seven books, but only had enough to buy some of them. He sorted them twice before deciding to buy four books: one on advanced potions, another about concealment charms, one that had some interesting enchantment potions that bordered on Dark Arts, and the one on wandless magic.

He entered the street, only to see the Gryffindor group mingling near the Three Broomsticks. Severus slipped into the shadows, watching them for a while, glancing occasionally at the other shops, and then looked up at the clear blue sky. There wasn't anywhere in Hogsmeade he wanted to go, but he didn't want to be cooped up in the castle all afternoon either. He turned and slipped around the back of the shops, headed for the castle anyway.

On his way, he thought about Hermione. She was fun to be around. Sure she was young, but she was smart and funny, excited easily, and made him smile. She was spunky and seemed to understand his snarky humor. It was a shame he couldn't sneak her out and spend some time sitting by the lake or take her on a hike. *A hike might not be bad...we wouldn't see anyone or be seen.* He smiled as he worked out a plan. He broke into a run and hurried to the old classroom. "Come with me," he said as he burst through the door.

He had startled her. She'd jumped as she whirled around with her wand aimed at his chest. She dropped her hand, then put the wand away in the pocket of Avery's robe. "Come where?" she asked, still breathing heavily.

"We're getting out of here for a bit," he said, walking up to her with a mischievous smirk.

"I'm not supposed to leave the room," she said as she backed away from him and drew her wand again. "Who are you, and where is Severus Snape?"

"I'll Disillusion you and use the Notice-Me-Not," he said with a grin, grabbing her wrist and casting the charms. "C'mon, it'll be fine."

He kept hold of her wrist as he led her, not caring if it looked odd. He refused to get separated and wanted to know exactly where she was. He used a door at the end of the first floor corridor that was usually locked before dusk and led her to the Quidditch pitch, going around the outside of the pitch to a trail he liked that few people knew about. Hermione stayed quiet as she followed him, but her footsteps could be heard clearly in the dirt and gravel of the trail. When they were far enough not to be noticed from the pitch, he removed the Disillusionment Charm.

"Are you sure this is safe?" she asked.

He laughed at her concern. "The hard part will be getting back before dusk without you being seen. But I thought you'd like some air, and we can collect some plants along the way."

She smiled and bit her lip, her eyes shining with happiness. They walked along the trail, jumping and climbing over rocks. He held her hand as they walked along a fallen tree over a rockslide. At one point, they had to climb a short way up a rock face. Hermione kept up with him, only needing a little coaching on the climb. Once at the top, she turned and inhaled in amazement at the view. "Oh, this is so beautiful!"

"I hoped you'd like it. I come up here sometimes to get away," he said, watching her obvious delight with the view of the vale Hogwarts sat in. "You can see the entire lake from up here, the castle, and there's Hogsmeade." He had to admit, the view of the castle was breathtaking.

"I've never seen the castle from this vantage point before," she said in awe.

"C'mon, we go this way," he said, leading her through two bushes that had overgrown and blocked the trail a bit. The trail followed the ridge around Hogsmeade, dropped down, then made a steep climb, and continued on a gradual decline. Severus stopped her in her tracks before she scared off a black scat-rat, a magical crossbreed of a large squirrel with a cat's head and retractable claws.

Hermione squatted down next to him, her thigh rubbing against his. They waited until the animal scurried away. "Will we see more animals?" she asked softly.

He pulled an overhanging branch back to let her pass first. "If we're quiet enough, yeah. This part of the trail comes out near the edge of the forest and through a meadow. I've seen unicorns there."

They saw lizards and a few rabbits as they made their way down the trail. When they reached the meadow, Severus held his finger to his mouth. "The unicorns will let you pass unchallenged. Me...if they see me, the stallion will charge, but the mares just run away. Be really quiet. If they sense us, walk in front of me and act protective, but don't draw your wand."

Hermione nodded, understanding. As they stepped from the trees, Severus stood really still. The bushes and grass were still tall enough to conceal them somewhat. He motioned for her to follow the trail that meandered through the taller grasses. Halfway around the meadow, Hermione stopped. Two unicorns were grazing in the sunshine, the sunlight making their coats shine as brightly as the sun reflected on the water near them. She sighed in awed wonder. Severus gave her a nudge and urged her quietly to keep going. When they reached where the trail turned back through the brush, Hermione turned to see the unicorns one last time, but they were gone. "I saw a dead one once, my first year. But I've never seen one alive. They are so magnificent...I never realized."

He looked at her, his brow creased and his head tilted slightly. "What killed it?"

"I don't want to explain," she said and walked on.

He shrugged and caught up, once again leading the way. "We're going to come out of the forest down by the Shrieking Shack. I'll have to Disillusion you then. Try to stay close to me, okay? I hope we don't run into anyone; if we do, go straight to the castle, but don't bump into anybody. If you follow the trees, you'll be safer than if you stick to the path."

Severus cast a few other spells, including a Silence Charm on her trainers, and then Disillusioned her as soon as the Shack came into view. "Stick with me," he said and took off for the castle. They made it to the gates before there was a problem.

"Oi, Severus, where'd you get off to?" Avery asked as he came walking up to him, followed by Rosier, Thortonson, and their girls.

Severus sighed and told them he'd been on a hike to collect potion ingredients.

The guys laughed, and Avery patted him on the back. "You were missed, mate. Mulciber even went back early to work on his essay, can you believe it?"

Severus made many sly furtive glances about as they walked to the castle, but he couldn't detect Hermione. He swore to himself that he was getting too good at the Disillusionment Charm for his own good. He was pulled along the throng of his friends all the way to the common room, still slyly trying to figure out where she was. They walked to the seats by the fire, and Avery indicated for him to sit next to him.

Severus sighed and plopped down in the chair. "I need to shower, guys," he grumbled. He looked around. Three first-years were revising at one table, a fourth-year was reading by the magical windows, and two second-years were playing wizarding chess.

"You're not that smelly," Avery said the same time Thortonson snorted, "What's keeping you, then?"

Severus felt a small hand touch his shoulder. "Okay, well this is fun, but I'm off," he said, getting to his feet. Avery jumped up too, telling Miss Myers to wait for him as Severus whispered, "Stay close but don't move anything."

Avery gave him an odd look as he headed for their dorm room, telling him about some drunk witch who had been singing in the Three Broomsticks. Severus felt someone bump him and was relieved that apparently Hermione was sticking close to him. Avery walked on his other side, stepping ahead of him between two tables. Severus maneuvered around a chair, getting behind Hermione, and he pushed her in the direction of the dorms, hoping no one saw his hands. Once in the room, he lost her again.

"Severus, you okay?" Avery asked.

"Yeah," Severus stated. "Stay here," he whispered, getting no response back. He hurriedly gathered his stuff and an extra towel. "Ya comin'?" he mumbled softly to the empty space in case Avery thought he was talking to him and exited the room.

"Course. I'm not hanging around in here," Avery replied, following him out. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing," Severus replied, heading for the showers. He felt her hand again when he stopped in the doorway. Sighing, he led her to the last stall and sat on the bench. "You might as well get cleaned up. It seems like most of the house are out somewhere, outside, or still in Hogsmeade, I suppose. My friends will stay in the common room for a while, comparing their shopping finds and snogging their girlfriends."

"Okay," he heard her say. There was a small splat sound as she walked though a bit of water on the floor followed by a few footprints. He felt her robe land on the bench next to him. The sounds of her trainers being dropped next, preceded by the soap, flannel, towel, and shampoo floating away. He took the charm off the robes and shoes and cast a cleaning charm on them as the water in the last stall turned on.

"It's weird trying to wash yourself Disillusioned," he heard her say.

"Do you need help?" he asked, crossing his arms as he leaned against the wall and closed his eyes.

"No," she answered back, and he could see her smirk in his mind's eye. At least this was easier, hearing her wash and not having to see glimpses of her through the slit in the curtain.

Suddenly the door opened and in walked Avery. "What's up, mate?" He smirked at Severus and started to strip. "If you want to get clean you have to *get under* the water, not stare at it."

"I was just thinking," he said, cursing every deity he knew for his bad luck.

"You can think and shower at the same time," Avery said as he turned on the water. "Severus, mate, is anything wrong?"

"No, nothing," Severus said with a shrug, turning on the tap next to Hermione's stall.

"Oi, what's with that one?" Avery asked, pointing at the stall Hermione was in.

Severus shrugged as he undressed quickly. "Dunno, it was running when I got here. I think that Myrtle-ghost is in the pipe."

"Damn, I hate it when she tries to peek," Avery said as he rinsed his hair out. "So, how was the hike? Did you get anything in the shops before you went?"

"Bought some candy and a book I think might help me solve a problem I'm having," he said as he reached through the curtain dividing his stall from Hermione's and grabbed the soap.

"You and your books," Avery said with a chuckle. "So, you think Hurshiser and Rowe will score?"

This was not a conversation he wanted Hermione to overhear. "Isn't this a first date?" Severus asked, hanging his head, letting the water soak his hair. He noticed a bottle of conditioner someone left on the floor of his shower stall and kicked it over to her.

"So," Avery said as if it was a sure thing.

"No," Severus said. "The girls didn't look like they were as gullible as the ones they usually go after."

Avery peeked around the curtain. "Ten says yes," he said with a cocky grin. "Five each."

"I don't have ten," Severus said with a grimace.

"I'll spot you," Avery said, letting the curtain fall back into place.

Severus reached through the curtain that separated his stall from Hermione's and snatched the shampoo.

"Well, I'm done. See you in the common room?" Avery said, turning off the water.

"Yeah," Severus said, rinsing the shampoo from his hair. He couldn't believe he was washing twice in one week *The things I do for this girl!*

Avery walked over and stood behind him. "You're going to be brewing all night again, aren't you?"

Severus turned and nodded, unabashedly giving him an eyeful, knowing it made Avery uncomfortable. "For a while; it's simmering, and I need to bottle it up."

Avery snorted and turned away. "Fine, see you later."

Severus rinsed his hair and turned off the water. He listened for a while as he wrapped a towel around his waist. "Sorry about that. Are you done?"

"I've been done for a while, but I was afraid to move," he heard her say.

"Leave the water on," he stepped from the curtains and walked to the benches. "I tried to freshen up the robe," he said as he held it out to where her voice had come from. "Here?"

The curtain moved, and a hand took the robe. It fluttered and floated as she put it on. Severus had just changed into his robe when Avery walked back in the showers. "Forgot my soap."

Severus glanced up and realized Hermione had ducked into his shower stall. "Don't tell me you're getting forgetful at your age," he sneered teasingly, slipping on his trainers. He disillusioned Hermione's robe again when Avery's back was turned, barely tucking his wand away when his friend turned around.

"You comin'?" Avery asked at the open doorway.

Severus gathered his things, walked to the door, and pulled it open even further as he motioned for Avery to go first. He felt Hermione brush past him and smelled his shampoo on the air before he followed her out. He turned for the exit, hoping to get her out of the common room unnoticed.

"Aren't you going to put your wet stuff away?"

Severus sighed. "Yeah, after I check my potion," he said flatly.

Avery scowled. "You've been acting kinda strange lately," he grumbled. "What's gotten into you?"

Severus turned and faced him. "How so?"

"You're just... off lately. Are you mad about something? Did Potter or Black do anything in town?" he asked. "You can't be still mooning over that Mudblood, are you?"

"Bugger off! This has nothing to do with *Lily*," Severus snapped, emphasizing her name, and turned to leave. He hoped that Hermione was following him or was somewhere close. He couldn't see her, of course, but he couldn't detect the shimmer of distortion that would announce her presence either.

A couple of fourth-year girls came into the common room, one of them dropping something that fell in the corridor. Her friends held the door open as she turned around to pick it up. He passed through the door, thanking the fourth-year as he did. He walked toward the classroom, wondering if Hermione was anywhere nearby.

"Hermione?" he whispered as loudly as he dared when the girls closed the door. He walked casually back to the door and tried whispering her name again. Nothing. He turned around, glaring both ways down the corridor, but he couldn't detect anything. *What if she's still stuck in the common room?* "Hermione?" he asked a bit louder.

A hand touched his shoulder. "I'm right here," she whispered.

He whirled around and grabbed it, pulling her with him to the classroom. He removed the charms once they were inside. "Damn, that was too close! What a mess."

Her eyes were down cast with embarrassment. "Sorry about that. I was waiting by the door for you when I saw the girls coming in and slipped out when I saw her drop her book."

"No, it's fine," he said, feeling a wave of relief. "Next time, we'll have to time your shower better, that's all."

"Actually, all considered, I think our timing was pretty good. Like a comedy of errors that worked out right," she said, laughing. "I never thought I'd see so much of the Slytherin common room and dorms, though."

He ran his hands over his face and cupped his hands behind his head. "One that I sincerely hope doesn't have a repeat performance." He dropped his arms as he looked at her. "You okay? Are you sore or anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Sleepy though," she admitted. "Severus, what's the deal with you and Ha...er, Potter and Black?"

He looked at the wall and sighed. "They are bullies, Hermione. They've picked on me since my first year." He turned to look at her. "I really don't want to talk about them."

"Sure," she said, turning to look at the bed and back at him. "Will you stay a while or do you have to go?"

"I thought you were tired?" he asked, crossing his arms.

She smiled as she walked over and pulled a deck of cards from her bag. "I am...was, but I thought maybe you'd like to play a game of cards."

He smirked at her. "Poker or Go-fish," he teased her.

"Do you know how to play Gin?" she asked as she sat on her bed and began to shuffle the cards.

"Yeah, I do, actually," he said as he shook his head, laughing at her. He sat at the foot of the bed facing her as she dealt the cards.

The next day, Severus watched as Hermione slipped the chain of the Time-Turner around her neck and picked up her bag. "I had a good time," she said as if she were merely leaving from a visit.

"Well, you were pretty tough to take," he said with a smirk, then sighed as he looked at the floor. He really didn't want her to go. "I had a good time, too. You'd better go." He could see her indecision on her face, and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other. She wanted to hug him, he was certain of it, but didn't know how he felt about that. Lily used to hug him whenever she'd leave...or used to when they had been close. He looked at Hermione and wondered if it would be the same, holding her. The silence between them seemed to stretch on for an eternity.

He had a hard time looking her in the eye all of a sudden. She looked sad, as if she were losing a friend. It was how he felt, but he wasn't going to admit it to her. *Damn. Just go already*, he thought, not wanting to stand here and prolong the inevitable.

She stepped forward and touched his arm, and it was all he could do not to jerk away from her. She wasn't making this easy for him.

"Thank you for everything," she said softly and moved closer.

"Yeah, well, you're welcome," he said, feeling like a wet prat. *What would a hug hurt?* She lowered her head and looked back up at him as she shifted her weight again. He swallowed as she made a tentative move toward him and reached out. His arms seemed to hang there as hers wrapped around him. Her soft, curly hair tickled his nose. He hugged her back, awkwardly, closing his eyes as he smelled his shampoo in her hair. He thought it would've felt awkward, hugging her, but now that he was holding her, he didn't want to let go. She turned her head and kissed his cheek. Severus pulled away and stared at the floor. "It's time. You have to go back, Hermione."

Her face fell as soon as he'd said the words. She nodded and moved away. "Bye, Severus."

"Good bye, Hermione," he said, knowing she'd be back, just not when. He'd have to check the diary to find out.

She checked the alignment and activated the device.

Severus had no idea how long he stood there, rooted to the floor, staring at the space she'd disappeared from. He turned slowly and looked at the pile of clothes and linen. Maybe he'd ask that house-elf to clean the room after all. Reluctantly, he headed for his dorm room, hoping that his dorm mates were asleep.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Gooseberry according to *The Best of British: The American's guide to speaking British, a gooseberry is to be the third person on a date or 'a third wheel' in American slang.*
The site is: <http://www.effingpot.com/people.shtml>

The Latin used in this chapter is:

Excussum [*to shake out, to search*]

Inveni [*to come upon, find, discover, to show oneself*]

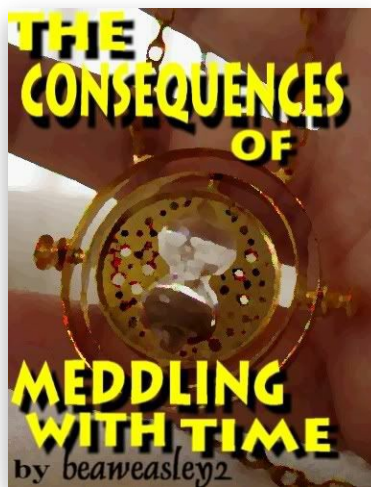
Chapter 9

Chapter 9 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this to point out my numerous errors and help me make this presentable for reading. You're the best, thank you!



Hermione arrived in the small classroom and suddenly realized that she wasn't alone. "Headmaster!" she exclaimed, taking a step back in shock and turning to look in confusion at the unfamiliar man sitting at the desk. "Who? What? Hi."

"Hello, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said, sitting in a comfortable chintz armchair with his elbows on the armrests and his hands laced together at the end of the very same table she and Severus had used. It boggled her mind; it seemed like that had been only yesterday, but in reality it had been twenty years ago. "To answer you, this is Mr. Cronus Latimer, the inventor of the time device you are currently using." The man sitting across the table from her nodded politely as Dumbledore continued. "As to what, it has come to my attention that there seems to be some problem with the device, or you have forgotten your instructions on how to use it properly, as you are apparently experiencing some miscalculations and have been having a few adventures in time."

Hermione noticed that his blue eyes had none of the usual twinkle, and he looked at her rather sternly. "Do have a seat," he said, indicating the wooden armchair across from Mr. Latimer. "We are waiting for Professor Snape to finish his lessons so that he may join us."

Hermione swallowed nervously as she dropped her bag and sat in the offered chair. Mr. Latimer had a journal open in front of him and a small inkwell and quill.

"May I see the Time-Turner, Miss Granger?" Mr. Latimer asked, extending his hand toward her. He had a strange cloth draped over his hand that looked like it was made of water but was as black as night.

Hermione nodded as she removed the Time-Turner and placed it on the cloth. The fabric seemed to shimmer with rippling wavelet rings at contact with the device. Mr. Latimer carefully examined the device. "It's the same as before, Albus. It's been overused...or should I say...strained to its capacity."

"Do you think that is the extent of its ability, Cronus?" Dumbledore asked, leaning forward to examine it as well.

"How far back did you go, young lady?" Mr. Latimer asked.

"I'm not exactly sure, sir," Hermione admitted. "I don't have a reference really."

"I believe Professor Snape indicated to me that she went back to 1976," Dumbledore said. He turned to face Hermione. "You will be forthright and honest with me, young lady. I expect you to tell me the truth and hold nothing back. How did Severus treat you? What did you do?"

Mr. Latimer looked amazedly at the Headmaster, then at Hermione. He picked up his quill and began to write out an arithmantic equation.

"He was nice to me," she answered the Headmaster immediately, watching Mr. Latimer with great interest.

"Elaborate. Were you seen? What did you discuss? What did you do, and was he in any way inappropriate with you?"

"Never!" Hermione looked up and gasped at the questions the Headmaster asked. "I mean, no, sir, he wasn't. He brought me books from the library, and sometimes we'd discuss them. We brewed potions...healing potions and a few of his own. We practiced spells, mostly ones Severus said were my year." One of Dumbledore's eyebrows rose at that comment. "Okay, not all, possibly, but nothing I couldn't do."

"That is not very reassuring, as I am well aware that you are capable of doing spells far above your age level. You will be examined by Madam Pomfrey for depletion of your magical core or signs of magical stress," Dumbledore said in a smooth, even tone, watching her carefully for signs of deceit. "Were you seen?"

"No, I don't think so. There was once when I was almost seen leaving the boys' bathroom," she admitted, then quickly felt the need to elaborate. "But I'm sure the guy didn't see me...Severus had me Disillusioned. Severus would sneak me in really late at night so I could shower. He always used a Notice-Me-Not Charm and Disillusioned me when he did. There was only the one time that Avery entered the showers before I was through, but Severus told him I was Moaning Myrtle and that seemed to satisfy his curiosity. But that's all I can remember."

Mr. Latimer placed Hermione's device on the cloth carefully on the table. "This one is my prototype," he said as he pulled a small black box from his robes and opened it. He pulled out another Time-Turner from the box. "It's an unfinished piece, but the rings are complete. If you would, please demonstrate for me how you set the rings for your jump back in time," he said, extending the device toward her.

"I'm not sure I can. I mean I can approximate," she said, accepting the piece and examining it.

"Try, Miss Granger," the Headmaster said firmly.

Never one to want to disappoint, Hermione tried to adjust the rings as she remembered having set them, struggling to align the runes just right. "I can't be sure, but I think this is right," she said, handing it back. "I was in the corridor after Ancient Runes near the window with the willow tree, and I was trying to keep from being bumped from behind...that's what happened this time."

"And that is how you met Severus Snape when he was a student?" Dumbledore asked.

She felt her face burn with embarrassment. "Well, no, my first jump I saw a Professor Snape who didn't recognize me. He took me to his office to question me, but there was a disturbance, and he warned me to stay put. I was scared and tried to return, but I went further back instead. That's when I met the younger Severus Snape. He knew who I was and hid me...both times."

Dumbledore pointed his finger at the calculations Mr. Latimer jotted down. "Professor Snape started teaching here in 1981," he told Mr. Latimer. He turned his gaze upon Hermione. "How old would you say Severus was, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked at the wall as she tried to remember how old he looked. "The first jump, he looked twenty or maybe a little older. The other times, he was N.E.W.T. level...sixth- or seventh-year. He's really smart and was always reading the advanced books."

Mr. Latimer wrote a few words down on his journal, checked the device again and made a few more notations. "So you made a second jump back instead of returning to your time?"

"Only the first time. The second time, I jumped back to when Severus was a student," Hermione stated, then had to clarify more accurately what details she could remember.

"Very interesting... seventeen years," Mr. Latimer said, making some calculations on his journal. He looked up at the Headmaster with a thoughtful yet distant expression. "I would have guessed that Miss Granger had made two ten-year jumps her first time, Albus, and a twenty-year jump her second, not seventeen. Only the alignment she's shown me doesn't equate to twenty years, it's more like..." He checked his calculations. "Eight years or so. Eight-and-a-half." He looked up at Hermione. "Do you ever repeat days, Miss Granger?"

Hermione felt her face get warm, and she lowered her head. She looked up at him through her fringe and nodded. "Occasionally, once or twice, but only when I had essays due in all my subjects at once."

"When you made the jumps in time, going back to the seventies, what condition was the Time-Turner in? Did it look like it does now?" Mr. Latimer asked, setting the second device on the desk and moving hers in between them.

Hermione looked at the sands in the hourglass and nodded. "Yes. It was hot, and the sands looked like this, more like shards of glass, not exactly liquid, but more fluid than the opalescent white sand it normally does. When I went back, Severus put it in a blue box lined with some kind of cloth, similar to what you have there," she said with a jut of her chin.

Mr. Latimer smiled and turned to Dumbledore. "If it's our box, then it should be all right." He looked up at them, then back to his notes. "Albus, if she bounced back as far as she's admitted and used the box for a week before bouncing again... that might be enough time."

"Miss Granger, how long were you with Master Snape in the past?" Dumbledore asked as Mr. Latimer added a few comments to his journal.

"A week the first time; this last time, two weeks or so, sir," she explained. "It was hard to tell being cooped up in the room the whole time."

"I don't understand...how long did he detain you in his office when you met the younger Professor Snape?" Mr. Latimer asked.

"Only a few minutes. I activated the Time-Turner as soon as he left his office," Hermione said, realizing he misunderstood her. "That jump I stayed with Severus Snape a week...when he was a student. *This* time I stayed with him two weeks."

"This time? There was another?" Mr. Latimer was flipping through his journal with his brow furrowed in confusion. "You said she was only gone a week last time she miscalculated, and this jump...when was this other jump back?"

The door opened, and everyone turned to see Professor Snape enter, his robes billowing behind him as he approached the table, and the door closed on its own behind him. "Ah, Severus, join us," Dumbledore said with a wave of his hand. Professor Snape sat in the chair at the desk across from Dumbledore. He was introduced to Mr. Latimer. "Professor, please tell us about your jaunt back in time. Firstly how did you acquire the Time-Turner?"

"I can only tell you what I remember, Headmaster. When I was sixteen, I had two strange visits from myself...well, my older self. The first time he identified himself as me from the future and told me things only I'd know. He explained that Miss Granger had come back in time...to my time...and had been brutally beaten by my housemates and died. He then convinced me to do what was necessary to protect Miss Granger from harm and to hide her until she could return," Professor Snape said smoothly, his hands laced together with his elbows on the armrests as he sat casually in his seat. Mr. Latimer was busily writing down Snape's comments. "The second time, he informed me that Miss Granger miscalculated again and would be back. I made sure to be where he said she'd appear and hid her."

"How did you get the Time-Turner?" Dumbledore asked again.

"I do not recall how my older self came by it, but I assure you, he did have one. He was wearing it around his neck both times," Snape replied calmly, his eyes on the two men as if Hermione wasn't even in the room.

"And the box?" Mr. Latimer asked, looking up with his quill poised in his hand.

"My older self gave it to me the first time I saw him," Snape stated. "He explained what it was for and told me to keep it in my pocket, so I did." He turned to look at Hermione with a casual glance, which made her sit straighter in her seat. "I assume he still has it; is that correct, Miss Granger?"

Hermione nodded, about to say something, and was interrupted by Mr. Latimer. "Did you by chance see the setting on the device, Professor? Would you be able to tell me how the runes were aligned?"

Snape turned to the man and shook his head. "Yes, I examined the device, but I was more concerned about the sand in the hourglass than the setting. I was, however, careful not to change it and used the box I had been given. So, no, I'm sorry to say that I cannot recall how Miss Granger set the device to make such a jump."

Mr. Latimer looked up again from his writing. "And *do you* remember going back in time, Professor?" he asked.

Snape sighed. "I do not. I know I did, twice, and I remember what he said to me, but I don't remember making either trip. I can only assume that since I went back to correct a wrong, that timeline doesn't exist any longer." Snape told the men what his older self had said during his second visit about Hermione being hurt from a misfired spell from a duel and about living in Gryffindor tower for a month. "Of course, I don't remember either of those jumps as they occurred in his time line, not my own."

Hermione gasped in shock.

"I see?" Mr. Latimer said, his finger moving as if he were writing in the air. "A month? Why a month? Most intriguing. Miss Granger said that each time she went back she had to stay longer, a week, then almost two weeks... Intriguing...quite unexpected. Why was that, do you think, Professor?"

"The sands took only a week to cool enough to flow normally from one side of the hourglass to the other the first time. I was careful to move the device without changing or rotating anything when I'd examine it. The second time, it took longer, nearly two full weeks; she returned the morning of the fourteenth day to be precise. The third time took longer, possibly because of the amount of time Miss Granger had been using it, but that's speculation," Snape said in a clinical tone as Mr. Latimer jotted down Snape's assessment. He looked at Hermione, and for two brief seconds, the span of two heartbeats, she thought she saw a look of wistfulness in his expression before his face schooled into his usual disdain for her.

Mr. Latimer leaned over to talk to Dumbledore, and Snape turned to look at Hermione again. She saw an odd flicker of emotion on Snape's face, almost like the conspiratorial glances Harry and Ron got on occasion, before he turned to address the other men. "That duration was nearly a month if I recall correctly. My older self warned me that each time Miss Granger miscalculated and bounced back to my time, the duration increased. It was his opinion that it was because Miss Granger uses the device every day."

"A third time?" Dumbledore said, his brow creasing as his eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Mr. Latimer's eyebrows rose and he grinned. "Are you certain?"

"Yes," Snape said as Mr. Latimer turned the Time-Turner over carefully in his hands.

"The sand is still crystallized, barely, not liquid yet. Given enough time, the piece might have repaired itself if conditions are cool and dry... If placed in the box, it will cool sufficiently faster." Mr. Latimer set the device down and wrapped it carefully in the cloth. "Albus, I will of course need the box," he said, missing Dumbledore's nod of assent as he turned to Snape. "Unless you still have one...oh, wait, Mr. Snape has it in the past."

"It's in my office," Snape stated. "Since I still had it as a teen, I've kept it all these years. I'll be happy to go get it."

Dumbledore held up a hand. "Not just yet, Severus, I still have questions." He turned his gaze as if staring off into space. "I am in need of service," he said loudly. A house-elf popped in and bowed. "Professor Snape has a small blue box..." Dumbledore looked pointedly at Severus.

"In my top right desk drawer in my office, all the way in the back," Professor Snape said smoothly. "You will have to open it in the same manner in which you rascals open my private stores to dust." The elf smiled nervously, nodded, then bowed quickly and vanished. "I hope the charms are still in effect." The elf reappeared, holding two small boxes, the one Hermione immediately recognized and a long one that looked like a gift box for a pen. Snape took the square box and asked for the other to be returned.

Mr. Latimer turned back a few pages of his journal. "So, what I don't understand is why I have a notation that on the twenty-third of September, Miss Granger made a one week jump back in time, then this jump today?" he asked and looked up at Hermione. "When did you make the second jump you mentioned?"

She shifted nervously in her chair. "On the twenty-third of September, that was the first time I bounced back...the one I told you about. When I returned, I bounced back a week and asked Professor McGonagall to hide me..."

Mr. Latimer and Dumbledore looked at her, obviously confused.

Professor Snape's eyes narrowed, and he sat up, put his forearm on the table as he leaned toward her with his other hand fisted on his thigh. "So you made another jump that day you came back...for a week? Explain," he demanded softly.

She stared at her hands, unable to look him in the eye. "I was worried that I was in too many places at once. I had been using the Time-Turner all that week to get to lessons on time and a few extra turns to complete essays. I thought that if I went back to a day when I had only used it once it would be safer, and then remembered that I had stayed a week with Severus to let the device cool...so I went back a week... so... I wouldn't miss classes," she stammered, feeling uncertain when she looked up at Professor Snape and met his sharp glare. "I thought it would be best."

"An extremely irrational and immature reaction, Miss Granger," Snape sneered, raising his voice at her. "You took an unnecessary risk that could have endangered you...permanently damaged the device."

"Severus, that's not..." Dumbledore admonished him as Snape turned to fully face her.

"Did it not occur to you, child, that this device could have returned you to the proper time for your lessons *after* it had cooled?"

Hermione hung her head in shame.

"Do you ever think about the risks you take, the dangers you put yourself in on a regular basis? I cannot always be there to save you...to protect you." He slammed his hand on the desk. "You cannot go through life jumping to the first conclusion you come up with without first considering the consequences and other options. You're a brilliant girl, but you do the most idiotic things! I expect such dunderheaded decisions from Potter, but I would hope that you would know better. I spend more time worrying about you..."

"SEVERUS! That's enough," Dumbledore snapped. "We'll discuss this another time." He turned to Hermione and smiled, his twinkle once again sparkling in his blue eyes. "Miss Granger, if you will take out a quill and parchment, I think you should be instructed on how to use the Time-Turner properly from Mr. Latimer."

"Yes, sir, I... under..." she said and froze midway for reaching for her bag, looking at the Headmaster in shock. "You mean I get to keep it?"

"Young lady, in only two months' time, you have given me so much information in the use of my invention!" Mr. Latimer said, smiling in delight. "Albus gives me weekly reports as does Professor McGonagall. This bouncing back decades in time is so exciting! No other Time-Turner has done this. It's beyond my wildest expectations!"

"You have got to be kidding me?" Snape snorted, gripping the armrests tightly and leaning forward. "You're letting her continue using the device?"

"Oh, certainly," Mr. Latimer said, his face aglow with anticipation. "You say she bounces again. Are you certain?" He turned to Hermione, not waiting for an answer. "I'll have to instruct you again on how to realign the Time-Turner for your return and make sure that you know how to read the time variance feature..."

"Headmaster, you cannot be serious!" Snape said in exasperation. "I lost her once and had to go back, and now you are letting her experiment for this old fool..."

"Severus, this device has a safeguard feature that will return Miss Granger from whenever she is," Dumbledore said patiently, his eyes sparkling. "It doesn't seem to cause her any physical harm, and we have you to thank for seeing to her safety." He set his hands on the desk as he rose to stand. "I, for one, am pleased that Miss Granger is so well looked after, but surely with the proper instruction, she won't have another unintentional mishap."

Snape ran his hand through his hair and gripped the back of his neck. "Don't count on that, old man. I still remember her being there."

"We'll see," Dumbledore said, smiling at him, and then turned his attention to Hermione, placing both hands, laced together, on the table. "Miss Granger, do pay attention and be careful with the device. In the future, you will please come to me if you make any miscalculation, no matter how small. I will notify Mr. Latimer myself. And, if you need hiding, Professor McGonagall and I will make whatever arrangements are necessary." He smiled as he looked at Mr. Latimer. "Cronus, Miss Granger will show you to my office when you are done here. Severus, would you come with me?"

Hermione caught the odd look Professor Snape gave her before he turned to follow the Headmaster from the room. Mr. Latimer spoke, drawing her attention back to the device in his hands to listen to him explain the use of the runes when setting the device for time travel.

Severus walked down to his private quarters after leaving the Headmaster, still furious that Miss Granger would still be allowed the use of the Time-Turner. He walked into his bedroom, opened the wardrobe, pulled out a drawer and took out a small brown diary. He turned the pages, glancing at the entries that correlated with Hermione's visits. They were all marked, one with a scrap of parchment she'd used to write down the books she'd wanted him to retrieve from the library, another with a leaf from the first day they'd gone hiking. He smiled as he fingered the brittle leaf, remembering the day with fondness. It had been such a risk, sneaking her out of the castle and back. They had nearly been caught, but it was one of the fondest memories he had. Gathering ingredients in the forest and playing in the snow were another. He turned the pages and removed the Chocolate Frog card she'd given him to read the brief entry.

Severus closed his eyes and inhaled slowly. She was an anachronism that his younger self enjoyed the company of for a little while. In this time, she was his student and completely unattainable. He saw no future for them; he made sure of it on a daily basis. Any association he might have could so easily be discovered and used against him, or worse...against her. The situation with Professor Quirrell two years ago was proof of that; the Dark Lord was still out there, biding his time before regaining strength to return. He had to maintain his persona.

However, he missed revising with her, missed their discussions, having her help him brew potions. She was an exceptional lab partner, even at this young age. If she had been his age, or if he could have afforded to drop his pretenses and tutored her, she'd be an exceptional witch. But those thoughts were futile. She was Muggle-born and worse, Potter's friend. *She will be a target, and I have to protect her.* He put the diary away and stared at the door. He had failed Lily. He would not fail Hermione.

Severus turned the pages to the entry of Hermione's third miscalculation and read the entry. Date, time, location, who was in the corridor, and the situation all clearly spelled out. He'd even noted what books she'd read and which potions they'd brewed. His younger self had grown fond of her in such a short time.

He closed the book with a snap and placed it back in his drawer. *That was the past, this is the present.* His job was to teach her, protect her from harm, and damn Merlin to hell, he planned to keep an eye on her and her friends and do just that.

Severus knew he was being unjust, giving Hermione a week's worth of detentions for assisting Longbottom in class, but she did speak back at him, defending her actions.

"But, sir, if I hadn't, then the potion would have made a toxic fume and exploded...either of which would have put all of us in the hospital..."

"Enough!" he snarled, placing his hand on her worktable and leaning forward. "Do not question me about my directions or my teaching methods again in my classroom."

"Yes, s..." she had started to say, most likely an apology, but he'd cut her off again, and doubled her detention.

He hadn't even marked it down in his ledger. Actually he had been furious with her for encouraging Potter to sneak down to Hogsmeade, even though everyone, including himself, was trying to protect the boy from Sirius Black. And they were seen...in front of the Shrieking Shack...Black's old haunt from his school days!

Hermione arrived on time, dressed for drudgery work. Severus smiled. "Miss Granger, I presume you remember how to make the Burn Paste properly?" he said smoothly, indicating the worktable situated closest to his desk that he'd set up for her detention.

Hermione looked at the stack of cauldrons in the sink and back with a confused crease between her brows. "Yes, sir. Of course I do."

"I expect you to brew the potion for first-, second-, and third-degree burns, and I want them to be of exemplary quality," he stated, indicating the three cauldrons lined up for her. He smiled, knowing that the task he was giving her would take her three evenings, not one. "Your results will be given to Madam Pomfrey, *if* they are adequate."

"And this is my task for my detention, sir?" she asked, clearly amazed by his choice.

"Yes," he stated, smiling. "Unless you'd rather scrub cauldrons all evening?"

"No, sir," Hermione said, smiling back, dropping her bag on the stool next to her.

Severus moved closer to her. "You do remember the changes to the directions in your book?"

Hermione nodded. She was biting her lip as she lit the burner under her cauldron and adjusted the fuel so the flame was blue.

Severus watched her as she worked. As a third-year, she didn't know how to brew all three at once. But if he played this out right, he would be able to have her help him brew the Wolfsbane with him next week. He ducked his head over the essay he was grading to hide his smile at the thought.

~ T. B. C. ~

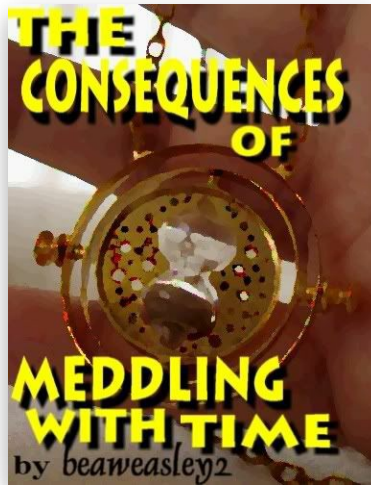
Chapter 10

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Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Many thanks to my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for helping me clean up my many mistakes, and to Pookah for the shoulder and friendly advice. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know. I'd be ashamed to show my story to anyone without your invaluable help.



Hermione was having a horrible week...well, a horrible couple of weeks, actually. Ron had been so mad at her over Scabbers' disappearance that he'd refused to speak to her. She knew that her cat hadn't eaten him. Crooks didn't eat his kills; he liked to show them to her so she'd be impressed with his prowess and bravery. He always expected a good scratch behind his ears and a few cat treats in exchange for his gifts. She'd tossed too many gnomes, rats, lizards, birds, and other small animals in the bin to know that Crooks hadn't caught Scabbers. He'd even brought her a Doxy and a Bowtruckle once.

Also, after all her hard work in helping Hagrid prepare for his day before the Wizengamot, Mr. Malfoy had convinced...or bribed...the members of the Wizengamot into accepting that Buckbeak was dangerous, and Hagrid had lost his case. Hermione had never felt more disappointed. She had spent a few hours every night in the library, searching for anything to help Hagrid win his plea for the hippogriff. Nevertheless, it had been for naught; Buckbeak had been sentenced to death, and that had been quite a blow to both Hagrid and herself. Of course, Hagrid appealed...she'd forced him to stop crying long enough to file the paperwork.

Truth was, she was repeating days again just to get everything completed on time. There simply wasn't enough hours in the day to get everything done that she needed to do. She was tired all day and so exhausted every night, so much so, she'd slept through Charms.

Charms! One of her favorite subjects!

She'd even lost her temper and slapped Malfoy. Well, truthfully, that had been a highlight of her week, although Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape had both had a stern word to say about that.

And she had stormed out of Divination, although truthfully, Severus had been right. She should have dropped that class ages ago.

And the chatter in the common room over the Gryffindor-Slytherin Quidditch game was driving her batty. There was so much homework for Easter hols that Hermione felt totally swamped, and the pressure was making her so short tempered, she honestly thought she'd crack.

At least she and Ron were friends again. Truthfully, she'd missed his sense of humor and friendship.

Even though Harry had managed to balance his time between her and Ron, he, too, had thought that Crooks had killed Scabbers. So, considering everything going on, most of their time was spent in the library revising, which was not Harry's favorite thing to do even though it did improve his marks.

In addition, regardless of the fact that her second and third favorite subjects were on Thursdays, it was her least favorite day of the week. Even without Divination, she still had Muggle Studies, Arithmancy, and Transfiguration in the morning and Care of Magical Creatures and Defense Against the Dark Arts in the afternoon. Of all her classes, Defense was the one she struggled in most, despite the many hours she spent revising for lessons and...to rub salt in the wound...it was the one class the boys excelled in.

Hermione left Muggle Studies and turned to duck into a corner of the corridor to pull out her essay and equations for Arithmancy so she'd have them ready to turn in. Due to her schedule, Hermione had added an Extension Charm to the inside of her bag and on the pouches inside it as well. That way she had everything, all her notebooks,

revision journals, and books for each class as well as a few extra books to help her with her Care of Magical Creatures lessons. She was tired of fighting with her book, *The Monster Book of Monsters*, although she thought she was almost taming the thing. However, that was probably wishful thinking. At least she hadn't lost a finger yet like Amanda Stebbins and Luis Spenser had. Apparently, Madam Pomfrey had been able to grow their fingers back easily overnight though.

She stifled a yawn and pulled out her Time-Turner to repeat the last hour. She adjusted the rings and then stood there as she stared at the setting. She still hadn't found enough material for her Potions essay, her Charms essay needed another nine inches, and now she had another seven-foot essay due this week for Muggle Studies. She also had twenty more Arithmancy equations to do. She groaned inwardly. Each one of her classes had assigned essays, even Care of Magical Creatures. She fought back the urge to yawn again, which made her eyes momentarily tear up.

She looked at the Time-Turner and adjusted the rings to go back an extra hour, then changed it to go back a whole day. She could take a nap and have eight hours to write Professor Snape's essay... Or she could do two days so she'd have time to catch everything up and still have time to revise. She sighed, which turned into a yawn, decided that was too risky to repeat the last two days, and turned it back.

"Oi, there's that Mudblood!" she heard Crabbe sneer from a few feet away.

She dropped the Time-Turner, turned her head, and saw Crabbe headed her way, followed by Malfoy, Parkinson, and Goyle. Unfortunately, Crabbe and Goyle both had expressions of malice, and Malfoy and Parkinson both had arrogant sneers that didn't bode well for her.

"McGonagall's precious mongrel pet," Parkinson sneered. "We should teach her how to properly respect her betters!"

She knew they were still really ticked about her slapping Malfoy. *As if they hadn't done worse to me!* She looked around and realized that she was alone, a prime target, mentally kicking herself for taking so much time.

Hermione exhaled an expletive and walked away to avoid a confrontation with the Slytherins, not wanting to deal with their taunts...or worse. She heard heavy footfalls and the click of Pansy's heels approaching her at a run. Not wanting to be caught alone in a corridor with the Slytherins, she ducked into a classroom doorway and pushed the door open with her shoulder as she activated the Time-Turner. She appeared several seconds later, facing a class of first-years as a hand grasped her robes and pulled her back into the corridor.

"No, you don't," Severus sneered from behind her back.

Hermione made a startled cry as he leaned close to her ear and whispered, "Play along," and then said a little louder, "Blimey. Look, you don't have to hide; I'm not going to do anything to you."

Hermione's mind whirled as she realized who exactly was behind her and that she had apparently bounced back too far in time again.

Severus turned her by her shoulders so that she faced down the corridor. "Get off to class, before you're late." He gave her a slight shove on her back, which she took to mean that she was to head down to the dungeons.

Hermione nodded as she realized that there were still several students in the corridor, rushing off to their lessons. Thankfully, none seemed to be paying them too much attention, just a few sideways glances as they hurried by.

"Don't run. I want to get you safely tucked away, but I don't want to attract any unnecessary attention. So walk at the normal pace you do when going to class. I'll be right behind you," Severus instructed softly.

She said, "All right," and walked as quickly as she could without breaking into an all out run. By the time they reached the end of the corridor and started descending the stairs to the Entrance Hall, there were only a few stragglers moving about. Severus was one or two steps behind her on the stairs, both of them keeping close to the wall.

They nearly made it to the bottom of the stairs to the Entrance Hall when a voice called out, "Oi, you there, Slytherin, what are you doing with one of my Gryffindors?" Hermione turned, realizing that the girl was chasing after them by the clacking sound of her shoes on the floor as she approached.

"Go on! Password's dragonwort," Severus hissed and turned around as Hermione continued down the stairs. "I'm not doing *anything* with her. She's just going in the same direction I am," she heard Severus snap at the girl.

Hermione didn't look back; she walked purposefully across the Entrance Hall, heading for the stairs to the dungeons.

"Then why were you following her?" the Gryffindor girl called out, the clomping sounds of her shoes on the stones of the stairs indicating Hermione she was still determined to confront Severus.

"I wasn't following her. I'm headed to the dungeons, if you must know. Not that it's any of your business where I'm going," Severus sneered. The sounds of the other girl's shoes stopped. Hermione snuck a quick peek back before she reached the stairs in time to see Severus turn his back on the girl. She heard him snarl, "Bloody Gryffindors," as he walked away from her.

"We have to protect our own! If your lot weren't always attacking us, I wouldn't be concerned, Snape!" the girl yelled after him, trying to catch up to Severus again. "Why were you bothering that third-year, Snape?"

But Severus was faster than she was and covered more ground. "I wasn't!" he growled angrily as he stormed across the Entrance Hall.

"Then why was she running away from...Snape!" she persisted.

Hermione quickly made her way down the narrow staircase, but Severus caught up to her before she reached the bottom. The Gryffindor girl's footfalls echoed in the hall above them. Hermione ran for the room where Severus had hidden her before.

He was faster though, and he reached the door before she did. "Inside quick."

Hermione hurried inside, dropped her bag and turned to face him. "What was all that about?"

"Bloody prefect," he sneered closing the door and casting a spell on it. He indicated for her to be quiet as he leaned his ear against the wood. After several long seconds, he turned to face her. "Hermione, you should know, things around the castle are escalating somewhat, especially amongst the upper years. Gryffindors...most of them are siding with the resistance, at least I think they are. Slytherin is divided; some are getting riled up about the Muggle suppression and about being forced to hide ourselves. There are some that even go so far as to hate all Muggle-borns. But then there are a few that think that this Lord Voldemort is going about things the wrong way, and he'll only incite the Muggles to reinstate the Inquisitions against wizardkind. It's not just us either. Ravenclaws are divided too, and some Hufflepuffs, well, not many of them...from what I've seen, most of the Hufflepuffs want to stay neutral. But I hear things and... Nearly every day you read about killings, disappearances, Inferi attacks, raids, and such."

"It's this war right?" Hermione asked. "You-Know-Who."

Severus crossed his arms and leaned against the door. "Yeah, it is. What do you know about him?"

Hermione lowered her head, wondering how much she should tell him. "Only what I read in the papers and in books," she said nervously. "You didn't want to know about things from my time, remember? We've always avoided talking about it."

"Books? So in your time the war is over?"

Hermione shrugged, then looked at his shoes, and nodded as she bit her lip. "You've always insisted that I don't tell you anything about my timeline, right?" She looked up, let her lip slip free, and swallowed against her nervousness. "I really shouldn't say anything, you know, in case it changes things too much... But why ask me now? It's too risky, isn't it?" She had been thinking about this ever since Professor Snape had mentioned she'd make another backward jump in time...that she'd see him again...this Severus.

Hermione had really considered telling him, even made a list of pros and cons that she could tell him what had happened and maybe save Harry's parents. However, she knew something had happened that night, something that had saved Harry but killed You-Know-Who. Then Hermione had remembered the storyline of *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells and seeing the movie. The scientist had not been able to save his wife's life. The time paradox theory. It had driven her crazy. Finally, Hermione had talked to Dumbledore about it. He'd listened to her, even read her pro and con list, and then told her she couldn't tell Severus anything. It had been the most reassuring yet totally frustrating visit.

"Severus, if I tell you anything that I remember, then it might not happen that way at all. If you do anything to change what I know, then my timeline changes, and then what I tell you will happen...won't...or will, but in a different way, or not happen that way at all," she tried to explain.

"No, you're right," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Damn, but...no, you're right." He looked at her, and Hermione knew that he really wanted to ask her anyway. "But it would be nice to know who wins."

She dreaded the questions, wondering how much she'd change if she did tell him anything. She frequently saw Professor Snape talking to Headmaster Dumbledore, and they looked like they were confidants or friends, not just colleagues. She knew that Professor Snape had been Dumbledore's spy because Dumbledore had stood up for Snape during his trial. Moreover, Professor Snape did more patrols than the other professors did, unless it only seemed that way. Professor Snape was usually the one she, Ron, and Harry were trying to avoid when they were sneaking around the castle at night. Well, him and Filch.

"If I tell you who wins, something that did or should have happened might not. Then when I go back, it might not be my timeline I go back to, but a different one, one in which I might not know what happened... It's confusing," she said and tried to stifle another yawn as she shifted her weight from one foot to the other under his intense stare.

"Hermione, you look exhausted. Take a nap," he suggested, pushing off the door. "I'll be back after Transfiguration."

"Yeah, I'd really like to," she admitted, picking up her bag and hitching it up on her shoulder. It was really heavy with all the extra books and the clothes she'd stuffed in it for Care of Magical creatures that afternoon. Well, what would have been her afternoon if she hadn't miscalculated again. *Although when I go back, I will probably be in time for my Arithmancy lesson...if I go back to my own timeline.*

She turned around to thank Severus, but he was gone. She walked over to the bed, dropped her bag as she kicked off her shoes and removed her robes, laying the robe on the foot of the bed. She climbed up and fell back on the pillows, yawning again. She was asleep the moment her body relaxed on the mattress.

Hermione was still asleep when Severus returned. As soon as he'd stepped through the magical barrier he'd set up around her bed and saw her, he smiled. She looked angelic lying there. She was turned toward him, her hair splayed out around her head, and her hands were tucked under her cheek. She had removed her robes and shoes, wearing a white blouse, skirt, and socks. Severus watched her for a few minutes before he pulled the extra blanket up over her. Hermione stirred as he leaned over her, as if aware of him, still fast asleep. She had a sweet smile on her face, and he smiled at her in return. He wondered if she was dreaming and, if so, what about. He straightened up and crossed his arms, just watching her sleep.

She was right; he shouldn't ask her about his future. Severus had been distracted all through Transfiguration, thinking about it as he rationalized the ramifications. His older self had also warned him about messing with the timeline. His older self had said that in two of her three jumps in his timeline had been disastrous; one when she's been beaten to death by his housemates and another when she'd spent a month with Lily. Neither of those things happened in his timeline, but they were in the diary his older self had given him. He hadn't said what had happened during her third one. So if Hermione did or said anything to change his timeline, it could be disastrous for her, and she was right, it might not happen as she would say they would anyway. If she did say something awful had happened, he might be compelled to change it, if he could, and her timeline would be different. Who knew what she'd return to? No, she was right; he just had to keep off that subject.

Severus walked over to his worktable and peered into his cauldron to check that no dust had fallen in on the lacewing flies he had stewing. His potion was the expected color and consistency. He checked his timer. It was nearly time to add the ground sandfish scales. He picked up the jar next to his elbow to examine the knotgrass that he had picked during the last full moon and that had been pickling in salt, lime solution, and the juices from his leeches for the last three weeks. He checked the jar holding his leeches next, and was glad to see that they were still moist enough under the Stasis Charm. Everything looked fine.

He carefully measured out the sandfish scales. When the thin red hands of the timer hit the number twenty-four, the timer made a soft chiming sound. He sifted the flakes into the cauldron so they landed softly on his slowly simmering potion. He checked his directions and did the calculations to see when the leeches and powdered bicorn horn would need to be added. He smiled; the knotgrass would be added at dinnertime, followed by the leeches an hour later. The powdered bicorn horn would be added in two days. He rotated the red hour and minute hands on his timer to match the amount of time needed until the next step and tapped the gold knob on the top of his timer, then set it down carefully on the worktable.

He looked up at the empty space where he knew that Hermione's bed was and decided to go revise in the common room. She'd be fine, and he was coming back in a few hours anyway. She had looked so stressed and exhausted. *No wonder, the chit's trying to take every class Hogwarts offers!* He turned, smiling at her foolishness. He had to admire her tenacity though; it was impressive that she wanted to learn everything all at once.

When he returned at dinner, carrying a tray and a pile of books, Hermione came out to greet him. "Hi," she greeted him as he dropped them on the table.

She stretched, her hair tousled, and her face crinkled from sleep, looking too adorable in his opinion for a little girl. "I brought lamb chops and sprouts, and loads of books for you," he stated dumbly as Hermione braided her hair, making her breasts strain against the buttons of her blouse. He turned his gaze away, embarrassed. "Go ahead and eat," he said, going over to the worktable rather than watch her. Unfortunately there wasn't anything for him to do; he'd already added the knotgrass before dinner, and he had another fifty minutes to go on his timer before he'd add the leeches.

When he turned around, Hermione was finishing setting the table for dinner, which made him smile. It was like playing house, eating meals with her. Well, what he'd always wanted his family life to be like. She waited until he sat down to start eating. Once again he was struck with the thought that she must come from a well off home since she had such proper manners most of the time.

"Tell me what you did in Transfiguration?" she asked, cutting her sprouts into bite size pieces.

"In N.E.W.T. level we either try repeating all the old spells nonverbally, or do more complicated transfigurations like changing a rock into a dog," he said and laughed when her eyes grew large and her smile broadened. "No, I'm not going to show you how to do that." Her smile instantly faded, and he chuckled at her disappointment. "It's not easy. I had trouble getting all the dog parts right."

"I had a hard time transforming a teapot into a tortoise," she said between bites. "I keep getting the lilac pattern on the shell."

"We can practice that after dinner if you want to," he suggested absentmindedly as he looked over his shoulder at the timer.

However after dinner, Severus pulled out his books to work on his essay, so Hermione did too. He was amazed at the number of books she was pulling out of her school bag and began picking them up to glance at the titles. "Are all these for your...ouch!" he started to say before the book in his hands bit him. "What the fuck was that?"

"Oh, be careful with that one," she said, looking up and hurrying around the table. "That's my Care of Magical Creatures book." She clasped his hand to look at his fingers, ignoring the book growling on the table.

Severus couldn't take his eyes off the book, baring its fanged binding at him around the leather strap supposedly to keep it closed. "That's your book for class? Is your teacher mental, or what?" He was so startled by the book, bound by a thick, brown belt, growling at him and trying to scuttle off the table, that he scarcely noticed her examining his hand until he turned to look at her. "Er, my hand is fine, Hermione. I was only startled by it."

"It has a mean bite unless you know how to calm it," she said, releasing his hand to grab the book before it fell off the table. "Professor Hagrid thought they were funny. You have to stroke it to be able to read it...I suppose it is funny in a way. But it really fits in with his lessons... You'd have to know him."

Severus was stunned, watching her pet the book. "Do you mean the grounds keeper, Rubeus Hagrid...he's your teacher?"

The book had calmed down and was purring contentedly in her arms. "Yes." She set the book down and pulled out her Arithmancy equations and Astrology charts.

He stared at the odd book, watching it settle down as if to take a nap, and then narrowed his eyes as he turned to look at her. "Hermione, what year level are you?"

She looked up at him, her brows scrunched together in a questioning expression. "I'm in third-year," she replied as if he should've known that.

Severus swore as he ran his hand through his hair. "And here I am teaching...showing you...holy shit! I could have depleted you...drained you or caused you... Why didn't you tell me?!" He was surprised, no, gobsmacked. He'd thought all along that she had to be a fourth-year; the things she knew, how easily she did the fourth-year stuff he'd been showing her. "Heck, we've even done fifth- and sixth-year...what was I thinking!" He stopped pacing to stare at her, really looking at her.

"I don't understand? What's the problem?" she asked, clearly confused, watching him with a concerned expression.

"As a third-year, you're still learning the basic foundation principles of magic, that's what! Only the exceptionally gifted students can do spells two years advanced for their age, and it's really rare if someone can do spells three or more levels above their age level without suffering from depletion, especially in your first few years. And I've been doing just that with you!" Of course, he'd always managed to do spells that were three and four years advanced for his age, but that was beside the point. He had been risking her wellbeing and hadn't even thought to ask her age. "You're in third?" He couldn't get his mind around that for some reason. She just seemed... older, more mature and together than the little third-year girls in his house.

She had been watching him, apparently not understanding what he was saying or comprehending the situation. "Yes, I'm in third. Headmaster Dumbledore had Madam Pomfrey examine me after I returned to my time, the last time, and she said I was fine, magically sound, and she gave me a clean bill of health."

"Well, thank Merlin for that!" he said, turning the chair around and straddling it, crossing his arms on the back. He stared at her, his face unreadable.

Hermione started to fidget with her papers, and then she pulled out several journals, notebooks, and finally a quill and ink from her bag. Severus watched her, smirking as she organized herself for revision. She looked up and asked, "What?" the same time his timer went off.

"Oh, nothing. You surprised me, that's all. Not many people surprise me," he replied, getting up to tend his potion. He strained off the knotgrass, chopped it up, and dumped it into the cauldron, waiting a full minute before stirring so that it would warm up in the surface oils and blend in better.

"What are you brewing?" she asked as she walked over and stood by his side, peering into his cauldron too. "Oh! You're brewing Polyjuice Potion."

"Yes," he said, counting off his rotations with his stirring rod. He turned to look at her when he withdrew the rod and picked up his knife to dice the leeches. "How do you know that? Most advanced students don't know the potion well enough to recognize it."

"I've made it," she stated, leaning in to see, but not close enough to actually be in his way, except Severus wasn't used to anyone peering over his shoulder as he brewed. Well, anyone except Slughorn or Lily. He dumped the leeches in and started stirring again.

"You're at the second stage, aren't you?" she asked as he finished off the last ten.

At least she knows not to interrupt me while stirring. He set down his stirring rod, flicked his hair out of his eyes and turned to stare at her, crossing his arms. "Yes... You made Polyjuice Potion? When?" *She is lying to me. She has to be lying.*

"Ah huh," she said, nodding to affirm her statement. "I made it last year."

Now he knew she was lying to him. Polyjuice wasn't even mentioned except in advanced Potions books, and the directions were in the Restricted Section. "You're pulling on my broom! You said you're in third year."

"Yes," she said, nodding and looking at him earnestly, her eyes meeting his with an expression he'd normally have read as open honesty.

"And you made this in your second year?" he asked, still not sure what to believe. Her soft brown eyes were staring directly into his, and there wasn't any subterfuge in her expression. "That's impossible."

"Well, I did," she said, turning away from him.

He could hear the hurt in her voice. He made her turn around and tipped her face up to look in her eyes. He could see that she wasn't saying it to try and impress him. Her expression was guileless, and her gaze still held his unwaveringly. "Do you have any idea how complicated this potion is? How many subtle techniques are needed to make this potion come out right, let alone perfectly? The book doesn't even have all the subtle variations mentioned... Did the potion come out right?"

Hermione tried to move her head in the affirmative within his grip of her chin. "My two mates transformed into the people they were impersonating."

He smirked at her, his laugh coming out as a bemused chuckle. "You didn't even try your own potion? Shame on you." He let go of her chin. "A Potion master always tests his own potions himself before subjecting a friend, or any test subject, first."

"I did take it," she said, grasping his arm, her eyes practically pleading for him to believe her as she bit her lip. She was so upset that her eyes were filled with unshed tears.

"And who did you turn into?" he asked, crossing his arms, still finding her claim unbelievable.

Hermione's eyes became huge, and she turned away but not before he saw her face redden in shame. "It was a cat's hair... I turned into a cat."

Severus couldn't help it. He was laughing so hard he bent over and braced his hands on his knees. Hermione turned to storm off, but he grabbed her wrist to stop her. "Oh, that's priceless," he said, hugging her with one arm while wiping a tear with the other. "Sorry." He let go and wiped his face, pushing his hair back again. "Merlin, I'd have given anything to see that."

She braced her hands on her hips, her eyes flashing angrily. "Well, you'll not be seeing it, as I will never make that mistake again."

"I should hope not," he said, regaining his composure. "Tell you what, I'll get my stuff, and we'll revise together. Later you can help me brew. Merlin, you're a corker, Hermione, a real piece of work."

She crossed her arms and then turned to plop herself down in her chair. "I don't like being laughed at," she mumbled as she picked up her quill.

He sat on the chair, his arms crossed on the back again and his chin resting on them. "I'm sorry. I've heard about that mistake being made, but I've never... You have to admit it's funny."

"Coughing up fur balls isn't funny," she said, then looked up at him and smiled. "But yes, I suppose. I just hate being the brunt... I'm sorry. It is funny."

Severus got up to get his bag, still laughing about her mishap, and amazed that she had made the potion *She did. She actually did.* He turned to look at her as he picked his bag off the floor. *She really is something, isn't she?*

~ T. B. C. ~

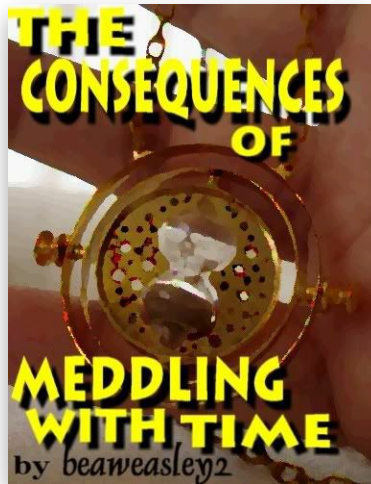
Chapter 11

Chapter 11 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

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Hermione scowled at the book and dropped her quill on her Potions essay.

She had stood by his side to watch as he had sifted the bicorn horn into the cauldron, careful to get the powder in the center of the potion so that it would all blend in and had counted off his rotations silently in her head. She'd noticed that he'd made precise, smooth, even strokes, slightly inward at the end of each rotation so the bicorn horn powder hadn't escaped to the sides of the potion and gotten stuck to the cauldron. At twenty-three strokes the powder had been already mixed in, but he made another seventeen after that as well. "How do you know what those subtle little differences are from what the book tells you?" she'd asked when he'd set the stirring rod down and lowered the flame.

"I dunno, an intrinsic feel for it. I know how things normally react and know what to expect. I experiment and try different things and make notes as to what works," he'd said with a shrug. "I've always been good at Potions, and since I know how ingredients interact with each other, I suppose certain things come naturally to me."

Hermione knew it was more than that, Severus rarely brewed a potion without changing something in the directions, and it usually came out perfectly. In the whole time she'd known him, he'd only had two potions fail, one miserably in an eruption and another that produced nauseous fumes. And, he could brew more than one potion at a time as well.

Within the first few days in the classroom, she'd finished her essays for Muggle Studies and Care of Magical Creatures, Magical Arts and Literature, her Arithmancy equations, and she'd completed all her pages of translations for Ancient Runes, rechecking her translations several times to be sure she had every one of them right. Hermione had plenty of material for her Care of Magical Creatures, knew all about Muggle money: the pound sterling, foreign currencies, credit cards, banks... She had even added information about traveler's checks and money orders. Even her Arithmancy essay had been easy enough, since Severus knew which books she needed.

Severus had teased her about stroking her 'pet book' when she'd tried to coerce her *Monster Book of Monsters* to lie quietly on the table so she could read it. Hermione had simply scrunched her face at him and ignored him for a while; then she had allowed her book to scramble away unimpeded off the table, smirking silently when he stomped his foot on it when it tried to bite his ankle. Unfortunately, he'd left annoyed with her, and his absence had felt like an oppressive weight. When he'd returned at lunch carrying roast beef and rolls, she had never been happier to see anyone.

Nevertheless, her Muggle Studies and Care of Magical Creatures essays were the easy ones to write. But her Potions essay was just not up to her usual standard, and she knew that Professor Snape would berate her for substandard effort if she handed in what she had. Not only that, but she still had nine inches of her Charms yet to do.

Hermione desperately wanted to go to the library and do her own research.

"I can't let you go wandering about the library, you'll be seen," he stated adamantly in a bored tone, not bothering to look up from his own book.

"You can Disillusion me," she persisted. "You manage that well enough when you let me shower."

"And have books just randomly floating in the air with their pages flipping?" he sneered. "Are you daft? You're not a ghost, and it will be to conspicuous if you're reading through books, invisible!"

"Books float about in the library all the time," she said, crossing her arms and leaning back in her chair.

"From the book trolley to the shelves!" he stated, shifting in his seat and lowering his nose over his book to avoid watching her petulant fit. "Not randomly falling from the shelves to hover between the stacks and flipping pages."

Hermione wasn't going to give up. It was a brilliant idea and a perfect solution, after all. "What if you were with me, anyone who does look will think the books I search through will be yours."

"I don't float books in the air beside me," he stated, tipping the book up to block his face from her view. "Besides, I can bring you any book you need."

"But I don't know which ones I need," she huffed at him. "That's the problem!" She couldn't understand why he was being so difficult. It wasn't like she wanted to go for a stroll; she needed more references.

"Let me see what you have so far," he said, holding out his hand.

Hermione gave him her Potions essay. Severus read it, his brow scrunched, then his eyebrow rose, and he glanced up at her in surprise, then frowned.

"What? Is it that bad? Am I wrong? The potions use the same ingredients. Maybe I should have chosen the Ocularius Restorative Potion? Oh, I knew that using Zorbet's theory compared to Newton's to be a long shot, but the use of the ingredients are the same. Stobek's Hopefulness Potion and Horner's article on forgetfulness..."

"Pipe down and let me read this thing," he cut her off, his eyes narrowing.

Hermione clamped her mouth shut, watching him with rapt attention to every miniscule reaction or expression to determine if he liked her essay. Finally, he set down the paper. "Merlin, you have enough theories and comparatives to write a bloody book."

"But I..."

"You're all over the place. You don't substantiate any of it; you just quote the books and jump from one idea to the next." He handed her essay back to her. She felt her heart sink in her chest. "You need to fully explore what you have and summarize what you are presenting."

She looked at him, her brows pulled together making deep creases between them. "I have."

"Have not. You quote all the books, but I don't know what you think about them. You haven't extrapolated at all. You give no opinions, theories, or speculations."

Hermione's face relaxed as she sat back in her chair and considered what he was saying. "My opinions. Extrapolate... but I do."

"Hardly. You've quoted so much stuff in there, it's like reading the books," he said, pointing at the parchment.

She worried her thumb as she considered what he was saying.

"Look, I can bring you the books for the stuff you've quoted, but you should really just rewrite this and add in your own thoughts and impressions. Explain why you are comparing these theories and reactions rather than just quote others... But hey, it's your essay. Do what you want." He stood up to go as Hermione read over her essay. "I bet you do that on all your essays...quote every reference in the library and compare one expert opinion after another, don't you?"

"No!" she exclaimed, even though that's generally what she usually did.

"Thought so. I don't get it, when we talk about this stuff, you're really smart, you understand so much," he said as he headed for the door. "That's how you should write."

Even though she was hurt by what he'd said about her essay, she mulled over what he'd said. Surely, Professor Snape must think the same thing about her essays, since technically Severus was him...only younger. No matter how hard she tried in his class, she never could get his approval or even a 'well done,' just scathing marks of adequacy. It was so hurtful that he was so harsh towards her...well, with everyone, actually. She picked up her quill and started making marks on her essay, places where she could give her reasoning between the comparisons, noting where she could explain, or put in her theory in using the quotes. By the time she was half-way through her essay, it was a mess. Pulling out another roll of parchment, Hermione started rewriting.

They had been up hours talking, telling humorous stories of their first magical accidental mishaps. "Oh the usual, I suppose," she said. "I lifted my father's car once to get my ball when it was stuck, or I'd summon my ball to me, especially if it rolled into the street. Oh, and I used to pull helium balloons down to me in the park when I saw them. I could make leaves twirl and dance, and I could light candles. I levitated or summoned things from shelves I couldn't reach, and in the kitchen, I found I could fix things I'd dropped while doing the dishes: cups, plates, and I fixed a figurine once when I broke the leg off. I was so scared of being punished or scolded that I'd hold the pieces together and wish them together really hard. I had no idea it was magic...I just thought my wishes came true." She laughed and blushed. "Reparo was the first spell I managed to do well with a wand."

"That shows a great deal of control," Severus replied, his feet resting on the table. "I was always scolded severely for doing magic at home; although, Mum would sneak me into the kitchen when Dad left the house, and we'd practice simple things. She also taught me a lot of dueling spells. I was a scrawny kid, not that I've filled out much, but she wanted me to be able to defend myself. I used to read loads of books on defensive spells and such, especially hexes, jinxes, curses... I didn't want to be picked on at Hogwarts like I was at primary school."

Hermione bit her lip and regarded him thoughtfully. "So you must have known loads of curses and such coming to school. I mean, if you read as much then as you do now, you must have known a lot."

Severus chuckled. "I was very well versed, mostly in curse theory and had loads of them memorized. I impressed my house prefect, Malfoy, with how much I knew. Rumors spread that I knew as much as a seventh-year. I think he and his friends started the rumors. It wasn't true, but the rumor made other kids think twice before taking me on...well, most of the other students. I admit that I've read every book on curses in the library, just in case... Sometimes the bullies will accost you just to see if the rumors are true or not." Severus looked at the timer and dropped his feet to the floor. "Blimey, is that the time? I have to go!" He shoved his parchments into his bag. "Do you need anything?" he asked as he stood, crossing his finger that she'd say...

"No, I'm fine. I would've liked a shower tonight, but..."

"No, it's all right," he said, heading for the door. "Can you shower quickly?"

"Yes, I think so," she replied, hurrying to get her shower things and a change of robes.

"Stay close so I don't have to look for you," he said as he Disillusioned her and led the way. The common room was empty and the bathroom was dark. He lit one of the

wall sconces and took his seat on the bench, thankful that he didn't have to close his eyes while she undressed. It was easier this way, keeping her invisible as she dumped her clothes on the bench next to him. He canceled the charm on the clothes as she entered the shower stall. "How did you learn to control your magic at such a young age?" he asked.

"I dunno," her voice, though soft, seemed to echo off the walls. The intermittent heavier sounds of the water meant she was washing her hair. "My early bursts of magic scared me and my parents. They're dentists and scientific people, and they figured that I had telekinetic abilities. So moving things, summoning, repelling, making things fly... stuff like that was easily understood. Little fires they attributed to pyrokinesis. Shattering glass well... They worked with me on controlling my anger and my abilities. Do you know what I mean by telekinetic and pyrokinesis?"

Severus smirked as he kicked back, leaning against the wall on the bench until she was though. "Yeah, I know what they are." Hermione really impressed him. She had shown huge potential as a child. She'd had quite a bit of control of her magic, it seemed, but then her parents had rationalized out her abilities with fairly open minds. "I'm surprised that the Ministry didn't come around much to fix things or augment anyone's memory?"

The water continued to splash as Hermione washed herself. "There was an odd woman that I thought lived down the street who used to come over frequently, but my parents always had their own excuses for my mishaps and strange happenings, so she usually left... Come to think about it, she always showed up after I'd done something odd."

He laughed. "Sounds like a Ministry official. Checking things out and realizing your parents had things in hand, I suppose. What else did you do?"

"Oh, once I accidentally unlocked the monkey cages at the circus! I thought that they looked so sad, and I wanted to give one my frozen banana. Dad grabbed my arm and pulled me away when the monkeys started to escape. I was six, I think. And once I got stuck on the roof. I was standing in the front garden when my cousin pulled my hair. I used to hate it when he did that, so I'd try to outrun him, only he'd catch me anyway. Well, one day I remember turning, and the next thing I knew I was on the roof. Dad called the fire department to get me down. I was clinging to the aerial."

Severus sat up in shock. "Blimey, you Apparated? How old were you?"

The water turned off. "I was nearly seven, I think? It was the end of the summer when his family came down to visit. What about you?"

He smirked at the sight of two towels, one obviously wrapped around her body and another on her head, which appeared as if floating into the room. He quickly Disillusioned the towels. "I mostly broke stuff when I had accidental bursts of magic. Mum would repair it so my dad wouldn't know. I made a tree branch fall on a girl who used to sneer at me all the time, threw a dog across the street that tried to chase me, that kind of thing. I could make bullies who chased me trip and hurt themselves to get away. But most of my magic was done with my mum." He stood and collected her things. "I'll leave your old robes on my bed with mine. That way they'll get cleaned."

"Will I get mine back?" she asked as the sleeves of Avery's robes seemed to fold themselves up.

"Yeah, I'll see to it," he stated, opening the door for her. "C'mon, I want to get to bed." He removed the charm off her in the doorway of the classroom and closed the door before turning to go.

Severus set the timer on his Muggle clock to wake him at four in the morning and shoved it under his pillow so that the sound of the alarm wouldn't wake his dorm mates. A trick he'd learned at home, so as not to wake his dad. The next step of the potion needed to be added at dawn, and that left him plenty of time to finish his essay before his classes. He'd hoped that the potion would be done before the weekend. The Slytherin vs. Hufflepuff game was this weekend, not that he really cared about this one; Slytherin was going to wallop Hufflepuff, even with three of their players in the hospital wing and using alternates. Still, he'd been asked to brew the Sprain, Bruise, and Muscle-Ache potions for Slughorn because his were so much better than the professor's, not that he'd tell him why.

In the morning, he got dressed and slipped from the room easily enough.

Hermione was sound asleep when he entered the classroom. Not that he'd expected her to be up. He tended to his potion and finished his essay, hoping that she would wake before he had to leave for breakfast. He walked over to check on her again. She wasn't like the girls he knew; she trusted him, forgave him easily, and laughed at his jokes. None of the girls in his house would have been this comfortable sleeping in a room he had complete access to, and he was certain that none of them would have fallen asleep in such a situation without placing an alarm charm to warn them of his intrusion.

He crossed his arms, amazed at the trust she had given him. From the first time he'd met her, she had given him her total unconditional trust, no questions asked. For the most part, she did everything he asked of her without giving him any grief or making any fuss. When he was angry, she was so understanding and soothing, listening patiently and letting him vent his frustrations. When he was in a foul mood, or not feeling particularly friendly, she seemed to understand him and read quietly on her bed, giving him the space he needed.

He had no idea how long he stood there, watching her. There was a soft knock on the door, and Severus moved away from the bed quickly. He was so glad that he'd had the forethought to add the Compulsion Charm on the door. He reached the worktable the same time Avery opened the door.

"Severus, mate, do you got a minute?" Avery asked stepping inside. "You're checking on the potion?"

"Yeah, I have an hour to add the next ingredient," he said. "I just finished my essay for Professor Walters."

Avery looked around the room. "Do you have any extra porcupine quills?" he asked.

"Only a few and they're old," Severus said, reaching for the jar on his shelf.

Avery smirked. "Oh, I don't care if they're old. I'll have more for you by lunch. I already sent Dad an owl. So when is the potion going to be done?"

"Two weeks," Severus answered, indicating they should go with a twist of his wrist. "What are you planning with the quills?"

"Oh, I just need them to get my point across. Careful asking, you don't want to become an unwitting accomplice, do you?" Avery asked, turning to go before Severus could ask him to elaborate. "See you in the common room later."

Severus was glad that he would be getting fresh quills, but was suspicious about Avery's intent. If he was going to use them in a prank or against someone, he really didn't want to know. He checked on Hermione, smiling that she was still asleep, and left to go revise in the common room. *If Avery isn't using the quills for something illicit, then that means my absence is being noticed again.* He'd have to convince everyone he wasn't becoming reclusive or depressed or whatever they were thinking about him. *Bigger. That means, Saturday, I'll have to actually watch the game instead of sitting in the top row reading.*

After lounging in the common room for an hour, sipping on cocoa while revising, he made his excuses and went to see Hermione. He slipped in quietly and carefully closed the door. "Boo."

She didn't jump at all, just compared something from her original essay to the book by her elbow. "I knew it was you."

"Oh, yeah?" He smirked as he sat down, watching her as she wrote a line and crossed it out. "I could have been anyone."

"Anyone else would have knocked." She indicated over her shoulder at the door with her quill. "That spell you showed me, the Compulsion Charm, it makes anyone intending to open the door knock first, right?"

"Smarty pants," he sneered playfully, petting her *Monster Book of Monsters* so he could pick it up. Besides being dangerous to fingers, the thick, furry book had a lot of

great information, if he could get the damn thing to cooperate.

"Insufferable know-it-all." Hermione looked up. "At least that's what you usually call me...I mean, your older you."

"Know-it-all? I don't think so," he smirked, noticing that she was revising her Potions essay. "Insufferable...okay, maybe." She had taken his advice and was revising all of her essays.

She picked up a crumpled piece of paper and tossed it at his head. Severus caught it easily enough. "Not bad. Ever think about being a Seeker?" she asked.

He tossed the paper in the bin. "Nope, never wanted to be a dumb jock."

"Just a brilliant Potions master and Dark Arts expert extraordinaire," she chided him.

"Got that right," he said, smiling, finally getting the book to stop growling and lay open in his hands. He kept stroking the soft fur as he read, glancing up in time to see her smirk.

"Petting my book, Severus?" She stressed her words as if implying something as she looked up at him from under her lashes.

He scowled at her. "It's intriguing."

Hermione put her elbow on the table and leaned her head against her hand as she looked at her essay again. "Oh, it's okay, you can pet it if you want to," she said, chuckling softly while crossing something out.

"Trouble with your paper, Hermione?" he said in a slow, silky drawl.

She glanced up, her eyes wide, and her mouth open.

"Why don't you show me what you've got," he purred again slowly and as silkily as he could while he continued to stare at her intently. He was amused to watch as she held her breath for a second before she swallowed nervously and looked away.

"No, I'm fine," she managed to squeak.

"Are you sure, *Hermione*?" he asked, saying her name as silkily as he could manage. Her cheeks even flushed that time. He knew he was being a prick, but girls rarely reacted to his voice...well, he rarely had the opportunity to talk to them like this. He'd seen Black and Potter trying the technique on girls in the library successfully for years. Well, they couldn't get their voice as smooth as he was able to do. The guys in his house had even tried talking that way once, a soft, silky drawl that sounded ridiculous to him...as if they were trying too hard to be sexy...but apparently his voice lent well to it. "I would be happy to be of service to you."

"I just have to, er, compare...finish theorize my...hypothesis of... my point," she stammered and lowered her head. "You're distracting me."

He mentally laughed at how flustered she had become, stammering incoherently and blushing so deeply. It was intriguing to watch. He had no idea she could be affected so, simply by just the sound of his voice. Even as he stared at her, the pink of her cheeks seemed to deepen, and she wouldn't meet his gaze. It made him chuckle inside, even though he had a smirk firmly on his face. She started to concentrate on her essay and the flush paled. He decided to see if he could make her blush again. "So, do you want me to help you? Tell me what I can do for you?" he asked lowering his voice and making it as smooth as he could.

Hermione didn't look up but her hand stilled, and she visibly swallowed. "No, I'm fine, thank you," she managed to say, but her voice cracked once.

Severus smiled at her reaction. "Are you sure? I'd be more than happy to." He knew that he should let her revise her essay, but this was too much fun. "So what *would* you like to do today?"

Hermione looked up. "I want to go to the library."

"Not happening," he stated, shaking his head, dropping the sexy timbre.

"A hike, like last time?" She had the most expectantly hopeful expression he'd ever seen.

Slytherin has booked the pitch today for a big practice... The alternates are playing against the first string, which means nearly everyone in my dorm will be out on the Quidditch pitch today, and the house groupies, and their girlfriends... "No way. Not today," he said, shaking his hand when the book snipped at him because of his inattention to it.

"Tomorrow then?" she asked, biting her lip and her doe-like gaze intent on his face.

"You're pushing," he said, wishing he'd never asked the question in the first place. He had been hoping she'd want to do spell work.

She sighed and turned back to her essay. "Too bad it's not my time."

Okay, that peaked his curiosity. "Why?"

"It snowed yesterday," she stated as if that explained everything. "No one would recognize me or know I was a stranger, especially if I wore a hat and scarf with my hood up."

Severus looked up at her and his mouth fell open. *Snowed...her time...and it was snowing a bit today.* "Maybe. But your robes are Gryffindor..."

"The ones I have on now are Slytherin," she replied, stroking her feather quill with her fingers.

Severus scowled at how she was misusing her quill. "Boy's robes, in case you hadn't noticed." The *Monster Book of Monsters* started to squirm again, and he stroked the spine to calm it back down.

She sighed and leaned her head against her fist again, watching his fingers caress the book. "I just thought that it might be nice to get out of this room or a bit. You know, fresh air, sunshine, play in the snow..." She looked up at him. "Unless it's not snowing now? I mean during this time." She leaned her cheek on her fist and her little finger on her lower lip. "I just thought it would be fun to...I had so much fun the last time."

"And it was really risky," he said, returning his attention to the chapter on kelpies.

"What is life without a little risk?" Hermione asked.

Severus remained quiet, his fingers absent-mindedly stroking the book as he read, which made the large book literally purr at him. If there was a clock, he was certain he'd hear it ticking away. She was staring and she knew he hated that, but she was waiting for an answer. He looked up and one side of his mouth pulled back in a smirk. "I'll think about it," he finally said. "Not today, though."

She sighed in resolution. She leaned down, reached for her bag, pulled out a Chocolate Frog, then looked up at him and withdrew another. "Would you like one?"

He smiled. "If you think you can spare it?"

She laughed, extending her arm toward him. "I have several in my bag. I like to nibble on them when I revise."

"Ah, yes, the dentists' daughter's little defiance to her parents' upbringing," he said, a bit snarky as he smirked at the offered treat.

"Ha ha ha," she said, her head bobbing left, right, and then left again. "I always brush my teeth extra carefully after eating sweets." She extended her arm a little farther toward him. "Really, do you want it?"

He took the pentagon-shaped box and smiled. "Thank you. Do you want the card back?" He had no idea if she collected them or not. They were a big deal to the younger kids of his house, even trading or selling them.

"No, it's...you may keep it," she said, smiling at him.

When he opened the box, grabbing the frog before it could jump away, he saw Hengist Waldebeuf of Woodcroft, the second Chief of the Wizards' Council who had established the first agreement with goblins for minting a standardized monetary system, smiling back at him from the bottom of the box. He lifted the card out and read the brief entry. This was the first time he'd seen the famous, hooked-nosed wizard except in books. His card was worth quite a bit to those who were trying to collect all the Frog cards. "Are you sure you don't want this one?"

Hermione's smile widened. "Nah, it's all right. I have others. Besides, it's something to remember me by."

He was shocked by her statement. He stared at her as he fingered the edge of the card. "As if I'd forget you," he mumbled inaudibly.

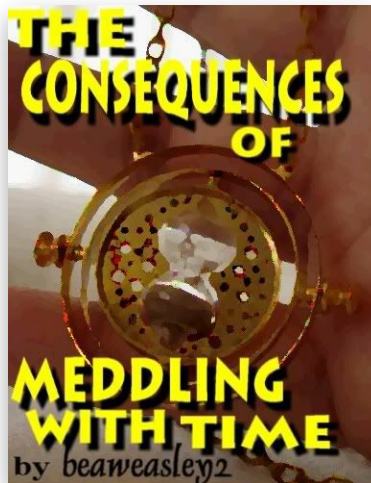
Chapter 12

Chapter 12 of 54

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Many thanks to my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for helping me clean up my many mistakes, and to Pookah for the shoulder and friendly advice. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.



Hermione sat at the desk revising her Charms essay. Well, she had decided to revise all her essays. She was trying to write her opinions on each principle she quoted on her Charms essay and summarize why she had thought the principles and theories that she had quoted were related. It was harder than she thought, substantiating her information with well-argued theories and extrapolations. Summaries were the easiest; she only had to write her thoughts as if she were talking to Severus. Nevertheless, she was determined to write the best essay she could. The problem was she was running out of parchment, so she was using the front and back of them for her drafts and notes.

She looked up at the timer on the worktable. According to the hands, Severus would show up in three hours and fifteen minutes, if not before. It never ceased to amaze her, the amount of time he spent with her. He really took taking care of her seriously and tried to make sure she had enough reading material to help pass the time between his visits.

She turned back to her essay and wondered what the guys were up to, then giggled to herself *Dumbledore said that this is 1976, and Professor Snape said he was sixteen when I...now, so Harry and Ron aren't even born yet.* She knew Ron's birthday and tried to calculate which of his brothers might be in this timeline *Percy...maybe. He's four years older and his birthday is in August so... he'd be an infant. Which means Bill and Charlie are little kids. Charlie is three or four years older than Percy.* She scratched out the equations. She was wasting time with this and then giggled at that thought. *All I have is time...extra time at that!*

Still, she missed her friends. She wondered what Harry would think about this Severus Snape and rolled her eyes *He'd probably run off to go meet his parents the first*

opportunity he had and ignore Severus completely. She laughed at the scenario that developed in her mind.

She brushed her fringe off her forehead and read the last few paragraphs again. She'd finished her Potions essay yesterday, and Severus had nodded in approval when he'd checked it for her. However, he had reviewed her Charms essay this morning and had told her that her second draft was better, but fragmented, and needed refining.

Hermione read the paragraph aloud, again, and erased what she'd rewritten, starting over. Her opinions sounded simplistic and childish to her ears. "I'm not inept at writing coherent thoughts!" she growled at herself. She read the essay again from the beginning. She was still all over the place because she had too many quotes.

She picked up her quill again. At this rate, her essay was going to have an extra eleven inches. *Maybe if I just eliminate something.* Sighing, she crossed out a quote, then circled it. No, Craigmyle's theory substantiates Bethencort's principle of concurring reactions, and Newton's Third Law of Motion validates Pierce Henderson's theory of frictional tension of the applied magical forces... Now she only had to explain why in her own words. She drew an arrow to the margin and started to explain why. She then circled Craigmyle's name and drew another arrow to the margin and summarized her reason for comparing his theory to Bethencort's and Tredwell's principles, and then Henderson's theory.

She circled Newton's name, drew an arrow down to the bottom of the parchment and started writing. By the time she was done, she'd filled up the bottom margin and most of the next margin. Dropping her quill, she read over what she'd written. *Not bad, sloppy but rational, I hope.* She went through and corrected her amendments.

She reached for a fresh sheet of parchment and realized that she didn't have any to spare. She still had five more essays to complete; well, three of those were ones she wanted to rewrite. She tried looking on the backs of the discarded parchments again for one with a blank side that was long enough, finally finding one that she could use. She picked up her wand, aimed it at the used sheet, and tried to erase the ink from it, huffing in exasperation when all she did was smear the ink all over the page.

"Problem, little Gryffindor?"

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin as she whirled around in her chair to face him. "When did you...? How long have you been standing there?"

Severus laughed. "I just walked in to check my potion. What's the problem?"

She showed him her parchment. "I tried to erase the ink, but it's set already and... I'm running out of parchment."

"Give me a minute." Severus walked over to the potion, stirred it the required times, waited and stirred it again. When he was done, he turned around to face her. "Don't you ever reuse your parchment?"

"Sometimes, not all the time... but I don't have my solvent," she said, looking remorsefully at the parchment in her hands, blushing. "It's in my trunk, which I can't get to, of course."

"What, you don't have any in that 'great bag of holding' of yours?" he chided her, smirking as he indicated her bag with a lift of his chin.

"No, I don't generally carry it unless I know I'll be in the library. I don't have breaks between classes on Thursdays," she admitted. "Isn't there an easier way?"

He smiled as he leaned against the worktable. "I use a solvent or the Solvent Charm and siphon off the ink, then dry the parchment." He stood up. "I'll get mine," he offered, turning to go.

"Or you can teach me the Solvent Charm," she said hopefully, turning in her seat as he walked by.

He turned and crossed his arms. "No, that's a fifth-year charm. Your Charms professor will show you the spell in the first week."

"You've shown me other fifth-year charms before," she said, smiling at him sweetly.

"And I explained why that is a bad idea," he said, not at all phased by her tactic of persuasion.

She dropped the smile and inhaled, preparing to try reasoning with him.

"You are going to insist until I say yes, aren't you?" he asked when she opened her mouth to try asking again.

She went ahead and voiced what she thought was a very logical solution. "We could try a small bit of parchment to see if I can do the charm, and if you think I'm capable of it, you can watch me as I try a larger piece. If I look like I'm straining, I'll stop and not bug you about it again."

Severus stood there, staring at her. Slowly his mouth stretched into a smile before he started laughing, and his arms dropped to his sides. "Blimey, girl, you are a clever bird. Well stated, but I still have to say no. I don't have time right now."

Hermione set her parchment down. "Okay. But that's not a no." Her smile fell as she looked at the parchment in her hand. "But I don't have any more to spare. I've used up all my spare rolls."

He looked at the stack of sheets and dropped his head, obscuring his face from view. "You know how to siphon up water, right?" he asked, coming around to stand beside her and drew his wand, "and the Latin word for ink?"

"Of course," she said, smirking at him, "it's atramentum."

He leaned around her. "Okay, I'll liquefy the ink...you siphon it off," he suggested, aiming his wand at her parchment. "Ready?"

Together they cleaned off several pages of parchment. "Thank you," she said when he pocketed his wand.

"You're welcome," he said, then pointed his finger at her. "Now no practicing the spell until I get back, okay? Promise me. I will let you try it, but I want to be here to make sure you don't overdo it."

"I promise."

He stared at her a moment, nodded and turned to leave. "I'll be back in two hours. If you want, we can brew something together."

Hermione quickly glanced at the timer on the worktable and smiled. It indicated that the potion didn't need attending to for three hours. "Sure," she said as she turned back to face him, smiling.

He shook his head at the expected exuberance. "So be good, my little Gryffindor."

"I promise."

Severus returned from the library carrying as many books as Madam Pince would allow him to check out. His library card indicated that he'd nearly tripled the number of books he'd borrowed this month in only a week, although the librarian hadn't commented about it so far. However, Rowe had commented on the number of books he'd been checking out lately, so Severus had used the Extension Charm on his own bag. Besides, a simple Relevo Charm to lighten the weight of the bag made it easy enough to carry.

Hermione was still revising her Charms essay when he entered. "How many do you have left?"

"Pardon?" she asked as she dipped her quill into her inkwell.

"Your essays, how many do you have left?" he asked slower as he set his bag on the table.

She looked up at him. "Besides this one...five, and I have my Astronomy chart to complete."

He nodded and smiled. "All right, get your wand..." he started to say as she smirked and picked it up from beside her book. "Okay... As you know, dye-based inks are generally much stronger than pigment-based inks because of the density of the pigments, so they are harder to remove. You seem to prefer the dye-based ink. That takes combining two spells at the same time, to liquefy the ink, then separate it from the parchment. *Liquare* makes the ink fluid, changes it back into a liquid, and *Dilutum* separates the ink off the surface of the parchment, acting as the solvent does, only better."

"*Liquare dilutum*," she repeated the Latin, careful to enunciate the words as he had.

"Exactly," he said with a nod, impressed, as usual, at how quickly she caught on. "Now the wand movement is tricky because *Liquare* is a smooth sweep and has to encompass the entire sheet of the parchment while *Dilutum* is a strong, straight, upsweep. So, you have to move the wand up the sheet with a deliberate stroke while covering the parchment side to side without waving your wand tip too much. And intent is imperative, you have to concentrate on both objectives simultaneously, which isn't too hard, but requires a certain amount of concentration."

Hermione nodded, having listened to him raptly, and her lips moved slightly as if repeating what he'd said to set it firmly in her mind.

He smirked at the determination in her expression.

She looked up at him, nodded, and said, "Got it."

"So watch my wand carefully. I'll do one parchment front and back so you can see the movement." He picked a long roll of parchment and secured the corners with a simple sticking charm. "*Liquare dilutum*," he said clearly and slowly as he moved his wand, adding a quick flick of his wrist at the end as he added, *Scourgify*." He scowled at the result. "Not as clean as I usually do, probably because I wasn't deliberate and determined enough. Watch again." He repeated the spells, faster this time, and smiled smugly at the result. He released the parchment and repeated the demonstration, once again having to repeat the spells to remove the residual residue left from doing the spells slowly.

Hermione tried the wand movement.

"You're flourishing your wand too much. You need to keep your movement straighter, with more angling of the wand, rather than sweeping about so much. Try again." She needed to be corrected several times before Severus thought she had it right.

"Now you try it." He leafed through her used sheets and picked up a smaller, well-used one. "Try this one first."

Her first time, she only made the ink smear, the second cleared the center but made the words on the edges bleed, and the third left a few faint splotches. The fourth, left the parchment clean but not as fresh as when Severus had done the spell. "Not bad, you're getting it."

She huffed in disappointment as she turned the parchment over.

He smirked at her dissatisfaction. "What, you thought you'd get it in one go?"

"No," she said, pursing her lips and getting that cute determined look in her eyes. He watched her as she tried the other side, cleaning the parchment sufficiently but not completely in two tries. The third time it was clean. She sighed in disappointment.

"Look at me," Severus demanded softly, lifting her chin. He didn't see any stress in her eyes; the soft brown orbs were steady and her irises were not dilated. "Okay, good. Hold out your hands." She silently complied as he stepped back to watch her outstretched hands. They were steady, the left dropping slightly, but when he corrected it, she was able to hold them out level and steady.

"No signs of fatigue then?"

"Don't get cheeky." He dropped her hands. "No, you're fine. Try another one."

Hermione picked up the top roll and secured it, having it clean in only two tries and the backside clean in one. Severus only nodded and sat down in the chair. He summoned an apple from her food stash on the benches. "So now you got that one down, what would you like to do next?"

She'd smiled at the compliment and then grinned hopefully at the offer. "Sneak me into the library?"

"No," he said, biting into the apple. "I meant spells."

"I just thought..."

"How about making your bag lighter to carry?" he suggested. He smirked at her raised eyebrows. "Relevo Charm...learned it in fourth-year, I think. Relevo, to lift or to lighten, as you know. The incantation is *Relevare*, and *saccus* to specify that you're making your bag lighter." It took all of two tries to show her how to do that one, and the same for *Ingraveso*, which was to make things heavy or burdensome.

The next morning after showing her how to use the spells on larger objects like the table and chair, he checked her again for signs of fatigue, relieved when she looked fine.

"You know it might be possible that I'm simply able to do spells above my year," she said when he told her she could drop her hands.

"I'm beginning to believe you, but I'm not going to show you anything above a fifth-year level," he stated, shaking his head when she looked up at him hopefully, "and not today. I have potions to brew."

Hermione bit her lip and tilted her head. "May I help?"

"I'm counting on it," he said, checking his stores and selecting ingredients. "I need to make Calming Draught, Pimple Unction, Blood-Replenishing Potion... but I don't have enough hellebore or... leeches, so we'll brew some Calming Draught and Strengthening Solution now, Pimple Unction if we have time, and do Blood-Replenishing tomorrow."

He chuckled softly to himself as Hermione smiled, saying "Okay," while she grabbed two cauldrons and carried them to the worktable.

Severus scratched out a line of his Arithmancy equations and started over. She loved watching him work out something complicated.

"Hermione, you're staring at me," he said without even looking up at her.

She smirked as he placed an arm across the top of his parchment and leaned over it as he wrote. She struggled to suppress a chuckle. "I'm not going to copy you. My

equations are not as complicated as yours are."

Severus tipped his head up and glared at her, making her giggle. She covered her mouth to hide her smile as the crease between his brows deepened, making him resemble his older self when truly annoyed. "Sorry, just, I have all my work caught up, and the potion hasn't finished simmering, and well, and..."

His scowl darkened, and he raised his hand up to rest his cheek against his fist. "You're bored, already?" He dipped his quill in his ink and dabbed off the excess on the tip on the bottle. "You haven't really been here that long."

"I've been here over a week," she said, chastising herself at the whine in her voice. If she knew anything about him, it was that whining wouldn't get her anywhere with him. At least she knew his older self hated whining. "I'm sorry. I know I have no one to blame but myself for even being in this situation, but sitting in this room all the time... Yes, I'm bored."

"Last time you were here two weeks and you were fine," he said pointedly.

Hermione held up the large book, so as not to show any sign of petulance. "Thirteen days actually, but who's counting," she said, turning the page even though she hadn't finished reading it. She pursed her lips at the stupidity of her actions and turned the page back.

He glanced up at her and set down his book. "Apparently you were." He looked annoyed.

True, he'd slipped her from the room to shower several times now, and he'd taken the risk to take her outside last time she'd come back, but that had been a series of complications. He had been separated from her on the way back to the castle, and they'd had a series of close calls that could have been disastrous if she'd been discovered.

He sighed and picked up his book again. "It's not a good idea to wander the castle. What if you are seen? How am I to explain you to anyone? I'm sure you'd love being interrogated by Professor Dumbledore or McGonagall. Hermione, I'm the only one who knows you are here and the only one who knows who you are."

"I know that," she said, setting the book on the basic principle theory of the underlying relationships involved in cross species Transfiguration down on the desk. She wasn't concentrating anyway and had read the same line twice. "We could slip outside again. Isn't it still snowing?"

His head shot up and the same line formed between his brows. "Yes, but how did you know?" he asked and scowled. "Did you leave the room?"

She shook her head and dropped her hands. "Only with you...to shower. Besides, when you came in here yesterday, your boots were soaked, your hair and the shoulders of your robes were wet and there were a few flakes of snow!"

"So?" he asked, regarding her suspiciously.

Maybe she could get him to take her outside again, if she reasoned with him. "Snow. Cold. I'd be bundled up. We could go out for an hour..."

"It's too risky," he said, leaning his head on his fist again.

Hermione sighed, realizing that he was not going to relent. She picked up her book and pulled it closer to rest it on the edge of the desk, tilted towards her. She had to backtrack a few paragraphs to understand what she was reading.

Time seemed to stretch on.

Severus checked the gently simmering potions with a satisfied grin before joining Hermione at the table to revise. She was truly an exceptional lab partner and could, in fact, follow his every direction flawlessly. She'd placed sliced apples on a plate between them and was leaning her head against one hand while munching on a slice as she read her book. He picked up *The Practical Theory of the Resonance of Amalgamation Charms*, crossed his left ankle to rest on his right knee and opened the book to his marker.

Hermione glanced up as she reached for another slice of apple and asked, "What are you doing this afternoon?"

"My house is playing against Hufflepuff today, so I have to go to the Quidditch game," he stated nonchalantly, checking his timer. It was half an hour to lunch yet. He wished that he could take Hermione with him to the pitch so he could have someone to talk to in the stands besides Mulciber.

"Oh, that would be so much fun to watch," she said, her smile hopeful. "I'd really like to see Slytherin play Gryffindor in your time!"

"Why?" he asked suspiciously.

Hermione blushed a deep pink. "Oh, to, er, compare teams of course. My time to yours..."

"You want to watch Potter showing off on his broom?" he asked and then regretted the question. Hermione didn't know James Potter or any of the Gryffindors in his time. That time line when she'd spent a month in the Gryffindor common room with them, which his older self had told him about, didn't happen in his time line.

"Do you mean it?" she asked, her eyes bright and shining with hope. "I can go?"

He grasped his ankle that rested on his knee. "Oh sure, why not? No one would notice if I showed up with a date," he sneered and immediately regretted saying date.

"Is it still cold? I could wear a cap, scarf, and a coat, and you could add the Disillusionment and Notice-Me-Not Charms..." she rambled hopefully, thankfully not commenting on his slip of the tongue.

"Too risky and I don't have an extra scarf and hat," he said flatly. He'd been thinking about taking her outside even before she'd mentioned it. He'd meant it to be a surprise, although the Quidditch game was not at the top of his list of activities.

"Good thing I have mine, then," she said.

He was amazed when she grinned mischievously and pulled a sheepskin coat from her bag plus a hat and scarf and warm, sturdy boots. The hat and scarf she had were a green and blue plaid with black trim on the hat and black fringe on the scarf. Not that it really mattered.

"I had Care of Magical Creatures after lunch in my time, so I'd stuffed them in my *great bag of holding*."

Severus felt like he'd been cornered. *Damn, okay... why not? No one will recognize her... I just need robes, and... Am I nutters?! I'll think about it.*

Her smile was so big, so full of gleeful anticipation, he shook his head. In the end he relented. "Merlin, I'm losing my mind agreeing to this!" he moaned as he thought it over carefully, analyzing how he could pull it off. *In girl's Slytherin robes with a hat and scarf... I could pull it off. With the spells on her, she's darn near invisible... A Notice-Me-Not, and in Slytherin robes. We'll sit in the top of the bleachers, and you will have to support Slytherin.*

Hermione actually clapped her hands in joy. "I can do that."

She had been eagerly looking forward to the match all through lunch. She changed into the set of Slytherin robes he'd found in the laundry and her boots. Severus cast the

Notice-Me-Not on her as well as a Silencing Charm on her shoes and the Warming Charm on her clothes before they left the classroom.

He poked his head out to make sure that the corridor wasn't too crowded before signaling for her to follow him. They made it through the castle without incident. It was snowing softly when they walked out of the castle. Severus walked slowly, his head bowed, watching the ground for Hermione's shoeprints. Thankfully, with so many students following the same paths, her shoeprints blended in with all the rest, and somehow no one stumbled, indicating that she didn't bump into anyone. He climbed to the top of the stands and felt Hermione slip past him, just as Mulciber approached. He cast a Repelling Charm on the seat on her other side and sat down, thankful that six first-years were sitting in a cluster near her. *Good. They'll mask any noises she makes.*

"Don't want anyone to sit next to you?" Mulciber asked, plopping down on Severus' other side.

"I want to read undisturbed," he said, pulling out the thin book on wandless magic as he sat down.

"Oi, so you bought my book," Mulciber said, bumping Severus on the shoulder.

He turned to smirk at him. "It's not your book unless you purchase it, but yes, it's the one you left on the shelf."

"May I borrow it later?" Mulciber asked, looking past Severus with a frown, staring at the space beside him with an intent stare.

"Sure," Severus said, putting his feet up on the seat in front of him and stared pointedly across the pitch to the Gryffindor stands. "Heard you had a run in with Black."

Mulciber turned his intent gaze from where Hermione sat to the Gryffindor stands. "He accused me of hexing Evans...don't get your wand tied in a knot," he said when Severus scowled at him. "I said accused. I didn't! I didn't do nothing." He looked past Severus again, his eyes narrowing in suspicion, however his attention was diverted again when the game began.

Even though the charm made it difficult to see her, throughout the game Severus had been able to feel Hermione beside him in the stands, bouncing slightly when Slytherin made a goal and grumbling when Professor Campbell made a bad call on a foul. Apparently, she knew the game rather well, and it seemed that she did, in fact, like Quidditch. He'd had to shush her a few times, and then cast a Silencing Charm on her voice. Thankfully, most of the time Mulciber was too engrossed in the game to notice anything, and the first-years were being quite boisterous.

Rowe was flying well enough as a replacement Chaser, and he made two goals in a row and stole the Quaffle from Saunders, one of the Hufflepuff Chasers, twice. Avery was doing all right filling in as a Beater for Thortenson, although more than once he'd knocked the Bludger into the Gryffindor stands. Luckily, Professor Campbell thought he was aiming for Burbage or Quirke, two of the Hufflepuff Chasers, as they flew close to the stands where the snowfall was lighter. However, Hodges, who was substituting for Rosier as Chaser, seemed to be having a hard time flying in the snow. He slipped from his broom three hours in, dropping the Quaffle that, thankfully, Rowe managed to catch and throw through the hoop before the Hufflepuff Keeper could block it, earning Slytherin another goal.

Tompkins, one of the Hufflepuff Beaters, managed to hit Avery in the side, making him hang precariously from his broom by one hand. He managed to land in the Ravenclaw stands, remount and join the game, but not before Quirke scored again for Hufflepuff. Avery used his next three contacts with the Bludger to retaliate. When Slytherin was down by thirty points, Westlake managed to hit the Hufflepuff Keeper, Elliston, with the Bludger, allowing Hornsby to score.

The game was a close and stretched on all afternoon and well into the evening, almost through dinner before Regulus Black suddenly made a quick directional change on his broom and shot forward, nearly colliding with the Hufflepuff goal post to catch the Snitch. Regulus flew through the tallest Hufflepuff goal hoop, waving the Snitch in his fist.

The final score was merely two hundred seventy to one hundred forty. Hornsby and Rowe had each scored six goals for Slytherin. But considering that Rosier, Atkinson, and Thortenson were not playing today due to injuries, it was a good game. Severus whispered to Hermione to make her way to the classroom, and he'd meet her there. However, his housemates, buoyed by their victory, corralled him once he'd stepped onto the ground.

"Severus, mate, did you see me knock that Hufflepuff, Tompkins, off his broom?" Avery asked, throwing his arm across Severus' shoulders nearly making him trip on his own feet.

"Rowe was on fire today!" Mulciber said, grasping Rowe's shoulders. "You were awesome!"

"Did you catch that recovery?" Rowe asked, holding his broom across his shoulders. "Set me right up for that goal."

Severus tried to look around for Hermione as his housemates marched him back to the castle.

"... and Reg held out for the last minute, to make sure that we were ahead..."

"... nearly thought I'd fall off the back end of my broom," Hodges admitted, slamming into Mulciber.

Severus turned around, searching.

"Mate, Evans is with Potter up there," Avery stated and draped his arm across his shoulders again. "She's made her choice, mate."

Severus tried to make his excuses in the dungeon corridor, but his friends forced him to join them for drinks and food in the common room. He tried to bow out after a short while, a futile gesture, but Hodges pressed a glass of Firewhisky-laced pumpkin juice in his hands.

"To the Team!" Hodges yelled, repeated by the celebrating Slytherins, which was shouted several times as various exploits of the game were rehashed to him as if he hadn't been in the stands watching the game. But every time Severus set down his glass to go find Hermione, a fresh one appeared and another toast was made.

Severus was quite snookered when he stumbled into the classroom, gave Hermione two bottles of butterbeer and three meat pies, and sat on the floor by her bed. He promptly fell asleep, leaning against her bed.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

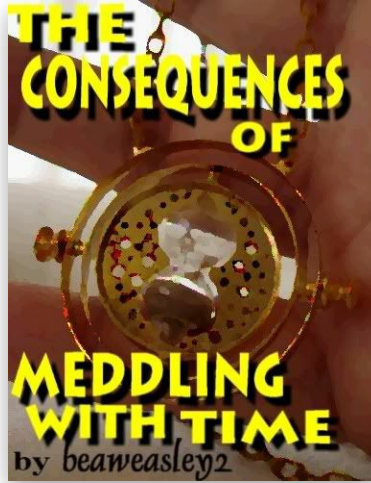
According to the almanac, snow fell in Scotland during Easter holiday in both 1977 and 1994 the second half of Hermione's third year and Severus' sixth.

Chapter 13

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Many thanks to my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for helping me clean up my many mistakes, and to Pookah for the shoulder and friendly advice. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.



The Polyjuice Potion was complete, so Severus measured out seven bottles of the glutinous substance, six he intended to sell to his housemates, no questions asked. He scraped half a goblet full off the bottom of the cauldron before he cleaned it with a Scourgify. He carried the goblet and one bottle to tuck into the desk Hermione used as a trunk.

"Oh, do I get one?" she asked, lying on her back on the bed with one leg balanced on her knee, reading.

"No," he said, closing the desk, "but I want to hide it just in case." Mulciber was getting behind in his essays and had actually been spending time in the library trying to catch up. Severus had found three of his hairs on his pillow and had them folded neatly in some toilet tissue in his pocket. It was a risk, but he was hoping that if anyone saw him leaving the castle with Hermione in Mulciber's form, no one would be suspicious, except maybe another Slytherin. But it did seem like most of his friends were too busy as of late to notice. Hurshiser and Rowe were still with the Ravenclaw girls; Thortenson was spending his free time with Linnet, and Avery was getting serious over Mysterie Myers. Even Rosier was getting cozy with one of the Hufflepuff Chasers, and Hodges was behind in his revision because of a bad interaction from two rogue jinxes, which had landed him a three-week stint in the hospital.

"It's been a late spring this year, but I want to see if I can find any of the lichens, crocus, pearlwort, and Giant Hogweed shoots today. Do you want to come?"

"Yes!" Hermione set down her book and rolled off the bed in one smooth motion, landing on her feet.

He laughed and then handed her one of Mulciber's robes, and his scarf, hat and coat with a smirk. "Here's the catch, you have to be a guy."

"Sure, I can do that," she replied. She held up the robe as he added the hairs to the Polyjuice Potion in the goblet. It turned a brownish-avocado grey. She looked at the potion and grimaced. "It smells like a rotten, overripe avocado."

He chuckled softly at her remark. "Drink this and put on his robe. I'll wait by the door." He turned and walked over to the desk to let her change. Even though she would look like Mulciber, and he'd seen Mulciber undress numerous times, he didn't feel right watching her undress.

He laughed as Mulciber walked into the room, smiling with anticipation, carrying the goblet. He took it and turned the goblet into a flask in case she needed to take another mouthful. "Hermione, relax your face." Her smile faded and he nodded. "Mulciber has an open-mouth, dopey look most of the time, like what he reads makes no sense, and he's not as well spoken as you are."

She tried and the result was spot on and absolutely hilarious.

They made it out of the dungeons, passing only a few lower-year Slytherins who gave them sly glances, and out of the castle without any hassles. The snow was ankle-deep until they were away from the general pathways where it was slightly deeper, but the edge of the forest had deep snowdrifts caused by the recent winds.

Severus hadn't wanted to wander too far, but he couldn't find any crocus along the tree line. He tried to keep the edge of the forest in view as they moved among the trees in search of the potion ingredients he wanted. The pearlwort wasn't in bloom yet, so he had to forgo collecting any, and he wasn't able to find any of the mushrooms he'd hoped to gather either. The deer-horn and silver mantel lichens were easier to find, and the Great Hogweed had plenty of new shoots to collect. However, he found several unicorn hairs and a small nest of woodlice to entice the bowtruckles so he could take a couple of nice straight branches from their birch tree to make new stirring rods.

When the potion started to wear off, Hermione swallowed another mouthful from the flask, grimacing and scrunching her nose in distaste. "Urgh, that's so vile! The cat tasted better."

"I could tell Mulciber you think so," he teased her.

Hermione grabbed a handful of snow.

"Don't you even think about it," he warned her before she took a bite of the snow and he sighed as he realized she wasn't going to throw it at him.

Mulciber's eyebrows rose and he smirked mischievously, a very non-Mulciber-like expression, just before Hermione closed her fingers about the clump of snow and chucked it at him.

"I thought I said..." he started to say as another clump of snow was hurled at him. He swept it away with a sweep of his hand and a wandless spell. "Not funny."

"Oh, I dunno, I think it's hilarious," she said. It was so odd seeing Mulciber smiling merrily at him while grabbing more snow. Hermione chuckled it at him, and he ducked as he swatted the snowball away with his arm.

He grabbed a handful of snow and tossed it at her. Hermione squealed and ducked as they both scooped up more snow. Hers missed...his didn't. But as he leaned down, a small bit fell onto his head.

"You're asking for it," he said, quickly packing an extra large clump of snow together.

"That was from the tree!" she squealed in a most un-Mulciber-like manner as his snowball splattered on her shoulder, getting her cheek as well. Hermione lobbed one at him that hit his arm.

They both scooped more snow and threw them. He was faster, hitting her squarely just before hers hit him. "Oh, now you've done it." He lunged forward and caught her scarf, yanking her to him as he scooped up a huge handful of snow.

"Severus, no," she protested futilely as he smashed the snow on the back of her neck getting some of it under the scarf.

She shrieked as she struggled to get away, only managing to trip him. But he hadn't let go, which only made her land on top of him. The fall winded him, and it took him a moment to catch his breath as she stared at him nose to nose. He flicked a bit of snow at Mulciber's grinning face, and she pushed herself up, wiping her face as she flipped onto her back next to him, laughing. Severus scrambled up, turned to offer a hand and froze. Mulciber was sliding his legs apart, then together while at the same time flapping his arms up and down in the snow bank.

"What are you doing?"

"Making an angel," Hermione stated as she raised a hand for help up. Severus grasped it and hauled her up. Once on her feet, she turned to look at her impression in the snow. "See, it's an angel: head, wings, dress..."

He looked at the depression and supposed it did look like an angel.

"Now you make one?"

He looked at her as if she'd lost her Gobstones. "I don't flail about in the snow."

"Why not?" she asked, and he laughed at seeing such an exuberantly playful expression on Mulciber's face. "Don't wizards make snow angels?"

"No, we make snow castles and snow sculptures," he stated and immediately regretted it as Mulciber's eyes widened in wonder. "Let me guess, you want to learn how."

He dropped his head as she replied, "Oh, yes!"

He sighed and dropped to his knees in front of a tall snowdrift. "If you ever tell anyone that I..."

"Like whom?" she asked, interrupting him. "I'm not about to go bragging to your housemates that you attempted..."

"Attempted? I'll have you know that I..." he started say rather defensively and then scowled at her smug expression. "I said I'd do it. Now stand back and give me some room." Severus took one of his birch branches and started outlining his castle, scooping snow away.

Hermione kneeled down next to him and helped to remove the excess snow. He patted new snow on sections where it was needed, poked depressions for windows and doors, using his stick to make smooth walls and crenellations. He picked up a wad of snow, uttering a nonverbal wandless charm and formed a few turrets on the sides.

He marked where he wanted her to build a wall around the castle, indicating where he wanted to put towers. As he used wandless magic to refine the castle, Hermione built his wall and three towers. After finishing the last cone-shaped roof, he backed up and fixed the towers, adding crenellations, long thin window slots, and smoothing the sides. He sat back and evaluated his handy work.

"Severus, that's amazing," Hermione said in awe, unaware that the potion was just beginning to wear off.

"You need more potion," he suggested, shrugging off her compliment.

"Do I have to?" she groaned, clearly not amenable to drinking essence of Mulciber again.

He looked over his shoulder and realized how far they had walked. "If you're okay in his robes, you don't have to for now. We won't be seen from this distance." He stood up, drew his wand and aimed for the snow castle. "*Crystallinus*." The snow took on a nearly transparent sheen, iridescent with rainbows of colors glowing lustroously, making the castle look like one from a fairy tale.

He turned and looked at Hermione, smugly satisfied by her expression of bewildered awe.

"Where did you learn to do that?"

He shrugged, not willing to tell her about the castles he and Lily used to make. "Something to do over Christmas hols when Mum insisted I go out and play. Not much to do in my town, so I suppose I made them to amuse myself." He quickly amended, "At first they were forts...not castles like this one," he admitted, so she'd not think him a ponce.

"What else can you do?" she asked, still staring at the snow castle.

He shrugged. "I don't do much anymore," he admitted. "I haven't done this in ages." In fact, it was only during the Christmas before last, his last Christmas with Lily, that he'd made a snow castle and a dragon for her. He didn't want to think about that...not ever again. "We should go back," he suggested.

"Do we have to?" she asked, looking up at him through her lashes.

He stared at a stray curl that fluttered against her cheek from the light breeze. He looked up to try to determine the time and shrugged. "Another half hour maybe, but I need to get you back before everyone heads to the common room to get ready for dinner. It'd look rather suspicious if Mulciber was seen passing himself in the corridors or, worse, someone we pass had seen the real Mulciber in passing... This is really risky, Hermione."

"You could just Disillusion me again," she entreated hopefully.

He shook his head, saying, "It's still best that I be seen walking with someone than have a second set of unexplainable tracks appearing in the snow." He looked up at the castle and shrugged. "I suppose we can wait until we are closer. You're not easily recognizable from this distance." He hoped.

When they got closer to the castle, he told her to take more potion, so she pulled out the flask, raised it in mock salutation him and said, "Bottoms up."

The change happened quickly enough, her cute face morphing into Mulciber's scruffy one, and he looked away wishing she didn't have to use the potion. They walked slowly, talking about the various plants that he'd discovered growing on the school grounds, and the best time to cultivate them for optimum efficacy. It was funny having this conversation with her and seeing Mulciber's face. He just couldn't imagine the real Mulciber ever being this interested in Herbology or Potions or this willing to talk about anything academically.

When they got near the castle, he asked her to dumb down a bit and reminded her to stop smiling. In the Entrance Hall, the Slytherin fifth-year prefect and his girlfriend gave them furtive glances, and they passed several second-years, Thortonson, and Hodges on the stairs to the dungeons. Thankfully, Hermione only grunted in greeting with a jerk of her head, so like Mulciber it was amusing, except passing his mates made Severus nervous. They were nearly at the classroom when Rowe, Rosier, and Atkinson turned the corner.

"Oi, Mulciber, you done with my notes from Care of Magical Creatures yet?" Rosier asked, stopping in front of Hermione.

"Yeah. They're in my trunk," she said, a little too nicely while attempting to make her face look dopey.

"I thought you had them with you in the library?" Rosier asked.

Hermione shrugged, not a thing Mulciber would have done, and Severus fought to control his expression to a mask of indifference. "I dropped my bag off..."

"Look, I don't have time...I have to get to my potion," Severus interrupted. "So if you want my help before dinner, we need to go, or you can meet me in my lab."

"Well, since you're apparently done with them...enough to go play in the snow...I need them back at dinner," Rosier stated.

Severus cringed inwardly, wondering when Rosier had seen them. He started to walk off and Hermione called out, "Severus, wait." He didn't turn around but did slow down slightly.

"I'll give them to you at dinner," Hermione said as she hurried after Severus.

He was mentally crossing his fingers that his housemates didn't pick up on Mulciber's difference of behavior.

"What happens if Mulciber doesn't have his notes at dinner?" Hermione asked softly when she'd caught up to him.

Severus opened the door of the classroom noticing that the potion was wearing off again. *Damn, that's cutting it way too close.* "He'll have them; I'll see to it. If he complains...I'll lend him mine."

Hermione nodded and walked over to her bed to change.

"I have to go," he said, just as she disappeared. "I have to make sure those guys don't get suspicious."

"Won't they be if you go now...you're supposedly checking on your potion?"

He swore softly and slowly counted to fifty before turning on his heel. "I'll be back after dinner, and if you want to shower, I'll sneak you in late after everyone has fallen asleep."

Hermione appeared, pulling on a jumper he'd lent her from Avery's trunk. It was huge on her, and she looked really adorable in it. "Okay, I'll be here."

He turned to leave. "You better be, my little Gryffindor, or I won't let you have any pudding."

A few days later, Hermione was sitting crossed-legged on the bed, reading the heavy tome on her lap, when the door opened. She leaned around the bed hangings and sucked in her breath as soon as she realized it wasn't Severus. The wizard was stocky, large and had short, spiky hair and a slightly pock-marked complexion. She saw a flash of silver from a badge on his robes, and cringed as she realized he was a prefect.

"Not here, damn it." He turned his back to her to look at the items on the benches, examining the blankets, picking up and setting back her plate and cutlery, and looking inside the pitcher. "What the...?"

She stayed on the bed, her knees grasped in her arms as she watched him, praying that he wouldn't find her, and wondering why he hadn't knocked before entering. Not that it mattered now; if he came her way, she was trapped.

The boy picked up one of Severus' cauldrons and turned to face the desk and worktable. "Now why would you need to elongate and widen a desk? You've never done that before," he said, fingering the top of the desk. His fingers drummed on the side of the cauldron as he walked over to the worktable, examining it. "And you changed the size of the professor's desk...made it bigger." He set the cauldron on one of the burners, and opened the long narrow drawer. He slammed the drawer closed and looked up, his gaze sweeping the room.

Hermione swallowed in fear. She tried to control her breathing, knowing that he wouldn't see her unless he actually walked over to the bed and passed the spells Severus had applied to her corner of the room. But her heart was racing, making loud thumps she could hear, and she was trying desperately to take slow, silent breaths, but her breathing was becoming erratic the more she tried to control it.

"Really made yourself at home in here, haven't you, Snape?" he asked, turning around slowly.

Hermione tried to relax a little as he leaned against the worktable and stared at the wall. In the silence, Hermione felt totally exposed. She dared not move, counting to five with each inhalation and exhalation to keep her breathing slow and even, ignoring the thunderous beat of her heart. She swallowed, being careful not to stare at the boy, keeping her eyes on the moving picture in her book, hoping that he wouldn't feel her presence and turn around. She glanced up and back down, too keenly aware of his presence. He turned again, his gaze sweeping the room again, and she fought against holding her breath, still forcing her breathing to the count of five. After what felt like an eternity, he turned and leaned back against the desk, crossing his arms. She was surprised to see his wand held in his hand.

The door opened and another boy came in, making the first one turn around. "I don't know where he is," the new arrival said worriedly, making Hermione suck in her breath in response. He was a thin, wiry looking guy with stringy ash-blond hair and crooked nose, but it was the expression that made her cringe. It was a dopy, slack-mouthed expression, and his pale watery-blue eyes seemed doltish. "I looked in the library, and Rosier checked the hospital. Nothin', he ain't nowhere."

Hermione looked at her stocking-clad feet and pleaded silently for them to go away, making furtive glances at them through bed hangings. She grabbed her wand and slid quietly to the other side of the bed, ready to hide under it if necessary.

The thin boy swore and slammed his fist on the desk. "I knew it! It's them Gryffindors. Get everyone together in the common room." The other boy turned to go. "No, wait." The thin boy froze and turned around. "Take Rowe and Hurshiser and check out the forest. I'll round up everyone else to check all the classrooms and broom cupboards. He has to be somewhere!"

The thin boy, she assumed was Severus' friend Mulciber, nodded and left, leaving the door open. "Damn it," the stocky boy swore, banging his hand on the desk again. "When I...if he's hurt, they're going to pay!" He shoved off from the desk and strode purposefully from the room.

Hermione stayed where she was, her mind a warring whirl of possibilities, each far worse than the other.

She got up, paced and threw herself on the bed, wishing that she had Harry's map.

She sat on the bed and stared at the door, wondering what had happened to Severus, trying not to think the worst. If he was hurt, no one knew she was here. But if ~~he~~ hurt, there was nothing she could do for him. She couldn't even go see him in the hospital wing.

She ran her hands over her face, trying to keep the rising anxiety she felt under control. It would do her no good to panic.

Hermione fell back onto the bed and covered her eyes, willing her worried mind to relax and stop speculating the worst scenarios.

After what seemed an eternity, Hermione's stomach grumbled. She had no idea how long it had been. She paced and tried to keep calm as she ate some of the leftover food that she had stored. By now, she knew the precise number of steps it took her to cross the classroom, from wall to wall, and from the door to each piece of furniture in her confined space.

The timer went off, and she checked the potion, wondering if she should try to finish it for him. His book and his directions were still on the worktable where he'd left them. She decided that he'd be unhappy if the potion spoiled. "Besides, what's the worse I can do...ruin it? If I leave it alone, it'd be ruined anyway, so no harm done, right?" she asked the empty room.

She measured out the beetles eyes, adding them in while stirring just as his annotations suggested...well, the one not crossed out. She reset the timer for the six-hour interval before reading the next step, tracing his added comments between the lines of the directions with her finger. *At an angle... Paper thin. I can do that.* On the right margin he'd written: *Rinse the astragalus root before slicing. Astragalus root...the directions don't call for astragalus root! Juniper berries are next* But it was written more or less above the juniper berries.

She tried repeatedly to lie down to sleep until morning, knowing that she had six hours to wait for the potion unless Severus showed up first, but she was too pent up with worry to relax. She tried eating a bit of éclair, but it turned her stomach and she vanished the remaining half. She lay down again and hugged her pillow, trying desperately to think about anything else other than Severus' body shoved in a broom closet, broken, magically deformed or bleeding.

The timer startled her, making her jump up, her hands trembling slightly and feeling nervous. Somehow, she managed to keep her shaky hand steady enough to clean, peel, and rinse the astragalus root Severus had placed on the dish before she sliced the entire root well enough, although she had to guess how much to use. She stirred the required twenty times and reset the timer for another six hours. She ate a roll as she paced, then fell back on her bed and curled up in a ball, staring at the door, wishing it would open again.

The timer startled her awake again. She cut the juniper berries in half, then in slices according to his notes and reset the timer for nine hours. Hermione decided to read in bed as she ate a chicken leg and an apple. After a while, she became exhausted and laid down. When she awoke, she had no idea how long she'd slept except to judge it by time left on the timer.

When it went off, she lowered the flame to let the potion simmer and paced for a while before lying down again. When the timer went off again, she doused the flame and removed the cauldron to the cooling rack. She looked around, wondering how she'd be able to find out if Severus was all right or not. She checked the finished potion wondering if the slightly darker shade of goldenrod was the way it was supposed to be or not, considering it was much darker than the book indicated in the color swatch.

She tried reading but couldn't concentrate. She tried analyzing what effect the astragalus root would have on the potion, but couldn't find what she wanted in his annotations or in his books. Frustrated, she tried practicing the spells he'd taught her on the water pitcher. Without Severus' regular visits, she had no idea what time of day it was or even how much time had passed, and she missed him dearly.

She was about to go lie down again when suddenly the door opened and Hermione turned, feeling like a deer mesmerized by headlights. She quickly scooted back into the space beside her bed.

Severus struggled to open the door to the classroom, his arms laden with his recent delivery of his potion ingredients tucked under his arm and his bag loaded with books. He'd just drop off the ingredients and books and then go to the kitchens to nick some food. He'd not seen Hermione since Monday, and that was right after breakfast, so he knew she'd have to be starving by now. He had no idea how much leftover food she'd stored on the shelves, but he fervently hoped it had been adequate enough to suffice her these last three days.

Hermione rushed forward as soon as he'd pushed his way through the door and walked into the room.

"You're alive!" she cried out, flinging herself into his arms the moment he stood up from depositing the ingredients on the desk and his bag on a chair. "Oh, thank God!"

"Of course..." he barely had time to say before her arms wrapped around him in a crushing strangle of his sore ribs. Severus didn't know how to respond. His hands landed on her back, unsure of where to go. No one had hugged him like this since... Lily, the first time he'd been discharged from the hospital wing. A warm wetness seeped through his shirt. "Hermione?" he asked, trying to pull back from her grasp to look at her face.

Hermione looked up and kissed him...well, actually kissed the side of his mouth...but close enough to count as a kiss, sort of. He jerked his head in shock, and she buried her head against his chest, crying.

"I-I was s-so worried," she choked out between sobs against his shirt.

He wrapped his arms around her, this time stroking her back to try to reassure her he was all right, ignoring the pain of his recently mended ribs, wrist, and ankle. "Hush, I'm fine." He'd hoped that she'd been all right, but Madam Pomfrey had insisted that he say in the hospital wing a few days, no matter how much he'd protested that he had to leave. He'd still left tonight against her wishes, saying that if he didn't go, her potion would be ruined, and promised to see her before his first lesson tomorrow. She'd even insisted on escorting him to the Entrance Hall and watched him leave down the dungeon stairs so he'd not be confronted by his nemeses on his way to his common room.

Hermione looked up, fresh tears making tracks down her face, and her nose was runny. "W-what hap-pened?" she continued to stammer out between racking sobs. "W-where were y-you?"

He assumed that she would be worried, but was really taken aback that she was this upset over his absence and what had happened to him. "I went back to collect some herbs and fungi after Care of Magical Creatures in the forest and ran into a few bullies. They disarmed and stunned me, then left."

"What?!" she screeched, finally letting go of him.

Severus was so glad that he'd put the muffling charm on the door. "Two centaurs found me and were discussing what to do with me when Rowe and Hurshiser came. Of course, they are seventeen and adults, but the centaurs know me, and we have a rapport of sorts. They let Rowe undo the spells and take me back to the castle." It was an abbreviated version of what had happened, but it was good enough to suffice. If she was this upset, there was no point telling her the whole truth.

Her eyes were huge with worry. "He...he said you'd been attacked, and the other guy said you weren't in the hospital... He was going to search every classroom looking for you," she said, clasping her hands together against her chest, then balling them into fists as if not sure what to do with them.

"Wait a minute...what guy...where?" he asked, grasping her shoulders.

"In here," she choked out, gripping one hand with the other. "He just walked in! He didn't knock or anything! I was so afraid of him. He looked like a brute, and he was pacing about, looking at everything."

"And where were you?" he asked, wanting the details of what had happened even if he had to shake it out of her. "Did he see you?"

"No, I was on my bed," she replied, still looking at him with huge tears swimming in her eyes. "I was afraid to even breathe...then the second guy came in and told him that you weren't in the hospital... I was so worried for you." Four tears rolled down her cheeks, and she sniffed loudly.

"I'm fine," he said. He was going to have to calm her down if he was going to get any answers. "Bruised ribs, but in one piece."

She nodded, her gaze sweeping over him as if trying to assess his condition herself. "It was Potter and Black who attacked you again, wasn't it?"

"Who else," he sneered. "Hermione, I'm fine. It takes more than being disarmed by two bullies, hit with a Body-Bind, hung upside-down, and Stunned to hurt me." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her face, then held it up to her nose. "Blow."

She blew and he dropped the soiled cloth on the corner of the table. She looked up and gave him a weak smile. "They really are prats, aren't they?"

"Yeah," he admitted, rubbing her arms a little, not knowing how to calm down a crying girl. "Look, I'm fine now. Still sore, but all right. Are you hungry? I can get some food."

"Yes, I'm hungry," she said and clasped his hand as if wanting to keep him with her. "I ate up all the leftovers I had stored on the benches. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'll get you something to eat." He used his free hand to wipe away the tears on her cheek and tucked her hair behind her ear. "Hermione, I'm fine...will be. I have to go back to see Madam Pomfrey tomorrow after breakfast, but I can sleep in my own bed. She knows I brew her potions...damn! My potion!" He pulled his hand free from her grasp and hurried over to the worktable.

"I finished it the best I could," she said, coming up behind him. She sounded so uncertain, but as far as he could tell, the potion was perfect...a little congealed, but usable. Madam Pomfrey would find it more than acceptable. "No, you did a good job. Apparently, you didn't have any trouble figuring out when to add the astragalus root. How much did you add?"

"Most of it," she said, "All the fleshy part."

He nodded, pleased with her answer as he scooped some up with his spoon and let it drain back into the cauldron, checking the color. The dark mustard had a honey hue as he'd hoped. "How did you cut the juniper?"

"In half, then in slices...it's what you wrote on the margin." She smiled at him but still sounded uncertain.

He turned around and gripped her chin to make her look up at him. "You did well. It's nearly perfect. Thank you." She hugged him again, this time not as fiercely, but uncomfortable all the same. "Hermione, my ribs."

She let go immediately. "I'm so sorry," she replied, bringing her hands together and looking down at her fingers. "I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just that... sorry."

He was still blown over by how upset she was over his abuse. No one in his house had been this worried. At least she'd stopped crying. "Let me go get you some food. I'll be right back, I promise." He ran all the way to the kitchens. The elves piled up food on a platter like before, but his wrist still hurt, and he couldn't really carry the heavily laden tray. One elf followed him to the classroom, carrying the tray for him. He thanked the house-elf, not wanting the elf to open the door in case he'd see Hermione. "I can levitate it from here, thank you." The elf bowed and disappeared with a pop.

Hermione came rushing forward to grab the tray as he floated it into the room.

"So what would you like to do...besides go to the library since it's nearly curfew?" he asked,

"Would you like to play some gin?" she asked hopefully, eating a chicken leg with one hand and holding a roll in the other.

"Sure. After you eat," he said, filling their cups with pumpkin juice.

"Severus, why did the spell on the door fail?" she asked between bites.

He looked up, his brow creasing as he considered her question. "Not all spells are foolproof, impenetrable, or unbreakable. Repelling charms are only as strong as the caster and the will of the person affected. If the will is strong enough or if the person is determined enough, they can fight off the effects or ignore the magical suggestion. I assume my friends were too concerned about me that they barged in regardless of the compulsion to knock first."

"The charm doesn't affect me," she said, taking another chicken leg.

He was watching her devour the food, feeling a pang of guilt. "It wouldn't...you know it's there and that you don't have to knock...but anyone else would be. Repelling and compulsion charms are cast to affect an object: person, place, or thing...in this case, the door...to make someone else do something, such as knock or go away. At the game, Mulciber had a sense that someone was sitting beside me even though the spell was supposed to make him compelled to look away. He couldn't see you, but he's the suspicious type. Only he was distracted by the game, and it broke his concentration. The Compulsion Charm makes someone do something minor, like washing your hands before leaving the loo, but it can't be anything threatening or harmful...just simple things, like knocking before opening a door."

"Oh."

"Yeah, oh." He smiled when she wiped her hands on a rag and set it aside, now that her hunger was sated. "Would you like a shower?"

"Oh, yes, please," she answered, looking quite relieved at his offer.

He waited as she stashed the leftovers and then hurriedly collected her things, thinking that a shower would do him some good and the hot water would ease his aches and pains. He momentarily wished that he could sneak them into the prefect bathroom, but Avery would want to go so that wasn't an option.

"I'm ready," she said, her arms full.

"Okay, let's go. Stay close, I don't want to get separated."

"No problem," she replied.

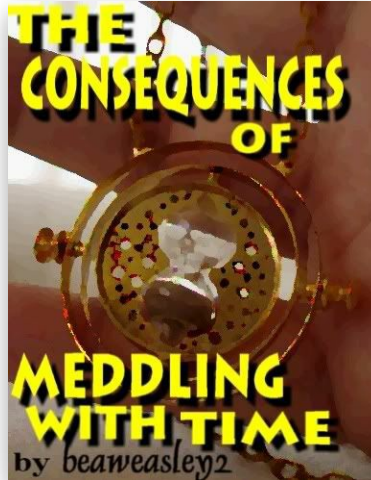
~ T. B. C. ~

Chapter 14

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Many thanks to my betas, *EverMystique* and *DuchessOfArcadia*, for helping me clean up my many mistakes, and to *Pookah* for the shoulder and friendly advice. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.



Severus was still really angry about the attack. He'd just found a sizable growth of bright yellow, stacked layers of Sulphur Shelf mushroom on the 'wound' of a huge, old tree. He hadn't heard the Gryffindor four approach until it was too late. First, Potter and Black had both hit him with the Disarming Spell with enough force to slam his backside against the thick roots of an old beech tree behind him, which had apparently damaged his kidneys. Then, when he'd tried to defend himself, Potter had hit him with a Body-Bind while Black had raised him up by his ankle with the Levicorpus at the same time that Pettigrew had cast a Flinging Spell. Severus had no idea that being slammed against a tree while being hung upside-down and in a Body-Bind would break so many bones at once, but Madam Pomfrey had mended them all in a jiffy. However, the damage to his kidneys had Madam Pomfrey really worried.

The potion helped, but the discomfort made it uncomfortable for him to lie or sit for too long. Not that Madam Pomfrey liked having her patients pace in her hospital wing, but since his backside had hurt so much, he couldn't stand lying in bed for any amount of time. That, and he wanted to collect the mushrooms before the next full moon, hopefully without being attacked again. And that meant having backup. At least Hermione hadn't noticed his restlessness. Still, he dreaded going to the hospital wing for his agreed upon check up and potion regime. He fully remembered the argument with Madam Pomfrey the night before when he'd refused to stay in bed any longer.

Slughorn came to collect Severus before breakfast and chatted with him all the way to the hospital wing about the remarkable changes he'd made with his last potion. "I sent your Euphoria Elixir to Healer Weston McKenna at St. Mungo's. He was quite impressed, Mr. Snape. He had never considered your use of peppermint to counterbalance the side effects of excessive singing and nose-tweaking...most ingenious of you. I have entered you and Miss Evans for the Hector Dagworth-Granger Most Extraordinary Junior Potioneers award. Two of my top students, both up for it this year. I'm so proud."

Severus was about to say thank you, but Slughorn went into his usual bit about the time when he'd won his Junior Potioneers award. "... had my picture taken with Reginold Waldheim, the Minister of Magic, and the Chief Healer-in-Charge of St. Mungo's himself, not that I didn't have Gordon McDermid as a student back in the day. Did I tell you about him? He was the..."

Severus tuned him out as he considered the best way to escape back to the forest to collect his ingredients.

Madam Pomfrey hovered over him the moment he sat on the examining bed. "I should've insisted that you'd stayed here in bed for four more days, but you persisted that you'd leave anyway to go brew potions in that private lab of yours," she admonished him.

"But, I know how much you wanted the potion I was brewing," he said, pulling several bottles out of his pockets and laying them on the bed.

She took the bottles and scowled at him. "I thought I said you *were not* to carry *heavy things!* I should keep you here, even if I have to tie you to the bed," the Healer said accusingly; however, she was smiling despite herself at the potions.

"I'll stay in bed and read," Severus protested.

Madam Pomfrey scowled at him. "You know that you'll be brewing potions all day if I let you go, and I want you *esting*. I don't want you lifting *anything* heavy...and that means no lifting cauldrons!"

"I'll have my dorm mates do my heavy lifting," Severus promised, knowing that at least Hermione would help him move the cauldrons. "And I can levitate anything..."

"That falls under heavy lifting, Mr. Snape. Magical or not, there is a certain amount of exertion involved..."

"Madam Pomfrey, I'm sure Mr. Snape will be responsible," Professor Slughorn unintentionally interrupted as he tried, once again, to reassure her. "I shall assume personal responsibility to keep Severus in his dorm room for four days, and Severus will swear that he won't lift anything heavier than his knife, stirring rod, or quill."

In the end, despite knowing her patient so well, or because she knew he would refuse to say in the hospital, Madam Pomfrey finally relented, reluctantly, and accepted the assurances of Professor Slughorn. However, she only released him on the condition that Severus see her for the next four days, before breakfast and after dinner, for treatment.

Slughorn escorted Severus to the dungeons. However, he led him to the classroom instead of the common room. Severus knew it was most likely to assure himself that he had enough ingredients to brew the hospital's requirements for the rest of the school year. Thankfully, Hermione was on her bed, or Severus assumed so, since he didn't see or hear her when they entered the room.

"Good, good, you seem to have everything well stocked," Slughorn prattled on, examining the potion ingredients. "I see you even have snacks. Don't want you to skip meals just so you can get your brewing done, now do we?"

Severus looked at the benches and cringed. All of Hermione's books were stacked neatly and grouped by subject, except for the growling book *Please don't be on the floor*. "Yes, Sir," Severus said, hoping that the professor didn't look too closely at the titles of the books.

"Now, let's get you settled in your room, shall we? I don't want Madam Pomfrey to think I went back on my word. I'll arrange with your professors to have your school work brought down to you," Slughorn rattled off.

"Thank you, sir," Severus said politely, giving the man just enough deference to flatter him without sounding like a suck up.

"You certainly have quite a collection in there," Slughorn stated, patting Severus on the shoulder. "Do any need to go back to the library?"

"A few, but I was hoping to exchange some after lunch, sir," Severus stated as they left the room.

"I'll ask one of my students to help you," Slughorn said as he led Severus out the door for the Slytherin common room.

"I'll ask Mulciber or Avery." He wished that Slughorn would go, but it didn't hurt to humor the man. He listened to the professor brag about the healing potions he'd invented for the Quidditch mediwizards as they walked to his dorm room.

"Catriona McCormack, Chaser and captain of the Pride of Portrees, really relies on my Bruise Paste, you know. Says it's the best she's ever used. She should try yours, Severus, and your one for sprains. I've never seen better."

"Thank you, sir." Severus smiled, knowing that if the captain of the Quidditch team The Prides liked his potions, he'd have a steady income for life. Mr. Avery had introduced him to Kevin and Karl Broadmoor, the two Slytherin ex-Beaters for the Falmouth Falcons over Christmas hols, and they both used his potions now. "I'd really appreciate a letter of introduction, sir."

"Oh, Severus, so eager," Professor Slughorn said, opening the door to the common room for him. "Can't wait until you leave school to get started on that brilliant Potions career of yours."

When Professor Slughorn finally left, Severus waited all of ten minutes before he got up to go to the classroom.

Hermione stepped forward to greet him when he returned. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Better," he said, easing down into a chair.

She tilted her head as she watched him. "You don't look better. You look stiff and uncomfortable."

He shot her a warning glare.

She reached out to take his hand. "C'mon."

"Where?"

"Please trust me," she implored, drawing him to her bed instead of the door, so he complied. "Take off your robes and shirt, and then lie down on your stomach."

He looked at her, his brow creased in confusion as she dug in her bag, pulling out a large tub of liniment.

"Lie down and take off your robes and shirt," she repeated, pointing at the bed.

"What's that?" he asked, indicating the jar with a jut of his chin.

"Something you created for back and muscle pain... I get cramps in my calves, and the Quidditch team uses it for aches, especially when they get hit with a Bludger. Now strip and lie down."

Something in her tone, plus the fact that she said he'd made it, obviously in the future, encouraged him to comply. The liniment was cool on contact, but then she straddled his hips and started to rub it on his back. The sensations were heavenly. The liniment was warm under her hands, and it slowly cooled where his skin lay exposed, but never truly felt chilly. Hermione ran her hands up and down his back in long, firm strokes. He moaned in pleasure except when she rubbed where the kidney pain was. He felt her add more liniment and caress his lower back and sides, gently working the stuff into his skin.

He did not know when he'd fallen asleep, but when he woke, he was still on his stomach on her bed. She sat in a chair, her feet propped up on the bed. "What in heaven is in that stuff?" he asked, surprised that most of the ache was gone.

"I have no idea," she replied, dropping her feet to the floor. "You'll need more tonight and tomorrow, but your back pain will be gone in a day or two."

"Oh, I won't complain about getting more of *that* treatment!" he said smoothly as he moved and stretched, amazed at the difference he felt. "Hermione, thank you."

She blushed deeply and shrugged. "No problem. I'm glad it helped."

He looked at his watch and gasped. *It's lunch time already! I promised to tutor Mulciber...* "Shite, I'm late!" He jumped up and ran out the door. "I'll be back."

He returned later, carrying cheese, several apples, pears, half a dozen apple turnovers, and a pile of sliced beef on rolls, enough food for four of them.

"Trying to fatten me up?" she teased him.

"Nope, don't want you to go without if anything happens to me again," he said, sitting down as she set the table. "Take what you want, and I'll put the rest in stasis for you."

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked, taking a beef roll and a pear.

"Nope, I ate on the way back here," he replied as he turned and put the food on the bench with her other stash. He collected his Potions books and joined her at the table. He'd borrowed a leaf of parchment from Mulciber and had copied down two versions of the Pimple Unction, one from his Advanced Potions book and another Pimple Solution he had found in *Magical Remedies and Cures for the Everyday Problems* by Sacharissa Tugwood. In Severus' opinion, the Pimple Unction was better, but it was not as quick-reacting as the Pimple Solution, which used bubotuber pus as a base. However, the unction lasted longer. Nevertheless, the girls in his house frequently complained that neither of them worked all the time. *If I could just find a way to blend them, use the...*

"What are you working on?" she asked between bites.

He looked up from his book. "I was wondering if I could improve on the potion we did in class. I heard the girls saying that it's only seventy-percent effective and only if they don't have a serious condition. I want to see if I can make it better...more effective."

"Oh," she replied, watching him as she finished eating.

He spent a good part of the afternoon reading potions books, trying to find a way to improve the Pimple Unction, and working out several possible variations as she read quietly. When he started brewing, she came over to help, laughing when his first variation almost melted the cauldron.

"It's not funny!" he snapped and glared at her as he tossed the useless cauldron under the table.

Hermione tried to suppress her mirth. "I can't believe that *you* melted a cauldron, that's all." She picked up his parchment and started to read his notes.

He wanted to snatch it out of her hand, but he refused to look at her if she was going to smirk at him for a simple mistake. "It happens. Salamander blood with the honey and orange peel makes a good astringent, and the camphor and groundnut oil keeps it from irritating the skin. However, I want to add bundimun secretion, but it reacts strongly to the salamander blood and streeler secretion making the potion too hot."

She set his parchment on the worktable. "Doesn't bundimun secretion need to be balanced with raw, sour Gruinard goat milk?"

He looked at her in amazement. "The lactic acid in the sour milk would do that. Where did you learn that?"

"In Potions. My professor mentioned it when he lectured us on the use of secretions in potions, so I looked it up. I found an article in a Potions journal about how lactic acid balances some of the more pungent secretions when two or more are used together in potions. But, it was discounted in *Concocting Potions, Both Strange and Wonderful* by Helga Grosselin. I have the book with me, since I like to use it as a reference. Dad sent me a copy for Christmas. She has a rather complete index of potion ingredients, their uses and interactions," Hermione stated with a shrug.

"That would balance the bundimun in the Pimple Unction, but it would still be too irritating," he said, crossing out the annotations for the failed version.

"When Lavender got a pimple, she showed me an article in *Witch Weekly* about how some witch used a cleaning solution with bundimun mixed with tomato paste and it fried her face, so the Healer suggested sour Gruinard goat milk, honey, lime juice, and raw sugar to resolve the..."

He was looking at his notes as she spoke and unintentionally cut her off, muttering, "And with sugar and fenugreek leaves... Yes, that would do it!"

"You're welcome," Hermione said with a smile, sitting at the desk and burying her nose back in her book as Severus tried to work out when to add the ingredients and the adjustments to the timing and stirring rod strokes.

His first attempt turned foul. The second time, he miscalculated terribly. The third potion turned a muted lime green instead of pink, and the fourth was a pale greenish-blue color.

"That's how it looked in the Potions book," she said when he scoffed at the color.

"Green?" he asked.

She nodded in assurance. "Turquoise, or slightly greenish if done right," she said, squinting at him in confusion. "What color did you think it should be?"

He shrugged, saying, "The original version is pink." He set it aside to cool. "Don't tell me you've made this potion, too."

Hermione blushed. "I made a cauldron-full for Lavender because I got tired of hearing her whine about her acne... I didn't use fenugreek leaves or sugar, and mine wasn't this thick. She had to use a lotion because of the irritation and wash her face twice a day."

"I'll have one of the girls try it to see how it works." He bottled his sample and cleaned his cauldron. He'd wait before crossing out the other options until both batches were properly tested.

"I thought a Potion brewer tested his own potions," she chided him.

He crossed his arms and leaned against the worktable. "In case you failed to notice, I don't have pimples."

She turned her head to hide her blush. "I should rub more of the liniment into your back," she suggested, probably to change the subject.

He shrugged nonchalantly and followed her to her bed, stripping his shirt off as he went. He lay down, smiling as she straddled his hips again and began rubbing the concoction in. His last thought, as he drifted to sleep, was that he just had to figure out what his older self had put in the liniment.

When he woke, Hermione was sitting beside him, reading another book. He checked his watch and frowned. He'd never fallen asleep like this in the daytime before except when he'd taken naps as a little kid or had been given sleeping potions. "Damn, I slept right through dinner. Are you hungry?"

"I had one of my apples earlier," she said, turning the page.

He looked at her foot next to his hand and smirked at the nail polish on her little toes *Merlin, she has small feet.* "Well, I might as well go get something. Is there anything you want in particular?"

She let her book rest on her legs and bit her lip as she considered his offer. "Bangers and mash... or bangers with bubble and squeak," she said with a smile.

He smiled at her suggestions, suddenly having a craving for them as well. "I'll see if they have any blancmange or tarts with clotted cream for pudding," he suggested, knowing that the house-elves would make them for him if he asked.

The next morning, Severus woke early, still unable to lie in bed for very long. Hermione offered to rub more liniment on his back. He pulled off his shirt and stretched out on her bed, secretly eager to receive her ministrations. When she finished, she sat cross-legged beside him. They talked about the Defense Against the Dark Arts, which led to a discussion on the Dark Arts.

"Hermione, what differentiates charms from curses is really only the intent," he replied to her inquiry. "Same goes for most of the Dark Arts. They are curses, hexes, and charms used with the intent to do bodily harm. It's not always the spell in itself; it's the intent of the caster."

She rolled her wand lazily in her hand. "So whoever is faster...?"

"It's not always speed, but accuracy and determination that wins the duel," he said, rolling over on his side. "The Dark Arts are not as static as, say, Charms or Transfiguration. Once a new Transfiguration spell is discovered, it's written in a book and everyone uses it... unless a slight variation makes the spell easier or more effective."

He adjusted her pillow to make himself more comfortable. "Dark Arts are varied and as unique as the individuals who use them; they are ever-changing and as twisted as the mind that conceives them. To defend yourself, you must be equally as creative, resourceful, and determined. Your attacker might be more fierce and clever than you, so you must be flexible and inventive in your defense."

"Like when you duel, not only do you have to try and anticipate what your attacker will use but you also have to be able to block and cast simultaneously."

"That's part of it. But in a duel, it's one on one. In real attacks, you might be faced with two or more opponents. That's when you have to know how to duck and dodge spells as well." He looked at her and wondered why she was so worried about defending herself.

"Like when you are being attacked by Potter and Black," she stated, and then raised her eyebrows at his annoyed stare. "Whenever you're attacked, you always blame them, and you never say one without the other."

He smirked at her observation. "Because they usually are together. They're cowards, Hermione, and cowards have to have backup to feel brave." He sat up and looked at his watch. "Damn, I have to go. We can talk about defensive spells later, if you like?"

Hermione's mouth curved into a smile that didn't erase the troubled look in her eyes. "Yes, I'd like that very much."

He thought about her statement all the way to the hospital wing. She was right; they did always attack him together. Potter and Black had received a week's detention for attacking him in the forest, and they'd want to retaliate. If he was going to collect his fungus, he'd need someone to watch his back.

When he'd arrived for his scheduled appointment, Madam Pomfrey was amazed at Severus' improvement. He told her it was the bed rest, but he knew she wasn't buying it. He asked her about the experiment he was trying with the Pimple Unction. She was properly impressed, even saying that she'd be happy to help him test his batch. She walked him back to the stairs in the Entrance Hall that led to the dungeons, discussing his hypothesis about the potion.

"I'll have it ready by tonight," he promised her.

"Mr. Snape, while I appreciate your fine quality potions, I don't want you on your feet all day. You're supposed to be resting," she admonished him in a kindly tone.

"But, I can't lay around all day either! It still hurts when I do," he replied, careful to look admonished even if he didn't feel it. "I promised to take it easy, and I am."

She nodded and smiled. "I'll expect you after dinner."

"Yes, ma'am," he replied, turning for the stairs.

Hermione was bottling his potions when he entered. "Thank you, but I was going to do that."

She simply smiled. "I'm nearly done."

He watched her a moment, amazed at how well they got on. She had been with him for three weeks so far, and he knew that their time was nearly up. While Hermione finished bottling the potions, Severus took the blue box from his pocket, careful to keep his back toward her. He removed the Time-Turner to examine the sand and was immediately disappointed. He quietly put it away, closed the box and tucked it back into his pocket, deep in thought. Hermione kept looking at him, but he was too preoccupied with his own thoughts to notice.

The problem was that the sand was sparkling, iridescent, and granular, but not as transparent as he'd hoped. *Not quite the glittery white sand that it was last time... Damn. But, it's not the opalescent white sand it's supposed to be.* He knew he was lying to himself; the Time-Turner was nearly ready for her to use. But, he wasn't ready for her to leave, even though it was time to let her go. From what his older self had said, he was supposed to have a month with her, and he wasn't going to cut her visit short. Besides, she had apparently heard that her stay would be a month, so what would a little deception matter anyway? *What would it hurt to tell her it will be back to normal in a few days...a week?* He turned to look at the space where her bed was and sighed. *I'll just wait for a few more days. It's not like she won't go back to her time, just later.*

"Severus, are you all right?" she asked, making him turn to look at her.

He smiled and reached for the ruined cauldron. "Yeah, I'm fine. I'm going to go replace this. I'll be right back." On his way to the potions classroom to get another cauldron, he decided to see how much Hermione knew about defensive spells and show her some simple ones. *Besides, she's more fun than Mulciber or Avery, even if she has to look like one of them.*

That afternoon, Severus taught Hermione how to cast the Stunning Hex, checking her every so often to make sure she wasn't straining. He also taught her the Tripping Hex, Legg-locker, and Numbing Jinx. She was an apt pupil, and after several tries, she managed to do them all fairly well. She asked him to show her more defensive spells, so he quizzed her on what she knew, surprised that she was, literally, a year behind. "You're only now learning about Dark creatures?"

"Professor Quirrell taught us the fundamentals of curses, hexes, and jinxes, and how they varied from charms my first year," she replied.

"That's normal for first year," he replied, nodding, waving his hand to encourage her to continue.

"But in second year, Professor Lockhart mostly demonstrated how he fought dangerous beings and creatures... and well... he turned out to be a braggart who only took credit for what other people had done."

"Blimey," he said not sure what to think about her statement. "What about defensive spells?"

"I can use Immobilous, Babbling Curse, Tickling Charm, and the Body-Bind Curse. We learned about Jelly-Appendage curses, but we only read about them. I can do the Jelly-Legs, but I haven't had any luck with the Jelly-Fingers, and I can do an Ear-Ringing Hex," she said, holding her wand casually.

"What about Colloportus...to seal a door, or Impedimenta Curse, Impedimenta Jinx...to stop or slow a person or object, or averting spells like Defensoris or Averrunco?" Severus asked, listing some of the ones he'd learned in his early years of Defense, but Hermione only shook her head. "Infantiae tardus...to make your attacker speak and move slowly, like in slow motion?"

She shook her head again. "I was shown...well, Professor Lockhart demonstrated the Homorphous Charm, to turn a werewolf back into a human, on my friend Harry, and we were taught Expelliarmus, the disarming spell, in a dueling demonstration. And this year, Professor Lup...er," she stammered, then continued, "our current teacher is trying to catch us up on what we've missed from last year."

"You don't want to tell me his or her name. Why?" he asked, arms crossed as he looked down at her. She'd told him the names of her other professors, well, except her Potions professor, but he had a good idea who that was by now.

"Er, no," Hermione admitted, looking at her thumb.

"Why?" he persisted. He wracked his brain for anyone with a surname beginning with 'luper.'

She refused to look at him. "You don't like him, and yes, you know him...knew him. It's not a good idea. I really shouldn't," she said, clearly avoiding answering him.

So, I know him...not as in I will know him... I know him. Severus could only come up with two...no, three possibilities. "Just tell me it isn't Rene Lupperger or Marcus Luppertz or... Remus Lupin," he said, naming the only people he knew whose surname began with 'lup.'

"Okay, no," she said. "Show me how to..."

"No, tell me who first," he insisted stubbornly. "You said I know him."

"I also said that you don't like him very much," Hermione said with a set, determined look that said she was going to be stubborn about it. "Are you going to show me how to block unfriendly spells or not?"

I don't like him? Hmmm. Rene Lupperger had been a Gryffindor prefect and pain in the arse during Severus' first and second years. "Tell me it's not Rene Lupperger," Severus insisted. He knew that it couldn't be Luppertz. He remembered Luppertz from Lucius Malfoy's year: a pure-blood Hufflepuff, a bit of a ponce, but posh, a do-gooder, and not a sharp quill in Severus' opinion. He'd set McGonagall's animals free because he'd thought they were abused in Severus' second year. *I'd never minded*

the bloke, actually, and certainly didn't dislike him. He and Malfoy are still friends, I believe...

"It's not Rene Lupperger," she said, crossing her arms with a huff.

There was only one other person he knew whose name began with 'lup.' "You mean to say it's Lupin?" he asked, stunned.

For a split second she gaped at him in disbelief and then shook her head. "No, I didn't say that either. So are you going to...?"

That's impossible. It's one thing to let that werewolf come to school...It took a moment for him to think. He is one of Dumbledore's favorite four.

"Are we going to duel?" she asked impatiently.

"Yeah, yeah. Go ahead. Try and hit me with a Body-Bind," he said, his mind still wheeling at the fact that the werewolf was teaching at Hogwarts *But, she did say that Dumbledore and McGonagall were still at Hogwarts in her time... Shite!*

Hermione's Body-Bind caught him unawares. "Are you all right?! I thought you were ready?!" she exclaimed when she removed the hex.

"Well, I am now," he snapped, annoyed with himself for being distracted. He turned his focus on her, assuming a dueling stance. "Ready, go."

~ T. B. C. ~

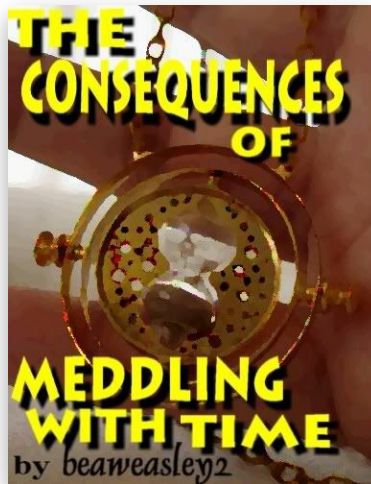
Chapter 15

Chapter 15 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Many thanks to my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for helping me clean up my many mistakes, and to Pookah for the shoulder and friendly advice. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.



They spent two days practicing defensive spells and brewing when he wasn't catching up on his class work. He was amazed at how quickly she learned the spells, even though she wasn't very good at dueling. Severus had to slow his reactions in order for her to beat him half the time. She really was more of an intellectual than a fighter, but she tried really hard, had great aim, and her spells were strong and forceful when she wanted them to be.

The morning that Madam Pomfrey declared Severus would be fit to return to lessons the next day, he asked Hermione if she wanted to go outside with him during his afternoon break. "You'll have to be under Polyjuice and impersonate Mulciber again."

"Oh, please, yes! I'll be anybody you want me to be!" she exclaimed, making a little bounce and grinning with delight at the prospect.

He tilted his head and smirked at her. "You'd want to be a boy just to go out and play in the snow?"

She pulled her feet up on the seat of her chair and rested the book on her knees. "Well, I know that you don't want to be seen with me...so it's the only alternative."

He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. "Will I get a moment's peace if I say no?"

"Yes," she replied, eyeing him speculatively while fingering the page corners of her book.

Severus watched her fidget, knowing that she really hoped he'd take her outside again. "I have to finish some equations, and I have an essay to complete. If I get them done..." He slid his fingers into his hair and rested his hand on the back of his neck. "Let me get caught up on my work first. If I get a break, we'll go... I dunno. Go outside

and play," he said sarcastically.

She nearly squealed when he acquiesced. "Okay!"

Severus moaned, wondering how long his luck would last with these excursions as he sat down and pulled out his Arithmancy equations.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you?" she asked, biting her lip.

"Please pipe down so I can finish my work," he grumbled, lowering his head to hide his smile, thinking *She is just too much fun to tease*

She picked up her book, saying, "Okay," cheerfully.

After his last class for the morning, Severus decided to skip lunch. So he grabbed oranges, meat and pumpkin pasties from the kitchen, and then hurried to the classroom. They ate in a hurry, Hermione eager to get outside again.

"Keep your wand handy. Any sound, take it out ready to fight. I don't care what you cast as long as you hit them."

"Hit who?" she asked worriedly, emptying her bag on the bed to use for carrying ingredients.

"Anyone who has any intent of attacking us...especially me," he stated firmly as he handed her empty pouches, bottles, and jars, which she carefully tucked inside the bag.

"You mean Potter and Black, don't you?" She drank the potion with the essence of Mulciber, making only a brief grimace before smiling again.

"Or some dark creature intent on having me for lunch," he teased her. He waited until her cute face morphed into Mulciber's. "Let's go."

She followed him quietly from the castle, passing several younger Slytherins who didn't even give them more than a cursory glance, and ran alongside him into the forest. This time, they had a lot more luck finding the ingredients he needed.

They were digging up crocus and pearlwort roots when Hermione stood and shifted from one foot to the other, squeezing her knees together. "Severus, I think we should go back now."

"Why?" he asked, placing a pouch full of crocus bulbs in her bag.

"I, er, I-I have to go," she stammered urgently.

He leaned back on his heels and looked at her, confused. "Go? Go where?"

"You know, *go*," she persisted, fidgeting and bouncing a little.

He suddenly realized what the problem was and fought back the laughter that threatened to erupt from watching her little dance. "So, go over by the tree, whip it out, and go," he said, indicating the nearest tree with its huge exposed roots, trying to keep his face impassive. "It's what we guys do."

She froze, looking up at him, her eyes wide with shock at his statement. "You mean touch it?!"

He tried very hard not to laugh. "Either that or we just wait another half hour until you change back, and then you can squat like a girl," he said blandly, enjoying watching her squirm. "I thought you said that you and your family go camping?"

"We do, but I don't... ooh! Please, I don't have bath tissue," she whined.

Severus summoned some leaves and transfigured them.

She took it and stared at the tissue in her hand.

"Did you need me to show you how?" he asked, shifting his weight to one foot and bringing his knee up as if to rise.

"No!" she exclaimed, gaping at him for a moment, and then quickly scuttled off behind the tree.

He went back to his task. After what seemed like a long time, he turned around. She was nowhere to be seen. Worried, he got up to find her. He saw her squatting by a large tree with her back to him, robes hitched up to expose the fact that she was balanced on her feet, but bent over slightly. "Do you need help?" he asked.

"No, I got it," she muttered, clearly embarrassed as she patted the dirt.

He crossed his arms, wondering what was wrong. He saw a small patch of wet dirt by the tree, so she obviously managed all right. "Are you sure you're okay?"

Finally, she stood up and turned around. Her face was morphing back, and she was starting to look like her usual self. "It was just weird, you know," she started to say and turned a deep pink. "I'd rather not talk about it, please."

He wondered what she meant, but nodded in understanding anyway. "Looks like you didn't miss though," he said, straining so hard to keep from smiling that his mouth was twisting into a smirk. "Look, I'll never tell anyone, okay?" He looked up, peering into the forest. "I want to go in deeper. So if you want, you don't have to take the potion for now."

She smiled with relief. "I really don't want to. I think I like being a girl. It's easier."

He couldn't help it; he laughed at her, and this time at least, she laughed along with him. He retrieved the bag and led them down a narrow trail, going deeper into the trees, following the patches of sunlight that broke through the canopy above. They found a small clearing where a female unicorn was nudging something golden on the ground.

"Oh, no," he said, his voice thick with compassion when he realized what it was.

"What?" she asked in a whisper.

"A foal died," he said, squatting down.

The mare looked up and stood protectively over the fallen foal.

Severus used his hand to urge Hermione not to move. "I'm glad you didn't take another dose. She wouldn't have liked the way you would've smelled."

The mare walked forward a few steps to look at the intruders on her grief. Severus and Hermione stayed as still as stone. She pawed the ground with her hoof, shook her horn, and then sniffed the air. She approached Hermione first, looking her over before nudging her with her nose. The mare's breath made her hair flutter, and she giggled as the tiny hairs tickled her skin. Hermione reached out and touched the beautiful creature. The mare jerked, then stepped closer and smelled the robes.

Hermione seemed to instantly understand the mare's confusion. "They're not mine," she said. "They belong to a friend of my friend." She indicated in Severus' direction with

her hand.

The mare looked at Severus, sniffing the breeze again as Hermione stroked her soft neck.

Severus edged forward and Hermione gasped at his boldness. The mare looked Severus in the eye and then lowered her nose to his hand. Severus held both hands up for the mare to smell, her horn pointed dangerously at his face. Severus could feel the question, 'Why are you here?'

He concentrated his response to her inquiry. *I'm a potions brewer, healing potions and such. I came to collect ingredients...I...we didn't hurt the foal.*

The words, 'I know you did not,' fluttered in his consciousness. After a long interval of a few heartbeats, the mare nodded and bowed.

"I'm sorry about your foal," Hermione said softly. "Is there nothing to be done?"

The mare backed up, her body seeming to sag slightly as she turned to gaze at her offspring.

A stallion trotted forward from the tree line and stopped short behind her. He snorted and stamped his hooves in annoyance. Severus could feel him say, 'No!'

The mare moved over and stood in front of him, both of the Unicorns staring at each other. She nodded, and he shook his head, his horn slashing the air defiantly. The mare turned to look at them and back, nodding again. 'Yes, I consent.'

The stallion walked forward and stared at Severus, and then at Hermione. He lowered his horn, pawed at the ground, and then backed up. 'Why?' Severus felt him ask, but was uncertain if it was directed at him or not.

Several thoughts crossed Severus' mind, all pertaining to what parts of the foal he'd want and why. He could sense the stallion's hesitation and concern. Finally, he felt the stallion say, 'We consent.'

"I can't believe this!" Severus said softly with a great deal of awe. He moved forward slowly, urging Hermione to follow him. He knelt down at the side of the beautiful foal and stroked the golden hide with a sense of wonder. The mare nodded again.

"Severus, what's going on?" Hermione whispered.

"Hermione, when they want to, they can give us impressions, like... kind of like communicating ideas... They have granted me permission to harvest," he said softly, stroking the foal reverently. Severus pulled out his silver dagger and following the stallion's directions, carefully removed the hooves and horn.

The mare pointed her horn at Hermione, the tip posed right above her heart, and then turned to point her horn at the fallen foal.

"Are you sure?" Severus asked utterly awestruck at the suggestion.

The stallion turned his head, clearly agitated, but stood still as a statue. However, the mare nodded. "Yes, she may take the heart."

Severus handed the dagger to Hermione. "She is allowing you to take the heart."

"Take the heart...I can't do that! This is enough!" she cried out, staggering back, holding her hands up as if afraid to touch the knife.

"If you don't, a poacher or a wild animal will come seeking it. She knows...I don't know how...but she knows why we'd want it," he said, urging her to join him.

"But, Severus," Hermione pleaded, "I can't!"

The stallion stomped his hooves, and Hermione moved forward. Severus knew that he was getting impatient for her to finish the harvesting. The mare walked over and brushed her nose on Hermione's cheek. Hermione stared at the fallen foal, and tears slid down her cheeks when she turned to look at the knife in Severus' hand.

Severus knew they were wasting time. "Hermione, dried unicorn heart is used in the strongest healing potions, and it's very rare. One foal's heart can make twelve potions and can cost several thousand Galleons. Likewise, freely given unicorn blood is also used in powerful healing potions, unlike blood taken by violence, which dooms the user to a cursed life...a half life. But, I'm a guy. It has to be you. She is allowing *you* to harvest it. We don't have much more time. C'mon."

Hermione felt the mare nudge her back. She walked forward, falling onto her knees, and touched the downy-soft, golden fur. Severus patiently instructed her, speaking with a cool-headed tone so much like his older self had when he'd come back in time. Hermione reacted to the voice, doing what he told her as precisely as she could. However, she cried the whole time. He told her how to collect the blood, and she filled several bottles. When she placed the heart in the jar Severus held, she turned away from him and fell on the foal, sobbing as if her heart would break.

The mare nudged Hermione on the shoulder, her warm breath blowing across her face. Hermione sat up and hugged the unicorn, burying her face in her neck.

Severus removed the liver and spleen and collected the mane and tail hairs of the foal. When he finished, he sat up. However, the mare and the stallion were gone.

"Shouldn't we bury the foal," Hermione asked, sitting on the ground.

"No," Severus said as he pointed to the trees. Several centaurs stood on the edge of the clearing. "Hermione, we have to go now." He stood, pulled her to her feet and half dragged, half carried her away. Back under the trees, he used his wand to wash his hands, then hers.

She stared at her palms. "You cannot wash the blood away," she mumbled, tears still streaking down her face.

"Sure I can. I just did," he said softly, cleaning her clothes the best he could. "Hermione, you didn't kill the foal. I don't know what did, but its death isn't on you. However, the harvested organs and blood will be used for healing potions that might save many lives."

She looked up at him, sniffed loudly, and wiped her face with her sleeve.

He wiped the tears from her cheek. "If you hadn't cried, they would've known we wanted the heart for ill-will," he said as soothingly as he could muster. "There is an old witch's tale about unicorn hearts. The heart could be buried beneath a building foundation or by a door way, to bless the building...provided the heart were given freely. I know they used to bury chickens and such for the same purpose..."

"Why are there so many myths about burying a heart to appease something?" she bemoaned, falling into step with him. She picked up a branch and swung it as they walked. "It's always an innocent creature sacrificed in order to appease a god. Or it's a living person...often an innocent little child...it's a sick ideology." She stopped and turned to face him. "I read a story that Merlin... This king needed to sacrifice a child who was born without a father so that the earth would be appeased. So, they tried to kill Merlin."

"I know the story," he said, hoping that talking about things she'd read would distract her. "The king was told to find a child born without a father, put him to death, and sprinkle the ground on which the citadel was to be built with his blood. However, Merlin said that they were idiots and that the problem was that there were two dragons fighting beneath the ground making the castle walls fall. It was the story of King Vortigern's Castle, and Merlin was proved correct...it's the legend of Dinas Emrys, also called Dinas Ffaraon."

"What are you going to do with the heart?" she asked, finally stopping her crying.

"Dry it to preserve it and then grind it into a powder," he stated. "I'll do the same with the liver and spleen. It'll take months to prepare, but if done right, it's the most powerful healing ingredient known to wizard kind."

"And the blood?"

He stopped to look at her. "Hermione, the mare and stallion allowed us to harvest the foal. Even the centaurs were waiting until we'd finished. Since we were granted permission by the parents, the centaurs didn't challenge us for the rights. Had we not been granted permission, the centaurs would have asked for it and would've harvested the foal themselves."

She stared at the ground, but nodded in understanding. "Better us than scavengers, I suppose." She looked up at him. "What parts did the centaurs want?"

"They would've taken the same parts we did, as well as the intestines and some of the tendons, possibly the hide," he said, turning to look over her head to see if anyone could see them, then looked back down at her. "The meat will then be left for the scavengers. It's the ways of the wild."

"The circle of life?"

"Exactly," he replied softly. "How about going to a secluded part of the lake to clean up, maybe even go for a swim? You do know how to swim, right?"

She looked up at him, but her eyes were still haunted. "Yes, I can swim. That sounds good, but I don't have a swimsuit."

He laughed at her. "You can wear my shirt over your bra and knickers. Will that suffice?"

She nodded, and he pointed the way, leading her along another trail.

Severus took Hermione to a place where a tributary of a stream formed a pool before it flowed into a river not too far from the lake where Hinkypunks could be seen occasionally. The water was cold, but with a Warming Charm not too cold, and only chest deep. However, there were two things Severus hadn't counted on when he'd suggested swimming. First, he wore a white shirt, and his white shirt when wet had shown off Hermione's bra and knickers while enhancing her body quite nicely. The other thing was that Hermione had been completely oblivious to his reaction upon seeing his shirt turn opaque and clinging tightly to her body. In addition, while the lake wasn't crystal clear, it wasn't murky enough to hide her legs from view either. But the water was cool enough that their swim hadn't lasted all that long. Thankfully.

Severus was pensive as they walked back to the castle. While Hermione had dried off and dressed, Severus had taken the blue box from his pocket. He'd carefully kept his back toward her, removed the Time-Turner to examine the sand again and had felt a sense of loss. He had quietly closed the box and tucked it back into his pocket, deep in thought as Hermione had taken another dose of the Polyjuice Potion.

Mulciber's mangy face kept looking at him as they walked, but Severus was too preoccupied with his own thoughts. There was nothing for it; his time with her was up and had been if the sand was any indication. He pulled back a tree branch for her and gave her a hand over a tree root. They heard a twig snap up ahead.

Hermione's head snapped up. "Aw, look, Snivellus and his mate, Mulciber. You two a couple now, or what?" Black taunted, swinging a large stick like a staff.

Potter watched Hermione, in Mulciber's form, with a malicious glee. "Oi, Mul-Volcan, did you have a nice time in the forest with Snivellus?" he sneered disdainfully.

"Smelter anything funny, James?" Black said sarcastically.

Severus eased his wand discreetly from his pocket, hiding it carefully behind his sleeve. He hoped that Hermione had sense enough to have drawn hers as well.

"At least you know your Roman mythology, or didn't you know that Vulcan is the Roman god of beneficial and hindering fire," Hermione said, drawing her wand and holding it tightly in her hand.

Severus wanted to yank her back and tell her to shut up. She was playing right into their game.

"Look, Volcanalia wants to play, Sirius," Potter sneered arrogantly.

As usual, Lupin was standing aside, watching and not doing a thing to intervene. "Guys, you know what McGonagall said, he's to be left..."

"Alone," Potter said, holding his wand confidently and poised to strike.

Severus struck first, hoping that he'd gain the upper hand, using his Levicorpus on Potter with the forward movement of his arm and firing a Body-Bind in quick procession at Black. However, Potter saw the motion and swung his arm, casting an Impedimenta Curse at him.

"*Expelliarmus*," Hermione shouted, making Black's arm jerk, but he had too good a grip on his wand.

Severus fired again at Potter, the same time Potter fired at him, but Severus managed to block Potter's spell. Unfortunately, Potter sidestepped and ducked, firing at Severus again. The spell grazed his robes as Severus turned to deflect it.

Meanwhile, Black turned and fired at Hermione. She dodged behind a tree for cover. She fired back at him, once again trying to disarm him and ducked back behind the tree.

"Playing kneazle and mouse, are we, Mulciber?" Black taunted as he fired again, advancing on Hermione's position.

Severus cast a Jelly-Brain Jinx with a quickly followed Levicorpus at Potter. Potter anticipated the jinx enough to block it, but he flung up in the air by his ankle as the second spell hit him. Potter cast a Stunner that Severus sidestepped and averted with the Defensio.

Hermione, meanwhile, was trying to avoid being hit by Black, ducking back behind the tree each time Black took aim at her. Severus took the risk of firing at Black, but he was ready and deflected the brunt of the spell easily. This allowed Potter to hit Severus with a Leg-Locker on his right leg.

"Guys, enough," Lupin said, casting a Disarming Spell at Severus, but Severus had a good grip on his wand. The momentum of the spell made his arm rise perfectly to cast an Impedimenta on Black. However, Potter took advantage of Severus' diverted attention to hit him with a Body-Bind.

As Black's arm slowed down, Hermione jumped out from the tree and shouted, "*Immobilus*," sending an enormous pulse that hit Black and Potter with full force, sending Black backwards and making Potter freeze in midair.

Lupin moved forward to defend his friends.

"Stop right there!" Hermione shouted at Lupin, Mulciber's face red with rage. "I trusted you! I kept your secret and you...you just let them attack us with provocation?"

"I-I...what did you say?" Lupin said, freezing in his tracks as he stared at Mulciber's face in disbelief.

Hermione released Severus' Body-Bind. "You heard me," she snapped at Lupin.

Severus immediately Stunned Lupin. "Are you mad?" he shouted at her. "They think you're Mulciber!" He walked over to Potter who was still hanging by his ankle and unable to move. "*Oblivate*," he said coolly and stepped up to Black to Oblivate him.

"What are you doing?" she asked, trying to pull his wand arm down.

Severus jerked his arm free and turned on her. "Erasing the memory of the fight! Oh, don't worry, they'll blame me anyway...they always do...but they cannot remember you." He turned to Black and flicked his wand. "*Oblivate*."

"But, you can't! It's wrong!" Hermione pleaded.

Severus Oblivated Lupin, released the immobilization on him and grabbed her arm, pulling her away. He tightened his grip and Apparated with her to a dense spot in the forest not too far from the gamekeeper's hut. Hermione staggered, trying to regain her footing from the sensation of the Apparation.

"Now you will listen to me. I could not allow them to remember seeing you here in the forest with me. Mulciber is in the common room right now for all I know, if he's not in class. If those three go back and tell Professor McGonagall that Mulciber and I attacked them, and I know that they would, then Professor McGonagall will go straight to Slughorn for retribution. Only, what if she investigates and Mulciber is not alone? There will be others in the common room, or if he's in the library, a room full of witnesses. Do you understand what I'm saying? Even though I'm using Mulciber's identity to sneak you *out of* the castle, he is *in* the castle. Two places at once." He ran his hand through his hair in agitation.

"And, if anyone starts asking questions, it will be assumed that an intruder is in the castle impersonating him," Hermione said, her shoulders slumping.

"No, there *is* an intruder in the castle impersonating him," Severus said pointedly. "*You*. Only you're not a threat to anyone. But, I would be hard pressed to prove that. You are not to be seen. You are supposed to be kept carefully hidden and a secret!" He sighed, turning his head away and then looked at her again. "I don't mean to be harsh, but you have to understand the risks."

"No, I get it," she said, her shoulders slumping slightly.

"Follow me," he said and headed for the edge of the trees. As they approached the gamekeeper's hut, Severus Disillusioned Hermione and told her to keep close. He squatted behind a tree and waited. His heart was pounding, and the birds in the trees were making their usual noises, but no noises came from the hut. He sighed in relief. He set one knee on the ground and waited. "Hopefully, Potter, Black, and Lupin will come out of the forest. If not, you and I will circle the gamekeeper's hut and follow the path up to the castle. We'll mingle with the students leaving Herbology and go straight for the dungeons."

"But, won't I be seen, my footprints, I mean?" she asked softly.

"No, I will be seen...alone. No one will notice your footprints. I'll have to go to the common room for a bit... No one will give it much thought." He checked his watch; class would let out in ten minutes. He kept his eyes on the tree line and his ears alert for any sounds from behind them, checking his watch occasionally. When four minutes passed he stood up and reinforced his Disillusionment Charm. "Okay, stay close to me." He led the way around the hut and up the hill, catching sight of Potter, Black, and Lupin leaving the forest near the Whomping Willow. He and Hermione reached the path near the greenhouses early and were almost to the steps to the castle when all the Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff second-years came pouring out, running for their common room to wash up for dinner. Severus removed the spell on Hermione as they descended the stairs to the dungeons.

Things were going well, until Severus heard Mulciber's voice down the corridor, saying, "Don't know where he is."

Severus swore. This was just what he needed: first a confrontation with Potter and Black, and now the real Mulciber was approaching, and Hermione was still impersonating him. Severus grabbed Hermione's arm and pulled her with him toward the nearest doorway. He shoved her into Professor Slughorn's storeroom, closing the door just as Mulciber, Thortenson, and Avery turned the corner.

"Where've you been?" Avery asked.

"Collecting potion ingredients. Why?" he asked nonchalantly.

"Just wondering. You coming to dinner?" Avery asked.

"Yeah," Severus said, hitching Hermione's bag on his shoulder. "I just want to clean up first."

"Whatcha you want in Slughorn's storeroom?" Thortenson asked, looking over Severus' shoulder at the door.

"Containers," Severus said as if that should be obvious, staring at him intently to challenge his statement.

"Kay," Thortenson said with a shrug. "See you at dinner, all right?"

"Yeah. Give me five minutes," Severus stated. He walked off and counted to ten, then backtracked and opened the door. "Go straight to the room. I'll come by after dinner."

"Okay," she whispered as she slipped past him.

Hermione walked to the classroom and let herself in, shutting the door quietly. She walked over to the desk holding her clothes and stripped, leaving the soiled clothes on the floor. Her hands were shaking now that all the drama of the afternoon was over. She pulled on a robe and flannel. Enlarging a goblet, she tried to clean herself the best she could, running the events of her encounter with Harry's dad and his friends in her mind.

She had been startled by the appearance of Sirius Black, James Potter and Remus Lupin. Potter looked so much like Harry, she'd almost called out to him until she noticed the arrogant expression on his face. He was not like Harry at all, in her opinion.

And Black, he was nothing like she'd imagined and certainly didn't look like his picture in the *Daily Prophet*. He was very good-looking: tall, with a cocky, aristocratic bearing, somewhat haughty expression, and his dark hair was cut short, above his collar in layers and fell into his eyes with a sort of casual elegance.

In contrast, Remus Lupin, one of her favorite teachers in her time, had only stood there, hands in his pockets and hadn't done anything to stop his friends from attacking them. He hardly looked much different. His hair was a wavy, light brown, and his second-hand school robes were clean and well kept. He'd even looked more well-nourished, yet still looked somewhat ill and tired with a slightly bad posture. She sat on the bed and tried to reconcile the mild mannered teacher with the teen she'd just seen and fell short. *Maybe if Professor Lupin grew up to be a nice guy, so did Harry's dad?* That had to be the case since Harry's mum married him...unless Lily Evans wasn't the nice and kind girl everyone seemed to think she was. Slughorn called her witty and charming, and Harry said that Professor Lupin had told him that she saw the best in others, even when they could not see it themselves, and would often stick up for those others who were criticized, picked on or mistreated.

But, there was no way around it; Sirius Black was a horrible boy, and James Potter was no better in Hermione's opinion.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Sirius Black's appearance borrowed from: <http://www.hplex.info/wizards/sirius.html>

The folklore of King Vortigern's Castle was borrowed from <http://www.timelessmyths.com/arthurian/minorarthur.html#Vortigern>

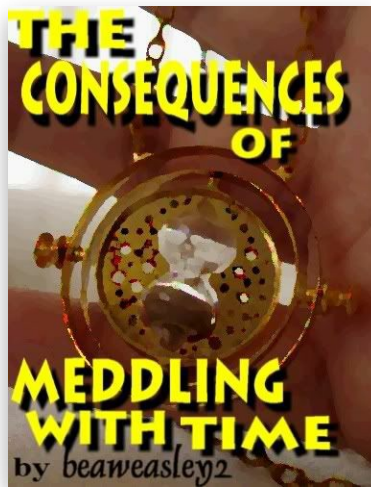
Chapter 16

Chapter 16 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this to help me make this presentable for reading. You're the best, thank you!



Severus didn't come back as promised. Hermione set down Severus' book, *Potions: The Magical Nature of Organic Matter*, and stared at the door again. Her pear core and half-eaten sandwich of beef stuffed into a roll sat on the plate next to her. She wasn't that hungry anymore; she was bored. He had been spending a great deal of time in the library the last two days, her favorite place in the castle, and she resented it. *No, that isn't fair, but I just want to be able to move about the castle again. Freely...no restrictions...well, reasonable restrictions. Bugger. Bugger.*

He'd even removed the Polyjuice Potion from the desk so she couldn't impersonate anyone and go there herself, not that she would. She frowned at a soft growling noise coming from under the bed. Her Care of Magical Creatures book had gotten free of her and was sleeping contentedly under there. It had bitten her when she'd attempted to extract it out earlier, so she'd used a bit of the hem of her blouse as a bandage.

The doorknob rattled, and she picked up the book and began reading the chapter about the transformation and composition changes between potion ingredients and the constitution and/or configuration of a compound that resulted within a cauldron. *In essence, why a potion is a potion and not just soup*, she grumbled mentally.

Severus set a pile of books down on his way to his worktable, grunting a greeting in her direction. He checked his two simmering potions and began to slice the hellbane truffles.

Or in some cases, poison, she sighed to herself, watching him over the top of the book. She listed off the number of toxic and poisonous ingredients that were frequently used in potions, stopping when she came to hellbane truffles. *Hellbane truffles, the one poisonous truffle!* She'd learned in second-year Potions and Herbology that hellbane truffles formed because of the symbiotic relationship with the roots of the hornbeam trees inhabited by Bowtruckles and the Bowtruckles themselves. The truffles fruit throughout the year but had the strongest efficacy for potions in early autumn. But, Severus had explained to her that in winter, when other foods were scarce, the truffles mellowed in toxicity, providing nutrients for the tree and a food source for the Bowtruckles. For that reason, the Bowtruckles guarded them as fiercely as they did the naturally straight branches of the trees desirable for stirring rods and wands.

"Are you nearly done with my book? I need to finish my essay," Severus asked as he cut the slices into thin strips before carefully cutting the strips into much smaller pieces.

He didn't even look at me to ask, she pouted to herself. "Yes," she replied, setting down the book and picking up one from the pile he'd dumped on the way to his worktable. Hermione could see his cutting technique in her mind, the way he held his knife, the way he rocked the blade rather than just chopping away haphazardly. If she closed her mind, she could see each of his cutting techniques, many that she'd mastered as well under his tutelage. His slicing technique impressed her the most.

She watched him as he slid the perfectly diced truffles off his cutting board into his cauldron and stirred the potion twelve times, adding one counter-clockwise turn, then stirring twelve more times. He frequently did that, added a counter turn when stirring. She understood his reasoning, but he'd nearly melted his cauldron each time he experimented with the additional turn. His annotations on when the extra reversed turn was to be done was always underlined and the other failed tries crossed out completely in his Potions book.

He lowered his flame, checked the other potion and sat down at the table. He pulled out a thick, rolled length of parchment and his quill. Hermione waited for him to look at her, but he simply opened his book and began to write, his nose only an inch from the parchment.

"Severus, is everything all right?" she asked softly, cringing at the firm set of his shoulders and the tick that she saw in his cheek when he looked up.

"Yeah, everything is fine. I have a lot of revision to do." He rested his forehead in his hand and checked something in the book.

Hermione returned to her reading. He was broody today, much like he had been yesterday, and she couldn't fathom as to why.

Severus elongated the worktable so that he could revise in between the steps of his potions. Hermione stood beside him, carefully stripping and separating the barbs off the Jobberknoll feathers. Her work had improved so much since their first time brewing together. He recalled the time she'd gotten powdered moonstone on her face when she'd inadvertently sneezed. And, the time she'd showed him how to extract the mucus from the glutinous snails... or the time she'd cracked open the ashwinder egg on her cauldron rim, and a baby ashwinder almost fell into the potion. Good thing he'd been aware.

He'd been quick enough with the wand to flick the snake away just in time. "Didn't your professor tell you to always crack your eggs on a dish first?" he'd chided her mirthlessly.

She had looked so abashed, biting her lip and looking up at him from under her fringe with pleading, doe-like eyes. He smiled to himself. His approval meant so much to her. He wondered if this was what it would have been like having a younger sister. His smile faded as the mental image of him cowering in a corner, protectively shielding Hermione's body from his father's wrath, or knowing he'd have to keep his door unlocked in case she needed to hide in his room at night... *No, it was a good thing Mum never had another child, least of all a daughter. Besides, where would she have slept? My room would've been out. The closet?* There were only two rooms upstairs and the closet. *Dad might have allowed Mum to magically convert the closet into a bedroom... but not likely.*

He turned back to his paper, due in Charms class in the afternoon. He still had to edit one half-inch worth off his essay, or it'd be too long.

His mind still wandered. As Hermione carefully added the knotgrass on the surface of the potion, he recalled the trouble he'd had with the Sprain Paste and the spoon she'd made for him from the mouse. It had turned back into a mouse, of course, but he'd transfigured it back. *Over summer hols, I can try to find an alternative or have one of them made. Maybe I could patent the spoon and make a bit of pin money! Summer was a little over two months away yet.* Severus' smile faded. She'd be gone, and he'd be alone in this room again. He sighed and Hermione turned to look at him, the tilt of her head and crease between her brows relaying her confusion.

He shook his head. "Nothing. You're doing fine."

Her lip slid slowly from her teeth as she watched him, her eyes sad and pleading.

He didn't know what to say. Well, he knew what he wanted to say...but couldn't. She would be gone in a day or two *Only this morning she'd asked how long she's been here already. His time, her time.* He hated thinking about that.

He'd have to send her home, and he hated the idea. However, he couldn't keep her like a pet forever, and he couldn't adopt her. Taking her home with him was not an option at all.

A soft knock broke the silence. "Hurry, hide," he hissed. Hermione ran for the space beside her bed.

Mulciber poked his head in. "Do you have a minute?"

"One," he said, checking to see how the potion was doing.

"Which is that?" Mulciber asked, jutting his chin in the direction of the cauldrons.

"Piles Potion," he said, indicating the cauldron closest to him with a jerk of his head. "I have to add the dried figs next. The other is Coagulant Draught."

Mulciber shifted his weight and looked about the room. "I need help with my Transfiguration. I can't get the legs of the chair equal."

Severus sighed. "Your problem isn't in making them equal. You have to concentrate on the image in your mind. You have to imagine them equal to begin with."

"But, each time I do, one leg is too long, and one leg is too short," he moaned.

Severus Summoned a chair to him nonverbally, and Mulciber gaped at him in astonishment. "Damn, you do that so easily."

"Some have the ability, some don't. You'd get it if you applied yourself," Severus said dismissively. "Look at the chair."

Mulciber stared at the chair.

"Duplicate it," Severus demanded.

It took several tries, most dismal, but finally Mulciber managed a reasonable chair, although it still wobbled. "I'm hopeless."

The timer on the worktable went off. "You only have to concentrate," Severus stated as he turned back to his potions. He added the dried figs to the Piles Potion. He dropped the ground turmeric rhizomes into the Coagulant Draught next and stirred the potion slowly. He knew that Mulciber was looking over his shoulder, but he didn't let it bother him. When he minced the white radish, he admonished him, "You're not practicing."

"I did it again, and it's the same," Mulciber said, practically whining.

Severus added the radish to the Piles Potion. "I have to finish these. I don't have time right now. Can we do this in Herbology?"

"Professor Sprout..."

"Won't know a thing," Severus scoffed at him. "We're repotting mature Screechsnaps. The noise alone will cover anything. We'll work with Townsend, and between him and me, we'll cover for you. If not, I'll bribe Rosier to make a distraction."

"Yeah, I suppose so. See you in the common room," Mulciber said with a shrug and left.

Hermione walked out smirking.

"What's so funny?"

"He doesn't have very good depth perception or he doesn't understand visual perspectives," she stated and began slicing the horsetruffles leaves.

He crossed his arms. "Explain."

"Draw a chair on paper," she answered back.

He scowled at her, and she shrugged back at him. He had no idea why he should, but she crossed her arms the same way he did when she wasn't doing what he'd told her. Sighing in annoyance, he flipped his parchment over and drew a chair. Hermione glanced at it and smiled, but he knew she was laughing at his sketch.

She set the leaves aside and reached for his quill. "Not a square, a rectangle with the sides at an angle, like this. Draw the bit of wood along the front and on one side, then add the legs and the back," she rambled as she drew a chair next to his. Hers looked more realistic, dimensional. "You can think in dimensional images...obviously your friend cannot. Teach him how to draw a chair this way, explain visual dimensions and perspectives, and he'll get it."

Severus nodded, understanding what she meant by the exercise. Mulciber was copying the chair without realizing that, in images and looking at something, the front appears longer than the back. "You'd be a good teacher."

"Thanks."

He looked at his watch. "I have to get my things for Herbology." He raised his wand to put the potion on stasis.

"I think I can finish these for you," she asserted, holding up her hand to stop him. "The Piles Potion just needs to simmer for an hour, right? And the Coagulant Draught needs leech juice, anise, and maidenhair leaves."

"Don't forget the snipefish spines," he said lowering his wand. "This is way above your level, Hermione."

She looked at him imploringly. "Don't you trust me?"

He considered her statement. Yes, he did, but these potions were perfect so far. *The Piles Potion is done. No harm there. She could set it on the cooling rack in an hour and bottle it for him, no problems.* The Coagulant was in its tricky stage. "The leech juice, anise, and maidenhair are typically anti-coagulants and the snipefish spines react badly if there isn't enough leech juice... if not added in the proper portions they would throw the potion off," he explained carefully.

"All right, I'll have to be extra careful. You have the amounts here..." she said, checking his directions. She looked up and smiled. "It's clear enough, I should be able to follow your notes just fine."

If she blows it, I'll have to start over. But, if I let her, the potions will be done before I get back after Charms. He stared at her for a bit, hoping he wasn't making a bad decision. *Hasn't she proven that she can brew potions even seventh-year N.E.W.T. students have trouble with?* "All right. But don't mess it up."

"I promise. I can do this," she assured him.

He nodded once, turned, and hurried for the door.

Severus entered the room, limping again. Hermione rushed over to him, but he held up a hand to stop her. "Hold on. I'm fine. Black tried to turn me into a chair. Professor McGonagall straightened me out, but I had to go see Madam Pomfrey again."

"That bastard!" she ground out venomously. "Do tell me that he's being expelled!" There was no way around it; Sirius Black was a horrible boy, and James Potter was no better in Hermione's opinion.

Severus huffed in derision and rolled his eyes. "Expel Black? One of her pets...one of the Golden Boys of Hogwarts? They'll probably make him Head Boy next year!"

"Head Boy...him? Are you mad? Didn't Black try to turn that fifth-year Ravenclaw, Barty Crouch, into a dog?" she asked, her fists firmly on her hips.

"Yeah, what of it? We're learning human transfigurations, and he was just practicing," Severus snapped at her as he walked past.

"*What?!*" Hermione exclaimed and pivoted as she watched him walk away, in total disbelief that he'd said that.

"That's what I was told. He was practicing on Potter and missed," he snapped angrily, dumping his bag on the table. "Barty Crouch hangs around with Brodie MacGough and Grunnar Sorensen from my house."

"So that's... What about Wendell Walters, the boy you told me about? Didn't Black hang him upside-down in the bell tower?" she asked, still amazed that Professor McGonagall hadn't disciplined either of them. She was usually so strict, especially with the students of her own house. "Surely, Black was given more than a detention then?"

"No, that was Potter, not Black. Although, no one can prove it; it's Walters' word against Potter, Black, and Lupin," he said, almost a sneer. "Look, Hermione, Wendell is just another scrawny kid whose dad taught him loads of curses and hexes so he'd be able to defend himself here at school."

"Loads of good it does him! Or you!" she exclaimed. She knew he was moody again today, but it made her furious that he'd been assaulted again.

Severus' dark eyes seemed to grow darker as they narrowed in anger. "Did you really think I am the only one that the Marauders torment? I'm not."

She held up her hands in supplication. "I never said you weren't. I was merely asking why they always seem to get away with it." She suddenly knew why...Harry's map. *The map...the Marauders: Padfoot, Prongs, Moony, and Wormtail. They couldn't be the same as Potter, Black, Lupin, and Pettigrew?*

"What?"

Hermione shook her head. "What do you mean, what?"

He crossed his arms and leaned back against the table. "You were a miles away. What were you thinking?"

"Something I learned about in my time," she said, hoping he'd drop the subject.

He turned around and opened his bag. "I hate it when you do that. If you don't want to tell me, then fine. But you don't have to brush me off."

She walked up to him. "I'm not brushing you off," she said, placing a hand lightly on his back. He stiffened and shrugged his shoulder to spurn her. She took a deep breath and decided on telling him the truth, well, part of it. "Sirius Black was...is...will be a wanted man. In my time, he's wanted for murder." *There that isn't divulging too much.* She didn't want to tell him that he'd escaped from Azkaban. That would be too much... and could possibly change things.

He turned his head to look at her. "I'm hardly surprised." He hung his head, his hair obscuring his face from her view. "Look, I don't want to fight. I was angry, but not at you. My body still aches a bit from the transformations. I want to get some work done before dinner. Is that all right?"

She nodded in understanding. "Sure." She wanted to finish reading *Potions: The Magical Nature of Organic Matter* anyway. She looked at the titles of Severus' books: *Principles and Applications of Human Transformations* and *The Practical Approach of Changing Forms*, but the title of the book on the bottom of the stack, *Human Transformations: Where Do My Shoes Go?*, made her snicker.

"What?" he asked, scowling at her.

"Nothing. I'd just like to read that one later if it's all right?" she asked, pointing to the third book.

He handed it to her. "Here. I don't need it right now."

She read quietly as he worked on his essay, careful not to stare at him. She was getting much better at observing someone slyly without bothering him. Or, he was growing accustomed to her. Hermione carefully turned the page, glancing up quickly, then back down. If she could stay in this time with him, she was certain they'd remain friends. They were very much alike and enjoyed the same things. She sighed, realizing that if she did stay here, she wouldn't be able to see her parents, Harry, Ron, her cat Crookshanks... She'd have no home, no money. She ran her finger down the edges of the pages, not really looking at the text of the book. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't stay.

There was a soft knock at the door. Hermione glanced up as Severus turned around. He snapped his fingers and pointed to her bed to indicate for her to hurry and hide. Hermione jumped up and scurried over as he made another urgent flick of his finger.

A barrel-chested guy with muscular arms walked into the room. "Are you all right? Rowe told me you're still limping."

Hermione recognized him, but couldn't place where.

"I'm fine. It just hurts more when you're forced into a chair than if you change yourself," Severus answered smoothly, obviously good friends with the bloke. "Madam Pomfrey said I was fine and gave me a Pain Potion, but it only lessens the pain in my hips. I'll take more tonight."

The guy looked at the table and back at Severus. "You got a minute?"

"Sure," Severus said, setting down his quill.

"I was wondering what's going on with you and Mulciber?" he asked, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Severus turned sideways on his chair, resting one elbow on the back and the other on the table. "Nothing is going on..."

"Mulciber is acting strange. I mean, the bloke's hardly a full quid in the head at the best of times, but he's becoming spacey." He shifted his weight as he glanced at the wall where Hermione's bed was.

She held her breath for a heartbeat. She knew that he couldn't see her, but he seemed to be looking right at her.

"I'm beginning to think that assault, the one that put him in hospital for two weeks, maybe it damaged him."

"How do you mean?" Severus asked, concerned.

"Rosier, Rowe, and Atkinson say they saw him on the grounds with you, but Mulciber claims he'd been revising... Well, he also thought the Bloody Baron or some ghost was at our Quidditch game against Hufflepuff. Remember, he kept going on about how ghosts can't be seen in the daylight?"

Hermione had to cover her mouth to keep from laughing. He was talking about her! *was the one who had been in the Slytherin stands, and Mulciber thought I was a ghost!*

"They must have just jumped to some conclusion... I bumped into Mulciber on the stairs, if I recall. We ran into them on the way here, in the dungeons," Severus stated, scowling. "Rosier said something about needing notes." He shrugged. "Maybe it's stress; it can do that, make you confused. It's not like the professors aren't all dumping extra work on us for end-of-year exams. Julianna Greengrass had to be given Calming Draught after freaking out in..."

Hermione relaxed, chuckling silently at Severus' explanation.

The guy narrowed his eyes and smirked at him. "It's more than that. Haven't you noticed anything... peculiar?"

"Avery, when hasn't Mulciber been peculiar?" Severus replied, rolling his hand over, palm up. "The bloke loves dissecting things and making the cats in the castle dance, for crying out loud. Even Mrs. Norris avoids him."

Avery snorted in what Hermione assumed was amusement, although she found nothing funny about torturing cats.

"I suppose." He looked around and turned back to Severus. "Some of us are planning a party for Rowe, for his birthday. You in?"

"Yeah, I'm in," Severus replied, lacing his fingers together. "Who's bringing the drinks?"

"Hornsby and Thortenson are," he said. His chest rose and fell as if he'd inhaled deeply. "Are you going to hang out with us?"

Severus turned to look at where Hermione was hidden and then at the books and parchments on the table. "I've been doing my essays in here instead of the library to avoid... problems."

Avery's expression turned dark.

"McGonagall gave me a warning," Severus sneered.

"Bitch! She's always protecting her precious cubs. Well, we have a bottle of Ogdens. Come have a drink with us."

"Let me finish this essay first," Severus said, and Avery gave him an incredulous stare. "Fifteen more minutes."

"Fine," Avery said, turning to go. "Just remember who your friends are. They're not those things made of pewter."

Hermione came out cautiously after the door slammed closed. "If you need to go, I'll understand."

"I need to get my work done," Severus replied, turning back to his essay.

Hermione's mouth pulled back, half-way between a frown and a smirk.

"I'll go have a drink in fifteen minutes and then come back," he said with a sigh, then looked up at her and smiled. "Besides, I'm well aware of who ~~my~~ friends are." He winked at her and turned his attention back to his parchment.

Her frown stretched into a huge smile as she sat down and picked up the book she'd been reading.

Severus knew he was being a jerk. He couldn't seem to help it. All she'd asked for was a shower, and he'd snapped at her. He lay on his back in bed, Levitating a wadded up piece of parchment. He turned his head and looked at the clock. Twenty after two. He sighed and let the parchment fall. His dorm mates were asleep, Mulciber, Townsend, and Avery all snoring away. He rose and slipped from the room as quietly as he could and checked to see if the common room was empty before heading for the door. He didn't see her when he'd entered the classroom. "Hermione?" he whispered in case she was sleeping.

"Here," she replied from across the room.

He followed her voice and saw that she was awake, sitting on her bed, reading one of the Transfiguration books he'd brought from the library. "I can sneak you into the showers now."

She set the book aside quietly as she rose, gathered her things from atop the desk by the bed and turned to face him.

In the dim light of the wall scones, he could see that her eyelashes were clumped, and her nose was somewhat red. *She's been crying.* "Ready?" he asked, feeling like dung for making her cry.

She followed him silently.

He disillusioned her at the door and led the way, hearing her footsteps in the dead quiet of the dungeon corridor.

"I'm sorry I made you mad," she whispered once he'd closed the door to the bathroom.

"It wasn't you. I've been irritable," he replied in hushed tones. He sat on the bench, leaned against the wall and closed his eyes as the water in the last stall turned on.

A gentle hand on his knee jerked him awake. "Wha'?"

"I'm done," she said softly. "If you're that tired, I can see my own way back."

"Nah, I'm fine," he said as he collected her wet things to dump under his bed. The house-elves were getting really good about checking there for Hermione's soiled bedding and clothes and the wet towels. "Wait here for me. I'll only be a second." He whispered her name when he'd returned.

"Here," she whispered back from somewhere near the door.

He led the way back, removed the charm and followed her to her bed. "Do you want to talk?" he asked, his hand gripping one of the bedposts as he watched her put away the toiletries he'd absconded for her.

She shook her head.

"Hermione, I'm sorry." He was about to lose a friend for an indeterminate length of time, possibly forever, and it sucked. "Talk to me."

She turned to face him. "I was only asking you how it was done, and you snapped at me. I wasn't asking you to show me!"

So that's what she'd been crying about. "Human Transfiguration is really complex and difficult. You really have to be an advanced student to be able to do it," he said, this time much more rationally.

She shrugged and climbed into bed.

"Move over," he said, nudging her as he sat down next to her. He adjusted one of her pillows and leaned against the headboard.

She rolled onto her side.

"What did you want to know?" he asked when he assumed she was comfortable.

"According to Douglas C. Giancoli, when you are about to do human transformations, you must have a clear picture of the object you are attempting to morph into, the framework or anatomy, in every detail. He even went as far as to say hair, nails, the shapes of the bones, for instance. Paul Tipler disputes that in his book, saying that you only need to understand the form of that which you want to take, and envision yourself in that form. Who's right?"

He chuckled softly. "Sure, a nice simple theoretical discussion before bed. Wouldn't you prefer one of Beedle's Bardic stories instead?"

"Do you know any Bardic poems?" she asked, picking at a thread on the blanket.

He chuckled. "No. I meant... never mind." He leaned his head against the headboard. "If you're changing yourself into an inanimate object, you only have to visualize the object you want to be, such as a chair, a table, a rock, a log... whatever. Most of these things don't have moving parts or movable joints. Those are the easiest ones to do. If you want to be a clock, for instance, you have to visualize the moving parts: the hands of the clock, pendulum, or a coo-coo bird. It's totally different if you want to be an animal. Most of the time, unless you are an Animagus, becoming an animal is really difficult and most wizards get stuck." He yawned and continued, repeating what he remembered of Professor McGonagall's lectures.

Severus had no idea when he'd fallen asleep. The slamming of the door to the classroom jerked him awake. He had slumped down on her bed, and Hermione was lying next to him, one arm across his body. It felt weird, feeling her snuggle up against him. He lifted his head to look at her, but all he could see was a mass of brown hair and her cheek. He could feel her breath on his arm where her face pressed against him. When he moved, she curled her arm and tucked her hand under her chin. He slipped into the corridor, heading for the common room when Rosier and Thortenson saw him.

"Oi, there he is!" Thortenson yelled, running down the corridor as he urged Rosier to follow him.

"Where have you been? You were gone when everyone woke up. Your bed didn't even look slept in," Rosier said, coming to a halt in front of Severus.

"Nowhere. A walk," Severus said, looking confused. "I couldn't sleep."

"Merlin, we thought you'd been attacked again," Thortenson said.

"Not this early," Severus said nonchalantly with a snort. "What time is it anyway?"

"Breakfast," Rosier said, shaking his head. "Everyone is looking... never mind." He pulled out a small mirror and looked at the reflection. "He's okay. See you in the Great Hall."

"Com'on, let's go eat," Thortenson urged them. "So, what's got you all bothered that you can't sleep?"

Severus shrugged. "Transformation... Animagi... you know, it'd be cool," he lied.

"You've got to be kidding, is that all?" Thortenson scoffed, laughing humorlessly.

Rosier clapped him on the back. "I bet you'd be a bat."

"You'd be a badger," Severus replied, falling into step with his friends.

Severus knew it was time. It had been time. He'd only been delaying the inevitable, and his friends were coming around more, making things difficult. He held the Time-Turner out to her, urging her to take it.

"I could stay longer, even take us both back a week or more?" she asked, her hands clasped in front of her.

"We can't, Hermione." He shook his head. She was all packed; even the growling book was bound and stuffed into her bag. She pouted, actually pouted.

"Awful things can happen to wizards who meddle in time, Hermione. There is a war going on out there. The castle is in high alert for intruders. I have been really lucky sneaking you around like I have, but really, what if we were caught? How would you explain yourself? Or me? I live in this time. What if I see myself, or someone who knows me sees me in the castle knowing I'm somewhere else? The probabilities of what could happen are endless. I knew the risks the first time I agreed to hide you."

A tear escaped and slid down her cheek. "I'll miss you."

He looped the chain of the device around her neck and pulled her into a hug. "I'll miss you, too, my little Gryffindor. But, I know we'll see each other again."

She was clinging to him, her face buried in his chest. "I luf you."

He pulled back enough to look at her face. "What?"

"I'll miss this...you...spending time with you."

It's not what she'd said, but his heart felt heavy from the sentiment. "Me, too." He leaned down to kiss her cheek and felt her lips press against the corner of his mouth. He rested his forehead against hers. "You have to go."

She pulled back, tears streaming down her cheek.

"Aw, don't cry. It's not forever." He conjured a handkerchief and wiped her tears away. "Aren't you my brave little Gryffindor?"

"Yes," she said, trying to smile for him.

He cupped her face. "So, until we see each other again. Which for you will be only seconds, right?"

"Yeah, it's pretty fast. Until then," she said solemnly.

He stood back and crossed his arms.

She hitched her bag onto her shoulder and set the device spinning, vanishing from his sight.

~ T. B. C. ~

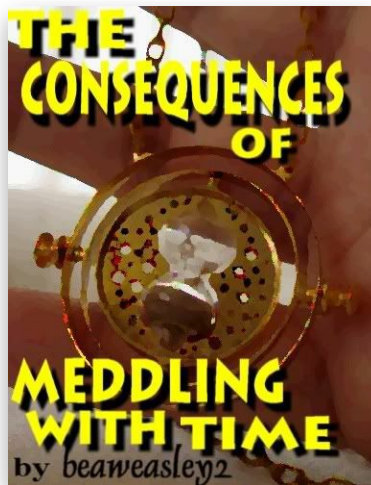
Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Many thanks to my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for helping me clean up my many mistakes, and to Pookah for the shoulder and friendly advice. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.



Hermione arrived back in her time, slightly dizzy from the return and, for a moment, disoriented. She looked up and saw Professor Severus Snape, in his teaching robes, his arms crossed, leaning against the professor's desk as if waiting for her. Hermione looked around, trying to get her bearings. Two wall sconces were lit, illuminating the front of the room where Professor Snape patiently waited. Only two desks stood in the center of the room, one student desk and the professor's desk. All the other students' desks were moved to the side in two clumps of tightly squashed-together rows. Any semblance of familiarity to the room he'd used as a teen was gone. It was like any other old, unused classroom in the castle.

Professor Snape uncrossed his arms and indicated the one desk that stood in front of him. "Have a seat, Miss Granger."

Hermione walked forward, swallowing back the uncertainty she felt at seeing the adult version of her friend watching her with cool detachment. She dropped her bag next to the bench and sat down quietly. Surely after everything they had shared, there would be some lingering effect, some sense of the friendly familiarity between them, but his posture and expression were exactly the same as when she'd left, only sterner, if that was at all possible. She tried to relax and not fidget under his stare.

"Welcome back," he said softly, crossing his arms again. "Did you have a nice time?"

"Thank you, sir. Yes, I did," she replied, her well-ingrained polite habit masking her nervousness. She couldn't read him at all, but then she'd never been able to read this Severus Snape before. The teenage Severus had been much less guarded and more approachable. In fact, she was beginning to miss him, the younger version, even more.

He seemed to be watching her, not exactly waiting...contemplating her, as if weighing a decision. Hermione carefully forced herself to continue looking forward, using the time to examine him as much as he was doing her. He looked tired. There was a slightly dark shadow under his eyes, and his skin was sallow. His younger self was pale but still had a healthier glow about him, a light olive tone. *Probably because he went outside more as a teen than he does now.* There was also a slight crook to his nose, not all that noticeable except she was quite a bit more familiar with his face now than she'd been before her jumps. *Did someone or something break his nose? When would it have happened?*

"Miss Granger, what exactly do you expect from me?"

She nearly jumped out of her skin when he'd spoken, tearing her from her study of his face. "I'm sorry, sir...expect from you?" she asked, thrown off a bit by his question.

"You have just returned from spending a month with my younger self, have you not?"

She nodded at his question and gripped her hands tighter on her lap. She tried to prepare herself to listen to what he had to say, assuming now that she might not like it.

He nodded once to acknowledge her agreement to his question. "An entire month where I was your sole companion, provider, protector, and friend. Yes, friend," he clarified when she'd looked up at his admission of friendship, and he continued before she could respond. "For a month and a half, if you count the previous two times to my past, while you were in my company, we had formed a friendship, one that I did enjoy for what it was. However, as a teenager, I looked upon you as my charge, like... a kid sister, if you will. One I had to look after for a while. For you, that was only minutes ago. For me, it has been seventeen years. A lot has happened in my life in those seventeen years, more than you'll ever know. I have grown up, you have not."

She felt a lump lodge in her throat, and her chest felt heavy all of a sudden. "Yes, sir, I see your point," she said, lowering her head to watch her thumbs as she rubbed them on the edge of the desk. She mulled over his words, wishing that she was somehow misunderstanding his tone, but knew that she wasn't. She inhaled slowly, fighting to breathe evenly.

"I hope you can. While I know that you and I are no longer simply academically acquainted, I still am your professor in this time, and as such, our relationship is one of professor and student."

Hermione felt her heart drop a little. He was discounting their friendship. He didn't want anything to do with her, not in this time. She wished fervently that she could've stayed in the past, had some means to support herself. But then, there was so much she'd lose in the present that would be too painful to give up.

"Miss Granger, look at me."

She didn't want to. If she did, she'd see that the Severus she really cared for had grown into this hardened, cold man who hated her. She laced her fingers tightly to hold back her emotions and slowly angled her head to look up at him, avoiding making eye contact.

He seemed to study her for a moment and then relaxed his arms, placing his hands on the desk by his hips. "You expected more."

"I didn't think about this," she started to say, then turned and looked at the place where their worktable had been only minutes before. Their worktable, where they had brewed potions. *And the place where the table had been is right behind me.* She could still see him leaning his head on his hand as he read, or the smirk on his face when she'd said something that amused him, the way his dark eyes shone when he'd found an answer in a book...

"But you hoped that our friendship would continue."

Her head turned as her gaze returned to his face. "I had... I have only just returned, sir. I haven't had time to think about what I expected. I admit that I have become fond of you, yes. But I... I suppose if I were to consider what I want now, it would be to..."

"Continue as we were when I was seventeen?" he asked derisively with a smirk. "Do you really think that is practical, you and I friends? You are only fourteen, are you not?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice. It's exactly what she'd wanted. True, there was an age gap now, and he was her professor. But, being friendly with a professor wasn't unheard of. A Gryffindor being friends with the Head of Slytherin... maybe that was expecting a bit much.

"And since I know you can do simple maths, I'm thirty-four, an adult, and an authority figure," he stated blandly. "How do you suppose a friendship with one of your professors would be like? Can you honestly perceive that kind of relationship with me?"

She shook her head, wishing she could just leave and run up to her dorm room.

"Please pull out the Time-Turner," he demanded softly.

Hermione carefully took off the Time-Turner and held it out to him. She hated to give it up, but knew that it was too hot to use anyway.

Severus reached out and clasped it by the chain, holding it up to look at the hourglass carefully in the soft illumination of the room. "Overstressed and hot." He lowered his arm, turning to retrieve the small, familiar blue box he'd placed on the desk behind him, and put the Time-Turner in it carefully. Hermione felt her body jerk as he closed the lid with a soft clap. "I'll return this to the Headmaster. You, young lady, are to be sequestered for a week or so with a friend of the Headmaster's until this device is usable again. Since I am well aware that you have completed all of your class assignments, each of your professors have devised enough work to last you for the time that you'll be overlapping. You may give me your essays."

Thankful, Hermione picked up her bag and began to pull out all of her completed essays. Professor Snape waited patiently until she'd compiled them in order and held them out to him.

"Thank you." He stuffed them into his pocket. "Now grab your bag and follow me," he stated and started to walk for the door.

Hermione had to hurry to catch up. "Sir, shouldn't I go pack something?"

He whirled an about face and leered down at her. "Go pack. Have you any idea how idiotic that suggestion is? You're in three places at once as it is: Muggle Studies, Ancient Runes and here! Unless your other self made another bounce I'm unaware of. It's bad enough that you are allowed to be using the device, one you so obviously misuse..." He made fists with his hands and turned around. "You have been provided for. Now let's go before you are seen."

He walked quickly to the entrance of the Headmaster's tower, Hermione hurrying along behind him. "Atomic fireballs," Professor Snape announced to the gargoyle and stood aside to let Hermione climb the stairs to the Headmaster's office.

"Ah, Severus, so she has arrived back," Dumbledore said, and indicated the chairs in front of his desk with a wave of his hand. "Please, do sit down. How was your trip, Miss Granger? I assume that all went well?"

Hermione sat down, holding her bag on her lap. "Yes, Headmaster, everything went well enough, I believe."

"She was nearly seen twice, almost bumped into one of my housemates while impersonating him, but other than that, she was compliant," Professor Snape commented curtly. "You have read my report."

Hearing him describe their close encounters this way made them seem far more problematic than they had been at the time. Hermione looked at the edge of the desk feeling ashamed.

"Yes, I have," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eyes. "Miss Granger, would you like a lemon drop? I'd offer one to Severus, but he always turns me down."

She looked up in surprise at the offer. "No, thank you, Headmaster," Hermione replied politely, suppressing a smirk.

"Very well," Dumbledore replied, lacing his hands on his desk. "So, Miss Granger, it seems that we have an overlap we need to correct. If what Severus suspects has happened, the Time-Turner has been overused and needs time to cool, so you must be sequestered, yet again."

"Pardon me, sir, an overlap?" Hermione asked confused. She was in a virtual overlap every day when she used the device.

Professor Snape turned to look at her. "Yes, Miss Granger, you have overstressed the Time-Turner..."

She clutched her bag to her chest, wondering if he was going to be as disappointed with her as Professor Snape seemed to be.

"What Professor Snape is implying is that you must be tucked away until the device cools. I daren't impose on Professor Snape with the task, so I have made other arrangements." He turned to address Professor Snape. "Am I correct in assuming that Miss Granger makes no more errors in her calculations for the rest of the school term?"

"None that I am aware of, but she could very well surprise us," Professor Snape stated with a frown.

"She does that every day," Dumbledore stated with a smile. "Now, Miss Granger, according to your schedule... you have Muggle Studies, Arithmancy, and Transfiguration this morning. Which subject were you going to attend before you had your mishap?"

"Arithmancy, sir," Hermione said with a sense of relief. "I have Transfiguration afterwards and Care of Magical Creatures and Defense Against the Dark Arts in the afternoon."

Dumbledore smiled and held out his hand. "May I see the Time-Turner, please?"

Professor Snape set the blue box on the Headmaster's desk. Dumbledore examined the device, intently. "Interesting. Just like before, not liquid but clearly nearly molten... and translucent." He laid the Time-Turner carefully in the box again and then summoned Fawkes to him, handing a small scroll and the box to the phoenix. "If you would please deliver this note with the box to Mr. Latimer, Department of Mysteries, for me."

Fawkes cooed softly, spread his wings and vanished in a flare of fire.

"Severus, you said before that Miss Granger needed to wait for a month for the device to cool enough for her to use it again, isn't that right?" Dumbledore asked.

Professor Snape shook his head. "I believe two weeks should be sufficient, seventeen, possibly nineteen, days."

Hermione looked at him in stunned disbelief. *That is only three weeks at best. Why had it taken a month this last time?*

"We'll say nineteen days to be safe." Dumbledore picked up his quill and made a notation on a piece of parchment, then looked up. "Now, Miss Granger, it would be best if you go quietly to your room, pack only that which you need for three weeks, and return back."

"I have already assembled suitable provisions for Miss Granger," Professor Snape stated and turned his head toward Hermione, "including your toiletries, extra books, and your assignments from your professors." He flicked his wand, ending a Disillusionment Charm and handed her what appeared to be a small Muggle rucksack. "Anything I may have overlooked, you may inform the Headmaster of."

"Thank you, sir," she said, swallowing nervously as she accepted the rucksack. *He's showing his thoughtful side again,* she hoped.

"Wonderful. Now if you're ready, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said as he rose to his feet, "you'll be coming with me to stay with a dear friend of mine. Severus, if you'll please deliver this to Minerva for me, it would be much appreciated."

"Certainly, Headmaster," Professor Snape said and stood to leave. His gaze lingered on Hermione, his dark eyes and the lines on his face seemingly to soften for a brief moment until Dumbledore extended the rolled parchment to him. He nodded once and strode for the door.

Hestia Jones was a warm, wonderful woman in Hermione's opinion. She wasn't much older than Professor Snape, black-haired with rosy cheeks and a fun sense of humor. She lived in a deceptively quaint-looking cottage, which had more rooms than Hermione thought possible, in Maldon near the Blackwater River. The front garden looked overgrown with huge bushes and brambles when Dumbledore first stopped at the garden gate, but once inside, Hestia's garden was a wonder of herbs, flowers, and vegetables, both magical and mundane surrounded by damson, apricot, figs, hazelnut, pear, plum, sweet horse chestnut, and several varieties of apple trees.

On their third day together, Hestia took Hermione shopping with her to get a bit of fresh air and some burdy roots. The fifth day, Hestia took Hermione to the fish market, and they ate lunch in a wizard-owned café on the waterfront. For Easter, she made small, egg-shaped cakes and gave Hermione some festive crackers, two that had real rabbits in them. On their eighth day together, they went to the Blue Boar Hotel on Silver Street.

The hotel was a charming fifteenth century coaching inn, eccentrically furnished as if straight out of Dickens, full of curiosities and antique pieces, including a nude oil painting over a welcoming brick fireplace. They ate lunch in a pub situated down a crooked corridor, obviously occupied by the wizarding guests of the inn. Afterwards, Hestia led Hermione past a small pub with a brewery to a secret stairway that led to a blue door. Hestia tapped the doorknob with her wand, and the door opened, revealing Enchanter's Way, a street every bit as magical as Diagon Alley. Hestia smiled obligingly when Hermione asked excitedly if they could visit the bookshop.

Hermione found a magical journal in the shop and immediately thought of Severus. Although Professor Snape had made it quite clear that their friendship was over, she felt compelled to buy it for no other reason than to give it to him as a thank you gift for everything he'd done for her. In the stationary shop, she picked out a black swan quill, smiling that it looked so like one he'd use.

She spent several days helping Hestia clear the weeds and fanged ivy from her flowerbeds, and on their thirteenth day, Hestia took Hermione to see a nursery for magical herbs and plants. The next day they dressed as Muggles and went to the Colchester Zoo.

They were following the search for Sirius Black religiously in the *Daily Prophet*. Hestia had known him, describing Sirius Black as a reckless hot-head who liked to cause trouble. His attack on the Potters had frightened Hestia very much, considering how close everyone thought they had been. Hestia was wary of Black, although she believed that the Aurors would eventually catch him. However, Hermione wasn't as confident as she was.

He had been seen in Braemar, Newtonmore, and Aviemore, which Hermione thought was much too close to Hogsmeade. She fervently hoped that Harry was being reasonable while she was away, keeping himself safe from Black. But then she remembered that she'd be returning to the same time she'd left, so she could undo any mistake he'd make, which made her feel better.

Considering what an awful boy he had been as a teen, Hermione felt even more worry for Harry. Black was unscrupulous in her mind, first being the school bully, then murdering his best mate, and now trying to murder Harry... Still, there was very little she could do about it now.

The time seemed to fly, and before she knew it, Fawkes flew into the kitchen with a note from Dumbledore, saying that it was time to go back to school.

When Hestia brought her back to Hogwarts, Dumbledore met Hermione at the gate and exchanged her rucksack for her book bag. With a flick of his hand the rucksack disappeared. "It will be waiting for you in your room," he explained when she gasped in surprise.

He disillusioned her and chatted with her all the way back to the castle about her visit with Hestia, her visit with Severus' teenage self, and her thoughts on transverse time conjunctions and parallel probabilities. Well, he explained his and Mr. Latimer's theories on the time travel theories. She was certain that anyone looking from the windows seeing what looked like the Headmaster talking to himself would surely think him a nutter. He reminded her to remain quiet once they entered the doors.

Forgetting she was invisible, Hermione shrugged and nodded. "Of course, sir," she replied when he'd hesitated.

He led her into the antechamber near the Great Hall and handed her the Time-Turner. "It has been set for you to make a small jump. Precisely three weeks to the day, or so Coronus tells me. I'll be waiting here for you when you arrive, since you have already done so in my time."

Hermione smiled. "Thank you, sir." She activated the Time-Turner. The room around her spun into nothing more than a blur, then slowed to a stop. Dumbledore was sitting across the room in a large over-stuffed armchair, sipping tea.

"Ah, yes, right on time," he stated, setting down the teacup and making Hermione laugh. He walked with her to her Arithmancy class. "You are in your own timeline now, Miss Granger. So there should be no worry of you using the device tomorrow. However, I strongly urge you to refrain from using it for the rest of the day."

"Yes, Professor," she promised and entered the classroom.

After Arithmancy, Hermione spotted Ron and Harry in the corridors with their heads together, obviously checking the map. Hermione rushed up to them, throwing one arm around each of her startled friends and hugged them. "Oh, Merlin I missed you guys!"

"Er, Herm...ouch, that's my foot!" Ron exclaimed as he sputtered her hair from his mouth.

Harry was saying, "Oi, Hermione, it's only...pfft...blimey! It's only been an hour!"

Hermione laughed and hugged them tighter. "I...you have no idea at all, and I love you for it!"

"Girl's gone mental!" Ron said, trying to brush her hair from his face.

She stood back and grinned at them.

"So, can we go to lunch now," Harry said, pointing down the corridor, "unless you're going to strangle us again?"

"Oh, Harry, I...it's... never mind. I'm just exuberantly happy, that's all!" she said, picking her bag up off the floor.

Ron shrugged and began talking to Harry about Slytherin's latest attempted attack on Angelina Johnson. "... She blasted him right through the door! Can you imagine..."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione arrived early that afternoon for Defense. Hermione took her seat, scrutinizing Professor Lupin with a new outlook on the wizard. She just couldn't get past the memory of him just standing by while his friends, Potter and Black, attacked her and Severus, even if they thought she was Mulciber. He'd even moved in to defend his friends, three against two! "Cowards," she mumbled.

Harry was searching through his bag for his homework and looked up at her, startled. "Pardon me?" Harry asked.

"Nothing. Something I remembered from another time," she replied and searched her bag for her own homework, the extra essays that Professor Lupin had given her, one on Dark creatures with incurable infectious bites and the other on nocturnal class level four and five creatures.

Professor Lupin passed by the rows, collecting the essays, Hermione had to try and control the contempt she felt for him. Professor Lupin looked a bit confused by her demeanor when she handed him her papers. Still, once he started lecturing, she focused on the material and not the wizard presenting it. However, when he stopped by her desk, she refused to look up at him. After class, he asked her to remain behind.

"Hermione, I am a little confused by the extra credit you turned in," he asked calmly.

"I don't understand. I did the papers you required of me in my time overlap," she stated, wondering what there was to be confused about. Surely he knew that she'd been sequestered for nineteen days.

He gave her a smile that didn't quite reach his tired eyes. "I asked for a comprehensive overview of all class level four nocturnal creatures. You seem to have written far more than I'd asked for," he said, laying her essays on his desk. "Were you bored?"

She shook her head in confusion. "No, I have my list here..." She pulled out her revision planner and read the list that Professor Snape had given her, reading the Defense assignment aloud.

He chuckled softly. "No, but I have an idea where the extra assignment came from. I'm more than happy to credit you for the work, but I must say, you hardly need it in this class."

"Thank you, Professor," she replied automatically.

His brow wrinkled in confusion. "Miss Granger, is there anything wrong?"

She shook her head. She couldn't tell him anyway, considering he wouldn't remember the incident at all thanks to Severus' Oblivate. "Nothing, just trying to stay abreast of my studies, Professor," she intoned.

He frowned. "You know that you can talk to me about anything, Hermione."

The use of her name startled her. "How could you! You were friends with him...and he turned in Harry's family to You-Know-Who! He even tried to kill Harry!" she said, her voice rising. He just looked at her passively like he had done while Black and Potter had taunted Severus, and she lost her temper with him. "You just stood by and let him attack, and you didn't do anything! Not a thing! You just let him..."

"I assure you, I did no such thing! I searched the castle for him, but he escaped!" Professor Lupin said emphatically, placing both hands on his desk as he rose to face her. "I admit that when I was a student, we were friends. We were in the same house, the same year at school. I didn't have any friends when I came to Hogwarts. I thought I wasn't worthy...Harry's dad, James, and Sirius Black befriended me, no questions asked, even when all the other boys shunned me. But that was twenty years ago!"

Hermione recoiled. His story mimicked hers exactly. *I didn't have any friends either, and the other girls avoided me, but Harry and Ron befriended me after the troll incident...no questions asked. Even though all the other kids in the house...in the school shunned me, Harry and Ron chose to be my friend.* "That still doesn't make up for the way..." She froze. *He didn't know I went back in time to his school years, did he?*

"Doesn't make up for what?" he asked, lowering and leaning his head so he could look her in the eyes.

She looked up at him, her eyes narrowing in suspicion. "Are you friends now?"

He frowned and shook his head. "How can I? He killed Peter Pettigrew and was responsible for the deaths of James and Lily Potter. I haven't forgiven him for that!" His shoulders sagged. "James and Lily were like family to me, more than just best mates. They even secured me in the basement...helped me each month and... I owed them so much."

Hermione watched him carefully. He wasn't lying; he truly regretted the loss of Harry's parents. "I'm sorry, sir. I have to go." She picked up her bag and hitched it up onto her shoulder. "I'm... sorry about accusing you."

He smiled and picked up her essays. "Thank you. Sometimes we have to forgive people their pasts. I hope I can earn yours."

"Thank you, sir," she said and turned to leave.

Hermione walked into Potions, not sure of how Professor Snape would receive her. He walked into the classroom, his robes billowing behind him and waved his hand at the blackboard, making the directions appear. "This is your assignment for today. Please note that the ashwinder eggs say gently whisked, not beaten to a froth. You may proceed."

When Hermione brought her potion sample up to his desk, he said smoothly, "Miss Granger, please come see me in my office at the end of the day."

"Yes, sir," she replied and turned to go.

Hermione entered his office. Professor Snape was grading students' papers and didn't look up as she walked up to his desk and sat down in the chair facing him. She waited patiently for him to acknowledge her.

Finally, he placed his quill in its holder, closed his inkwell, and laced his fingers together as he looked up at her. "Regardless of what I may or may not have taught you in your step back in time, Miss Granger, you will not experiment with your potions in my classroom. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," she replied politely.

"I expect you to follow my directions precisely in the order that I post them on the board and curtail any questions or comments on any directions or ingredient preparation steps to only that which I have indicated for you to do. You will not question me about any alteration or deviation from the given directions," he continued as if she hadn't spoken. "You will not instruct any student in any technique or variance of the directions I provide while under my tutelage."

"Yes, sir," she replied with a nod of her head. "I understand."

He pointed a finger at her and narrowed his eyes. "That goes for Mr. Longbottom, as well as your two friends."

"Yes, Professor," she said, wishing that he hadn't made that stipulation. Neville needed the help in class *But, he'd specifically stated that I wasn't to show anyone what he'd taught me in the past...not that I couldn't tell them what I know from this time.*

"And, under no circumstances, what-so-ever, will you ever call me Severus," he said with another jab with his finger.

"Of course not, sir," she replied in shock. The idea of calling him by his given name was certainly out of the question. She was surprised that he was concerned that she'd show him such little respect.

"You may leave," he said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

Hermione decided that now was as good a time as any to give him her gifts. "Professor?"

"What is it, Miss Granger?" he asked impatiently.

Hermione pulled the carefully wrapped package from her bag. "I wanted to give you this."

"Why?" he asked, startled by the appearance of the gift.

"As a thank you for everything you did for me when I was in your care," she said as she set the journal and quill on his desk.

He stared at the bright wrapping as if not comprehending its existence.

She waited patiently until he gave in and opened the gift.

"The journal is for your potions...the ones you improved upon. I thought that you might like to have a place to write them down," she said and mentally chastised herself for stating the obvious.

He closed his eyes a moment, and a tick showed in his cheek. "I have such a book already."

She bowed her head and reached out to take the book, but he had reached out to take it and her fingers brushed his. She looked up at the unexpected contact.

"Thank you. Your token of gratitude is appreciated," he said softly, his expression softening for a split second, before his body stiffened again. "You may go."

She could tell by the reaction that she'd thrown him off guard with her gifts, and he was... flustered, possibly. She didn't wait for him to open the long, narrow, blue box laying on the journal. She knew he'd like the quill.

Severus still stared at the door after she had gone. He'd done everything he could think of to dissuade the girl from any romantic notions, and she had still given him a gift...two gifts, actually. The journal was bound in magically protected dragon hide, impervious to any potions ingredients, except for acidic dragon bile. He knew that the pages of parchment were of an excellent quality, medium grade, and allowed for any artistic rendering he'd wish to include. The journal would also automatically update the name of his potion entry on the index. The book would even add additional pages if he so desired. It was a very thoughtful gift, more so because she had specified for him to use it to record his own potions.

A long, slender blue box lay on the journal. He ran a finger along the box, detecting only a mild magical signature, nothing threatening. Not that he expected for there to be anything untoward or dangerous coming from Miss Granger. He lifted the lid, and his eyes widened in surprise. An elegant black swan quill lay on a blue satin lining.

Severus fell back in his chair, staring at the quill. His favorite, even if he didn't indulge in their purchase, generally opting for the more practical black goose quills. The quill

alone would have been a sufficient gift.

Her voice echoed in his mind as he sat contemplating the rationale behind her motives, 'A thank you for everything you did for me when I was in your care.'

He could think of no reason or any strings that Miss Granger would expect for such a generous gift. He shouldn't accept it; he should summon a house-elf and have the items returned.

His hand reached out to touch the quill with the lightest of caresses. It was perfect, no separating or irregularity in the smoothness of barbs of the feather. Delicately carved silver gilt accentuated the tip with a pattern of wood-grain-like twists and curves. A wizard's quill. He closed the box and noticed his name, 'Professor Severus T. Snape, Master of Potions,' in silver letters on the journal. *Personally embossed. Hestia must have told the shopkeeper my full name. Miss Granger didn't know my middle initial.*

The chatter and laughter of his next class interrupted his thoughts. He picked up the quill box and journal and placed it at the back of his right hand drawer. "Quiet," he said smoothly, drawing everyone's attention.

Severus turned and glared at Hermione. "Miss Granger, do not hiss directions at Longbottom!" he snapped angrily. She at least had the humility to appear admonished, even if Potter demonstrated his usual audacity and scowled back at him. Nevertheless, she had given her word and had now broken it...again, for the third time this week. "I will expect you back here...tonight! Seven o'clock. Now, do your *own* work."

When Hermione arrived for her detention, Severus had just finished setting up the cauldrons he intended to use on one of the larger worktables. He turned to face her and smirked when he saw she was tying her hair back with a ribbon with her sleeves already rolled up.

"You have an option, Miss Granger," he said as he indicated toward the sink. "You may either scrape and scrub those ingredient jars..."

Hermione turned to look at the pile of jars in the sink and nodded in acknowledgement.

The fact that she was prepared to meet his worst, without argument or complaint, made him smile. Oh, how he'd missed this girl. "Or you may assist me in brewing the Wolfsbane Potion. Your choice," he stated, knowing full well which she'd choose.

She jerked her head back to look at him, obviously not quite sure she'd heard him correctly. She was so easy to read, but then he knew her so well.

"However, if you choose to assist me with the potion, you will be required to return several nights for the next fourteen days until the potion is in its final stage, and you'll be assisting me with other potions as needed by the hospital as time permits between stages."

Hermione somehow managed to suppress her smile. "I would prefer to assist you with the potion...potions, sir."

He nodded and crooked a finger at her. "Drop your things on the table there," he said, pointing at the workstation closest to his desk. "You will bring your essays or revision materials with you each night to fill in the allotted time between steps if Madam Pomfrey has no requests for me. However, I expect you to follow directions without idle chatter and revise quietly so I may grade my papers. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir, perfectly."

~ T. B. C. ~

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Many thanks to my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for helping me clean up my many mistakes and to Pookah for the shoulder and friendly advice. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.



It had been weird reliving Easter for the third time in one year, the first having gone by almost unnoticed with Severus as a teen, the second having been spent with Hestia, and the third with Professor Snape and her friends, although not at the same time. For fun, she'd sent a letter to her mum asking for Muggle food dye to color eggs, a dozen Shocker Lizard and two dozen chicken eggs. Ginny had really enjoyed dying the eggs. They had hardboiled the chicken eggs before coloring them and made small baskets for each of their professors, chicken eggs for the teachers, the Shocker Lizard eggs for Professor Snape. Hermione never told Ginny why Professor Snape got a dozen and each of their professors only two, except for Professor McGonagall who got four. Ginny had assumed that Hermione meant it as a prank. The funny part was the

reactions of her professors and the fact that only Professor Burbage, who taught Muggle Studies, had even heard about the Muggle tradition.

Hagrid had been surprised, asking what kind of bird laid orange and purple eggs. Flitwick had put a stasis charm on the yellow and pink eggs and set them in an enlarged Snidget nest he had and kept it on his desk. Professor McGonagall had been so touched, her eyes had filled with tears, and she'd insisted that the girls have tea with her. Professor Sprout had held the green and blue eggs as if they were precious and later she'd sent each girl a honking daffodil as a thank you.

When the girls had gone to Professor Lupin's office, Hermione had hung back and let Ginny present the eggs. He'd asked Hermione about the tradition of the coloring, but her answers had been brief. Ginny had been confused, but Hermione had only shaken her head and shrugged. Professor Lupin had sighed and nodded, thanked the girls and let them leave. Hermione still didn't know how she felt about him. On one hand, he was an excellent teacher, trying to bring the lessons up to where the students should be academically the best he could, treated everyone equally, and was fair and impartial in his marks. She respected him as a teacher, but now felt uncomfortable around him. Ginny, and most of the other students, liked and respected him.

But, Hermione had been convinced that he was a werewolf the day after Professor Snape had set the essay on them. Hermione had begun to notice that he was always gone the day after a full moon, sometimes only one or two days, but always recuperating from an illness. And he looked haggard the day he'd return to duty. She'd look at him in the Great Hall, noticing changes, like his hand would shake when he drank, his shoulders would be slumped slightly, and he'd improve as the moon waned in the sky.

Unlike her other professors, Professor Snape had been livid when Hermione had taken the basket of shock lizard eggs to his office, thinking that the eggs had come from his stores. He'd almost refused them until he'd discovered that they weren't his and that the dye hadn't effected the eggs at all. Nevertheless, he'd treated the eggs as a prank and had given Hermione detention for a week, which he'd quietly rescinded later when she showed up in his office the next evening. It hadn't mattered to her; it had given her the excuse to report to his classroom every evening without Harry, Ginny, or Ron getting suspicious.

Then there was Sirius Black to worry about. *The Daily Prophet* carried updates of 'Black sightings,' in every issue. Some were farfetched, such as the ones in London or Sussex and Westminster. Hermione was certain that Black would avoid heavily populated areas, but the ones in villages concerned her, especially the ones in Scotland. On one day, he was seen in Lochnagar, two days later in Kildrummy, then Bradenoch Village and Ballater the next, and then sightings three days later near Avelon moor, followed by Braemar. Hermione asked her father for a map of Scotland and marked the sightings using wizarding maps in the library to locate villages not on the Muggle map. In her opinion, some of the sightings were bogus, but too many were close to the mountain range where Hogwarts stood.

She still vividly remembered the attack in the forest and felt absolutely sure that someone who had been such a git in school, such a bully, would certainly have turned to Voldemort's side. But the sightings, the ones that were close, really frightened her, more for Harry's sake than her own.

Now that she was helping Professor Snape brew the Wolfsbane Potion, she wondered what effects the potion had on Professor Lupin and if he was truly as safe as the books indicated that he should be. She took heart in the fact that Professor Dumbledore must have matters well in hand. Hermione was certain that, between the professors and the Headmaster, Professor Lupin was sufficiently secured away each full moon because there hadn't been any werewolf attacks in the *Prophet* and not one student had been injured or disappeared unexpectedly after the full moon. But she still wondered about his friendship with Black and if he still considered Black a friend at all, reasoning that he probably didn't. But, the worry that he might be remained always in the back of her mind.

On the nineteenth of April, the potion began its simmering phase. Three of the potions they had made for the hospital sat on another worktable, two cooling and the other still simmering.

Hermione traced her finger on the annotations Professor Snape had added to the directions of the Wolfsbane Potion. "Sir, why the alterations of the timing?" she asked, hoping that he wouldn't mind the question. He'd been surly ever since she'd given him the small basket of twelve brightly colored eggs.

"Think it out, Miss Granger," he answered as he dipped his quill in his red ink without giving her even a cursory glance.

Hermione bit her lip as she stared at the directions.

"Aloud."

She glanced at the calendar on the wall. His calendar contained the dates of the lunar cycle. "You indicated that you began brewing the base on the third quarter of the moon's phase, waning, and didn't begin adding the primary active ingredients until five days later to coincide with the four nights the moon would be darkest...the new moon."

"Obviously," he said with a slow drawl that she knew meant he was waiting for her answer. "Why?"

"You're using the influence of the decreasing lunar cycle to strengthen the potion's efficacy!" She was stating the obvious again, but from what she'd read about the potion, he had begun too early in the month. "But I thought that the potion had to be started on the night before the new moon and completed by the first quarter?"

"Such has been convention," Professor Snape stated, his tone telling her he expected her to hypothesize why. "However, I adjusted the brewing schedule for a reason."

"Because if... To incorporate the waning phase of the moon rather than the waxing phase. Didn't you say that Professor Lupin stated that he could feel the pull of the moon as the moon waxes?" she asked, knowing that was the reason he'd changed the timing. "As it reaches its zenith, the full moon, so the waxing of the moon has some of the same influence that triggers the transformation that the full moon does, only not as strongly. The waning of the moon, even the first day of the waning moon, puts the infection into remission until the next lunar influence. Therefore if you were to strengthen a potion designed to counteract the influence of the full moon, you'd want to use the influence of the new moon...it's lunar opposite."

"Exactly," Professor Snape said, leaning back in his chair. One side of his mouth stretched back in a half smile that echoed a glint in his eyes. "Lupin must take the potion during the week prior to the full moon for optimum affect. By using the influence of the waning cycle of the moon, I have added the lunar influence that puts the infection into remission. I have also found a way to control the potion so that it has a longer simmering time, thus making the potion stronger. Or so Lupin has stated."

She was so impressed with his discovery. "Others have tried that and failed...miserably! But you solved the..." She looked at the cauldron and back at him. "Are you going to publish your findings, sir?"

"And admit there is a werewolf in Hogwarts for me to experiment on?" he asked, smirking at her.

"Oh, yeah, right," Hermione said as she rolled her eyes at herself for not having considered that fact. "I see your point."

"You may leave, Miss Granger," he said coolly, dipping his quill to resume marking papers.

"Thank you." She admonished herself, thinking, *Oh, my gods, he thinks I don't believe him! I shouldn't have rolled my eyes! He thinks...because of him... not my shortsightedness.* "Professor, I didn't..." she said as she watched him.

He leaned closer to the essay he was grading, the old habit of closing himself off and ignoring her. She waited but he wouldn't meet her gaze. "I'll see you tomorrow then?"

"No, I will not need your assistance until the second of May," he said dismissively.

She sighed as she collected her things. He may be older but apparently he still had a fragile ego when it came to his experiments. "I'll see you in class then, sir."

"Obviously," he replied coolly. "Good night, Miss Granger."

"Good night, sir," she said and walked away, wishing he'd have allowed her to apologize.

Hermione sat with her friends in the chairs by the fire, revising for her Charms exam. It seemed that everyone in the common room was busy revising or working on homework. The fifth- and seventh-years were particularly antsy as of late because of the upcoming O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s.

Hagrid had received notification that Buckbeak's appeal was scheduled for the day after exams, giving him time to hold end-of-term exams for his classes. Hermione was certain that Professor Dumbledore had something to do with the arrangement. It also gave Hermione a few days to revise for her own exams before she would coach Hagrid on the facts she'd given him for the hippogriff's appeal. Hagrid had promised to read the note cards she'd given him every morning and night. She was determined that this time Hagrid would be ready, knowing all the information so well he could quote the cards, even if he dropped them. And she would be there for moral support if he got nervous.

Harry was restless. Yesterday after class, he had sworn that Professor Trelawney had unknowingly made a real prediction, a true prophecy in which she'd said that the Dark Lord would return. Hermione was skeptical. She still thought that Professor Trelawney was a fraud, but Harry was absolutely convinced the seizure-like fit that he said he had witnessed was real and not faked. She wanted him to be wrong, though. She was frightened for Harry, especially having seen firsthand just how mean Sirius Black had been as a teen.

It was also terrifying to think that You-Know-Who could...would come back so soon. They were only third-years! Way too inexperienced to face someone like He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named! And considering that in both their first and second year, You-Know-Who had seemed to make a direct attack on Harry...first in the forest, then in the chamber where Dumbledore had the Mirror of Erised, then the memory-self from the diary setting the Basilisk on him...

Hermione wanted to ask someone about the supposed prophecy, but couldn't think of anyone who'd take her seriously. She was terrified that Sirius Black would give up on trying to kill Harry himself and go seek out his master. And that thought sent chills down her spine. If Professor Trelawney's wonky act wasn't an act for attention but an honest to Merlin real prediction, she really did need to talk to a professor. But which one?

As far as she knew, Professor McGonagall had as low of an opinion of Professor Trelawney as she did, Professor Snape would simply dismiss the idea as wooly, and she didn't know the Headmaster well enough to seek him out. She supposed she could ask Professor Lupin, but Hermione didn't exactly trust him in that regard. Even Professor Snape was suspicious of Professor Lupin. Considering he'd been suspicious of Professor Quirrell her first year, and he'd been proven right in his suspicions, Hermione was going to trust in him in this as well.

She looked over at Ron and smiled. He was industriously reading several books on hippogriffs, knowing as she did that they would be on Hagrid's exam. Harry on the other hand was scratching his head as he worked on his crystal ball assignment. Oh, yes, she was so glad that she'd dumped Divination. She would only get eleven O.W.L.s, but that was all right in her book. She closed her Charms book and switched to revising for Alchemy.

Hermione threw the cloak over Harry and Ron as Hagrid leaned against his door. "One minute, there. I, er, that is Fang he, er..."

"Threw up on your pants," Hermione hissed, peeking out at the men who had come to talk to Hagrid about Buckbeak. Hermione was incensed. Mr. Macnair had brought a huge axe to the appeal, which could only mean that Fudge was going to have Buckbeak killed regardless of what was said for Buckbeak's appeal. It was so unfair!

Hagrid looked puzzled for a minute, then repeated what she'd suggested.

"Good one, Hermione!" Ron whispered, barely able to keep from laughing. He was holding onto Scabbers with both hands ever since Hermione had found him hiding in Hagrid's milk jug. However, Scabbers was restless, struggling to be let free.

'Out, out,' Hagrid mouthed, waving them for his back door. Harry grabbed Ron's sleeve and pushed at Hermione, indicating that they hurry, and Hagrid called out, "One more minute, Dumbledore, sir."

They scrambled down the stairs to Hagrid's garden and crouched behind the pumpkins. "Merlin, that was close," Ron sighed as he struggled with Scabbers, who was refusing to stay in his pocket.

Hermione drew her wand and aimed at the squiggling rat. "*Revinxi*," she hissed, making strings lash out and restrain Scabbers. "That should hold him."

"Thanks," he replied.

"Hush, Ron!" Hermione turned quickly, thinking she saw a flash of pink from the corner of her eye. "Someone's... I thought I saw... Something's wrong," she whispered. "We have to go!"

Ron was looking at the edge of the tree line. "What did you see? Malfoy?"

"Hagrid's got them in the house now," Harry said, making sure that the cloak covered most of them. "Let's get Buckbeak."

"No," Hermione snapped, answering both guys. She grasped Harry's arm. "We can't, Harry! Minister Fudge, Mr. Macnair, and that other Ministry wizard have yet to hear Hagrid's appeal. If we take him, Hagrid will get in trouble. Besides, Dumbledore will make them see reason." It was hopeful thinking, not that she believed it herself, but there was nothing to be done. It seemed to her that the Minister had apparently already made up his mind, and an innocent creature was going to be killed. She thought about using her Time-Turner to turn back the clock and free the hippogriff, but with Dumbledore inside Hagrid's hut it was really too risky.

As they made their way up to the castle, Crookshanks appeared, hissing and clawing at Ron's trouser legs. Scabbers started to go berserk, squealing and gnawing at the strings that bound him. Ron tried to quiet Scabbers but the rat bit him, which gave Scabbers an opportunity to escape. Crookshanks chased after Scabbers. Ron ran after both of them with Hermione and Harry in pursuit. However, Ron, being taller, was faster and chased the cat and rat all the way to the Whomping willow. Suddenly, from out of nowhere, a big black dog appeared, grabbed hold of Ron's leg and dragged Ron into a hole under the Whomping Willow.

Hermione screamed just as a huge branch crashed into the ground in front of her, some of the smaller branches striking her like whips. Ignoring the pain of their stings, Hermione lunged after Ron as Harry dodged another branch. Desperate to get to Ron, Hermione tried again and again to reach the hole.

"There has to be another way!" Harry shouted as he was thrown off his feet by the Willow.

"*Immobulus*!" Hermione shouted, aiming her wand at the tree. Several of the branches stilled, but not the entire tree.

"Well, that helps," Harry said, trying to dive for the hole again.

Crookshanks appeared from the hole, pressed his paws on the trunk, and stopped the tree from attacking Harry and Hermione. "Oh, clever, Crookshanks!" Hermione cried out, rushing up to her cat.

However, Crookshanks was too quick for her. "Werrowerrr," he said with a flick his tail and dove back into the hole.

They followed the cat down and through a tunnel to emerge into a dilapidated room with boarded up windows, a broken sofa, and stairs. "We're... Harry, this has to be the Shrieking Shack! We're outside the castle...in Hogsmeade!"

"Hermione, the dust... Ron was dragged upstairs!" Harry hissed, scrambling after Ron.

"Harry, wait!" Hermione tried to warn him, but he was already climbing to his feet.

"Give him to me," a gruff voice sneered ahead of them.

"Geroff me!" Ron shouted back at his attacker.

Hermione tightened her grip on her wand. "Harry, stun first, okay?" she whispered. "If it's Black in there, I'm hoping that he doesn't have a wand. I'll try and stun the dog."

Harry nodded. The way her heart was pounding, she was amazed that he'd heard her. Harry kicked the door open and bounded inside, yelling, *Expelliarmus*, as he went in with Hermione right on his heels. The scene in the room was like a nightmare.

It was a bedroom, and Ron was sprawled on the bed, clutching Scabbers to his chest. Sirius Black, dirty and mangy-looking, was pointing Ron's wand at her. The second thing that registered in quick procession was that Harry had been frozen on his feet. Even frozen in a Body-Bind, Harry looked murderous. She reversed the spell only a second before Black disarmed her. Harry lunged forward as Hermione grabbed a loose board and swung at Black, hitting him in the thigh.

"It's him...Black! He's the dog! He's the dog that's been following you!" Ron was shouting, and Sirius Black's eyes narrowed. "He's the Grim, Harry...an Animagus!"

Harry dove for the wand in Black's hands when his attention wavered, knocking Black to his knees, making him drop Ron's wand. Hermione swung again, catching Black on the shoulder. Between Hermione and Harry, they managed to overpower Black.

"Hermione, I've got him!" Harry shouted, holding out her wand to her to make her stop hitting him. "Take it."

She snatched her wand as she dropped the board, aiming for Black's chest. But Crookshanks jumped up on Black's chest, his fur standing up on end, making him look twice his size. "Crookshanks, get away!" she cried, not able to bring herself to hurt her cat. Harry tossed Ron his wand.

"Hermione, wait!" Professor Lupin cried, bursting into the room and grasping her arm.

She struggled against him, kicking and trying to swing her arms out of his fierce grip. "But he's..."

"He's not!" Professor Lupin shouted. "Trust me."

"No," she snarled, wanting nothing more than to defend her friends against Black.

Harry was still pointing his wand at Sirius Black, who was laughing maniacally at Harry. Hermione assumed that the reason Harry was not firing a curse at Black was because Crookshanks was facing Harry with his fur fluffed out, hissing, and his back arched defiantly to protect the older man.

"You! You told me that you *were* on his side!" she snarled accusingly at Professor Lupin.

"I'm not...wasn't! Hermione, Pettigrew *is* alive," Professor Lupin shouted, gripping both her arms from behind.

Harry turned slightly. "He's not! He's dead," Harry shouted angrily and pointed at Black. *He* killed him! He's the reason my parents are *dead!*"

Hermione struggled against Professor Lupin, even trying to kick him in the shins, but he held fast. "You told me you saw him on the map, Harry! The map *never* lies!" Lupin said through gritted teeth when she managed to slam her foot down on his toe.

"He's here, Remus," Black said, pointing at Ron. "Right here, let me..."

"No!" Hermione and Harry shouted. Bedlam broke out, everyone yelling at once. Ron calling Black crazy, Harry accusing Professor Lupin of being mad and that Black had to die. Professor Lupin insisted that Sirius Black was innocent and that Pettigrew was somewhere in the room.

Scabbers bit Ron's hand again. "Ouch, stop that, you mangy ol' rat!" Ron cried. Scabbers nearly broke free, but Ron caught him again.

From where Hermione was it looked like the rat had bit him a few times.

"See, Remus, see! It's him! It's Pettigrew!" Black cried as he tried to scramble to his feet.

"I see him," Professor Lupin responded. "Harry, you yourself told me you saw Peter Pettigrew on the map, remember? Peter is an Animagus, just like Sirius! Listen to me. I can prove this."

"Scabbers is an Animagus?" Harry asked, lowering his wand a fraction. "Show me."

"Meet Peter Pettigrew," Professor Lupin said, finally letting Hermione go and aiming his wand at Scabbers just as the door burst open.

"Lupin," Severus snarled and aimed his wand at Black. "Figures I'd find you here with him."

Professor Lupin turned slightly to look at Professor Snape from the corner of his eye, not wanting to take his eyes off Scabbers.

Hermione tried to tell him what was happening. "Severus, no, it's..."

"You stay out of this," he snarled at Hermione.

"*HE'S PETTIGREW!*" Harry shouted.

"Potter, you are in no position..." Professor Snape started to say, when Scabbers bit Ron again, and Ron let go.

Professor Lupin fired a spell at the rat. Black lunged for the rat as Professor Snape tried to fire a spell at Black, but missed. Hermione tried to stun Black, and missed as well. Scabbers dodged Black as he lunged again to try and catch him. Snape's spell missed again, rebounding on the wall as Lupin tried to disarm Professor Snape. Hermione screamed and tried to stop Severus from casting anymore spells, but he pushed her away, which made her trip and stumble. Harry turned and fired a spell at Professor Snape as Scabbers ran for the door. Hermione tried to stun the rat, the same time Professor Lupin did. Ron also sent a Stunner from the bed, but at whom, Hermione couldn't tell. Severus aimed his wand at Lupin as Harry took aim at Professor Snape. Severus' spell hit Lupin in the chest. Professor Lupin's spell managed to stun the rat. But Hermione's spell collided with Ron's, absorbing some of its magic as it rebounded, hitting Professor Snape the same time that Harry's spell did. Professor Snape flew back into the wall with a loud crunching sound and crumpled in the floor. And Black crumpled to the floor as well.

"Oh, my gods, we hit a teacher!" Hermione gasped, rushing to check Professor Snape.

"Harry, did you get Scabbers?" Ron asked.

"I hit Snape," Harry replied, releasing the spell on Professor Lupin and turning to face Ron. "You?"

"I got Black."

"I stunned Pettigrew, I think," Professor Lupin stated, looking under a broken chair.

Hermione was only half listening as she tried to roll Professor Snape onto his back. She could hear a crunching noise that sounded horrible. "We broke his ribs!"

"Good," Harry replied as he aimed his wand at Professor Lupin's face. "You better be right," he snarled.

Lupin released Black and flicked his wand at Scabbers before Harry could protest. Hermione looked up as Scabbers took human form, gawking at the man lying beside her. He resembled Pettigrew from the articles she'd read about Sirius Black and his infamous attack. Suddenly, remembering all the times she'd held Ron's pet in her lap and stroked his fur made her feel sick. "Pervert," she sneered at him, narrowing her eyes when he leered at her.

"But that's not possible," Ron said, in shock. "I've had him for ages! He was my brother Percy's rat..."

Sirius Black sat back on his heels. "I've been following him all year, Remus. I had to...I needed...he'd have..."

"Why don't we all sit down and then you can explain. I think Harry deserves to know the truth," Professor Lupin said as he made a quick assessment of Professor Snape and forced a purple potion down his throat. "A basic healing potion. He'll be fine for now. Madam Pomfrey will have him fixed up in no time."

The story was insane but it all made sense. After a great deal of arguing and shouting, Hermione had learned that Pettigrew had faked his death after he'd informed Voldemort to the whereabouts of the Potters. Black had seen Pettigrew in an issue of the *Daily Prophet*. He'd escaped Azkaban by turning into a dog, going to the top of the prison and Apparating for home. Once there, he'd set out to find Peter. Professor Lupin had then explained to Harry that there were places in the castle not on the map, although not many, mostly places they didn't know about or never used as students. Therefore, Sirius, having known more about the castle and grounds than the average student, and all of the teachers, had been able to move about the castle easily enough without getting caught, even as a huge, black dog.

Professor Snape, while injured, wasn't as bad off as Hermione had first suspected. The splintering sound had been nothing more than pieces of old wood under his back. Professor Lupin had bound Pettigrew, only after Harry had insisted that Black not kill him. Black had reluctantly agreed to turn Peter in instead to clear his name. With Professor Lupin's help, Hermione had used an old, broken chair to make a crude stretcher to carry Professor Snape to the castle.

The problems started after they had emerged from the tunnel. Crookshanks had hit the knot that immobilized the Whomping Willow so they could get out safely. However, in the excitement to reach Harry in time, Professor Lupin had forgotten his potion. As Professor Lupin had pushed Professor Snape out of the tunnel and then scrambled out himself, the moonlight had illuminated his skin. He turned his face to the full moon and his eyes immediately changed. He'd dropped his wand, which Ron had tried to snatch up but Pettigrew had managed to take away from him before Hermione could intervene. Sirius Black had tried to reason with Lupin, but the transformation had already begun. Harry had finally realized that Pettigrew had Ron's wand, and he'd tried to disarm him, but Pettigrew had turned into his rat form and escaped.

That was when Professor Snape woke. He quickly scrambled to his feet, swearing, still moving awkwardly as if woozy, but determined to shield Hermione, Harry, and Ron from Professor Lupin. "We have to hide, to... to..." Professor Snape backed up, still shaky on his legs, his arms outstretched, pushing Hermione and Ron with him, instead of drawing his wand. "Go back, he's turning," Professor Snape warned, stating the obvious.

Hermione could see Black, now back in his dog form, as he tried to wrestle the transforming werewolf away from the humans. "But where to?" she tried to ask, fear making her words stick in her throat.

"The way we came?" Ron asked incredulously, clearly terrified. "But he can get in there!"

Black bit Professor Lupin and turned to run, his actions apparently successful in making Professor Lupin, now fully transformed, charge after him instead of the other humans. Severus tried to turn, to corral Hermione, Ron, and Harry into leaving, but Harry went chasing after Sirius Black and Professor Lupin instead.

"Potter, you idiot boy, get back here," Professor Snape hissed, not wanting to shout in case the werewolf turned back on them.

Hermione tried to go, too, but Professor Snape grabbed her arm. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I have to help Harry," she said, trying to break his grip and run after her friend.

"Are you insane?" Snape snarled, staggering slightly but maintaining an iron grip on her arm. "You'll do no such thing. Help Mr. Weasley, if you must help anyone." He jerked on her arm, making her stumble to her knees.

Hurt by his roughness, Hermione turned to kneel by Ron's leg and tried to transform some leaves into cloth to make a bandage.

Professor Snape cast a Patronus, but all Hermione saw of it was a four-legged creature shooting for the castle. "Now the Headmaster will be aware," he said smoothly. "You're coming with me." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, wrapped it around the bite wounds, and then magically bound Ron's leg with twigs and bindings.

Professor Snape refused to talk to Hermione all the way up to the hospital wing, still holding onto her with an iron grip. Once there, he dumped her unceremoniously on a cot and leaned over her. "You will be here when I return, is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor," she said, slumping down on a cot.

He turned, his robes flaring out dramatically, and limped from the room, leaving her and Ron in Madam Pomfrey's care without a backward glance.

It had seemed to take forever, but Professor Snape finally returned with the Headmaster, although they were carrying Harry between them on a stretcher. After leaving Harry on the bed beside her, the two wizards argued softly by the door as Madam Pomfrey checked Harry over. Dumbledore and Professor Snape turned to greet the Minister of Magic when he arrived, the same time that Harry woke up. Madam Pomfrey gave Harry a chocolate bar, but Harry refused it and scrambled from his bed when he heard that Sirius Black would be given the Dementor's Kiss. He tried in vain to convince the Headmaster, Professor Snape, and the Minister of Magic that they had the wrong guy. Hermione even tried to tell them as well, but Professor Snape and the Minister wouldn't listen to either of them. The Minister was only listening to Professor Snape's version, and he hadn't seen Pettigrew!

Suddenly in a swirl of robes, Professor Snape turned and snarled at her, "Miss Granger, HOLD YOUR TONGUE!"

"Now, Professor Snape, she's only a child," the Minister said in a condescending voice, "we must make allowances."

Dumbledore tried to gain control of the situation, but the Minister remained unyielding, and Professor Snape was equally adamant that Black get what was 'his due,' even reminding the Headmaster that Black had tried to kill him before. Finally Professor Snape and the Minister left the hospital.

Hermione knew by the way Professor Snape had glanced at her before he'd closed the door that he was furious at her. Shrugging her worry about Professor Snape aside, she turned to Dumbledore. "Headmaster, please, you have to believe us!" she tried pleading as she and Harry continued to try and tell him everything.

Then of all the bizarre things, the Headmaster actually gave a veiled instruction to Hermione to use the Time-Turner to save not only Sirius Black, but Buckbeak as well.

Severus was fuming mad at Hermione for attacking him, even more so for using her Time-Turner to free the criminal Black. He expected such insolence from Potter, but she had indicated that she wanted to continue a more affable relationship with him. He'd even begun to relent and relax around her during their private time together. But then she'd had the gall to attack him. *Me! and all I'd been doing was trying to save her bloody life. Ungrateful swot!* He sat in his chair in front of the fire, drinking a reasonably priced brandy. After all of this camaraderie that had been built between them, just as he was starting to trust her; she still had the audacity to attack him, when all he had been doing was trying to defend her and her bloody friends. *Insufferable wench.*

She'd been down to see him...or to try to see him, several times, but he'd slammed the door in her face when she'd started to try and validate her reasoning. He hadn't wanted to hear it. He had to tolerate her in class, but he'd be damned if he'd entertain her excuses.

He sipped on the warm liquid and stared at the fire. Nevertheless, its warm heat sliding down his throat did nothing to relax him. Not tonight. Not last night. Not any night since the night Black had escaped, and not any night after that he'd had to suffer her presence either in class or her intrusion to his office. *Her actions cost me an Order of Merlin, for an augury's wail!* he sneered venomously to himself. *That insolent chit! After everything...and she turned on me!* At least Lupin had peacefully resigned.

He held up the glass, staring at the dark amber liquid. The reflection of the fire on the alcohol only reminded him of her eyes, those softly imploring, doe-like eyes that used to...

He lowered his arm. He refused to allow his mind to wander in that direction. She had, just as Lily had, turned on him. He downed the last of the brandy and stared at the flames. *At least I don't have to make that werewolf's potion anymore.*

He set the glass down and picked up his journal...the journal Hermione had given him. He'd copied all his revised versions of the potions in its pages from his *Advanced Potions Making* and his copy of Lehniger's *Advanced Brewing of Magical Potions*. He'd even entertained the thought of sending it for publication, but so far other obligations had prevented that from happening. Maybe over the summer hols he'd consider...

Severus tossed the offending book on the coffee table in front of him.

Suddenly, the fire turned green and the headmaster's face appeared. "Severus, I received your note; however, I cannot concur."

"What don't you *concur* about, Headmaster?" Severus said angrily, already assuming what would follow.

There was a pause before Dumbledore replied. "I would consider it a personal favor if you'd reconsider your decision regarding the potion."

He knew it! "No." He turned his head to look at the bookshelf instead of the face in the flames.

"Severus, it's necessary."

"The students are no longer in jeopardy."

"Remus will be a valuable asset to the Order when the time comes," Dumbledore replied, his tone pleading. "The prophecy that Harry informed me about, the one Sybill made, I believe it has come to pass."

"Damn this vow of ours."

"We will need him, Severus. I will need him."

Severus stared unwavering at Dumbledore's face. "Of course, Headmaster. Whatever you wish," he said coolly.

Dumbledore sighed, spreading ashes on his hearth and making the flames flicker. "Thank you. I shan't bother you any more tonight. Sleep well, my son."

"I hate it when you call me, son," he grumbled, but the Headmaster had already ended the connection.

~ T. B. C. ~

Author's Notes:

Yes, I changed a few things, paraphrased and condensed the events and dialogue that took place in the Shrieking Shack and the hospital wing. An asterisk denotes what is a direct quote or copied from the book. I didn't want to rehash it completely, but it was necessary to have some of it in the story. Forgive me.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this to point out my numerous errors and help me make this presentable for reading. You're the best, thank you!

And to Jay, thank you for my lovely banner. Hugs~



Severus couldn't believe the idiocy of the Ministry of Magic. Even after the Death Eater 'demonstration' at the Quidditch World Cup, Fudge still pressed forward with the Triwizard Tournament and Dumbledore allowed it! At least Dumbledore had the forethought to restrict attendance to the school and hire an ex-Auror for the post of Defense, even if it was Alastor Moody. But Dumbledore refused to impose a tighter curfew or allow Filch to use sensory and detection probes on all the guests and Ministry personnel. *What did they think? That the Death Eaters' demonstration after the game had been merely for show...as part of the entertainment?* Something was up, stirring in the background, and Severus wasn't sure who was behind it.

He looked over to where Miss Granger sat between Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley and their house ghost, laughing. But when the food arrived, Miss Granger looked upset. He couldn't fathom why. The two boys seemed unperturbed. He shook his head. Her emotional state was not his concern. He wished his only concern for the year were the extra potions Madam Pomfrey would require because of this blasted tournament.

Miss Granger sipped on her juice and set the goblet down gently as she conversed with that idiot Weasley. As usual, her manners were impeccable, considering she was surrounded by uncouth imbeciles stuffing their faces. Weasley was jabbing his fork at her, his mouth full of half-masticated food as he responded. Severus turned his head to observe what his Slytherins were up to. What he'd had with Miss Granger was in the past and best forgotten.

He had other concerns this year to deal with. Little Walter Waters and Eugene Coulters, both half-bloods...or less according to some, had been sorted into his house. As was the Lestrangle girl, Brynhilda. *That is a problem I didn't want this year.* So far, the other students were too busy catching up with friends to bother the boys, and Miss Lestrangle seemed to be talking amicably with the other first-year girls. *Maybe she won't take after her three infamous relatives.*

He turned to Aurora Sinistra and asked her how her summer went.

For Hermione the year was starting out the usual way, full of surprises, and not all of them were good ones. At the Sorting Feast, she'd found out that Hogwarts had slaves, house-elves enslaved to do all the cleaning and cooking for the entire school, and that still irritated her. Plus Hagrid had found some disgusting, stinging, fire-shooting things he called Blast-Ended Skrewts that was to be their Care of Magical Creatures project for an undetermined length of time. She liked Hagrid, but she'd been hoping to be introduced to nicer creatures this year such as Augureys, Diricawls, Unicorns, Centaurs or at least something with fur.

And if that wasn't enough, Professor Snape was back to his scathing, snarky self. Although scary to look at, Professor Moody certainly was an interesting bloke. Hermione still smiled when she remembered seeing him turn Malfoy into a ferret. And his lessons! Hermione was quite apprehensive about his curriculum considering he'd started the year teaching them about the Unforgivables. Seeing even the Imperius used on class members still gave her the chills, although she and Harry had finally learned how to throw it off.

Then there was this tournament, the Triwizard Tournament, to look forward to. Only, Hermione was rather anxious about the whole thing, now that Harry was a champion. The night the champions had been announced, Harry had looked so scared, and when he'd returned to the common room, he had been so down, really quite withdrawn, and escaped to his room quickly, well as quickly as he could. To make matters worse, now even Ron wasn't speaking to him.

Hermione was so angry with Ron. Sure, Ron had been excited to see Viktor Krum, and he was completely besotted with Fleur Delacour, but his jealousy toward Harry was affecting both of their concentration. Harry had been so unfocused in Charms, he'd been completely incapable of learning the Summoning Charm.

When she and Harry arrived outside Professor Snape's classroom, Malfoy and his Slytherin friends were taunting Harry and flashing some ridiculous badges. "Oh, very *funny*," Hermione said sarcastically to Pansy and her friends* who were puffing out their chests and making the badges change and flash. "*Very witty*."

She tried to block out Malfoy's taunting and keep Harry focused on their conversation, but Malfoy was winning. "Harry, the badges are not at all funny...simply another way to tease you," she said, touching his arm. "You've had to deal with their taunting for years... Do you hear me?"

But Harry's face contorted in anger.

"Harry!" she tried to warn him the moment she saw him pull his wand. Draco had his out, and the students were scrambling to move out of the way. "Harry, no!"

But her cry was overshadowed by Harry yelling, "*Furnunculus!*" the same time Malfoy shouted, "*Densaugo!*"

In an instant her vision was blurred as the spell that Malfoy cast collided with Harry's, Malfoy's hitting Hermione full in the face. She reeled back, almost losing her balance except someone had shoved her back upright. "Hermione!" she heard Ron cry, but the ringing in her ears made everything around her drown out, and there was a tremendous sharp pain in her mouth, which was making her eyes water. Hermione touched her mouth and gasped. Her front two teeth were growing, stretching down over her lower lip. She let out a startled cry. *I don't know the counter-curse for Densaugo!* It didn't matter; she wouldn't have been able to say it anyway because her teeth were now touching her chin.

Suddenly Professor Snape had arrived, and she felt a sense of relief. Surely he'd put things straight. The buzzing in her ears was subsiding, and she could hear him saying, "... hospital wing, Goyle."

"Malfoy got Hermione!" Ron said accusingly and yanked Hermione's arms down, forcing her to show her teeth to Professor Snape. He'd hardly needed to in her opinion since they were now practically down to her collar. The Slytherins were all gaping at her, pointing and laughing. Lavender and Parvati were laughing as well. Only the guys looked at her sympathetically.

Professor Snape was staring down at her with a hard cold expression. "I see no difference."

Hermione choked back a sob at his cruelty, turned around and ran away. She couldn't believe him! How could he not see she was in trouble? Tears streamed down her face, and she was drooling uncontrollably, but she managed to make it to the hospital wing without tripping on the stairs she could barely see.

"Miss Granger, have a seat right over there," Madam Pomfrey suggested kindly, pointing to an empty cot. She pulled a curtain around the bed of the student she'd been helping and walked over to her. "Tsk, tsk, nothing to do until they stop growing, I'm afraid."

Hermione watched in horror as Madam Pomfrey pulled a syringe with an impossibly thick needle from her pocket and filled it up with a purple potion. "Tip your head back, Miss Granger. I'll just squirt this Pain Potion into your mouth. You won't be able to use a cup I'm afraid."

Hermione did as she was told, indicating with her hand when she needed to swallow. Madam Pomfrey even squirted some of the potion on her gums, which helped a little. Once the pain lessened, Hermione changed into the pajamas and crawled into bed. It seemed to take hours, and she must have dozed off because when she opened her eyes, Madam Pomfrey was setting a tray beside her bed.

"Now, let's see about those teeth." She gave Hermione a mirror and instructed her to tell her when they looked normal.

Hermione gasped when she realized that her teeth had nearly reached her navel. She watched in fascination as her engorged teeth began to shrink. When they did look normal, she looked imploringly up at Madam Pomfrey. "Almost, but a bit smaller," she fudged hopefully. Madam Pomfrey smiled and nodded, and Hermione allowed the Healer to make her teeth look perfect, straight and even, as if she'd had braces for years. As Hermione admired her new smile, Madam Pomfrey carefully placed the tray across her lap.

"It's a heavy meat broth and bread, Miss Granger," the kindly matron said. "Soak the bread and try to swallow it. I don't want you chewing."

Hermione tried her best not to chew. The broth had mashed peas and potatoes in it that went down easily enough, and the bread was so fresh it had melted in her mouth once it had been saturated with the broth.

She had just finished when Professor Snape stepped through the curtain. "I came to see how your teeth are."

"They're fine," she said waspishly, setting down her spoon.

He levitated her tray to her bedside table with a slow wave of his hand. "I was rude to you in the corridor, Miss Granger," he said softly.

It wasn't an apology, but at least it was an admission. "Yes, sir."

"Show me, please."

His request startled her, but she crossed her arms and bared her teeth with a forced smile.

"I see you've decided to improve them," he said after she closed her mouth.

His coolness toward her was unsettling. "I didn't see why not," she replied petulantly.

"Your smile was fine the way it was," he said offhandedly.

She looked up at him, amazed and a little hurt. *Why is he being so obtuse about it? They were awful. I was always teased about being a beaver...*

He looked directly at her. "Not your best feature...but you."

His face had the familiar mask of indifference he generally wore, only now that she knew him...or at least his younger self...she noticed that there seemed to be a bit of sadness to his tone. She stared at him in disbelief. *A compliment...was that almost a compliment?*

"I brought you a mouth wash. Not a Muggle mouthwash, this potion will actually clean your teeth while strengthening them," he said, handing her a bottle with a small cup over the stopper. "You are to use this for a week...and only for a week. The restoration can sometimes dull your teeth; however, I added something to help whiten them. Do not drink tea or pumpkin juice for the week you use this and the week after, only water. I recall that you normally use a toothbrush and paste?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, holding the bottle with both hands.

"Don't," he said firmly. "Your teeth need to set. Brushing and flossing could make them move. No solid foods for a week. You'll be given porridge for breakfast and special soups and stews for lunch and dinner that you can easily swallow."

Great! I'm causing more work for Hogwarts' slave labor. "Thank you, sir."

He pulled two books from his pocket. "My lecture this week was taken from these two sources. If you read them, you should not fall behind in class. When you are released, you will spend one night a week catching up on the potions you will have missed. These evenings will not, however, be recorded as detentions."

She looked up at him, then at the books and back to his face. "Thank you, sir," she said as she took the books.

He nodded once. "Good night, Miss Granger."

"Good night, sir. And thank you for these and my mouth wash."

He simply inclined his head, turned and walked away.

Severus mulled over the conversation he'd had in the Headmaster's office and wanted to throw something flammable into the fire.

"Dragons? Get an egg away from a nesting female dragon. Have you completely lost your mind?" Severus scoffed at Dumbledore. "You cannot allow dragons on the school grounds; they are dangerous! And once the word gets around that they are here, the students' curiosity could put them at risk."

"Severus, this is not helping matters," Dumbledore said. "Now, I happen to know that Miss Granger will undoubtedly assist Harry in preparing for the task."

Minerva looked ashen. "But he's only a little boy!"

"A little boy that seems to get into every conceivable kind of mischief that he possibly can," Severus sneered, furious that he'd have to find a way to ensure Potter's survival or suffer from that damnable vow. "And how exactly is Miss Granger going to help him prepare for dealing with a fully grown dragon...a nesting female at that?"

Dumbledore smiled benignly. "I'm sure between the two of them they will come up with something. If not, a minor nudge may be in order."

Severus' scowl deepened at the Headmaster's suggested implication and Minerva gasped, her eyes wide behind her spectacles.

"Oh, Minerva don't look at me like that. I'm not suggesting we help the boy cheat; only that we make sure that we situate ourselves strategically in the stands so as to assist him if he gets into trouble." He turned to look at Moody. "Alastor, keep an eye on him for me."

"Oh, I can do that, Albus," Moody replied with a crooked, half-smile...smirk that morphed his scarred face grotesquely and a glint in his eye that gave Severus pause.

That smile still gave Severus the creeps. He'd seen that smile thirteen years ago when Moody had cornered him that November night when Severus had sought out Dumbledore the second time. The night he'd made that thrice damned vow.

Severus stormed into his office and over to his shelves, searching through the contents for anything to aid Potter against a dragon. Finding nothing, he turned to the storeroom, however, even his private stores turned up nothing practical. He mulled over the possibilities as he searched each shelf. A few poisons were strong enough to incapacitate a dragon if it was given in a large enough dose, but he didn't have any on hand. He could make a Neuromuscular-Paralyzing Potion or the Oropharynx-Asphyxia Potion, even a strong enough variation of the Draught of Living Death... but in order for them to be effective, Potter would have to administer the potions to the dragon.

So unless the dragon was sleeping, which would be highly unlikely, or was going to eat something drenched in...*Bugger! The judges would have to believe that Potter had brewed them... No. I don't have anything the boy could use, except the Felix Felicis concoction*, he thought as he picked up the vial and then set it back with a snort. *Which is illegal to use in competitions and its use would be discovered.*

He scowled. There was nothing practical to give to Potter. Even the Fire-Protection Potion was of no use against fiery dragon's breath and a Strengthening Solution was impractical unless Severus knew how Potter planned to do the task.

Severus scoffed at the train of thought. *Strength...Potter! Ha! Potter will not tackle or wrestle the dragon nor face it with a sword and shield.* He turned heel and strode to his rooms to search his personal library.

He looked around, scanning his books, one after another, and found nothing that Potter could use...well, nothing within his range of abilities that was of any use against a fully mature female dragon. Potter was a mediocre fourth-year at best. There were some spells and some Dark Arts that could be used against a dragon by a powerful wizard, such as himself or Dumbledore, but they were way beyond Potter's abilities. Severus snapped the book in his hands closed and put it back.

After several hours, he poured himself a generous amount of elfin-made Barbados rum. He sat on his sofa, staring into the fire, trying to fathom a way around this problem. *Dragons. Take an egg away... They are truly mad!* He was worried for Potter, but only because of his feeling of responsibility to help keep the boy alive...his vow to Dumbledore. "How am I supposed to keep that idiot boy alive if he has to face dragons?!" he snarled. *It takes at least seven to a dozen trained dragon keepers to control an angry nesting dragon. How is this boy going to accomplish this task?* He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes.

Miss Granger. Of course. He would search all the books in the Restricted Section if he had to, to find some way for that idiot boy to survive this task. *But when I do find something, how am I to give it to her? A house-elf...they are obliged to tell the Headmaster the truth, and I can't simply hand it to her.* He sighed, mentally kicking himself at the only logical choice. *A detention, naturally. I'll further sully her academic record for my own purposes. Oh, bullocks, if she helps keep the boy alive throughout this tournament, I'll give her bloody bonus points on her exams,* he mentally snarled as he downed his drink and rose to go to the library.

"So! All I'll have to do is put on my Dad's cloak and make my way to the nest," Harry said enthusiastically. "The dragon won't even see me."

Hermione cringed. "I dunno, Harry, that seems far too easy. I mean, if all you had to do was be invisible then this task wouldn't be such a challenge."

"It's the best answer..." he started to say but trailed off as the corridor became crowded.

"Harry, dragon poaching is practically unheard of because they are so dangerous. I'm certain that if all you had to do was be invisible..." She stopped when Harry grabbed her arm as a door to a classroom opened and students began to swarm into the corridor. "I just think it might be too risky."

"But we've used it before. It's a really good invisibility cloak," Harry stated, clearly having made up his mind.

Hermione saw Ron stop ahead of them to tie his trainer and turned to Harry, hoping to encourage him to talk to Ron, but Harry had turned down another corridor, leaving her alone. Sighing, she opted to follow him instead of going to the common room. She'd only taken a few steps when a hand clamped down on her shoulder to stop her. She whirled around to face her attacker and found herself confronted by Professor Snape.

"A moment, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said softly, drawing her forcibly aside. "Being invisible won't help Mr. Potter. Dragons can sense wizards under the Disillusionment Charm because they can sense the magical signature with their tongues," he said so softly she barely heard him. He turned abruptly before she could say anything, his robes swishing across her legs, and walked away.

Hermione watched him leave, his robes billowing behind him as the students parted to let him pass, stunned by his revelation. She quickly turned to go find Harry, hoping he'd believe her and wondering how she'd convince him of this information without mentioning that it had come from Professor Snape.

Hermione was concerned. Neville hadn't shown up for Herbology, and today they had been dividing bubotubers, something he'd been looking forward to doing all week, although Hermione was hard pressed to see the appeal. The potting mix was more moist dung and brackish muck than soil in her opinion. And they had to use Face-Shielding Charms in case the pustules burst. Ron had been working with Seamus and Dean lately, and Neville had promised to help her and Harry...except he didn't show. Harry was little help these days; he was so completely distracted by the dragon challenge that he wasn't concentrating on anything else, so most of the work had all fallen to her.

"So why did Neville miss Herbology? It's his best subject," Harry asked as they exited greenhouse three at the end of class.

Seamus turned to look at them. "Malfoy hit him with the Conjunctivitis Hex just before class, and it made his eyes swell and look all wonky. He couldn't see a thing! He had to go to hospital to see Madam Pomfrey," he said and ran off to catch up to Ron and Dean.

Harry leaned close to Hermione and whispered, "That would be a good idea," in her ear.

"I dunno, Harry, it might be a horrible risk. An angry, temporarily blind, female dragon thrashing about, trying to defend her nest? You might get stomped on," she replied, cringing at the thought. She saw Professor Snape approach them, apparently heading to the greenhouses.

"But if she can't see me, she can't eat me either," he argued hopefully. "I'm quick. I dodge Dudley all the time."

She pulled Harry aside, watching several Hufflepuffs sneer and smirk at Harry as they passed. "A dragon is a bit more dangerous than your cousin, and Dudley doesn't spit dragon fire," she argued. "Besides, do you even know the Conjunctivitis Hex?"

Harry shrugged, one hand keeping his bag from sliding down his shoulder. "How hard could it be if Malfoy used it on Neville?"

She shot him an incredulous glare. "Malfoy uses all manners of hexes, curses, and jinxes; that doesn't make them right. Besides, I don't think blinding the dragon is a good idea. You still have to get around her. She can smell your magic on her tongue, remember?"

However, Harry didn't seem to see it her way. "I bet we can find the hex in the library, and you can help me learn it."

"What, by letting you hex my eyes?" she asked, gobsmacked. "No way!"

He curled his mouth in disappointment and scuffed his shoe. "It was only a thought. We can use a rat then," he suggested before walking off.

Hermione smacked his arm.

"Ouch!" he said, rubbing the spot she'd hit him. "Okay, no rat. I'll use Crabbe or Goyle." She glared at him and he shrugged. "That seems only fair!"

The next morning after Professor Snape finished his lecture on tropane poisoning, he turned to face the class. "So, Mr. Potter, name six plants that contain tropane alkaloids, and do not read to me from Miss Granger's notes."

Hermione, who'd angled her notes in Harry's direction, scowled at him and slid her notebook back in front of her. Harry had been circling the incantation for the Conjunctivitis Hex on his notes.

"Angel's trumpet, henbane... Devil's weed...trumpet, er, mandrakes..." He turned his head to look at Ron. "Deadly nightshade and thorn apples, I think."

Ron glared at Harry.

"You think? Five points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for the inability to *think*. Mr. Longbottom, which plants did Mr. Potter fail to mention?" Professor Snape asked while still watching Harry intently.

"The datura species of: Devil's weed, Devil's trumpet, Devil's cucumber, Hell's bells..." Professor Snape's head snapped in Neville's direction and Neville blanched. "P-prickly b-bur, Jimson w-weed, moon-moonflower, and the p-potato, and tomato..."

"Enough," Professor Snape snapped, "five points to Gryffindor, Mr. Longbottom. You will all write six feet on tropane poisoning and the plants Messrs. Longbottom and Potter mentioned, due next week." He turned and sat down at his desk. "Miss Granger, see me after class," he snapped as he grabbed his quill. "The rest of you are dismissed."

Hermione collected her things and waited patiently as the rest of the class filed out.

"Well, come here," Professor Snape said curtly.

She sighed and approached his desk.

"Even if Potter could improve his aim and manage to hit a dragon in the eye with the Conjunctivitis Hex, it would only make the dragon dangerous and quite angry...and blind. However, she, like most reptiles, could still locate him with her sense of smell. Also she might step on Potter or crush her eggs. Discourage him. Likewise, using an Immobulus or the Impediment Curse, which Mr. Potter hasn't developed the skill to utilize at this age level, is only effective against class four creatures, not class five. It takes at least six to eight fully trained wizards to immobilize a fully-grown dragon. I would have thought you'd be aware of the fact."

Hermione's mouth opened in surprise. She was too dumbfounded that Professor Snape somehow knew that Harry had even considered using the hex for her mind to register his disparaging remark about Harry's magical ability and her lack of knowledge. "How did you know we were..." she started to say and was cut off by his smirk. "You overheard us."

"Apparently I did," he replied and resumed his marking.

This was the second time he'd said something to help Harry. "Thank you, sir; I'll let Harry know."

"That is all; you may leave," he said without looking up. Hermione thanked him again and hurried out of his classroom on her way to find Harry.

Hermione tapped Harry's parchment to get his attention. "It's just Viktor Krum and his gaggle of followers. Ignore them." She'd been so worried for him, having to deal with the lies that Rita Skeeter wrote about him, how no one believed that he hadn't entered the tournament, and she felt sorry about the sneers and taunting he had to endure. However, after what Sirius had said about Karkaroff having been a Death Eater, and Hagrid telling Harry about the dragons, she was seriously worried. She saw Ron sitting across the room with Seamus, Dean, and Neville.

"At least they don't wear the badges," Harry said despondently.

She looked up, and Viktor nodded at her, then scowled as he skulked away. "You'd think they would have books on his boat," Harry scoffed, pushing his hair up with his fingers as he leaned his head on his hand.

She knew he was missing Ron, but neither would end this ridiculousness. "We'll find an answer, Harry," she said, exchanging books for one from her third pile.

"How?" he asked softly. "It's not likely I'll find a passage, 'here is how you steal an egg from a dragon.'"

"No, but something will come to us; we have to keep looking," she replied, wondering if an Exfoliating-Scarfskin Hex would work on dragon scales. *A Descaling Charm worked to scale a fish? But that would injure the dragon, wouldn't it?* They had used the spell to scale herrings, one of the rare few times Professor Snape allowed them use their wands in class.

Professor Snape had leaned over her shoulder in class, commenting on her grinding technique on the cochineal insects that he'd taught her during her stay in his classroom lab, then whispered, "Make the Burn Paste I taught you. Use a coffee filter to sieve off the comfrey preparation, and use the dragonwort *after* the comfrey oil. Double the calendula."

She turned her head to say thank you, but he was already examining Neville's potion. Neville was already so nervous he dropped his cochineal insects all over his worktable. Hermione measured out her two grams and passed the dish to Neville. "Here, I have extra, Neville," she said softly, giving Professor Snape a look that challenged him to deduct points from her. "I know Professor Snape hadn't intended to startle you."

"Th-thanks, Hermione," Neville stammered, keeping his head down so he didn't have to see Professor Snape glare at them, thus missing his subtle nod, even though he was openly scowling at her.

However, later when changing for bed, she found a slip of parchment in her pocket, which read: *The Renaissance of Essential Potions and Elixirs by Carnis Waite: Strengthening Solution, page sixty-two. A stronger Whit-Sharpener Elixir, page nineteen. Fire Protection Potion will not help.*

"Didn't the autobiography on Tilly Toke or the book on Quong Po offer anything?" she asked, hoping that whatever they found, Harry wouldn't need the potion hidden in her trunk. She didn't want him getting disqualified by using a potion restricted by the Department of Magical Games and Sports. "I haven't seen anything that would help you. You don't have a magical sword and shield or a dragon staff. Not that having one would help you; it takes years to learn how to fight with them."

"Maybe I'll ask Dumbledore for Gryffindor's sword," he mumbled dejectedly.

"You can ask, but I don't think you'll be allowed to kill the dragon. We'll find something," she reassured him, hoping she sounded more optimistic than she felt. He and Ron still weren't speaking to each other, and it was really grating on her nerves. It had been unnerving going to Hogsmeade with Harry, considering he'd worn his dad's cloak. At least Hagrid and Professor Moody had joined them in the Three Broomsticks. Hermione had been amazed that Professor Moody could see Harry, but then that magical eye was an amazing device.

She pulled *Physical Shapeshifting Through Transformation*, by Phaedrus Goldschlager, toward her, scanning the first few twenty pages on shape-shifting and Animagus transformations. She was soon engrossed, reading the chapter on Merlin's ability to shift from human to a deer, wolf, or owl.

Hermione waited until she would be the last to turn in her potion sample. She approached Professor Snape's desk, feeling like a hundred pixies were in her gut. She set the bottle down and took a deep breath. "Sir, may I ask you something?"

"Not now, Miss Granger, I'm busy," he said curtly as he checked her name off on his ledger. He picked up a sample, noted the name on the vial and made another mark.

"It will only take a minute," she implored, hoping that he'd not get too mad at her persistence. He had helped her, giving her advice on their other ideas. Maybe he'd help her again.

He looked up at her, clearly annoyed. "What is it?"

"I have a question about Summoning Charms," she began.

"You should ask Professor Flitwick about that," he cut her off dismissively.

"He didn't give me books and advice," she said quickly. She fought back the nervous fear swelling in her gut. "Please, sir, I know you could tell me what I need to know."

He sat up and crossed his arms. "Very well, what is it?"

"How close does an object need to be when you use a Summoning Charm?" She turned her head slightly. That wasn't what she needed to know at all. "What I mean is, what if the object is far away? I've checked, and there isn't anything in the books about summoning things from a far distance."

"Really, you could rationalize this out for yourself." He watched her a moment, then sighed when she shifted her weight nervously. "It depends on the item, where it is, and what might be blocking it from coming to you," he stated smoothly. "Be specific."

She decided to be straight with him. After all, he wasn't being too mean at present. "Harry's broom. I don't know where they are going to have the dragons, but if say they use the Quidditch pitch... Would Harry be able to summon his broom to the Quidditch pitch?"

For a brief moment it almost looked like he'd smiled, the same smile he'd given her after she'd gotten something right that he'd shown her when he'd been a teenager. However, the stern face of her professor returned just as quickly. "If Mr. Potter becomes accomplished with the charm, yes, he might be able to summon his broom to the enclosure. However, he will have to have significant determination and precise focus on what he wants. Also the item in question should be accessible. If the broom has to fly through a door or window it may be blocked and might not break free to come to him."

Hermione smiled and clasped her hands. "Perfect! Thank you. I was hoping..." Her relief was making her babble, until he narrowed his eyes at her, cutting her off. "Thank you, sir. That is very helpful." She turned and ran, wanting to give Harry the good news.

That Friday in Potions there was a scrap of parchment stuck to the bottom of her essay. When she picked it up, words appeared *Quickening-Reflexes Potion...a blue-stoppered, red phial, my storeroom, third shelf on the left, behind the dried muddaubers next to the phial of Draught of Peace and a large jar of Burn Paste.*

Harry wouldn't need the Quickening-Reflexes Potion if he could out fly the dragon on his Firebolt! That was if he could out fly the dragon! It was such a gamble on Harry's part but the only solution that seemed feasible. She decided to take the offered gift anyway, just in case. *Professor Snape just gave me permission to, didn't he?* She looked up at him, but he had his back to her as he waved his hand to make the directions appear on the board. She didn't catch his eye as he sat down at his desk, ordering them to begin. *Okay, then...* She looked at the door to the supply cupboard. *I'll do it. For Harry.*

~ T. B. C. ~

Author's Notes:

Yes, I changed a few things regarding the events and dialogue that took place in the corridor outside Potions when Malfoy hexed Hermione's teeth. An asterisk denotes what is a direct quote or copied from the book. I wanted to give this scene a bit more insight since this is a canon Severus and Hermione moment.

Chapter 20

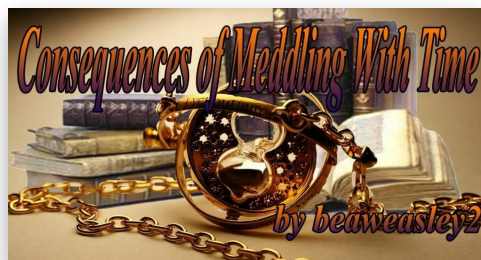
Chapter 20 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and DutchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Potter survived the first task, thanks to Miss Granger and I Severus scoffed as he removed his robe. Rumor has it that even Moody had felt the need to give the boy a bit of advice, he sneered, unamused, as he pulled out a clean robe. His morning class had ended with Mr. Walters coating half the students, and himself, in bright yellow goo. Quite a feat for a novice brewing a nonvolatile potion, with relatively benign ingredients, that was supposed to be blue.

However, considering that the term would officially end after Double Potions with the fourth-year Gryffindors and Slytherins this afternoon, he was in relatively mild temper.

Today he'd show the class the Itch-Relief Salve, which he knew that only Hermione would be able to brew with any efficacy. That is if she remembered his trick of pressing the secretions from the sopophorous beans rather than slicing them.

He dressed carefully, making sure his hair lay flat, and proceeded to the Great Hall. Several students were milling around, loitering in clusters along the walls of the Entrance Hall, the girls hoping to catch some bloke's eye and be asked to go to the Ball, while the guys congregated in small groups, trying not to appear as if they were talking about the girls. It was a futile game to be played.

Severus knew that only those brave enough to ask a girl surrounded by her friends would get partners. He was so glad he didn't have to partake in such foolery. Severus scowled at the students, making all the Hogwarts and Beauxbatons students scuttle into the Hall.

He noticed that Viktor Krum was watching Potter, Weasley, and Miss Granger cross the Entrance Hall as they headed to lunch with a predatory look. Severus motioned for the students still lingering on the stairs to hurry along as he casually observed the famous Quidditch player.

Krum's lips stretched into a smile when Miss Granger nodded to him in passing, then scowled as several girls approached him, giggling like besotted idiots. Krum quickly followed along behind the trio, his eyes locked on the back of Miss Granger's head in a manner that made Severus' scowl darken.

All through lunch Severus kept an eye on Krum, making note of his preoccupation with Miss Granger.

"He's such an excellent student," Karkaroff said as he set down his cup.

"I'm sure he is," Severus replied nonchalantly.

"He's taken an interest in one of your students, I think. A Miss Granger, Harry Potter's friend," Karkaroff stated.

Severus turned to glare at him. "I doubt she'd be interested in him," he stated, his eyes narrowing. *What is Karkaroff up to now?*

"Well, the girl has said yes. In fact, he's even sent her a gift. A dictionary, I think. Surprising she'd need a dictionary if she's supposedly your brightest student," Karkaroff said dismissively.

Severus' mind was distracted as he observed Viktor Krum and Miss Granger, trying to see what she saw in him besides the obvious fame, while Karkaroff extolled Krum's achievements, both academically and professionally. He was round-shouldered, although that could be just from his posture as he bent over his plate to ignore the Slytherin girls sitting next to him. When he did look up, Krum's hooked nose, thin lips, thick eyebrows, and hunched posture made him look surly. *Hardly an impressive countenance. Krum asked Hermione and she said yes. So, she likes the rich and famous after all. Figures.*

He watched Hermione as she ate, talking with the two imbeciles she called friends. *She's too young to be infatuated with boys* Her bushy hair was pulled back by a ribbon, and her bag, laden with books, sat under her seat, but she was still the same little girl he knew.

"... you've never seen a more deft wizard," Karkaroff stated, drawing his attention away from Miss Granger.

Severus turned to look at Viktor Krum again. "I'm sure he is," he stated. Severus noted that Krum, his scowl growing darker each time Miss Granger laughed at one of her friends, was also watching Miss Granger.

Ludo Bagman leaned toward Karkaroff. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone fly like him...they'll write books on the stunts he's pulled. Practically reinvented the Wronski Feint and the Llewellyn Dive!"

Severus tuned out the two wizards as he ate, his gaze flicking between Miss Granger and Krum discreetly. While Miss Granger seemed oblivious to Krum's scrutiny, the girls at the Slytherin table were not. Soon even their attention was diverted elsewhere.

Severus was stationed in the Entrance Hall to make sure that only the eligible students were entering the Great Hall. He stood inconspicuously in the corner with the doors and marble stairs in full view. He'd already memorized the list of Hogwarts third-years that had managed to procure partners for the Yule Ball. It was no surprise that Miss Weasley's name had appeared on the list, with her penchant for older wizards.

He watched amused as Mr. Weasley, in rumpled, antique dress robes, loped down the stairs with Mr. Potter and approached the Patil twins. Both boys looked uncomfortable in their formal attire. *Hardly surprising*, he mused when a vision in periwinkle blue caught his attention.

Miss Granger descended the stairs with as much poise and grace as any pure-blood debutant, and a smile so radiant it took his breath away. She disappeared in the crowd for a moment, but he saw glimpses of her as she walked across the Hall for the oak doors, stopping to smile and wave in his direction.

"She's lovely, isn't she?" Minerva asked as she approached him.

"She's a child," he said dismissively to hide his smirk at the ring of thistles around the brim of her hat and turned to watch the others coming into the Hall.

Minerva chuckled softly. "Don't look so sour, Severus. It's a party," she murmured, laughing at his darkened glare. "You look nice. Although, it would've been nice to see you in a color other than black. Albus wanted us to all look our festive best."

He turned to face her fully. "I'll have you know that my waistcoat and cravat are green," he said coolly. His Slytherin charges entered the Entrance Hall. Malfoy and Parkinson both nodded in greeting as they passed into the Great Hall to find their seats.

But Minerva had started laughing at his statement. "Oh, Severus, I never implied... oh, dear... that you should wear..." She stopped laughing and wiped away a tear. "It's so dark, it might as well be black."

He scowled at her and turned to look at the students.

"Well it's time to collect the champions and their partners."

"Indeed," he said, not bothering to look at her, knowing she was still smiling humorously as the huge oak doors opened and the Durmstrang students filed in, several breaking ranks to greet some of the students that lingered in the Entrance Hall. He exhaled sharply when he saw Miss Granger walking on the arm of Viktor Krum, smiling as if she was already having the time of her life.

"Good, there they are," Minerva said, pointing demurely and turned back to Severus. "I shall see you inside."

He nodded curtly as she moved away from him.

"Champions, over here please," Minerva called out, and Severus watched Krum lead Miss Granger over to queue for their big entrance.

Severus' seat assignment had him seated at the end with Ludo Bagman and Karkaroff and in direct view of Miss Granger, Mr. Krum, Mr. Potter and Miss Patil. All through dinner, Karkaroff babbled on about Mr. Krum's intelligence, bravery, magical skills, and his lucrative career. Severus could hardly enjoy his prime rib.

As soon as the plates vanished, the music started. Severus slipped from his seat and moved to an inconspicuous spot on the side of the room. He crossed his arms as he watched Miss Granger dancing with Mr. Krum, appearing to have a wonderful time. At least the boy was keeping a respectable distance in proper form during the slow dances. Finally unable to watch her dance any longer, he moved along the wall to the refreshments table to make sure no one spiked the punch.

Not long after the Weird Sisters had started to play their more popular music, Severus saw Miss Granger having a heated argument with Mr. Weasley. He smirked in satisfaction as she stormed off, leaving a befuddled Mr. Krum talking to an agitated Mr. Weasley and a bemused Mr. Potter.

Severus decided to ignore the boys and try and find Miss Granger, casually walking across the room in the direction she'd flown to. Unfortunately, Mr. Krum had more success than he did in finding her.

Miss Granger was sitting on a bench, sliding the edge of a ruffle between her fingers. She looked up at Mr. Krum with a weak smile when he sat down next to her. "Vos your friend, er, makes you unhappy?"

She nodded and accepted the butterbeer he handed her. "He's being a royal prat." Mr. Krum tilted his head and she sighed. "I don't really want to talk about Ronald."

Severus drew back, deeper into the shadows and watched them. In this light, and with the way Mr. Krum was leaning toward Miss Granger, Severus was shocked by the apparent likeness between himself and Krum in basic appearance. *Minus the foot deformity and posture...we are similar in build, same hair... hooked nose, and narrow face...*

He sneered to himself as he looked at Miss Granger smiling at Krum, and remembered how she'd smiled at him that way when she stayed with him as a teen. *Every time she'd gotten a spell right or when I'd teased her, she smiled at me like that...* Miss Granger's laughter floated back to him. *It's not the same as when I was young he scoffed, watching her get a dreamy sort of look on her face. It reminded him of the time he had read to her on her bed in his lab, and he turned away. He's still not good enough for her. He's just a dumb jock!*

He moved through the shadows in the grotto, startling young couples and deducting house points. *I couldn't have had her then; she didn't belong in my time. And I certainly can't entertain any thoughts of her now.*

He spied Hagrid sitting next to Madame Maxime and cringed. He turned, taking another path, and bumped into Karkaroff. "Not now," he hissed, trying to evade another dialogue on Viktor Krum's attributes.

"But the Mark, Severus, have you noticed? How can you not. He's back, returning... You have to have noticed," Karkaroff rambled in a harsh whisper as he followed him.

"Of course I have," Severus stated offhandedly in a soft angry hiss, angry that he was risking everything to discuss their Marks here, in the Grotto, where anyone might overhear them. "I just don't see what there is to fuss about, Igor."

"Severus you cannot pretend this isn't happening," Karkaroff persisted, thankfully keeping his voice down but looking around as if expecting the Dark Lord to materialize out of the shadows. "It's been getting clearer and clearer for months." He leaned closer, and Severus cringed at the smell of Firewhisky on his breath. "I am becoming seriously concerned."

Severus took a step back from the wizard in disgust, but Karkaroff matched his retreat persistently. "I can't deny it..."

Severus brushed him off. "Then flee," he said curtly. "Flee...and I'll make your excuses. I, however, am remaining at Hogwarts." He turned and strode away, startling Miss Fawcett and Mr. Stebbins when he blasted the rose bushes near them. He covered his momentary surprise by deducting house points and giving them both detentions.

He spotted Mr. Weasley and Mr. Potter and snarled at them to move on after Mr. Weasley's lame excuse that they were 'walking,' hoping those two meddlesome brats hadn't overheard Karkaroff's fears. *Karkaroff and his damn cowardice. Of course I've noticed that my Mark is getting darker! I'm not blind and it itches, irritatingly so.* Severus blasted the roses off several more bushes, but neither the shocked exclamations of the startled couples he exposed, nor the deducting of more house points, nor the doling out of detentions lessened his growing temper.

He turned on the path to return to the Great Hall and spotted Miss Granger saying good night to Krum. For a moment he was thrown back in time. She had the same shy tilt of her head, the same wistful expression that she had given him eighteen years ago when she'd had to say goodbye to him. Severus felt like his feet had become mired in mud as he stood and watched, unable to turn away or keep from staring at her. She looked up at Krum, who was leaning toward her much too intimately, and Miss Granger smiled. Krum lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, politely enough.

"Good night," Miss Granger said, still holding his hand. "I had a good time."

"I did as vell," he replied and leaned closer, hesitated for a second, then kissed her cheek. Miss Granger turned her face, returning his affection with a quick kiss to his cheek.

Severus turned back to the Hall. *Well if he's her choice, I see no reason to be bothered with her* thought with a dark scowl, giving her up as a lost cause.

The first month and a half of term hadn't been a very good one for Hermione. Rita's article after the Yule Ball had outed Hagrid as being a half-giant, and truthfully anyone who saw the man could have no doubt that he was, except that Hagrid was the kindest, gentlest, most caring bloke Hermione had ever known. He'd accepted her as a friend as soon as they'd been introduced. When Harry and Ron had abandoned her over a lousy broom, Hagrid still treated her kindly.

Sure she'd enjoyed Professor Grubbly-Plank's lessons better, much better, but Hermione's friendship with Hagrid would mean an undying loyalty to him, even if she had to deal with frightful and dangerous creatures. Besides, with Hagrid around, the risks were minimal. Mostly.

But Rita Skeeter was a real scandal-mongering sensationalist, who didn't care whom she slandered as long as her unabashed, self-promotional tripe was eye-catching and attracted readers. In Hermione's opinion, it was nothing but nasty gossip. At least the Headmaster had convinced Hagrid to return to work. But she was tired of the Blast-Ended Skrewts and rather wished they'd burn, sting, or suck each other to death and be done with it.

Then there was Ludo Bagman. Hermione didn't know what to make of the man. He was always popping up, frequently followed by goblins or avoiding Fred and George, and his interest in Harry made her suspicious. He was in charge of the tournament, and according to Harry, he'd been offering to help him cheat.

Now, however, Hermione was getting desperate. This was the second time that the library was not helping her find an answer to a problem or solve a question: how to help Harry breathe underwater. She put *Physical Shapeshifting Through Transformation* back on the shelf and pulled down the next six books. She sat down at the table next to Harry and began to speed-read through the first book. Most of the spells were N.E.W.T level and would be impossible to teach Harry in only a few hours. That and she wasn't about to risk depleting his magic this close to the second task. *At this rate I'll have read the entire Charms and Transfiguration section by the end of the month! Or at least this tournament,* she thought with a sigh as she set the book aside and took the next one.

"Find anything?" he asked hopefully.

She shook her head as she turned the page. "Most of this shelf seems to be N.E.W.T. level. I don't think I could do them yet, let alone teach you how to in..." She looked up at the clock and sighed again. "Only two hours until curfew..." Harry looked crestfallen so she reached out to give his arm a reassuring squeeze. "I haven't given up on you. We'll find something, Harry."

She wished that she could've run some of her ideas off Professor Snape, but he had been ignoring her, except in class when he'd once again been his snarky, demeaning, and derogatory self. Hermione had tried desperately to appease him, but he wouldn't even look at her and had ordered her to leave if she'd lingered at all after class. She piled up her books and headed to the shelves to exchange them.

At nine-thirty Hermione was following Professors Dumbledore, Snape, and McGonagall, along with Ron, Cho, and a French girl, who looked like she could be Fleur Delacour's sister, to a small house magically erected on the lakeshore. Hermione looked at the shack and then at her Professors with a rising sense of anxiety. "When do we, er, have to..."

"At dawn, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said smoothly. "You'll be placed in a state of stasis for the duration of the task."

She stopped dead in her tracks. "An hour... under water... How?"

Professor Snape stopped and stared at her. "Three," he replied, quirking an eyebrow at her as she gaped at him open-mouthed. "You will be given a potion that will allow you to rest comfortably as your body is well oxygenated for the procedure. In the morning you will be given potions and placed in a state of hypothermic hibernating stasis."

"The temperature of the water will induce hypothermia, but..." She looked down at the lakeshore where Madam Maxime was reassuring the small French girl and Dumbledore was conversing with Ron. She assumed that Cho was already in the shack, being put to sleep. Somehow, the explanation just didn't seem plausible to her. "But hibernation...it's only sleeping...breathing! I'll drown!"

"No, you will not," he said coolly, then stepped closer to her. "Don't you trust me, Hermione?"

"Of course I do," she replied automatically and looked up at him. There was something in his expression, something angry yet sad. "...you made the potions?"

"I am the one who devised the manner in which you will be placed in this state of magical stasis," he stated, his eyes narrowing for a brief moment as he watched her face.

"Then I trust you," she replied, meeting his gaze and trying to relax her nerves. *He won't hurt me. He won't let them kill me.* "I'm just...no one said anything about how we were going to be doing this."

He raised his arm toward the shack. "Shall we continue?"

Hermione was directed to a cot between Cho and Ron. "Do I undress?" she asked.

Madam Pomfrey looked up from Ron's bed. "No dear, only remove your shoes."

Professor Snape covered her with a blanket and picked up a phial from the small bedside table. "Drink," he said softly.

Hermione complied without reservation, looking up at him with total trust as she swallowed the potion. There was an immediate warm sensation from her head to her toes, and she closed her eyes to enjoy the feeling.

She heard him moving around, and knew that he was in the room, working on his potions. The stone walls of the dungeon classroom were chilly, but the covers were warm and plush. She could hear the soft thuds of his boots as he moved about, obviously trying to be quiet and not wake her.

"Miss Granger," Severus said softly, nudging her shoulder.

She wanted to roll over and curl up next to him, feel his arms around her like he'd done last night when she'd fallen asleep next to him.

"Hermione," he said her name in that melodic voice of his. "Hermione, wake up."

She forced her eyes open, squinting at the bright light from the candle by her bed. Severus was looking down at her, a slight crease between his brows that told her he was worried about something.

"Drink this," he urged her, tipping a glass to her lips.

It was a strong tea, and she could taste the orange, sweet cinnamon, chicory, peppermint, anise, ginger, and rosehips...

"Stop analyzing and drink it," he said, sounding slightly annoyed. "You'll need the concentrated nutrients."

"This isn't the potion that will make me hibernate?" she asked against the lip of the glass.

He smirked at her. "No, but a necessary one."

Hermione tried to raise her hand to hold the glass, but her arms felt weighted down and impossibly swollen and huge.

Professor Snape carefully wiped her lip with his thumb. "Stop trying to fight it, Hermione. Drink."

She swallowed obediently and he smiled slightly. "That's my little Gryffindor. Now this one." He poured a bit of a minty, menthol-tasting potion in her mouth that made her lips and tongue go numb. He was watching her eyes intently between each carefully measured mouthful. He wiped her puffy-feeling lip, and tipped her head up to finish the last of the potion.

Strong chamomile and orange oils and hibiscus and ginger flowers filled her nose, and Hermione wanted to sneeze.

"Relax, Hermione, give in to the potions," he said smoothly as everything faded around her except his voice.

Severus watched Hermione's face become slack and levitated her body as Filius turned the cots and shack back into pebbles. Beside him, Minerva, Pomona, and Madam Maxime were likewise tending to the other victims as Poppy did a quick diagnostic check on each of them and added her delayed revival charm. Poppy nodded to him as the light of her charm infused into Hermione's body.

He quickly and carefully floated Hermione to the lake and to the Mermaids waiting to take the victims. Severus was worried that they were taking too long. Hermione...the victims...had to be completely submerged before the potions took full affect.

He looked up at the castle, seeing the library in his mind's eye. He knew that the bloody boy hadn't figured out the clue on the egg. Severus himself had searched the library for weeks to find a way for Hermione to survive being underwater for three to four hours.

He'd known what the challenge was since the first day of term; he'd created the potion that would put the victims into a suspended state until the victims broke the surface of the lake and the revival charm made them take their first breath. It was a very complicated potion, a Dark Arts combination actually, that called for mixing asphodel in an infusion of wormwood with powdered moonstone, syrup of hellebore and Death Adder venom. Three of those ingredients didn't react well to the venom. Effectively he had mixed the Draught of Peace and the Draught of Living Death with Death Adder venom in a concentrated gillyweed secretion base. Even the soporiferous beans reacted strongly with the venom, and their combination was potentially deadly, especially to females due to their higher estrogen levels.

The first potion that they had given the victims to increase the oxygen in the blood worked well with the Bubble-Head Charm for a short period of time. He had

experimented with the potion for the Order members to fight the Inferi the Dark Lord had placed in rivers and lakes in the seventies. But while it didn't prevent drowning, it did increase the amount of oxygen in the blood and brain.

He was reluctant to leave the lake for breakfast, opting to remain on the lakeshore. The soft ripples of the surface, eerily black did little to soothe him as it had on his walks in the past. The waters were clear along the shallows, but he couldn't see into the depths. He stood on the dock and waited, keeping his concerns concealed behind his expression of indifference. He almost felt relief when Hagrid appeared with the school boats and the students erupted from the castle as the doors opened.

Severus turned as the students and teachers piled into the boats and sailed over to the stands. He stayed close to Poppy and joined the officials on the lakeshore. Unfortunately, Karkaroff was also sticking close, rather than taking his seat with his students.

Minerva was standing next to Dumbledore and indicated for him follow her to the side. Severus followed, ignoring Minerva's glare. "He got the message," Minerva whispered.

"In time?" Dumbledore asked, turning to look at the castle.

Minerva shrugged. "I suppose so, Albus. Pomona said that Mr. Longbottom has the book *Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean* and I was in the staff room when Alastor insisted on discussing the task and mentioned that Mr. Potter should use gillyweed while that house-elf in the soccer shorts and maroon sweater...Dobby, I think his name is...was cleaning. I don't like helping Mr. Potter cheat, but I do know he had fallen asleep in the library."

Dumbledore turned back to Minerva and Severus. "Ah, good. Well then, shall we find our seats?" He clamped a hand on Severus' shoulder. "I wanted to let you know that Kingsley said that the Oxygenating Potion is working famously in the trials."

Minerva gave them a quizzical look as Potter bolted down the path crying out, "I'm here! I'm here!"

Severus watched closely as the champions all took their places. After Ludo Bagman moved away from Potter, most likely to reprimand him for his late arrival, and made his announcements, he watched Potter carefully as he took off his shoes and socks.

Potter removed a glob of gillyweed from his pocket. Severus was glad that he'd had the foresight to order fresh gillyweed of the highest quality and had placed it in a clear jar on a low shelf in his store room, then asked that house-elf Dobby to dust the shelves and containers.

His thoughts turned back to Hermione as he stared out at the placid lake.

~ T. B. C. ~

Author's Notes:

Yes, I changed a few things regarding the events and dialogue that took place in the grotto during the Yule Ball when Karkaroff confronted Severus. An asterisk denotes what is a direct quote or copied from the book. I wanted to give this scene a bit more insight since this is a canon Severus moment.

Chapter 21

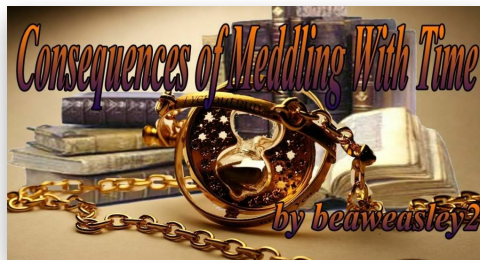
Chapter 21 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and to DutchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



The second task had been a success. As soon as Hermione had surfaced, gasping for air to fill her lungs, all Severus had wanted to do was to personally check the nail beds of her fingers for signs of oxygen starvation and any sign of hypoxia or asphyxia. From where he'd been standing, he didn't see any blue discoloration of her skin or lips, although she'd been trembling from the cold. He'd watched Poppy's wand as she'd made her diagnostic charms and had mentally sighed with relief when the tip hadn't glowed red or yellow.

He knew that Poppy was well aware that any sign of yellow would indicate severe reaction to the combination of the sopophorous beans and Death Adder venom. Certain that the students had been all right, Severus had maintained an air of confidence and followed the Headmaster back to the castle. However he'd visited Poppy after lunch to

assess her potions requirements, relieved that none of the girls had shown any sign of poisoning.

He was pleased...his experimental potions had been a success.

Severus wrote a detailed and comprehensive account in his journal to document his experiments and the results. Should his involvement ever come to question regarding his use of the Dark Arts on students, he wanted to make sure that his reasoning was sound and above reproach. The school governors were touchy enough about his previous use of and knowledge of the Dark Arts. He placed Barty Crouch's and Ludo Bagman's letters of approval for the potions and Dumbledore's letter of consent, after his entry. He felt a painful twinge in his Dark Mark and clamped a hand over it, gritting his teeth. When he became accustomed enough to the pain to ignore it, he stood and sought out the Headmaster.

Hermione had little time in the weeks following the second task for frivolous activities. She was glad that Harry was now tied with Cedric, but helping Harry had put her way behind in her own revision. He might be exempt from all exams, but she certainly wasn't. The good thing was that she'd managed to keep up on her essays. Granted, they were not as long as she'd done in the past. Her Charms and Transfiguration essays were every well documented, thanks to the countless hours searching through those two subjects in the library, but all her other subjects she'd relied on summarizing what references she'd found in the limited time she'd had, validating her choices with her opinions, and extrapolating on her theories and speculations.

She still maintained her high marks and had received praise from her professors...well, all but Professor Snape who simply wrote comments on her papers contradicting her theories and suggested different references which were more appropriate than the ones she'd used. Several times he'd even suggested she rewrite her essays to further explain her position to improve her mark from Acceptable to 'more acceptable.' He was such an infuriating man.

Also following the task, Rita Skeeter had written an outlandish article about her. Hermione hadn't cared about what that wench had written, but thanks to her lies, Hermione had received hate mail for weeks, some even containing dangerous substances like bubotuber pus and Wartcap and Bulbadox powder. Thankfully now all her mail was checked before owls were allowed to deliver it to her.

That wasn't the only thing; Hermione was concerned now, thinking about Sirius' suspicions about Barty Crouch. He'd been acting wonky ever since the end of the first task. Fudge's offer to help Harry cheat bothered her as well, and Hermione had noticed that Karkaroff was frequently trying to catch Professor Snape alone. He'd interrupted a lesson on the fifth of March, and Harry had mentioned that Karkaroff had shown Professor Snape something on his left forearm that day when class had been dismissed.

Later, during one of Hermione's detentions, Karkaroff had barged in and hissed something at Professor Snape, indicating his left forearm. Professor Snape had been in a horrible mood ever since both incidents. Sirius had told them during the last Hogsmeade weekend that Karkaroff was a Death Eater, but in Hermione's opinion the wizard was much too high-strung and the nervous type to be a Death Eater. However, after the commotion he'd caused during her detention, she wasn't so sure anymore.

Hedwig flew into the Great Hall the last Saturday of Easter hols, bearing a huge package clutched in her talons. She deposited her package in front of Harry and Ron, landing in front of her. Hermione gave Hedwig a strip of bacon as Harry opened the package, since Ron was busily eating. Inside were smaller packages.

"Ron, it's from your mum," Harry stated, grasping a large present and handing it to Ron. He frowned as he picked up a much smaller one, examining the tag. "It's for you," he said with a furrowed brow as he gave it to Hermione.

"Whoa," Ron said as opened his, exposing a huge dragon-sized egg. "Looks like mum got you one as well, Harry."

The paper on Harry's egg had not been as well taped and had fallen open. He pushed off the rest, exposing another huge dragon-sized golden egg. "Suppose she's glad I survived the dragon."

Hermione looked at her own chicken-sized egg and sighed, trying to suppress her disappointment. *Surely Mrs. Weasley would know me well enough to know the truth. Certainly she wouldn't believe everything Rita Skeeter writes?* "Your mum doesn't read *Witch Weekly*, by any chance, does she, Ron?" she asked softly so as not to attract attention.

"Yeah," Ron said, his mouth full of toffee, "gets it for the recipes. Oi, Harry, you want to see what Percy wrote?"

Hermione had been preoccupied with her own meager egg to have noticed the letter in Harry's hand wasn't from Mrs. Weasley. She leaned over to read the formal script and frowned. The letter was short, to the point and quite rude, but what else did they expect from a prat such as Percy. She shoved her egg in her bag and rose to go. "I'm going to the library," she announced.

The boys were too wrapped up in their current mystery to do more than utter, "Yeah, see you," as she walked away. But then she'd come to expect that response whenever she mentioned the library or revision.

She pulled out her things, sighing when she removed the meager egg and placed it beside her. "It's not fair. She should know me. It's not like I haven't stayed in her house over the summer," she mumbled to herself, distracted, rolling her quill in her fingers. Shaking her head she tried to focus on her work, but the implication of the egg haunted her attentions. Finally she dropped the quill. "Of all the... It doesn't matter what they think," she snarled, barely above a whisper as she grabbed the egg and shoved it into her bag.

"No, you shouldn't." The softly spoken voice made Hermione's hand freeze as she turned to look at him.

Professor Snape was looming over her shoulder just as he did frequently in class. Nervously she asked, "Pardon me, Professor?"

He leaned down slightly, his dark eyes glinting. "You should know better than to let the ignorant words or immature actions of others impugn your opinion of yourself." He stood suddenly, his gaze sweeping the other students sitting near her, which made each one look away, heads bowed over their work.

Hermione stared bewildered at his retreating back as he swept away, his robes billowing behind him.

Ludo Bagman bounced on his heels in the staffroom as he explained his ideas for the final task. Severus was utterly appalled. "I worked out quite a list with your Care of Magical Creatures professor, Rebeus Hagrid."

Severus cringed inside at the pronouncement. He wondered what Hagrid's idea of 'challenging' magical creatures were, considering what he thought were appropriate for students' lessons.

"Acromantulas we hear that you have fully mature Acromantulas in the Forbidden Forest. We are having a Chimaera, a Manicore, and a Harpy sent from Greece, a Cockatrice from Andover in Hampshire, a Graphorn from the Appalachian Mountains, and a Nundu from east Africa," Ludo rambled off as if very pleased with himself.

"Oh, Merlin, no!" Minerva exclaimed, reaching out a hand and gripping Severus' forearm in a death grip. "They are simply too dangerous and totally unpredictable! One breath and the students will die!" she exclaimed, oblivious to his attempt to dislodge her claws from his person.

Ludo was carrying on as if oblivious to her outcry, "... a Lethifold, tough time we had finding one. Not easily captured but I've heard that they were successful."

"Absolutely not! They are nearly impossible to contain!" Minerva shouted, finally letting go as she turned to the Headmaster. "Albus!"

Ludo's smile faltered. "But Potter can do a Patronus! I had word that the boy can..."

Severus narrowed his eyes dangerously. "Why not bring back the dragons or a sphinx. Hagrid's *pet* dog, Fluffy..."

"Sphinx... Oh, yes, Professor Snape, splendid! Now you're thinking!" Ludo replied swinging his hands excitedly, as if under the impression that Severus approved of his choices. "And Hagrid has that interesting Blast-Ended thing in his paddock."

"I must insist, Ludo, that the Nundu be returned to the wild. None of the champions are well-enough equipped to deal with a fully-grown Nundu. As for the Chimaera and Manicore, I insist that they be immature. They pose too much of a threat otherwise," Dumbledore said with that damnable benevolent grandfather tone he liked to use. The old man turned to Hagrid for a moment. "There will be no more talk of dragons, sorry, Hagrid, but I think you'll have your hands full with the creatures we're expecting. I will consider your use of the Skrewt or Fluffy... but I am reluctant to have a Graphorn at the school, unless it, too, is quite immature. I do know a man who has a sphinx he may lend us, and I know of a few spells we'll employ..."

Severus laced his hands together and steepled his index fingers under his lower lip, smirking to himself as he listened to the Headmaster curtail Ludo's plans. Many of the books Potter would need were in the Restricted Section where only Mr. Diggory would have access to them. *No matter, I have unlimited access to those volumes. I'll only have to invent ways of passing them to Miss Granger, again.*

Pomona looked up from where Percy was jotting down Ludo's suggestions beside her. "Devil's snare? Strangling Ivy? It's bad enough, Headmaster, that they want to use Wandering Boxwood, but those plants are dangerous."

"And Potter has already managed to get out of Devil's Snare's entanglement," Severus said coolly with a satisfied smirk. "I doubt he'd have forgotten how, and I'm certain the boy can learn the Slicing Hex." *And just in case, I'll mention them to Miss Granger next lesson.*

"So when do yeh expect the critters to arrive, Dumbledore, sir?" Hagrid asked, his beetle black eyes twinkling in anticipation.

At the end of May, Ludo Bagman had taken the four champions down to the Quidditch pitch to explain about the third task, but all he'd admitted to knowing was that there would be creatures and spells in a maze. A maze they had to get to the center of to win.

Considering the unusual essay Professor Snape set on the proper means of harvesting and preparation techniques for Strangling Ivy and Devil's Snare, she was sure it was far more than just simple spells and magical creatures. He'd already covered that particular subject in their second year. Hermione was quite anxious about this task as it was the last possible time whoever put Harry's name in the Goblet of Fire had to kill him.

The mysterious disappearance of Mr. Crouch and Viktor's attack seemed far too coincidental to her. Harry kept insisting that Mr. Crouch was apparently insane, and that his mumbblings were incoherent, but he was obviously wanting to get a message to Dumbledore. Even Sirius felt that things were too dangerous, and Moody and Hagrid were both worried.

Every possible moment was spent helping Harry learn as many hexes and jinxes to defend against magical creatures as she could. She and Harry were reading up on as many level three and four magical creatures as they could.

She stopped by the library after dinner to return her books to the trolley and saw Professor Snape conversing with Madam Pince. She smiled at him and walked to the Bestiary section to select more books.

She'd had four stacked beside her and was scanning the context of another when the sneering voice of Professor Snape said softly in her ear, "Just another postulant blowhole, Miss Granger."

"Pardon me, Professor?" she asked, looking at the picture of Guillaume Bainbrige fending off a griffin in the *Magical Academia Naturae Curiosorum* as he lifted a thick book off the shelf.

"Don't waste your time on insignificant creatures," he hissed and thrust it at her as he exchanged it for the book in her hands. He drew another, dropping it on the one he'd given her, making her arms sag momentarily from the force.

Hermione read the title of both books, *Mythical Creatures of the Ancient Mediterranean* and *Magical Creatures: Monsters of Greek Mythology*, and looked up to ask him... but he was gone. She picked up *Defending Yourself From Claws and Teeth, Fighting Ferocious Fangs, Tussling Treacherous Talons, and Sparring Against Savage Stingers* and carried them to Madam Pince's desk to check out.

Professor Snape wondered how far Miss Granger had progressed in the magical creatures and bestiary section of the library. He tapped the finger of his hand holding his quill as he considered following through with his plan.

Miss Granger was carefully checking the amount of thorny spurge sap in her beaker, her brown eyes squinting slightly as she made sure it was precisely to the line, before dumping it in her potion. She was doing so much better than her classmates, but that was to be expected.

When the class was over, he detained Miss Granger and made her wait until her overly curious friends had left the classroom. "Miss Granger, what is the first defense against noxious or virulent fumes?" he asked without looking up at her.

She smiled, knowing the answer, of course. "The Bubble-Head Charm."

He wondered if she was adept with the spell. "Ineffective against Garrotting Gas or Strangling Gas," he stated and shoved several books across his desk toward her. "I expect you to have read these and to write two feet, in brief answers, to my question in regard to the potion induced fumes I've marked."

Hermione she picked up the books, and her eyes widened at the titles.

"Yes, they are from the Restricted Section," he said smoothly, sitting up and leaning forward, indicating the books with his quill. "You will not show these to anyone, nor let your friends know that you have these books, but I cannot stop you from *telling* Potter what you've discerned from the assignment. *Especially* in regards to these *two gasses* I've just mentioned. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, tucking the book in her bag.

"In addition, if either one of your two friends can demonstrate the Bubble-Head Charm properly on Tuesday, I'll award Gryffindor twelve points."

Her eyes widened at the offer of earning house points, just like he knew they would, but she recovered quickly. "Yes, sir, I'll make sure we know it," she said with an excited smile.

"You may go," he said, dipping his quill to resume his grading. He smiled as she hurried from the room. It wasn't cheating, letting her read the books. Besides, Mr. Diggory had been given access to the Restricted Section, something he knew that was far too dangerous to allow Potter to do. *At least this way, Miss Granger will show Potter what he needs to know about the various gasses proposed as obstacles in the maze.* He only hoped that Potter would learn the spells well enough to pass through the gasses. *I'll quiz her on them Tuesday. That should make her impress its importance on Potter.*

Hermione was quite proud of Harry. Not only was he actually doing much better in their classes, but he was really trying to learn all he could for the upcoming challenge. Hermione slipped into the library before her next class to leave several of her and Harry's books on the trolley. Checking her watch, she decided she had a few minutes to spare to grab a two more defense books to read at lunch. She was selecting one for Harry, an O.W.L. level book, *Entangling Your Way Out of a Sticky Situation* when she felt someone take hold of her shoulder, making her jump in surprise and several books fall. "Oh my! I didn't see you... er, Professor? Did you want something?" she exclaimed, startled and quickly recovered her wits.

"Don't topple the entire library, you silly girl," Professor Snape sneered as he flicked his wand, sending the books magically back to their self. "I am surprised you'd risk being late to my class by coming in here."

"I, er, wanted to exchange my book," she replied nervously, quickly grabbing a book and turning to go. "I won't be late if I walk with you, though, will I?"

"Yes you would, however, I won't dock points if you do," he stated and slipped three books into her bag. "Restricted Section tomes...and I expect you to keep quiet about it."

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise as she stared at him, amazed that he was allowing her to have them, again. "Why?" she asked. His eyes narrowed, and she blushed. "It's because I'm helping Harry, isn't it?"

"Potter is inept to deal with these challenges at his age...and before you defend him, it's a fact not a disparagement. These tasks are designed for the seventh-year level student, advanced N.E.W.T. level. Do you remember what I told you about doing spells above your year level?"

"They deplete you," she admitted, fully remembering his reaction when he, his younger self, had found out he'd been teaching her spells above her year level.

He nodded once. "Yes, and unlike you, Potter is not capable of it," he said coolly.

"Harry can..."

"Not. He might have the ability to manage it, but not the knowledge to control the spell or handle the magic needed. Go check those out."

Hermione hurried over to Madam Pince's desk, quietly accepting her chastisement for running in her library, and turned, surprised that Professor Snape was waiting for her.

"Anyone can use a spell, shouting the words to give the necessary force to do it, but that is not controlling the magical force or casting the spell correctly," he said casually, continuing their conversation when she approached him.

She followed him from the library, enthralled by what he was saying.

"Each time he does that, he risks depleting himself. You must always check him for signs of depletion when you both try the spells in the higher year levels. I expect you to have either myself or Madam Pomfrey check you as well."

"Yes, sir," she simply said, hoping he'd continue, but he didn't, walking down the stairs in silence. When they reached the corridor on the first floor, she asked, "Sir, why are you helping Harry?"

His head snapped in her direction and his eyes narrowed, but curiosity made her press on. "I mean, you keep giving me books from the Restricted Section to help him. I can't help but wonder why?"

A tick appeared on his cheek, but he didn't answer her, walking steadily down the marble staircase and across the Entrance Hall. He constantly glared at the students that gawked at her and Professor Snape as they passed, making the students scatter in his wake. However, he stopped her on the stairs as they descended to the dungeons. "I am *not* helping Potter *cheat*. I am merely giving you the same books Mr. Krum and Mr. Diggory have referenced. Now, get to class."

Startled by his sudden change of tone, she hurried on ahead and worked her way through the students waiting on Professor Snape to find Harry. "I have more books," she whispered.

Harry look at her as if that was not news at all. "You always have books, Hermione..."

"From the Restricted Section," she hissed softly, ducking her head while leaning closer to him. "They are ones Cedric and Viktor have read."

"Wicked!" Ron said, looking at her bag as if able to read the titles as Harry smiled, obviously eager to see them as well.

"Well, why are you all not in the classroom?" Professor Snape called out as he opened the door.

"Because it was locked," Harry mumbled, and both Hermione and Professor Snape gave him an angry scowl.

After all, he is helping you to survive the next challenge, you ungrateful prat she wanted to say to him, but kept her thoughts to herself.

"Inside and set up your caldrons," Professor Snape said, adding, "Ten points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, for your insolence," as Harry walked past him, then said softly, "Five points to Gryffindor for your acknowledgement, Miss Granger."

She stared at him, wondering what he was on about. *Gads! Unless he... but that's impossible! But the students say he can... No!*

"The directions are on the board. Why are you not starting?" he asked the class curtly.

Hermione hurried over to her worktable.

"Besides, I have those two books from the Restricted Section to finish reading."

"How did you get them?" Harry asked softly.

She didn't want to tell him. One minute she had been elbow deep in suds, cleaning a cauldron for her detention...the next minute Professor Snape had told her to dry her hands, then handed her several books, and dismissed her. She'd tried to ask him about the books, but he'd simply told her to get out of his classroom before he changed his mind and not to let anyone see her with the books.

"I got permission," she said, hoping that whatever they found, Harry wouldn't need the potion hidden in her trunk again. They'd been lucky he hadn't been disqualified by the Department of Magical Games and Sports for using the potion against the dragon. "I have several spells that might help you that we can practice."

Her last few detentions, Professor Snape had taught her how to use some of the defensive spells, such as the Patronus Charm, which she knew was a seventh-year charm, and way above her age level. He'd also given her a potion to help her body boost her magical energy while she slept and a phial of sleeping potion.

"Maybe I'll ask Professor Moody, too. He's an Auror, maybe he knows some stuff that might help," Harry mumbled dejectedly.

"You can ask, but I don't think he's allowed to tell you, considering that he knows what the challenge is. We'll practice what we have and keep looking for others. At least,

you'll be somewhat ready for whatever you have to fight," she reassured him, hoping she sounded more optimistic than she felt.

Hermione was re-shelving her books when Cedric Diggory, Hogwarts' first champion, entered the aisle to return his. "How are you?" she asked with a slight nod and a smile. "Are you ready for this next challenge?" She knew that Harry had informed him about the dragons, but neither knew what they faced next.

Diggory looked at her slightly confused as he turned to face her. "I'm fine. I'm reviewing all my defensive spells from my past years, but it's rather frightening, you know, the idea of facing the unknown," he said and glanced over her shoulder. "How's Potter?"

Hermione chuckled. "Nervous. How else?"

Diggory nodded as he handed her a small stack of books rather than returning them to the shelf. "I'm sure you will come up with something," he said, turning to go. "I wish him luck."

"Thank you," she said, watching him go, confused as to why he'd think she wouldn't mind re-shelving his books. She picked up the first book *The Logical Approach to Defensive Magic* by Albert Waffling, and shook her head with a knowing smile, certain that Diggory had just tried to give Harry a hand again.

On Monday, Professor Snape moved around the room, checking the progress of the students' potions. When he stepped behind Hermione, he leaned over and frowned. "Abysmal. I know you can do better," he sneered and emptied her cauldron with a flick of his wand. "Start over, and slice the leeches as I showed you."

Hermione bit her lip to keep from making an angry retort, knowing full well her potion was more than adequate; in fact, it had been a perfect shade of tangerine.

"What did you do to anger Snape?" Harry asked.

She shrugged. "I've no idea," she whispered back, flinching when Professor Snape looked up at her.

"Quietly," he snapped and glared at Harry.

Near the end of class, Professor Snape made one more circle of the class. "Bottle your potion and place it on my desk," he said to the class and stopped next to Hermione.

She looked up, knowing that her potion was incomplete. "You may stay to finish the potion."

She sighed in relief. "Thank you, sir."

He nodded and walked away. Hermione shrugged when Harry gave her an apologetic look. "At least he'll let me finish it. I won't get a zero for the day."

As soon as the last students left, he asked her for the books. "I have to return them to the library."

"I'm not done with the ones on magical creatures of the Appalachians," she stated, hoping to change his mind.

"How many times have you read it?" he asked with a sneer.

"Only twice... well, three, if you count the..."

"Then you have it memorized," he said with a smirk. "Read the sections marked in this book. Make sure to use the spells written on the slip of parchment under the flap before opening the book. It screams," He handed her two others. "Do you still have Lockhart's books?"

"No, sir," she replied, startled by the question. He'd hated Lockhart in her second year and called him a narcissistic, counterfeit fop and a coward, which is why she'd left all his autographed books at home.

He scowled at her. "Get them. His account of fending off a Lethifold is dissimilar to Flavius Belby's account in Papua New Guinea in 1782. I expect a full comparison between the two accounts on my desk on Friday. You will also want to compare his chronicle of his account with a manticores with that of Norvel Twonk. Likewise, Lockhart's exploits of his adventures in Egypt should be examined carefully, especially in dealing with a sphinx, serpopard, and an axex."

"Sir, what does this have to do with Potions?" she asked, confused, quickly running what she knew of these creatures over in her mind *a sphinx...a lion with a human head... and intelligence; an axex is creature with a hawk's head on a dog's body... also thought to be a griffin, and a serpopard...the body of a leopard with a long neck and head of a... cobra!*

"It's my assignment, for your *benefit*, and I expect you to do it," he growled at her.

"Er, yes, sir," she stammered and left, now absolutely certain he was *wastelling* her what some of the obstacles of the next task were. *A manticore, Lethifold, sphinx, serpopard and an axex! Oh, Harry!* She hoped he still had his copies of Lockhart's books.

Severus took a calming breath before he touched his Dark Mark with his wand and Apparated. Mr. Diggory was dead, Potter was cut and bleeding, and his account of what transpired in the graveyard Severus had just arrived in did not bode well for him. Taking another long, deep breath to carefully compose himself, he stepped forward, turning to scan the area for the Dark Lord, slightly unnerved to be standing on a disturbed grave next to a toppled cauldron still containing remnants of a foul smelling potion.

"Severus, how disappointing," a cold voice said from his left.

Severus immediately bowed, almost prostrating himself on the ground. "I was detained, my Lord," he said clearly, keeping his eyes cast downward. He could hear the Dark Lord approach.

"Do you defy me?"

"No, never my Lord; I was standing beside Dumbledore when the summons came. With the disappearance of Potter and the Diggory boy, chaos erupted. I thought it best to stay, maintain my cover so that I could tell you what was done and said at the castle," Severus said as calmly as he could, but dared not rise.

"But why take so long to come to me?" the Dark Lord asked, the tip of his wand now sliding down Severus' shoulder.

He suppressed the impulse to shudder. "When Potter returned, holding Diggory's dead body, things got intense, interesting," Severus said smoothly. "I knew... My Dark Mark, it had been growing darker all year. I knew something was... I was able to keep abreast of the situation, Dumbledore's decisions and... I knew it was you. By some miracle you'd returned, but the timing... My first thought was to come, defy the old fart, but then I realized the opportunity my precarious position afforded. I waited until Dumbledore ordered me to go to you." He wanted to add, *I even showed my Dark Mark to that fool we have for a Minister as proof of your return, but the incompetent dunderhead still refuses to believe me. But, Dumbledore does.*

He dared to look up and saw the anger in the red eyes. "By delaying, I have managed to retain my post, my task to spy on Dumbledore, to keep his faith in me and his belief that I am his servant, not yours," he added hoping to appease the wizard. He dropped his head again. "It was a risk I took to keep my place, the one you assigned me to all those years ago."

The silence was as oppressive as a Lethifold smothering a victim, until the Dark Lord spoke. "Why did you not try to find me, Severus, all those years? Why did you abandon me?"

"I can only beg you for my ignorance. I thought you dead. I, like so many, thought you finished, and though I deeply mourned your loss, I had to maintain the pretenses of being pleased. I know now that I was gravely mistaken and foolish to have believed... Forgive my ignorance and shortsightedness. I should have known," Severus said, inflicting the first and only signs of emotion in his voice, that of true remorse, as if he'd been unable to speak his shame without it.

Again the silence weighed heavily on him as he waited for the inevitable that was to come. His punishment.

"Why did you prevent me from obtaining what I'd needed to return, the Philosopher's Stone? Why did you assist Dumbledore in shielding it from me?"

Severus stiffened, shocked that his speech seemed to have appeased the Dark Lord. "My Lord, I had no idea it was you seeking the stone. If you had given me any indication it was you..."

"I did not trust you," the Dark Lord spat accusingly.

"I merely thought that Quirrell wanted the stone for his own gains...for riches beyond measure," Severus said, saying the last bit in a sneering tone. "Had I known, I could have aided rather than hindered you. You'd have come back to us three years earlier."

The Dark Lord scoffed at him. "Tell you! Confide in you? I was certain you'd become Dumbledore's scrooge, his loyal dog."

For good measure, certain that he was winning over the Dark Lord, Severus sighed. "I admit that I stayed in his good graces, built up his trust and reliance on me and my knowledge of the Dark Arts, but I assure you I only used Dumbledore to avoid Azkaban. Nothing more. I'm ashamed to admit that my position, the one I sought at your bequest, I retained at considerable groveling simply to remain out of prison."

The Dark Lord paced, rubbing his chin as he did so. "I see. Yes, I can see why such an arrangement would be preferable... and..." He turned around again, glaring at him once more. "Why have you been assisting Potter all these years?"

"I have the arduous job of teaching that insolent upstart Potions. He's nothing but a whelp of a boy with no apparent talent. There's certainly nothing extraordinary about him. He hardly listens in class or follows directions, other than how to not melt cauldrons in my classroom. He is nothing more than a mediocre, self-satisfied, arrogant waste of my time. He is so much like his father in every conceivable way. I have tried to have him expelled, numerous times, unsuccessfully because the old man favors him so. But I couldn't well kill him and retain my position at the school. However, this year, the signs were there. I had no idea that Alastor Moody was Barty Crouch Jr. I suspected Moody to be an imposter, but no proof or anything consequential to support my suspicions. Oh, Barty played him well, and his suspicions of me threw me off track more than once, I admit. But my Dark Mark indicated that something was afoot. Ever since it started growing darker I knew that this tournament was a means. I was waiting for you to make your move. Again, had I known of your plans I'd have been better able to assist Barty..." He looked around and frowned. "I saw Karkaroff leave just before I did. Has he come and gone?"

"Igor Karkaroff is a dead man," the Dark Lord sneered venomously. "Why have the others defied me and not joined the other Death Eaters here in the graveyard. Am I now considered so weak?"

Severus chose to remain quiet, taking the last as a rhetorical question.

"So you tell me you've been in Dumbledore's confidence all these years. Tell me everything, Severus," the Dark Lord said, transfiguring the cauldron into a throne and seating himself comfortably.

Severus boldly transfigured a tombstone into a comfortable chair and moved it to rest in front of the Dark Lord. "Where would you like me to begin?"

The Dark Lord laced his fingers together, although he'd watched Severus' audacity to make himself comfortable through narrowed eyes. "Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix. How many survive, where do they meet, and have their numbers grown?"

Severus returned home, not ready to see the castle or face Dumbledore. Only that wasn't the real reason he sought the gloom of his home. He'd had an overwhelming sadness crush down on him the moment he'd betrayed Dumbledore, which deepened like a knife wound with each truth, and half-truth, he'd told the Dark Lord about Potter, knowing that by returning to the Dark Lord as his sycophant, he'd betrayed Hermione just as he'd betrayed Lily seventeen years ago.

~ T. B. C. ~

Author's Notes:

Yes, I added the events and dialogue that took place when the trio received Mrs. Weasley's Easter eggs. An asterisk denotes what is a direct quote or copied from the book. I couldn't help adding it in, plus it's a good way to show where we are in relation to the year, right?

Chapter 22

Chapter 22 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly, and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes, and WriterMerrin for giving it polish. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione and her parents were driving home in the late afternoon after spending the weekend at the shore. But as they drove inland and away from the coast, the heat became even more oppressive.

"George, I really don't want to cook," Mrs. Granger said, turning to look at her husband. Hermione leaned around her mum's seat to check the onboard temperature gauge. It read a stifling twenty-four degrees Celsius...or seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit according to the converter next to it for the Yanks. *And the forecast had said warm, sunny, and rather dry... I'd call this hot.* Either way, she was very glad that her parents had opted to escape the heat for the coast, and it had been fun spending time with Aunt Eileen, Uncle Rick, and her cousins Leah and Andy, even if they were only four and seven.

"Jean, I need to check in with the practice and see if Mrs. Whelton rescheduled her bridge," Mr. Granger replied, turning the car onto their street, Canterbury Crescent.

Hermione smiled, knowing that meant she'd have time to rinse off in the shower and change her clothes before they'd leave for Ralston's on Stockwell Road. However, her smile faded when they pulled up into the drive, and she saw a grey and white tabby sitting primly on the walk. "Mum, Dad, something's up...Professor McGonagall is here," she warned her parents, quickly drawing her wand from her beach tote.

"Are you sure?" her dad asked, looking in the rearview mirror at her.

But Hermione was already scrambling from the car. When she approached the cat, Professor McGonagall turned and led her to the front door before transforming. Hermione was shocked to see her professor in a crisp white blouse, pleated skirt and sensible shoes as if dressed for an office. "Miss Granger, go inform your parents that Professor Dumbledore is inside, then come inside quickly and pack. We haven't much time."

"What happened?" Hermione asked, hearing the soft flaps of her mother's sandals behind her.

"Nothing that alarming, but you need to be taken to safety," the witch said cryptically.

"Nothing alarming? I don't understand," Mr. Granger asked upon seeing his wife being ushered into his own house by the stern professor.

"Not on the street," McGonagall insisted, helping Mr. Granger with a bag and following the younger woman inside. "I'm afraid that Miss Granger has been spotted at the Brixton Hill Library and on Brixton Road. Unfortunately, we have no idea if she's a target, but our sources say that it might be likely. So, as a precaution, we need to have Miss Granger join her friends in a safer location until we can assess the situation."

"But it's only the fourteenth of July!" Mrs. Granger exclaimed, clearly struggling with the information.

"What about my parents?" Hermione asked, seeing Professor Dumbledore walk into the hall from the dining room.

"That is why I am here, Miss Granger, to see to their safety. Nice to see you; I hope your summer holiday has been a pleasant one so far?"

"But she's only been here two weeks!" Mrs. Granger exclaimed.

"Miss Granger, please go pack quickly," Professor McGonagall said, "while Albus and I explain the situation to your parents."

Hermione wanted very much to hear the explanation too, but she was accustomed to following the witch's instructions. She had spent the last four days taking the tube to Brixton to visit Louise Duke while her parents had been at work. Louise Duke was like a sister to Hermione, since Dr. Duke and his wife were her parents' best friends, as well as Dr. Duke having been a partner in her parents' practice since before Hermione was born. *But if a Death Eater had seen Louise and me...*

Hermione shuddered at the thought as she ran upstairs and began to quickly lay everything she'd need at school on the bed. She double-checked everything, grabbing anything else she might need and all her books. Then she used her wand to pack everything like Mrs. Weasley had taught her last summer. With a double flick of her wand, all of her clothing folded itself neatly. She swished her wand, and everything floated into her trunk and situated itself inside, although not as nicely as Mrs. Weasley had done, but well enough. Hermione put Crooks' in his carrier and then slowly scanned her room for any last-minute items she'd forgotten. Satisfied, she pulled her new trainers from under the bed and tucked them into her trunk as well.

Her mum wasn't any happier when Hermione finally ambled down the stairs, floating her trunk and Crookshanks carrier before her. "Ready."

She hugged her dad, promising to be careful and to mind her professors, and then hugged her mum. Mrs. Granger held her as if she'd never see her again, which made a lump form in Hermione's throat. "Mum, I'll be fine. I'm sure it's only a precaution. Tell Louise that I had to... I dunno, go stay with grandma for the summer or something so she doesn't worry. Okay?"

Mrs. Granger cupped Hermione's face with her hand and stared at Hermione as if memorizing her face. "I will. Write me every week, and be sure to wear a hat when it gets cold. Did you pack the scarf and gloves your grandmother knitted you?" Hermione nodded. "And your new boots, the new coat, you have your floss..."

"Jean, we have access to an owl," Mr. Granger said, walking over and placing an arm about his wife's shoulders. "She'll be fine."

She turned to Professor Dumbledore and he smiled at her. "Everything will be fine, Miss Granger. Do say hello to Mr. Weasley for me."

"Of course, Headmaster," Hermione replied.

Professor McGonagall transfigured Hermione's trunk into a sizable handbag and nodded for her to go. Hermione quickly embraced her parents one more time and followed her professor out of the door. Surprisingly, the professor walked up to a man leaning against a British Mini at the curb. "Put your things in the car, Miss Granger, and be quick."

The man greeted her as he picked up Crooks' carrier and placed him in the back. When Hermione got in, she noticed Professor McGonagall had once again transformed and was curled up on the seat next to the carrier. The man, Gregory, turned out to be Professor McGonagall's nephew and apparently was familiar with driving, although he apparently wasn't at all concerned with traffic signs. The car seemed to magically and effortlessly zip through the traffic, even across intersections against a red light, never hitting anything...or anyone...as they sped along.

By the time they'd reached London, Hermione was a bit nauseous.

Gregory pulled onto a respectable-looking street of lovely Georgian terraced houses and pulled up to the curb. "You're here."

"Where are we?" she asked, trying to take in her surroundings.

"London Borough of Wandsworth," Gregory said as he opened up her door. He made the seat fold forward and pulled out Crooks' carrier, handing it to Hermione. "Aunt Min, I'll be by tomorrow. But I don't think I'll have anything new to add."

"That's quite all right, Gregory; it will be nice to see you regardless." He gave her a quick peck on the cheek and hurried around to the other side of the car. "Hermione, please read this note carefully, memorize it and give it back," Professor McGonagall said as she handed Hermione a slip of parchment.

It was not in the professor's handwriting, although it was familiar to her. Hermione read the note. *The headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix can be found at number twelve, Grimmauld Place.* No sooner than she'd read the address twice, a large, old-styled terraced house seemed to stretch out of the crack between two of the more modern-looking houses, numbers eleven and thirteen, in front of her.

"Shall we then? It's not good to be loitering on the pavement," her professor advised, walking purposefully to the door.

Hermione followed, a bit disconcerted that the old battered door to the house didn't have a latch or a key entry of any kind, just a twisted silver snake knocker and a doorbell.

Professor McGonagall knocked twice and waited. Nothing happened. "I hate doing this, but..." She pressed the doorbell, and a loud clanging noise came from inside, followed by the screeching of an old lady. "I think we might be a bit early."

The door opened, and they walked into a long hall with gas lamps and a very dusty, large chandelier overhead that, at one time, might have been an elegant grand entry. Professor McGonagall led Hermione down the hall. She peered into an unkempt dining room on her left, then stopped in front of a large door just past a grand staircase and returned Hermione's trunk to its original size and shape. Hermione was standing in the entry of a house that would be the perfect setting for any horror movie, wondering why on earth her professor would think this place safe.

"Wait here and I'll go find Molly," Professor McGonagall said, making Hermione suddenly feel bereft of protection.

She was about to pull out her wand when Mrs. Weasley exited from a door at the far end of the entry hall, wiping her hands on a dishtowel. "Hermione, how are you, sweetie? Good to have you. Ron is upstairs with Fred and George, of course, and Ginny is in the room off the first landing. Follow me."

With a flick of her wand, Hermione's trunk floated up the stairs ahead of the motherly witch. Hermione grabbed Crooks' carrier and followed her, trying to avoid looking at the heads of what were probably the former house-elves of the family, which had been gruesomely mounted on the wall, as she passed.

"The drawing room is on the right, a sitting room we've converted into a bedroom for you girls and a bathroom," she said, opening up the door. It was a spacious room with windows that looked out back onto a park of some sort. "Oh, well, Ginny might be in the bath. She'll show you around when she's done. I have to finish the roast, so go ahead and unpack."

"But my parents? If I was in danger, won't they be too?" Hermione asked as Mrs. Weasley set the trunk on the floor.

"No, dear, it's a precaution. You were spotted, and word got back to You-Know-Who that you were living in Brixton. Professor Dumbledore thought it prudent to have you brought here," Mrs. Weasley stated calmly.

Hermione stood in the hall, grasping Crooks' carrier with both hands. "But the Dukes! They're in Brixton...they'll be..."

"Fine," Mrs. Weasley tried to assure her, urging her into the room with a gentle shove. "They will be on vacation for a while until the Death Eater's realize you don't live there."

Hermione absentmindedly set down the carrier on a chair. She was anxious, considering she had no idea what protections were being set up for her parents. "Dr. Duke is a partner in the practice...it's an easy connection to make."

"Arthur is already handling that, Hermione. It's all being taken care of," Mrs. Weasley tried to reassure her, but she was still beside herself with worry. "Now rest up a bit; dinner is in half an hour."

"I'm sure it's all a misunderstanding."

Hermione turned around, surprised to see Sirius Black standing in the doorway. "Hello, Hermione. Snivellus told us that you were spotted and that Antonin Dolohov and Bellatrix Lestrange were going to attack your house in Brixton. But then, Ron said you don't live there, so I'm sure it's a false call."

His nonchalance really irked her. "But I have friends in Brixton!"

"So you were there?" he asked, still smiling at her.

"Yes," she snapped, wanting to wipe that arrogant smile off his face. "Louise and I have been friends for ages. If she's hurt because of me..."

His smile faded, and Mrs. Weasley placed an arm across her shoulders. "Hermione, Arthur deals with this sort of thing all the time, dear, nothing to worry. He's sending them on vacation for a while in a house owned by a friend. They will be perfectly safe," she explained, giving her a squeeze for reassurance. "And Professor Dumbledore is increasing the wards on your parents home, car, and office. Please be assured, it's all being taken care of."

Sirius' smile returned. "Besides, it's you they were after, not your parents, so it's a good thing to have you here with us, tucked away safe."

"Thank you," she replied coolly. "But it's because I'm friends with Harry, isn't it? To get me in a fix to draw him out or something."

"See, sharp as a whip...nothing gets by you. Trust Dumbledore, Hermione; he'll see they're all right. Besides, they are not the apparent target...you were. Otherwise, they'd have attacked the... Dirks?"

"Dukes," she corrected him curtly, releasing Crookshanks from his carrier.

"Right, their house. But you're right. They thought if they abducted you, then they could draw Harry out. Besides, wouldn't you rather be here where all the excitement is in dreary old London?" Sirius said with a twinge of sarcasm, taking a step forward.

Hermione whirled about to face him. "I'd rather be with my parents. I haven't seen them in months, and I was whisked away without any information...to this house that reminds me of a horror movie. I fully expect some homicidal murderer to accost me in the hall."

"Good thing you're right wicked with a wand, then isn't it?" he said as if trying to be charming.

Hermione turned her back on him. "Please go, I want to change." It was an excuse, but she didn't want any more adults telling her things were all right. If it were all right, she wouldn't have been whisked away to this nightmarish home.

Ginny entered and plopped down on one of the beds. "Hermione, why were you being so rude to Sirius?"

"I-I'm just..." She walked over to hug her friend. "I just wish Professor McGonagall or your mum would've given me a straight answer. I didn't mean to take it out on Sirius or your mum... I'll apologize later."

"I know exactly how you feel...it was the same for us; one day Professor Dumbledore showed up, and the next thing we knew, Mum and Dad moved the family here. No one says anything whenever they think Ron, Fred, George, or I are within earshot. Get used to it. So, welcome to the mysterious can't-tell-you-anything-because-you're-a-kid Order of the Phoenix," Ginny scoffed, making Hermione laugh despite herself. "We're to keep away from the drapes for now...they have doxies. And stay away from the Floo...I think there's a ghoul in there. Mr. Moody said he'd sort it out tonight. How about I show you around?"

Hermione followed Ginny as she left the room and climbed the stairs to the second floor. "Did Mum point out the drawing room? It's dingy and the drapes have doxies in there, too, so you've been warned. I just know we'll have the pleasure of getting rid of them."

From the landing on the second floor, Hermione stopped to look down over the banister. From this vantage, she had a clear view of the entrance hall.

"Ron's room is in here," Ginny continued as she walked on, "and that's the master suite...except Sirius hates the room. He's still using his old bedroom on the fourth floor."

"This was Sirius Black's home?" Hermione asked as she hurried after Ginny. It was like nothing she'd imagined his house would be.

"Yes, it's his house. He's allowing Professor Dumbledore to use it for the headquarters because it's so close to everything...only twenty minutes to King's Cross." Ginny turned on her heel and climbed the stairs, taking two at a time. She stopped on the third floor landing. "This floor has three bedrooms: that's where Fred and George are; Professor Lupin uses this one when he's here...which isn't often actually...and Mum and Dad use that one." Ginny continued up the stairs as she rattled on. "The topmost landing has only two doors. That's where Sirius' room is and the bedroom that belonged to his brother, Regulus. There's also a pull-down that leads to the attic."

The house was huge, in Hermione's opinion. Judging by the length of the stairs, every room must have vaulted ceilings.

Ginny reached the fourth floor and hissed, "Comesss downss," making the trap door in the ceiling open and a slanted stepladder appear.

Hermione followed Ginny up the ladder as she disappeared from view, wondering what was so interesting about the attic.

Ginny was kneeling down, waiting for her. "Fred and George are cleaning up the attic, sorting out all the boxes and stuff with Sirius so they can keep Buckbeak up here. Oh, just so you know, we each have to clean the rooms we're in...which means you and I are cleaning up that sitting room."

"Oi, Hermione, come to help?" Fred called from the far end of the attic.

"Nope, just showing her around," Ginny shouted back.

George backed out, stood up, and handed a box to Fred, who was standing in the middle so he didn't have to stoop under the slanted ceiling. "Oh, well, then we get to keep all the treasure for ourselves, eh, Fred?"

'Right," Ginny said, dragging Hermione away. "Like they could; all that belongs to Sirius."

As soon as Hermione stepped foot on the carpet in the corridor, the ladder magically receded.

Ginny bounded down the stairs with Hermione in tow and turned. "That door, Mum calls it a parlor, but the rest of us call it the library. Sirius already warned us that we're not allowed in there...so now you've been warned. There are loads of Dark Arts tomes that have to be sorted, doxies in the drapes, chizpurples and whiteflurries... and there was something revolting that had been spilled on the rug. Anyway, we're going to have to do this room soon so the chizpurples and whiteflurries don't spread throughout the house now that it's occupied. Dumbledore has some kind of seal on it for now."

The other room was the dining room, which again had the appearance of having been a very elegant and ornate room once, but was thick with dust and neglect. "And everyone is helping clean up the kitchen today...even Tonks. Mum hates a dirty kitchen." Ginny led Hermione back to their room. After an hour, Mrs. Weasley came to ask the girls to help her in the kitchen.

The room was huge, with a large fireplace at the far end. Ginny led Hermione over to the pantry, just off the cooking area. It was large enough for two people to stand in comfortably. "Our job is to clean this up. Here's a scrubbing brush," Ginny said, handing it to her. "When we're done in here...we get to clean the floor out there."

"Wonderful," Hermione said, getting to work.

By lunch, Hermione's back hurt. When she came down from washing her hands, the only seat available was between Ron and Sirius. Hermione kept her attention toward Ron, Fred, George, and Ginny all through lunch, then got up and left before pudding, claiming that she needed to write a letter to Harry.

She'd just started her letter when Mr. Weasley poked his head around the door. "Hermione, a moment?" he asked.

She looked up. "Sure."

He stepped in and closed the door. "I feel I must warn you that due to the circumstances, it's imperative that any letter you write has to be approved before you can send it."

"Why?" she asked, in alarm. "Harry will want to know..."

"He can't. Not right now," he stated firmly. "We are in a crucial stage in the war, and because you're here, you could become, er... privileged to know things that cannot be divulged. Do you understand?"

"But he'll want to know where I am," she said, trying to understand his request for things to be kept secret, but also knowing Harry would want to know.

"The house is protected by charms that would make that impossible, I'm afraid. And anything you tell him that could divulge what's happening could cost someone their life."

Hermione nodded, finally comprehending his concern. "All right, what can I say?"

"Only that you're having a nice summer," he answered before turning to go. "Show your letter to Molly, and she'll post it for you."

Hermione sighed and started writing, knowing that Harry wouldn't like being kept in the dark.

Hermione and Ginny were sent up to dust and oil the antique wood furniture in the dining room whenever there was a meeting in the kitchen. Since the furniture had been under sheets and in good shape, the job turned out to be a fast one. Mrs. Weasley had tried cleaning the drapes with her wand, but one section had crumbled in her hand. And the grayish-mustard wall silks looked hopeless to Hermione without a proper steam cleaner.

"There is a spare set in a trunk in the attic," Sirius had stated. "Mum used them for Christmas and special holidays. I'll go get them."

"Later," Mrs. Weasley had said, "after we put the room to straights."

Mr. Moody had arrived to check the formal sideboard dresser for Boggarts, declaring it empty, and Mr. Weasley had managed to fix the latches on the twin bow-front corner

cupboards. Mrs. Weasley and Ron hung the red velvet curtains, and she even managed to clean the old silk walls, but they still remained a dull mustard color. So, by Hermione's third day, the dining room was at least habitable.

When Dumbledore showed up as the clock struck half past twelve, Mrs. Weasley once again shooed Hermione, Ron, Fred, George, and Ginny out of the kitchen. "Buf, Mum, I'm noff done," Ron bemoaned, his mouth still full of roast beef sandwich.

"Then take your plate upstairs," she admonished him, waving them on with her hands. "Off you go."

"Miss Granger, a moment?" Dumbledore asked just as she passed him.

Hermione stopped and turned around. "Of course, sir," she replied perfunctorily out of habit.

"I think it's time to sort out the parlor before the infestation spreads, and I would like you to lend a hand. I'll need someone who can follow exact instructions," he said kindly.

"Sir, I'd love to help you sort out the parlor," Hermione said, beaming up at him.

Dumbledore shook his head, making his long beard sway. "No, my dear, not me; I haven't the time. I'll have someone come by to do it soon...maybe see if he has the time today. Now, you must go so I may speak to Molly and Arthur in private."

"Of course, sir. Good day," she said and hurried after her friends.

Hermione grabbed a book off the coffee table she and Ginny had placed by her bed. Ron, who was sitting closest to her at the sideboard desk, looked up when Hermione turned for the door. "Whaff?"

"I just want some time to read without watching you stuff your face," Hermione said with a chuckle, holding up the book. "You know, just me and Herbert Wieddleman."

He rolled his eyes at her as she left. The only option for peace and quiet was the dining room. She was very happily engrossed in the theories of Professor Wieddleman when she felt a presence. She turned her head, surprised to see Professor Snape standing casually in the doorway. "You're rather early for dinner," she said, not sure why she'd said that at all. He was obviously not here to eat. Mrs. Weasley was anything if not absolutely punctual when it came to meal times.

"I am here to give a report, Miss Granger," he answered curtly. "It's you who is apparently waiting to eat."

She set down her book and turned to face him. "Er, no, actually I'm in here because the drawing room is currently off limits, and the library hasn't been checked yet for dangerous tomes. Professor Dumbledore said that he was going to have someone come today to start checking them and I was to lend a hand."

"You?" he asked with a quirk of his eyebrow.

"Yes, me," she replied, smiling. "I think Professor, er, Mr. Moody said he'd be here about two o'clock."

"I seriously doubt that the Headmaster will ask Alastor Moody to do it," he stated, walking away.

She got up and hurried after him, and Severus turned around. "Yes?" he drawled out slowly. "Was there something else, perhaps? Or may I go to the meeting now?"

She ignored his sarcastic tone. "You're in the Order?"

"Of course I am. Why else would I be here for the meeting?" he said drolly, crossing his arms.

Once again she felt off-footed. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't know you were. No one has said who all the members are."

"And no one will," he stated. "Now if you'll excuse me."

Later, Mrs. Weasley and Dumbledore entered the dining room, with Severus in tow. "Miss Granger, I'd appreciate it if you'd assist Professor Snape in cataloguing the books of the Black family library."

"Absolutely, sir, I'd be delighted to help him," Hermione replied, genuinely happy to be asked.

Severus grunted.

Dumbledore turned towards him, smiling, completely unaffected by his sour expression. "See, Severus, she's amiable to the idea. Any books that you deem unfit or dangerous should be separated from the rest of the books and a ward set on the shelves."

"Headmaster, wouldn't it be prudent to remove the books?" Severus asked, staring at Hermione.

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, given our current circumstances I think it best to have them here, as a reference if necessary. A thorough cataloguing would be enough, and some reorganization is in order."

Severus tilted his head and a crease deepened between his brows. "But if you're going to have children in this house...especially Miss Granger and her friends...their insatiable curiosity..."

"Which is why I wanted Miss Granger working on this project with you, Severus, so she can know which books are too dangerous for her to handle. We can always put the Quidditch books by the windows and the Dark Arts tomes on the wall behind the desk," Dumbledore suggested with a twinkle in his eyes. "I'm sure you and she can work out a suitable arrangement."

Severus turned away, his robes billowing behind him as he left the room. However, he didn't return the next day or the one after that.

Instead, Mrs. Weasley had kept them busy scrubbing every inch of the kitchen. When she'd needed to cook or there was a meeting, she'd shoved them out to go clean their bedrooms. Bill had shown up on Tuesday and Wednesday to help Ginny and Hermione de-doxify the drapes without getting bitten.

At the start of Hermione's second week in the house, Mrs. Weasley had assigned them to clean up the bathrooms in pairs. She and Ginny had been assigned the one off the first landing, and while it had been a mess, it hadn't been too bad, only taking a day to scrub clean.

On Wednesday, Dumbledore knocked on the door, making the girls turn their heads from their position of scrubbing their bedroom floor. "Miss Granger, if I may, would you come with me please. Oh, and if you have your wand, please leave it in your room."

"Of course, sir," Hermione replied as she dropped her scrubbing brush in the bucket and rose to follow him. "I don't have my wand on me, sir."

Professor Dumbledore only nodded in acknowledgment and indicated she follow him down the hall to the library where Professor Snape stood leaning against the wall in a red coverall.

He handed her a similar coverall as she approached. "Put this on, Miss Granger," he said and crossed his arms.

"You and Professor Snape will be sorting out the parlor today," Dumbledore told her as she slipped into the hooded coverall. "Severus, once the infestation is eliminated,

be sure to give Miss Granger the potion."

"Of course, Headmaster," Professor Snape replied in a bored tone.

Hermione looked up as soon as she'd secured the last snap.

"It's good you've braided your hair. It will need to be tucked into your hood. The Headmaster will be adding a shield for your face before we enter the room," Professor Snape informed her. "Have you ever read anything on chizpurples and whiteflurries?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, ready to tell him what she knew, but he held up a hand to stop her.

"I'm sure that you know how dangerous they are."

Professor Snape picked up a bee smoker. "We will be dusting the room with this insecticide. Heavily smoke all the books, rugs, pillows, cushions, rug...every surface in the room. Is that understood? We must be thorough," he instructed.

Hermione nodded. She now reasoned that was why the coveralls were red...black chizpurples and the white whiteflurries would both show up easily as tiny specks on the bright red.

"Good," Professor Snape said, picking up the other smoker. "Pull your hood up."

She complied, making sure her hair was tucked inside, and put on the protective gloves, watching them magically seal closed to her sleeves.

"Do not remove your gloves or open your coverall at any time," Professor Snape stated flatly, handing her one of the smokers.

She shook her head. "No, sir, or they will get inside my protective barrier and infest me. I'd hate to have to shave my entire body and be sprayed down with the insecticide."

"Very good, Miss Granger. Now hold perfectly still, Severus," Dumbledore said with an amused smile. He pointed his wand at Severus' face and then hers. She felt a layer of something she couldn't see settle on her. It felt not unlike cellophane, but she could breathe easily enough, only all sounds were now muffled.

"Now, keep your mouth closed and follow me," Professor Snape said, his voice sounding more like a murmur to her.

She knew that she'd have to really pay attention to him in case he gave her any instructions so she'd do things right. They entered the room and the door closed behind them. Hermione looked around the room in awe, wondering where to start. Except for the windows, a huge portrait of some surly wizard and one of a prim looking witch, all the walls were lined with bookshelves stacked full of books. In the center of the room was a seating area, to the right a large desk and to the left, a baby grand piano stood by the windows and two wingback chairs in opposite corners. In Hermione's opinion, the room couldn't be more perfect...minus the aforementioned infestation.

Professor Snape indicated that she should start on the right side of the room, and he started on the left. The smoke had a sulfuric, pine smell and left the taste of lemons and pepper in her mouth.

At one point, she felt him touch her shoulder as he ran the fog from his smoker over her coverall. She turned to face him, noting that he was covered with what looked like white and black dust. She motioned to him and began to do the same for him as well.

At noon, they stood together in silence outside the door as they ate, then returned to work. They continued working until the light began to fade. At the end of the day, every inch of the room was coated in a thick layer of grayish-purple dust.

Professor Snape placed a hand on her arm and said, "We have to stop." They carried their smokers to the door, and he knocked.

Dumbledore opened the door and encased them in another shield as the door closed behind them. She felt a rush, not unlike the feel of flowing water, swirl around her, then vanish. Hermione stood, looking at her hands as Professor Snape pulled off his coverall. "Take it off, Miss Granger, and shove it in that bucket," he instructed her, indicating an old-fashioned ash bucket that had been placed by the door.

Hermione did as she was told. He handed her two small vials. "Take this one now and the blue before bed. The dust will have to sit for eight days at the least."

"Gestation is six to seven days, I know," she replied with a nod as she followed Professor Snape to the entry. "Will you be back then?"

He turned and smirked at her. "No. Goodnight, Miss Granger."

"Good night, sir," she replied.

Hermione was beginning to have a great deal of compassion for house-elves. Mrs. Weasley must have thought that idle hands led to mischief, because she was a stern taskmaster when it came to cleaning. Kreacher, as far as she could tell, hardly did anything but move about the house mumbling to himself. It was pitiful. Not only that, but Sirius seemed to actually despise the creature, shouting at him and calling him vile all the time. Hermione tried numerous times to get them to understand that Kreacher needed to be shown respect...but so far, only Ginny listened to her.

Moreover, Hermione hated having to show Mr. Weasley or Mr. Moody her letters to her parents and friends, especially any letter to Harry. Worse, she was forbidden to write to Viktor. No matter what persuasive argument she tried, none of the adults would relent. She just knew that Harry was going bonkers without word of what was going on, and the platitudes in her letters to everyone felt like lies to her.

The good thing was that as long as she and Ginny were cleaning with Mrs. Weasley, Sirius Black was generally somewhere else. He occasionally left, scouting for something in his canine form. For what Hermione had no idea as she wasn't allowed near the kitchen during the meetings, but at least he was leaving her alone. Professor Lupin came and went, only using the bedroom once since she'd been there.

The next morning, Professor Snape came to get Hermione at breakfast, carrying, of all things, two vacuum cleaners. Hermione followed him up to the door of the parlor, and they put on their coveralls.

"I assume you know how to work one of these?" Professor Snape asked, indicating the vacuum cleaners on the floor. He continued without giving her time to reply. "You are going to use this to clean up all the dust from the room. The vacuum bag is charmed to accommodate all of it, so you don't need to worry about changing the bag. There is an attachment to use on the bookshelves I charmed myself." He took the attachment with a row of bristles off and showed it to her. "This is charmed to fit in the spaces between the books and the shelves. You can also use it on the furniture cushions and pillows. Is that clear?"

"Yes, Professor, perfectly," she replied.

"Her...Miss Granger, it's unlikely that any of the insects are alive. The dust should have dried up all the eggs. However, if any have survived, they will be attracted to you just like before."

"And I should just vacuum them off us," she replied with a nod.

"Very good, Miss Granger. Now if you're ready," Dumbledore said with an approving nod. Once again, Dumbledore cast the shield on them, and they entered the room.

Hermione looked about the room and decided to work from the top down as much as possible. Professor Snape worked on the drapes while Hermione climbed the ladder,

vacuuming every shelf of the library.

At noon, they were interrupted by a loud pounding on the door, followed by Ron's voice, shouting, "Mum said you have to eat lunch."

Hermione and Professor Snape ate quickly, standing outside the parlor door in Mr. Moody's protective shield, and then reentered the room to continue working, her on the bottom shelves and he on the piano.

He tapped her shoulder as she finished vacuuming the last chair cushion. "We're done for now, Miss Granger," he said, indicating the door with a subtle tilt of his head.

Alastor Moody checked them for any remains of the insects on their persons. "I don't see any of them. I don't believe that there are any more insects to be concerned about," he said gruffly.

Professor Snape nodded. "I concur. I didn't see any indication of the pests inside." He handed Hermione two vials, a bottle and a bar of homemade soap. "Take the potions again and use my soap and shampoo. You and Mr. Weasley can vacuum up all the remaining fumigation dust. Be sure to put the vacuum bags in the ash buckets. Do not touch any of the books until they are properly cleaned with the vacuum attachment. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," she replied. "Thank you."

"I'll be on hand when they're in the room," Moody replied, his face contorted into a grotesque smile.

Hermione shoved the vacuum cleaner bag and her coveralls into the ash bucket, thanked Professor Snape and Mr. Moody, and hurried off to take a long hot shower.

Ginny sat at the desk, logging in the books Severus placed into a wooden crate. There were five piles of books on the floor behind her, ones that Severus considered benign enough to remain in the library, but would be placed on the wall behind the desk and secured. The ones he placed in the crates were ones that were dangerous for a personal collection or cursed.

Hermione was carefully wiping the last remains of the dust from the books that he'd deemed safe enough and setting them back on the shelves.

Sirius checked over the duplicate copies of old schoolbooks stacked on the coffee table. "These the ones that are going to the Hogwarts' library as a donation from the Black family estate?" he asked, picking up two of the books, checking the titles of the books in a box. "These are Great Aunt Cassiopeia's school books. No point in keeping them since I have Grandfather Pollux's and Reg's."

"Hogwarts already has sufficient copies of the old school texts," Professor Snape stated, casting a complicated series of spells on a rather defiant book.

"Trouble with the book, Snivellus?" Sirius taunted.

Severus managed to get the book under control and placed it in the crate. "Since you're incapable of handling your own family's Dark tomes, it has fallen on me to deal with them, Black," he replied curtly. "Take those books and go."

"Sirius, if I have need of you, I can always send a message to you," Hermione said, hoping to keep them from bickering again. It was tiresome, the way Black always tried to bait Severus. Even Ginny glowered each time he did.

Sirius picked up the box. "Maybe I'll give them to Harry," he said.

Ginny snickered, and Hermione forced herself to suppress a smirk.

"They'd find better use if given to Miss Granger," Professor Snape said, silencing a book's mournful wail. "I doubt Potter would everread them."

Hermione smiled as she looked at the books with longing.

"No, Harry wouldn't; they'll simply take up space in his trunk," Ginny murmured, mirroring Hermione's thoughts. She looked at Ginny, and the younger girl winked at her.

"Well, I'll offer them to Harry anyway the next time I see him," Sirius said, heading for the door.

"Which will be never, since you're chained to the house," Professor Snape said and turned his attention to a rather large tome.

"I would be happy to write to him and let him know you have old school books to send him," Hermione offered, but Severus cut off Sirius before he could reply.

"And how exactly would you explain obtaining the books since you cannot divulge that you are residing in this house?"

"You're right, sir," she admitted remorsefully. The information restriction was really oppressive, and Hermione hated it.

Professor Snape picked up a thin book and dropped it into the crate. "Finish up, I don't want to be here all week doing this," he said, moving over to the next shelf.

"Why, Snivellus, do you have a more pressing engagement to attend to?" Black sneered from the doorway.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Professor Snape said with a wicked smile, even though he didn't turn around. "I have to finish testing a potion that would supposedly incapacitate a werewolf and trap him in his altered state."

"What?! No!" Hermione gasped.

"Oh, the potion will fail," he said softly, smirking at her.

"What do you mean trap him in his altered state?" Sirius demanded as he reentered the room and dropped the box on the floor.

"What altered state do you think I mean, Black? You're friends with Lupin...what altered state does he undertake?" Professor Snape replied with a hint of venom in his tone.

"You wouldn't!" Sirius snarled.

Professor Snape turned around. "No, I wouldn't. Besides, the potion will not work. Potions with silver roots have to be brewed in a silver cauldron, and cerebrumium, which reacts strongly to silver, cannot be. They are the main ingredients."

Hermione blanched and nearly dropped the book. "You mean the Silverarian Potion? That potion is illegal!"

Severus smirked at her and nodded, and Hermione gasped in shock.

"What's the Silverarian Potion?"

But Hermione barely registered the question, still staring worriedly at Professor Snape. "That potion is lethal! It was considered a failure in 1816 and hasn't been worked on since the last known brewer who attempted the brew blew up his village in 1941."

"Why?" Ginny asked and Hermione turned to look at her.

"It uses silver nitrate, mercury, and silver roots and is, as Professor Snape said, brewed in a silver cauldron so that the silver aspect would hopefully kill the werewolf. Muggles believe that silver bullets can kill a werewolf. Bullets *can* kill one, but if the werewolf changes before he dies, the werewolf will survive the..."

"Lestrage thinks that it was the brewer's mistake. I simply have to prove it's impossible to brew, and the Dark Lord will give up on the idea," Professor Snape said softly.

Hermione reached out and touched his sleeve. "But you'll be careful, won't you?"

"Oh, how touching," Sirius sneered, and Hermione and Professor Snape both turned to glare at him, Professor Snape positively maliciously at him. "Always so fallible, aren't we?"

"He does what he has to," Hermione said as Professor Snape stepped away from the ladder.

"Warn your friend to stay away from the vales above Doonesbury," he said in a low angry tone to Sirius. "The wolves there are not friendly. Now take the books and go...or stay, but keep your dribble to yourself before you push me too far, Black. Now, I have work to do..."

"You forget yourself, Snivellus! This is my..."

With a wave of his hand, Sirius and the box flew out of the door, and Severus drew his wand, casting a shield across the door. "If either of you must leave for any reason, ask me. You will not be able to exit without my assistance. Now back to work...quietly!" he snapped and returned to the bookshelves.

Ginny shrugged at Hermione and picked up a dust rag to help with the dusting until there was a pile of books to log. Hermione stared at Professor Snape a while, then resumed working, thinking, *It isn't like Sirius hasn't had it coming, the way he's taunted Severus...*

~ T. B. C. ~

Chapter 23

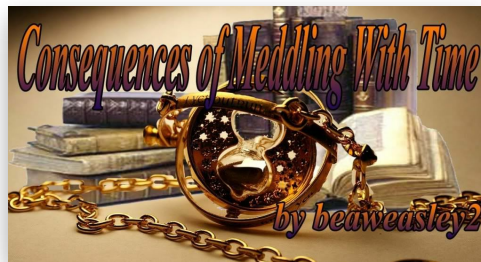
Chapter 23 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to EverMystique and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Ever since working with Severus on the library, Hermione had been reevaluating her opinion of him. All his actions to date, from the first time he tried to save Harry on the Quidditch pitch their first year on, proved he was on their side, regardless of what Harry and Sirius thought. Sure, he as cantankerous and aloof, but he was a good teacher, a protector, knowledgeable, and a skilled wizard. However, Hermione frequently found herself wishing he were more like his younger self from her third year.

Severus came by the house infrequently, usually arriving just before the meetings started and leaving immediately after. On occasion, he'd come into the library and read awhile after the meeting while waiting for either Mr. Weasley, Kingsley, Tonks or Dumbledore to speak to them privately. He looked fine, well fine for him, but she could see the strain in his eyes from the stress he was under. She didn't want to think about what Voldemort was asking of him, what he was being forced to do, because in her mind her imagination went wild, creating all sorts of horrors.

Hermione sat curled up reading in one of the large wingback chairs by the window in the library during an Order meeting, one of the few times they could take a break in cleaning, when Severus entered. He walked to the section behind the desk, the 'restricted shelves,' calmly pulling out a book, checking something, setting it back, and selecting another. He didn't turn to acknowledge her, but Hermione smiled to herself anyway, enjoying his presence in the room as she read.

She was struggling with the theory of a particular spell in her book when Sirius snidely taunted Severus from the doorway, saying, "Don't have enough Dark Arts books of your own, Snivellus?"

Hermione looked up and scowled at him, but Severus didn't even turn around. "Not that I have to answer you, Black, but I only came in to check the protective spells on the bookshelves," Severus stated drolly, casually re-shelving a thick book.

Hermione watched him over the top of her book as he made a subtle wave of his hand across several books before taking one off the shelf. She held the book in her hands

closer to her face in annoyance as, once again, Sirius was verbally baiting him. *It's always Sirius who's the instigator*, she thought with an agitated sigh. It made her sick. Why Sirius was in the library was a mystery to her, unless he was simply bored and it amused him to try and rile Severus up.

Severus opened up a book that started making an awful wailing screech like an injured cat, and Sirius stormed out, slamming the door in his wake. Severus slammed the book closed, turned and seemed to notice her for the first time. "What are you doing here...listening in on our conversation?" he snapped.

"I was in here first," she replied, "and I'd hardly call that a conversation, sir. He only wanted to get you to argue with him."

"That is none of your concern. I can handle Black," he said, coming over to where she sat curled up by the window.

"I know you can. Besides, I wouldn't repeat the immature ramblings of a..."

"What are you reading?" he interrupted her.

Hermione lifted up her book to show him the title, and he snatched it from her hands. "Oi! I wasn't done with that!" she exclaimed.

"It's a Dark Arts book," he stated. "You're done with it."

"It has protection spells and..."

"These are not the type of protection spells you should be reading...let alone consider trying," he said curtly, brandishing the book at her.

She reached out to snatch the book back, about to retort, but the softly-implovingly sound of her name, "Hermione," made her lose her thought and stare at him in shock. "Once you cross that line, once you start using the Dark Arts, especially the Blood Arts, your morals blur. They are enticing, they seem like strong spells and enchantments, and in many cases they are, but they are tied to your emotions, intent, and desires. At first you think they're benign, but there are few who can turn away from it," he coolly explained, but there was a quality to his voice, a sense of danger that enthralled her.

"You have," she replied, sounding a little breathless.

"I have not," he said sharply, standing up as he hid the book from view, and the sense of an enchantment seemed to snap off in her head. "Do not for a moment forget that I am a Death Eater, you silly girl. Once a Death Eater...always a Death Eater." He turned and left the room, taking the book with him, making Hermione feel bereft and empty.

Hermione stared at the new rug that lay on the floor, a purchase Sirius had asked Mrs. Weasley to make for him since they couldn't get the foul stain out of the old one, examining the pattern as she contemplated what he'd said. She felt light, almost lightheaded, but not quite. As soon as he'd taken the book away from her, she'd felt deprived of it, until he'd hidden it from her. Then she'd felt a sense of... release. The feeling of having been let go now bothered her; that break in the connection she'd felt.

"Hermione, are you all right?"

She looked up to see Professor Lupin watching her. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"Professor Snape mentioned that you were reading a Dark Arts tome," he said and moved a chair closer to sit opposite her. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"No," she replied.

"Hermione, the Dark Arts are alluring, but they won't give you power, no more power than you already have inside of you."

"I know that," she said, wishing he'd leave. She wanted to talk to Severus about this, not him. *What does he know anyway? He hates the Dark Arts just like Sirius does.*

"...fear, hate, and anger are three of the strongest emotions we have. Many of the Dark Arts are based on our anger and hate. It promises power, great strength, and knowledge. But it's a lie...it provides none of this. It feeds off of your anger and hate, and the more you hate the stronger you seem."

"Like the Cruciatius," she replied. She knew this...it was nothing that Barty Crouch Jr, while posing as Professor Moody, hadn't already explained. "The Dark Arts draws its energy from your determination, intent, and desires; an energy that is enhanced by your emotion."

"Exactly, then in an act of anger, when you want to hurt someone, or in an act of revenge just once to get even... and then it's only a small slide down to using it again and again until they don't seem all that wrong anymore," he said, clasping his hands together. "Even the spells to manipulate and control someone against their will... the very thought of being able to bend someone to your will, it becomes so easy to do. Once you're seduced, once you cross that line, it's very easy to be swayed and your morals to become relaxed, even bent."

"That's why Sirius hates Professor Snape, because he can do the Dark Arts," she said. It wasn't a question; it just came out sounding like one.

He sighed heavily and looked away for a moment. "Yes, both he and James hated the Dark Arts and anyone who used them. Severus came to school knowing more about the Dark Arts than any seventh-year, or so the rumors were," he said, looking at his hands again. "You do know that of everyone I know, I've never seen anyone more well-versed in them."

"But did that give you the right to pick on him in school?" she asked and he sat up, his eyes widening in surprise.

"No, it didn't. There was more to it than that. There was a war going on, people...even students...were taking sides. Almost all of the friends Severus had in school are now among You-Know-Who's ranks."

"So because a boy was knowledgeable of something...something you weren't...that made it right? You just stood by while he was tormented and hurt, and that was fine because he knew about the Dark Arts? Because he was what...from Slytherin and therefore on the bad side...so that made him fair game for you and your friends to torment? Is that what you're telling me? It was four against one!" she snapped at him.

Professor Lupin's head jerked back slightly as from her anger. "It wasn't...did Professor Snape tell you that?"

She huffed at his question, quickly thinking how to phrase what she wanted to say. "No. It's not hard to figure it out...the way you talk to each other, the way Sirius calls him by that childish sneer, 'Snivellus.' You were bullies in school, and it shows," she said, knowing she'd been vague enough.

"I wasn't proud of what we did," he said; the hurt and confusion in his eyes made her want to scream.

"Please leave me alone," she said coolly. "I don't have the book anymore and won't read any of the others."

Professor Lupin nodded and stood up. "They were my friends, Hermione," he said softly. "They befriended me when no one else would."

She refused to look at him. "They were bullies." *And you were no better*, she wanted to say aloud, but didn't.

She heard him pause at the doorway and then silence filled the room, although she still felt like someone was watching her. She turned and saw Severus standing in the doorway, his gaze on her. She felt self-conscious under his scrutiny and sat up to speak to him, but he turned and disappeared.

Severus was resting in the library after making a report to Dumbledore. Young Mr. Weasley was in the girls' room again, down the hall, apparently having a disagreement with Miss Granger. He could hear their argument from all the way in the library. He smirked. Hermione was having a tirade at him about how Sirius and he treated the house-elf, Kreacher.

"That comes around to leopards never changing their spots," she snapped.

"Hermione," the boy whined.

"He was a bully as a teen, and he hasn't grown up at all since then. He's still the same insensitive prat."

A few seconds later, the boy was running up the stairs.

Severus heard her footsteps approach as she stormed from the sitting room she and Miss Weasley were ensconced in as a bedroom and entered the library. He watched her quietly as she searched the shelves as she selected something to read. He was well aware that she'd already read everything on the shelves to her right. Her insatiable love of reading was something he could never forget.

From his angle he could see she was looking at the books on the ancient magic of foreign wizards. She selected a book that he knew to be on the spells used by the Egyptian wizards on the tombs in Giza, and then pulled out the Hieratic translation guide from another shelf.

When she turned around, the look of surprise amused him. "Oh, I didn't see you there," she stammered.

"Obviously," he said smoothly and pretended to read as he watched her over his book. She pulled out a roll of parchment and then lay on her stomach on the floor with her feet up as she busily worked on translating the book so she could read it.

They sat in amicable silence: him reading, her translating. It reminded him of when he'd spent time with her in his potions lab as a student, and he found he still enjoyed the comfortable feeling of her presence. He shook his head. Such thoughts were too dangerous. He couldn't allow their friendship to happen now...the Dark Lord would find out, and there would be trouble.

"Well, isn't this a cozy scene," Sirius said from the doorway.

"It's called reading. You might try it someday, Black...it improves your mind," Severus said frostily, hoping the git would get the hint.

Sirius entered the room. "Oh, believe me, I have, Snivellus," he said. "Enjoying the view?"

"I don't want to hear this!" Hermione rolled up, leaning one elbow as she cast a Silencing Jinx on him.

Severus set his book aside and glared at her. "How dare you! I neither want nor need an insufferable know-it-all to defend me," he snapped at Hermione. The last thing he wanted was a girl standing up for him again; he was perfectly capable of handling Black himself.

"I just want to read in peace!" she snapped back at him.

He scowled at her for her insolence, and she at least flushed at his nonverbal admonishment. "I'm sorry, sir, that was uncalled for."

Sirius managed to end the jinx because he was the one to answer, "By jinxing me? In my own house?"

"Yes, because at least Professor Snape has the common courtesy to be quiet in a library!" she snarled at him.

"It's my house!" Black snarled back.

"And he was just sitting there reading! Why did you have to come in here and start harassing him?" she shouted at him.

"Miss Granger, enough! I do not require you to fight my battles," Severus snarled, making her blush again. "For your information, Black, I'm awaiting the Headmaster. If my presence in your precious library is too annoying for you, then by all means, go scratch your fleas elsewhere."

From down in the entry hall, Mrs. Black began wailing and screeching again. "Sounds like your mother is awake," Severus sneered, setting aside his book. "Miss Granger, enjoy your studies." He stood and walked around the sofa, bumping into Black slightly as he passed him without comment.

"Severus, Sirius," Kingsley stated, as Severus came down the stairs, obviously followed by Black. "How are things?"

"The same normal aggravations...and constantly having to watch my back," Severus said in greeting. "How are things at the Ministry?"

"The same," Kingsley said with a grin as they walked down the stairs to the kitchen.

"You two sound like old wives," Black scoffed from behind them.

"Too bad we can't let the dog out," Severus told Kingsley.

Kingsley smiled. "That's just what I have in mind."

Dumbledore was already talking to Tonks and Arthur when they entered the kitchen and closed the door. Severus stood in his usual spot and waited to give his report.

Hermione was stepping out of the dining room as Severus arrived for the meeting. "Hello, Professor," she replied.

"Miss Granger," he said and handed her a book. "Kindly return this for me."

"Sure," she replied. "Er, the Silverarian Potion, how did that go?"

He smirked at her. "Unfortunately, a complete and total disaster...utterly destroyed the lab. I've never demolished a lab before. Lestrage is livid, but the potion idea is shelved."

"Fantastic," she said, then caught the hard coldness that crossed his features. She turned, not at all surprised to see Sirius Black coming down from upstairs carrying a bucket full of something foul smelling. Sirius had his wand in his hand, and for a moment she thought that he was aiming at Severus. A quick sideways glance, she realized Severus might not have seen Sirius' wand because he hadn't drawn his yet. As Sirius raised his wand, Hermione acted quickly, casting a Reflection Shield she'd read, not realizing that Severus had whipped his wand out and cast a jinx in defense.

Sirius' spell rebounded on Hermione's shield, but since the shield was aimed against Sirius, Severus' jinx passed right through, making Sirius fall the last step. The contents of the bucket spilled out onto the floor before Sirius landed face first in it. "What do you think you are doing!" he snapped, now covered in hippogriff excrement, boils, and sporting a broken ankle.

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, her face red hot with embarrassment, about to explain her actions, but then she saw the proud smirk on Professor Snape's face that he tried to hide and her train of thought escaped her.

"That was an advanced Shield Charm," Severus said coolly as he tipped her head up to look in her eyes.

"It was in a book," she muttered, confused by his coolness.

"And well executed," he said softly, then raised his voice adding, "Help clean up the mess. I'll go get Mrs. Weasley."

She saw Sirius glaring at her.

"Why?" Sirius snapped at her when she turned to help him.

"I cast a shield charm, that's all. I thought you were going to hex him or something," she said, her hands on her hips.

"With a bucket of crap and coming down the stairs?" he asked incredulously.

"It's not like you don't take any opportunity you can to bully him," Hermione said as she helped siphon up the mess with her wand. "You behave like a teenager all the time. You'd think you'd have grown up somewhat by now?"

He glared at her. "And it offends you?"

"Yes. It offends me," she snapped, pushing past him and up the stairs as Mrs. Weasley arrived to sort out the mess.

She flounced onto her bed and covered her face with her pillow, only then realizing that Professor Snape had cast a Tripping Jinx, not one for boils, so in essence she'd saved him, or herself, from that curse. She lowered the pillow to her knees, laughing at the thought of Sirius getting hit with his own curse. "Poetic justice," she told Crookshanks when he head butted her arm for attention.

Mrs. Weasley's screech could be heard even up in the girl's bedroom. "Dementors! What were Dementors doing in Little Whinging?"

Hermione and Ginny both bolted for the kitchen, but were stopped on the landing by Fred and George.

"Mum is really wound up," George whispered.

"Should be able to hear plenty if you'll pipe down," Fred added, then held up his finger to his lips. He handed Ginny what looked like an oversize ear. "Use this. We just invented them."

"Apparently Harry and his cousin Dudley were attacked by two Dementors in an alley off Magnolia Street," Fred repeated what he heard his dad say. Hermione had to strain to hear Mr. Weasley because his voice was considerably lower than Mrs. Weasley's. "Harry is... expelled. Blimey!"

"EXPULLED? HOW COULD HE BE EXPULLED?"

Hermione couldn't make out the reply, but Mrs. Weasley's response of, "But that was a reasonable use of magic! You're allowed to defend yourself in cases of attack," was loud and clear.

"Harry produced a Patronus," Ginny whispered. "Dumbledore's gone to the Ministry."

"Find out what you can," Hermione whispered to Ginny and immediately rushed to get to the library. She pulled out the Black family's copies of the magical law books and began searching. The law books had the Magical Law Office official seal, which meant that unlike Muggle law books, these magical law books are all tied together to the Ministry's copies and magically updated with the new amendments as the laws changed.

Professor Lupin entered and walked over to her. "Do you need a hand?" he offered and showed her how to decipher the added amendments anyway before she could tell him she'd already figured it out herself. She feigned listening as she looked for anything that would help Harry. "I'm surprised that the Black family has a full set of law books. It's not common for wizarding families to have an official set. Not that it won't be helpful," he said. "Someone in the family must have been on the Wizengamot...or was aspiring to study magical law."

"Regulus," she replied, finding the books on Underage Magic.

He looked up, surprised by her revelation. "Pardon?"

"Phineas Nigellus Black was a Headmaster at Hogwarts, and Sirius' younger brother, Regulus, wanted to be the magical equivalent of a solicitor or barrister," she said somberly, finding the section for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Magic. "Before he joined You-Know-Who, I suppose."

"How do you know this?" he asked, curious despite himself.

"Ginny and I attempted to clean Regulus' room for habitation, and Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black has a portrait here." Hermione found the amendments concerning underage magic and carried it to the desk for study.

Taking a hint, Lupin backed away. "If you find anything helpful, let either Molly or Arthur know," he said and left her alone.

Hermione was busily jotting down notes when Ginny came into the library, and she looked up. "Kingsley just arrived, and he told Mum, Dad, Professor Lupin, and Sirius that Harry's expulsion is on hold pending a hearing," she said dejectedly. "He told them that Cornelius Fudge and Dolores Umbridge are behind Harry's expulsion. They're furious that Potter still insists that the Dark Lord is back. Did you find anything helpful?"

Hermione shook her head. "Just what we were told at the leaving feast: in life threatening situations any witch or wizard, of any age, has the right to defend themselves. It's iron clad. All he has to do is prove he and his Muggle cousin were attacked by Dementors."

"That won't be easy, Muggles can't see them...only feel them, and his cousin wouldn't know that. Oh, Hedwig arrived with a letter to Sirius," Ginny said. "I'll ask him later what it says."

Ron suddenly burst into the library. "Oi, Professor Snape is here, and Moody, Kingsley, Tonks, and Miss Jones. Looks like an emergency meeting has been called."

"Good," Hermione said, standing up, wondering if she'd have a moment to say hello to Hestia. She grabbed the parchment she'd been writing on. "I'll go ask Mr. Weasley if I can send this to Harry. He must be frantic."

Mr. Weasley was in the entry hall talking to a short, grey-haired wizard and tall witch who had her slightly graying blonde hair up in an elegant coiffure. They all stopped talking when she approached. "Mr. Weasley, I have it all worked out. I would like to send this to Harry," she asked, holding out the parchment.

He held up a hand. "Not now, Hermione, this is important. I can talk to you about this after," he said, indicating that the witch and wizard move into the dining room.

Hermione moved to follow him and was halted in her track. "But if I could only write to Harry, I could explain..."

"No, you may not, Miss Granger," Dumbledore said from behind her.

She turned to face him, hoping to make him see reason. "But I've read all about the Reasonable Restriction for Underage Magic, and it says..."

"I'm well aware of the laws, Miss Granger, and when Harry is brought here, he will appreciate all your efforts. For now, I must ask that you please go upstairs."

Frustrated and furious at being dismissed, she stormed up stairs and began to pace. "I'm going to the library," she announced, but Ginny merely shrugged.

Hermione paced the library, looking at the books. She'd already exhausted the law books on the subject, and the Black family library was useless on any additional information about Dementors than she already knew... and reading wasn't an option...she couldn't concentrate on anything else. Sighing, she selected a book on Dark creatures and sat down crossed-legged on the floor.

"What are you reading?" Severus asked softly as he entered the room.

"Checking up on the telltale signs of Dementors," she replied, placing a hand on the book as she looked up at him.

He knelt down and looked her in the eyes. "What have you found that you don't already know? Miss Granger...Hermione, I know you; in your third year you read everything there was on the creatures."

"I just want to help Harry," she replied, both elated by his compliment and deflated because he was right. "I just hate not being able to tell him what I know. He must be going mad with worry."

"Dumbledore has it in hand," he said, smirking at her. "Do you really think that the Headmaster of Hogwarts isn't aware of the bylaws concerning underage magic? He wrote most of them himself. Kingsley Shacklebolt also has influence in the Ministry and there are others. Why won't you trust us to handle the situation?"

"Because I hate feeling useless," she admitted.

He reached out and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. "I know. But for now there isn't anything that you ~~can~~ do. So, please trust us to handle it."

She nodded, closing the book on her hand, and he laughed softly. "But for now enjoy reading up on Dark creatures," he said with a smirk as he rose.

She watched him walk away, wishing he'd stay and talk to her, and then sighed deeply *No, Sirius is in the house...they'll only get into a fight again.* She opened the book to continue reading.

Ron's room had been cleaned up in anticipation of Harry's arrival.

When Mr. Moody arrived, Mrs. Weasley had hustled everyone upstairs to their bedrooms. It meant that for the next however-long-it-took...they didn't have housecleaning, but being shooed away to their rooms irked Hermione. It was like being a little kid all over again.

Like she always did, Tonks had knocked over the troll foot, which made Mrs. Black screech and holler, and Harry had been shuffled upstairs by Mrs. Weasley as soon as he arrived. Hermione had hoped to sit down with Harry and catch up on everything, but he'd been so furious, yelling about being left in the dark, not getting any letters, and he'd assumed that just because she and Ron were at headquarters, they knew far more than he did. Well, they did know some, but not that much, thanks to Mrs. Weasley. All in all, if Harry would've only just calmed down and quit sulking, things would've gone better, but he was being a real prat. Something Hermione seriously wished he'd have grown out of by now. After all, he was fifteen, not a little kid anymore.

Ginny returned from the loo. "Snape is here, and he's giving a report at the Order meeting," she said and motioned for Hermione to follow.

Ron, Harry, and Hermione followed her from the room, hoping to get close enough to hear something. Fred and George were on the stairs, each holding an Extendable Ear trailing down to the kitchen door.

"It's not working, that cat is interfering," Ron complained, trying to listen in with Fred.

Hermione touched George on the shoulder, and he withdrew the small earpiece, letting her lean close to him so she could listen in too. In between Crooks growling and hissing, they could make out, "There is a small ... office on the sixth floor ... a pair of Muggle-borns who've set up a marketing... Already ... their advertisements are ... Colorful moving ..." and then only the sound of Crooks' purring.

"I'll go get him," Hermione said, walking down the stairs to the short hall where the kitchen door was. She could hear Kingsley's deep baritone voice saying, "So we have to move tonight and not wait ..." before the door opened and Moody walked out.

"Er, my cat," she stammered, pointing at the corner where Crooks' sat with a string dangling from his mouth.

"Well, get him and get back upstairs where you belong and take your friends with you. All six of you are not needed to retrieve one cat," Moody snarled, crossing his arms, his one eye showing nothing but its white sclera.

"Yes, sir. Bad, Crookshanks," Hermione hissed as her cat ran off with the fleshy string. Hermione went after him, not really wanting him to eat it.

Mrs. Weasley's motto of 'the devil finds mischief for idle hands,' ensured that everyone was constantly given tasks to do. During Harry's hearing, Hermione had been extra industrious, fighting her nervous tension by combating dust and doxies with a vengeance. She'd jumped up when Harry returned and hugged him tightly when he'd announced that he'd been cleared of all charges. She had been in shock when Harry told them that he'd had to face the entire Wizengamot...a full hearing instead of simply the representatives of the Improper Use of Magic Office.

The rest of the month was fairly innocuous.

Mrs. Weasley had found out about the Extendable Ears when she caught Hermione and Ginny chasing after Crookshanks with one in his mouth. Hermione had been livid at her familiar for dropping it neat-as-you-please on the woman's foot and then having the temerity to look up at her proudly as if he'd done the right thing. All he'd accomplished was that Mrs. Weasley now used an Imperturbable Charm on the kitchen door at all times.

Ginny had taken to chucking Dungbombs at the door and blaming them on Crooks', and considering he'd seemed to become a turn-coat, Hermione didn't admonish her for the fib. And they still had yet to uncover what this secret weapon was that Voldemort wanted.

Hermione was coming down the stairs when she saw Professor Snape and Dumbledore leaving the stairs to the kitchen. "So when shall I inform Minerva of your arrival?" he asked the Headmaster.

"I have one more option to try," Dumbledore said sadly. "Tell her I will arrive in time for dinner." The headmaster turned. "Ah, Miss Granger, I believe that congratulations are in order."

"Sir?" she asked confused, coming down the last few steps slowly.

"I don't think the letters have arrived, Headmaster," Professor Snape said softly, but she saw an odd slight curve of his lip, almost a pleased smile on his normally tightly controlled face.

Dumbledore turned slowly. "Ah, of course. I'm ahead of myself. Good day, Miss Granger."

"Good day to you, too," she replied, now intensely curious about what that all meant.

Hermione tried to put the incident from her mind, but the announcement that the Ministry of Magic had passed an Educational Decree number twenty-two, allowing the Ministry to appoint professors if the Headmaster couldn't find someone, alarmed her. "They're targeting the Defense Against the Dark Arts position," she said, trying to decipher if the article covered who had been hired or not.

"How do you know that?" Ron asked.

"Professor Dumbledore has to find a new professor every year, doesn't he?" She looked up at him and sighed. His mouth full of some gummy treat the twins had made that was making him develop green splotches and his ears to grow. "Honestly, why do you trust them so?"

"He probably has someone lined up already," Ron said hopefully, ignoring her other question.

"Not if this is in the *Daily Prophet* it doesn't," Fred stated, measuring Ron's ears. "Thirty centimeters... and growing. Make it thirty-five."

"Can't be that many people who want a cursed teaching position," George added, jotting down notes in his journal.

"But, school starts in two days!" Hermione exclaimed.

Kingsley arrived and the order members moved into the kitchen. Fred disappeared, but he was remanded back upstairs by Mrs. Weasley. "Sturgis Podmore was caught breaking into a door in the Ministry of Magic," Fred announced proudly after she'd left.

"How can he break into the Ministry? The bloke works there," Ron stated, munching on the other side of the chew.

"Apparently not behind that particular door," Fred stated with a roll of his eyes that clearly had that 'I can't believe we're related' look.

The day before they were to depart for school, Hermione was on her bed reading one of her new school books. The school lists had arrived only the day before, and she shuddered to think what Mrs. Weasley must have gone through to get them all their school things, considering that every parent of a Hogwarts student would have been shopping in Diagon Alley on the same day. It must have been bedlam.

Harry slipped in the door, and Hermione moved two books aside so he could sit down. "Do you have a minute?" he asked.

She lowered the book to her lap. "Of course, Harry. What's up?"

"I didn't congratulate you," he said, looking at his hands.

"But you expected to be made Prefect, too," she said softly. "This doesn't mean that he's better than you or anything, you know."

"I know," he said, still staring at his hands.

She sat up and leaned forward, hoping he'd look at her. "It's rather kind of Professor McGonagall to choose him. It gives him something to be proud of."

He turned to look at her, and she smiled encouragingly at him. "Ron feels like he's always in someone's shadow, Harry; first his brothers' and now yours. This is something he's earned. Maybe if you'd look at it that way, it wouldn't hurt as much."

His eyes flashed at her choice of words, and she knew she'd nailed it. "I'm not hurt..."

"But you're disappointed. It's understandable. However, you've enough to be getting on with, don't you think? You've Quidditch and your studies. Try and be happy for him. Don't let this tear you apart like the Triwizard Tournament did."

Harry's lips stretched into a smile that didn't reach his eyes. "I'll try."

She gave his arm a gentle squeeze with her hand. "He's your best mate. For once, it's Ron's turn. Try and be happy for him, okay?"

"I am, I suppose," he mumbled.

She hugged him. "Good." She released him and picked up the new Defense book. "Have you read this? It's a bunch of tripe! All theory and no actual spells or defense at all."

He held up his hands. "Hermione, of course I haven't read it...I'm not even at school yet!"

She sighed. "Well let's hope the new professor has handouts or something, because if we all go by this book...we're dead ducks."

~ T. B. C. ~

Chapter 24

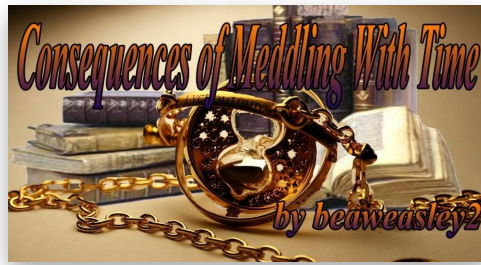
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Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to Writermerrin, EverMystique, and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Severus entered the staff room and frowned slightly, but imperceptibly to anyone who didn't know him well, at the witch sitting with imperious propriety between Dumbledore and Minerva wearing Pepto-Bismol pink robes and a matching pillbox-shaped hat. He sidestepped his usual chair and sat between Madam Hooch and Flitwick, getting warm smiles from both.

"An' how was your summer, Severus?" Rolanda asked softly.

"Tolerable," he replied, hoping that the meeting would start soon. "Yours?" Severus knew that the flying instructor went home to Düsseldorf every summer, and he personally hoped that the news from her homeland would be favorable.

"You know, not so good," she said softly, leaning toward him slightly. "Went home. Although the effects of the heat can be felt, it's not as devastating as things in Scotland, Sussex, and Surrey. I heard that Mr. Potter had some trouble."

Severus concealed his reaction to her veiled report. "When does he not?" he asked, the tone of his voice projecting his condescending attitude about Potter's favoritism. "It was resolved in his favor."

"When is it not?" she said with a roll of her eyes, clearly alluding that she held the same opinion as he did. "Do tell the Headmaster that the young birch trees are listening, but many are still scarred from the last round of twig harvest and are not as pliable this season."

Severus refrained from smirking that her not-too-subtle use of metaphor meant that the young wizards and pure-blood families in Germany were not going to join in the Dark Lord's campaign. "Good to know, but why can't you tell him yourself?" he asked dryly, seeing Dumbledore rise to his feet.

"Have you seen the state of the school's brooms? I have to replace the twigs on over forty of them this year alone before the first flying lessons can be scheduled," she said, recoiling back slightly with wide eyes and a gaping mouth. She leaned toward him again. "Only because there is no budget for new brooms...again. Who's the witch with a fly-eating grin in the putrid pink robes?"

Severus chuckled softly only because he could well imagine how much damage fifty to sixty students a year could do to the school's brooms.

Dumbledore cleared his throat. "We're about to find out," Severus replied, turning his attention to the Headmaster.

"I would like to introduce you to Miss Dolores Umbridge, who shall be taking the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts," Dumbledore said, indicating the short, squat, and flaccid-looking witch with a wide-jowled face making an attempt at a girlish smile. Severus was immediately suspicious of her. "If you'd please make her welcome and..."

"Thank you, Headmaster, for that kind introduction," Umbridge interrupted the Headmaster, making the staff stare at her in astonishment. "I'm so looking forward to working with all of you in enlightening today's youth with the important relevant information they will need for their lives ahead of them. I'm sure that you, like me, can't wait to impart the fundamentals of magic in a safe and worry-free environment. I trust that we will work together to strive to do what's best for the students and in making them fine, upstanding members of our wizarding community. I like you ..."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose as she droned on. When the witch was done rambling, everyone simply stared at her in silence.

"Ah, yes. Thank you, Professor Umbridge. I'm sure we are all looking forward to a productive year," Dumbledore stated, finally gaining control of the meeting. "Now, if I might bring up the matter of staff assignments. This year due to the reemergence of Voldemort..."

The irritating witch in pink coughed.

"We will be increasing the shifts to the nightly patrols and..."

Professor Umbridge coughed again, this time louder.

Dumbledore turned to look at her. "Yes, Professor, you have something to add?"

"Excuse me, Headmaster, I don't mean to be rude, but as of yet there is no proof that anyone of any great *significance* has returned, let alone a dead, Dark wizard," Umbridge said in a high-pitched saccharine-girlish voice that made Severus want to puke. "I have no idea why such considerations would be necessary."

Even Professor Flitwick rolled his eyes as the Headmaster replied, "Because I see it as a necessary precaution," and continued with the meeting, ignoring the indignant huff of the jowl-faced witch.

Severus had felt the usual headache coming on even before he had his first class of the day. Dolores Umbridge's speech at the Sorting Feast had been, as all political speeches went, mostly falsely polite platitudes and innuendos...but those innuendos had spelled out trouble for the year ahead. The Ministry was interfering at Hogwarts.

Ever since the first staff meeting, Severus had known that he distrusted the new professor, and now more than anything, Severus resented Dumbledore's insistence that he not be given the post of Defense Against the Dark Arts. Miss Umbridge, a stout supporter of Fudge, was apparently holding steadfast to his beliefs.

The Order knew that Fudge was paranoid, and his delusion that Dumbledore wanted to take over the Ministry was escalating. Never mind that Dumbledore had turned down the position each time the current Minister stated intention of stepping down. To date, Severus knew of at least ten times that the Headmaster had refused the post, possibly more. The first time was back in 1932, and then six years later, surprising everyone, when he'd chosen to take a position as Transfiguration professor instead of working for the Ministry. He'd declined the Minister's job again in 1947, two years after he'd defeated Gellert Grindelwald, and at least six more times since then. Heubert Meriwether, Undersecretary to Minister Bagnold, had offered the position to Dumbledore in 1990 before the Wizengamot approved Cornelius Fudge's appointment. *How more definite could a wizard be that he simply isn't interested in the post?*

Severus walked to his desk and tossed the *Defensive Magical Theory* by Wilbert Slinkhard on his bookshelf with disgust. It fell on the floor with a thud, but he left it where it landed. The book was pure tripe. *Not one defensive spell or incantation at all. Four hundred and eighty-one pages with a twelve page prefix, twenty-nine page appendix, and ten pages of author's notes of useless information and dribble. What a waste of ink.* That meant that the students would have a teacher that didn't want them fighting or learning any spells that could be used offensively, let alone defensively. *And the Dark Lord is out there, slowly gathering his fold and making plans, and our seventh-years are going out there at the end of the year to face the Dark Lord and his Death Eaters with assertive communication skills and diplomacy? It's pure idiocy!*

"Professor, do you have a moment?" Miss Brambila Rusbridge, one of his fifth-year Slytherins asked from the doorway.

"Yes, briefly. Class will start in five minutes," he said, ushering in the girl. Mr. Rayne Boughton and Miss Tracey Davis entered the room behind her, and all three walked quickly to his desk.

"Professor, I was wondering if we could talk to you about... er... Defense?" Miss Rusbridge asked shyly.

"All right," he said, hoping she'd get to the point. He had to be patient with her; he was her Head of House after all, but her timidity around him tested his reserves.

"She handed out this book," Miss Rusbridge replied, holding her *Defensive Magical Theory* in her hands and looked at Rayne Boughton, her boyfriend, for support.

"How are we supposed to pass our O.W.L. in Defense?" Mr. Boughton blurted out and set his copy of the book on Severus' desk. "Have you seen her book? It's all theory! Not one spell or actual defensive spell in here...unless non-offensive responses and talking nicely to your attacker count. Assertive communication my arse... er, sorry, sir. But this is important, and she acts like we won't even need a wand to learn how to defend ourselves."

Miss Davis nodded in agreement. "She said that she's teaching us in a 'safe, carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic,'" the girl said in a high-pitched imitation of the witch, "to quote the Toad."

Severus narrowed his eyes and pursed his lips in warning, to hide the smirk at her cheek. He liked Miss Davis; the girl had a sharp mind, when she applied herself, but a little bit of an attitude.

"I'm sorry, sir. I meant professor."

"Return after dinner, and we shall discuss this. No more cheek from you, Miss Davis; I expect better from you. And warn your housemates to do the same." The door opened, and he looked up, seeing the rest of the fifth-years filing in. "Now, take your seats. I have a lesson to teach."

Hermione set her quill down beside her on the bed and smiled at it as she remembered when she'd tried to make a spoon out of a broken quill. She'd found the right spell since then, of course, and she'd added the new transfigured spoon to her Potions kit. Professor Snape had been as demanding as always in his classroom, but something was bothering him; she could see it in the creases between his eyes. They were deeper...he was stressed about something, and she fervently hoped it wasn't Voldemort. "Surely he wouldn't summon him away from school? He'd be missed...it'd be noticed," she mumbled to Crooks when he jumped up on her bed.

He sat down and regarded her as if considering how to answer her, then proceeded to wash his face.

Hermione was absolutely disgusted with the way things were going this year. She had sorted out her schedule with Professor McGonagall, insisting that she loved all her lessons and really did want to take all of them. She knew it would be a daunting schedule, but nothing like her third year. Harry kept landing himself in detention with Professor Umbridge, even after Professor McGonagall had warned him to keep his temper. She'd even asked Hermione to try and keep Harry from losing his temper around the new Defense professor. *As if that's remotely possible*, she thought, sitting crossed-legged on her bed, reading her useless Defense book. She'd wanted to say the exact same thing in class, only Harry had beaten her to it. Of course, then she'd be the one in detention with that woman.

She shifted so she could look at the clock. *He's probably still with her. He'll have at least another half-hour to go. Hopefully he'll watch his tongue and not get another* She laughed at the idea of Harry restraining himself and thinking before speaking. *Not him.* She wanted to ask him if he still had trouble with his scar. It could wait until morning, but sometimes the pain was intense enough to make him hiss. That worried her.

When Sirius had appeared in the Gryffindor common room fire, he'd tried to reassure Harry by telling him that now that Voldemort was back, his scar might hurt more often. That made sense, she supposed. But the information he'd told them about Umbridge, her hatred of half-breeds and werewolves...that was alarming. *He's right; the world isn't divided between good people and Death Eaters.* But that the Ministry didn't want them trained in combat...not trained to fight...alarmed her a great deal. *We're facing a war...possibly, and of course we'll need to fight! We'll have to protect our families, our way of life...I'll be fighting for my life! For my parents' lives!* But would they be ready? *Not if Umbridge refuses to teach us defensive spells!*

She sighed as she looked down at the book resting on her legs. Why no one wanted to believe Harry and Dumbledore about Voldemort's return astounded her. The entire Ministry was acting like Cedric Diggory merely died of unfortunate circumstances from the Triwizard Tournament...and that Harry was an attention-seeking nutter. Of course Percy's letter to Ron had been a huge disappointment. *Stay away from your best mate... the git.* It was just like him to side with the Ministry against Harry and Dumbledore.

Hermione threw the book down and fell back against her pillows, covering her face with her hands. She couldn't believe what was happening this year. Professor Umbridge's words echoed in her head: "Let us move forward, then, into a new era of openness, effectiveness, and accountability, intent on preserving what ought to be preserved, perfecting what needs to be perfected, and pruning wherever we find practices that ought to be prohibited..."

"And she had the audacity to tell us that she's going to be giving us a 'carefully structured, theory-centered, Ministry-approved course of defensive magic'" without any intent at teaching us any practical skills at all," she complained to her familiar.

"Grr-meower," Crooks replied in disgust.

"I know!" she replied, idly stroking his fur. She scratched behind his ears as she wondered what she should do about the situation and found herself calming at the sound of his purr. "You're right, of course. I just have to calm down and look up the defensive spells for myself. It can't be that hard, right?"

"Murrrowr," he said and turned so she could give his other ear equal attention.

Hermione entered the Defense section of the library and gasped in shock. The entire aisle was empty except for two shelves: one on the right and one on the left, both at eye level. She moved down one shelf, reading the titles:

Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled.

Assertive Discipline: Positive Behavior Management for Today.

How To Be Assertive: Your Best Defense.

Assertive Communication Skills: Your Best Defense.

Controlling People: How to Recognize, Understand, and Deal With People Who Try to Control You

Preventative Negotiation: Avoiding Conflict Escalation

Understanding Differences and Avoiding Conflicts

Prospect Theory and International Conflict: Avoiding Losing Your Temper

The Anger Workbook

Wands Are Not For Cursing

The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships and Acceptable Behavior

The Art of Forgiving: When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How

Anger Kills: Seventeen Strategies for Controlling the Hostility That Can Harm Your Health

What To Do When Your Temper Flares: Controlling Your Magical Outbursts

Overcoming Emotions That Destroy: Practical Help for Those Angry Feelings That Ruin Relationships

Anger: Wisdom for Cooling the Flames and Soothing Emotions

*Anger: Handling a Powerful Emotion in a Healthy Way**

She picked up a black and gold soft cover book, *Anger Management for Dunderheads*, and snorted, shoving it back into place. The entire section was full of books on anger management, self discipline, assertive communication, and building successful relationships. Hermione covered her face with her hands and exhaled slowly. She really regretted not taking some of the books from the Grimmauld Place library... *If only I'd been nicer to Sirius, I'd be able to ask him to send me some.*

"Oi, Hermione," Fred said as he entered the aisle behind her.

Hermione, startled, nearly jumped out of her skin as she spun around to face him. "Geo...er...Fred," she stammered, her heart pounding in her throat.

"Sorry, saw you in here and wanted to pass this on to you," he said, giving her a note from Professor McGonagall.

He turned to go. "Fred, wait!" she hissed loudly. He turned around. "Are you on good terms with Sirius?" she asked, hoping he wouldn't be too curious as to why.

"Yeah," he replied, his eyes narrowing slightly with a deep crease between them.

Damn, his curiosity was piqued. "If you asked him to send you some books, say on shield charms, protection spells, deflection..."

He crossed his arms as he interrupted her. "Is Miss Perfect Prefect wanting to defy authority?" he asked.

She stepped closer to him. "These books are not going to help me pass my O.W.L.s any more than they are going to help you pass your exams," she stated, pointing to the useless books on the shelves.

"My exams will be set by Umbridge," he stated. "As will your O.W.L.s."

"I thought that they were administrated by the Wizarding Examinations Authority..." He was right of course. "Which is part of the Ministry..." She looked down, staring at his shoes, as she considered what would convince him to help her.

"George and I already asked him," he said, and she looked up hopefully, "and before you ask, yes, you may borrow them."

"Thank you, Fred," Hermione said with heartfelt relief.

"Don't mention it. You and I know what's really going on and know what's coming," he said offhandedly, "no matter what the Toad says."

He turned to leave, and Hermione thanked him again, getting a wave before he disappeared from view. She left the aisle and headed for the Potions section, glad that at least Professor Snape still believed in giving his students a real and practical education.

Severus activated the Floo in Minerva's office and stepped out into his office, simply furious at the turn of events. *That false-flatterer, incompetent imposter...her and her bloody Minister had the audacity to pass Educational Decree number twenty-three, appointing that insufferable woman as the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts? That incompetent witch dares to assume she has the right to interrogate me in regards to my teaching abilities?* Well, he'd see about that. He'd seen her proposed curriculum...and it was asinine! *Not one student will pass their O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s...not a one! Well, my Slytherins will... possibly Miss Granger and, of course, Potter.*

Umbridge had already inspected Filius' lessons and had found him lacking. *What Filius is lacking is stature!* Filius was an exceptionally strong and very capable wizard, in Severus' opinion. *He is a six-time gold medalist international dueling champion...nine times regional champion...and has numerous trophies and plaques from the Most Honorable Society of Charm Masters. If he isn't overly qualified to teach these dunderheads...who is?*

Severus exited his office from the door rather than use the Floo to his sitting room. The walk to his rooms would do well to assuage his temper at present, and he might get lucky enough to dock house points on the way. It was a little known fact that the private residences of the professors were not, in fact, directly connected to their offices. Every teacher was given living space on the sixth floor consisting of a comfortable sitting room, a large bedroom, and private bath, and in some cases a second room for their personal experiments. Severus' personal lab however, was adjacent to his office since his supply closet was down there. It was simply a matter of convenience and very thick stone walls.

There were exceptions: Hagrid, who had opted to retain his hut on the school grounds, Firenze, who had been given accommodations to his preferred specifications on the ground floor, and Pomona Sprout, who likewise requested quarters on the ground floor since there wasn't a Floo to the greenhouses where she worked. Professor Trelawney did have rooms on the sixth floor, but claimed that the windows didn't face in the right direction for her sensitive nature, or some such tripe, so she slept in her tower.

On the third floor, Severus startled two Hufflepuffs scurrying down the corridor for the stairs, apparently, according to their babbling, having just left the bedside of a friend who was laid up in the hospital wing. He also caught a couple in a compromising position in the Armor Gallery, which was another twenty points from Hufflepuff and thirty points deducted from Gryffindor.

On the fourth floor, he deducted ten points each from three students who were running in the corridor, apparently having just been expelled from the library by Madam Pince, and he burst in on two prefects still frolicking in the prefect tub. That was good for twenty points from Gryffindor...each.

In the deep alcove to the photography classroom, he found Mr. Pucey engaged in a sexual tryst with Miss McDougal, which infuriated him as he had to take fifteen points

from his own house. However, he did wait patiently, arms crossed and scowling darkly while Miss McDougal dressed before deducting fifteen points from Ravenclaw for being out after curfew and another fifteen for her indecent exposure.

On the sixth floor, he flicked his wand at the door to each of his colleagues' abodes, with the exception of the Umbridge witch and Professor Trelawney's rooms, enhancing the protection and security spells as he walked by. Few of his colleagues used their doorway exits, since each had a Floo connection to their offices, but Severus wasn't going to take the chance that the insipid witch, Umbridge, wouldn't want to snoop around in their rooms uninvited.

Early the next morning, he made his way to the owlery, summoning a dozen owls to him. "These are for the professors," he said, giving the name of the recipient to each owl as he handed the owls a folded piece of nondescript parchment. "They should be delivered with the morning post to avoid suspicion."

That done, he turned and went for a leisurely walk down to the lake before breakfast to clear his head.

Lessons in Defense were getting worse, Harry was getting detention now almost every week, and Hermione discovered that reading about spells did very little good if you couldn't practice them. Having overheard both Professors McGonagall's and Grubbly-Plank's review, Hermione knew that Umbridge was taking on too much control at Hogwarts. Dolores Umbridge, professor and High Inquisitor of the school; what a bloody farce that was. It was bad enough that she'd tried to disband all school activities and student organizations and then reinstated the ones she approved of. The woman was insatiable in her desire to control everything.

She'd had enough. Enough to even tell Harry and Ron there were more important things than homework. Ron took the mickey out on her about that one, even insisting she go to the hospital. "Ignorant git. Well, it was a bit out of character for me... but still," she grumbled as Crookshanks climbed gingerly onto her lap.

She stroked Crookshanks' fur as she tried to plan her next move. Getting Harry to agree to teach Defense had been easy enough. He had a reputation to those who still believed Harry and Dumbledore that Voldemort was back, or that was what she'd backed on. Besides, she wasn't popular enough to lead the group, so she'd only be effective as an assistant or collaborator. It was her plan and it was happening.

Still, the group of students that had shown up in the Hog's Head hadn't been as many as she'd hoped, but maybe it was a start. But that posed a bigger problem...where to have the meetings. Somewhere Umbridge didn't know about. It had to be a large enough space. It had to be accessible. And it would be an unofficial, illegal group since Umbridge would never sanction such a group; so, if they were caught, it could get every member expelled from Hogwarts.

They had looked at the map, and there wasn't anywhere suitable. There were several unused classrooms, but since this was supposed to be a secret club...they were out. The grounds were too risky. The cave where Hagrid kept the school boats echoed too loudly, and the sounds of their voices had echoed up into the Entrance Hall. The common rooms...well, were not private enough, and she couldn't very well invite all the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws into the Gryffindor Common room any more than they could go to theirs. She'd even thought to use the prefect bath, empty of water of course, but was afraid that some of the spells might crack the pool.

No, they needed to find a practical location. And soon.

Hermione entered the Great Hall and sat down between Ron and Neville. "Any luck?" Neville asked as Hermione set down her bag. Harry leaned around Ron to hear her answer.

Hermione shook her head, and Ron silently shook his head as she turned to ask him the same thing. It was frustrating. Hermione had even considered the dungeons...but the idea of them running into Slytherins down there was not a good idea, especially considering the number of Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws in their group. It would be far too suspicious.

Harry straightened up and picked up his goblet with an exasperated huff. "Don't worry, mate, Fred and George are looking too," Ron said to him softly. "Those two know this castle as well as the Marauders. We're bound to find somewhere we can use...eventually."

Hermione was hopeful. After lunch she waved goodbye to the boys and headed for Ancient Runes. Padma Patil and Mandy Brocklehurst entered the classroom and walked to their usual table, Mandy looking at Hermione speculatively as she sat down. Padma looked like she'd been crying, and her hand was bandaged. When class ended, Padma approached Hermione. Mandy stood aside, looking about her as if she'd rather Padma just leave instead of talking to Hermione. "How will we know when the meetings will take place?"

Hermione hadn't considered that problem in her planning. "Harry, Ron or I will tell one of you from Ravenclaw, and they will have to pass word on to the others," she said, realizing that would be an illogical solution.

Mandy must have thought so too, because the girl rolled her eyes. "Okay," Padma said, nodding. "Tell my sister I said Hi."

"Will do," Hermione replied. She was contemplating any possible way to alert the members of the Defense Club to meeting dates and times when she saw Luna skipping down the corridor and moved to intercept her so as to talk to her briefly. "Any luck finding a location?" she asked when the blonde stopped in front of her.

"No, but I did find a new stairwell," Luna replied dreamily with a smile. "But it's not large enough. I'll check with Hanna in class, but I don't think she knows of a place either."

"Right," Hermione stated as she moved to let Luna go. "I'll talk to you later." It was frustrating. Harry was now eager to start teaching them Defensive spells, and there was a growing interest in the idea of a Defense Club, even though it was still prohibited.

She saw Cho Chang and Marietta Edgecombe in the girls' loo, and Cho had asked her about the first meeting too. Hermione had just shrugged and said that she and Harry were working on it.

After Defense, Hermione maneuvered herself between Ron and Harry as they walked down the corridor. "I saw Luna after Ancient Runes, and she hasn't found a place to hold meetings either," Hermione whispered. "Oh, and, Harry, Cho said to tell you she said hi." Hermione shook her head at the momentary sappy expression that crossed his face. "After dinner I think we should go to the library...I have to look something up."

"Hermione, Harry has Quidditch practice after dinner," Ron informed her.

She gaped at Harry in astonishment. "So Umbridge reinstated privileges to the house team? When?"

Harry shrugged. "Angelina was going to ask her after her class. I haven't heard otherwise..."

Hermione shook her head. "Never assume anything when it comes to that witch. I bet she hasn't just to spite you."

"Oi, that's not fair, Hermione," Ron admonished her.

"No, Ron, it isn't," she said sadly. "I'm going to check on something..."

"In the library," the boys said in unison.

"By the time we leave here, they're gonna put her name on a plaque in there," Ron said, and with a sweep of his hand he added, "Hermione Granger: read every book in here in only seven years."

"Very funny, Ronald," she sneered and ran for the library. When Ron had mentioned fairness, she remembered something she'd read about, a charm that connected

objects so two people could communicate with them, when she was in her third year and was staying in the old classroom under Severus' protection. She hoped the library still had the same book.

The next evening, Hermione holed herself up in her dorm, reading an advanced Charms book as the rain pelted her window. She'd found the book easily enough and had smiled at the tiny spiky signature on the borrower's card. This was the same book Severus had read for his essay on communication Charms in her third year.

However, it was really hard to concentrate at the moment, since her mind kept worrying over whether the idea of starting a Defense club was a good one or not. Hearing Sirius' excitement about the club had really made her think. On one hand he was right, it was much better learning how to defend themselves and risk expulsion than being tucked away safely and learning nothing at all.

But the look in Sirius' eyes had alarmed her...the raw excitement as he suggested the Shrieking Shack...the way he'd said that James and he wouldn't *have lain down and taken orders from an old hag like Umbridge*", especially since he'd had the audacity to chide her for taking an idiotic chance by holding their first meeting in the Hog's Head. If Mundungus had followed them to the Hog's Head, what would have stopped him from following them into the Three Broomsticks? This Defense Club would have been something that James Potter and Sirius would have done. *Oh, get a grip, Hermione. No they wouldn't! They'd have sneaked off by themselves, the four of them, and practiced defensive spells on their own...they wouldn't have cared about anyone else.*

She sighed and turned the page, smiling when she read the name of the spell: the Protean Charm. Sitting up and crossing her legs, Hermione balanced the book on her lap and withdrew her wand to practice the wand movement.

Severus was fuming. Umbridge had given her report to Minister Fudge, and now he had a list of potions that the Ministry deemed unfit to teach at Hogwarts. Well he'd be damned if he was going to change his curriculum of fourteen years to accommodate the paranoid delusions of an inept Minister and his lackey... *What had the imbecile written? 'Potions of questionable lawfulness or practical usefulness for our future law-abiding citizens.'* He thrust the door open as he entered the room, taking some pleasure in making the fifth-years jump and turn to sit properly in their seats, eyes facing front.

"Pass your essays forward," he growled as he walked to the front of the class. He stopped and stared directly at Potter. "I believe, Mr. Potter, that you owe me two essays. I do hope that Miss Granger was of sufficient help so as to complete your assignments on time."

He collected the accumulated essays as they were passed up by the students in the front row, and then deposited them on his desk. "Since none of you were able to produce an acceptable Strengthening Solution on Monday, you will all repeat the exercise today. And since this is your second attempt, I expect reasonable results." He flicked his hand at the blackboard and smirked as the directions appeared. "You have one hour."

He walked around the room when the potions were at the halfway point, checking the students' progress. "Mr. Potter, as Miss Granger so aptly reminded you on Monday, you should be adding your Salamander blood at this stage," he said coolly, giving an approving nod to Malfoy and walking on to the next workstation. He smirked when Hermione leaned over to whisper to Mr. Longbottom, just as he'd hoped for. "Mr. Longbottom, put down the boarbeetles. Miss Granger, you'll be spending the evening in my company tonight, I'm afraid, since you seem unable to *let Mr. Longbottom. Do. His. Own. Work.*"

Although he maintained his usual sneer as he continued the round, checking the progress of each student, he was actually smiling on the inside at the expression of indignation on her face...so much like the one he'd seen when she was hiding with him as a teen...not the intimidated student she had become, and it thrilled him.

A long blue box that held the black swan quill Hermione had given him as a thank you sat in the back of his top right desk drawer, beside the well-worn, brown Muggle diary and the small blue box that held the Time-Turner.

It was because of an entry in that diary he'd kept that he had made the decision that would hopefully not only change the outcome of the war and ensure that the Dark Lord wouldn't be able to recruit as many to his side, but would hopefully change public opinion regarding the reputation of Slytherin House forever.

~ T. B. C. ~

Author's Notes:

Okay, I cheated. Many of the titles of the Defense books are actual books and can be found on half.com, but only because I wanted to use the titles of real books.

The quotes in this chapter which are denoted by an asterisk were borrowed from the American version of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. I only used them...they are not mine.

Since I needed a second Ravenclaw female, I used Mandy Brocklehurst. Yes, she's now in the DA, which is only a minor deviation from canon. There are more deviations from canon to follow, just so you know.

Chapter 25

Chapter 25 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, and to my betas, WriterMerrin and DuchessOfArcadia, for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione entered Professor Snapes' office with a feeling of trepidation.

"Sit down, Miss Granger," he said as he pointed to the chair in front of his desk and resumed marking the essay he had before him without even bothering to look up.

Hermione crossed the room and sat in the offered chair with her hands clasped in her lap, crossed her ankles, and waited.

He set the essay, now marked to the point of looking as if it'd been bled on, on a pile to his left and picked up another from the pile on his right.

"Sir, I can explain," she said, her voice shrill and loud compared to the soft scratch of his quill.

"Do you think me an incompetent teacher?" he asked, still bent over the parchment under his quill.

"Er, no, sir," she replied with a shake of her head. *So this is why he wanted to see me, I guessed rightly...*

"Do you consider your skills with potions to be so accomplished that you don't need your full attention when you brew the potions I assign you?"

"Er, no, sir," she said, disheartened as she looked at her hands, picking nervously at the cuticle of her thumb. He was still refusing to look at her.

"Stop doing that," he barked.

Hermione's head snapped up, and she was shocked to see him staring right at her.

"I told you once, years ago, that picking at your cuticles leaves open sores...sores that can be very bad with certain ingredients we use."

Hermione blushed. *He had. Two years ago in fact...well, nineteen for him.* "I'm sorry, sir, I haven't broken the habit."

"Among others," he sneered, finally looking up at her. "What makes you believe that I am not perfectly aware of every move Mr. Longbottom makes in my classroom, or for that matter, your friends, Messrs Potter and Weasley?"

She shrugged. "I know you must be, but I just don't want Neville blowing up the class," she admitted.

"And you think that I allow students to blow up my classroom?" he asked with a sneer as he stood and moved around his desk. He stopped sneering and looked down at her, although his eyes were still narrowed. "Let me rephrase that; I've been teaching Potions to dunderheads for fourteen years. In all those years I have *never...ever* allowed a student to blow up my classroom. Mr. Longbottom will not be the first." He stopped in front of her and leaned against the desk with his arms crossed. "Your constant interference with Mr. Longbottom has resulted in the fact that he is unable to brew even the simplest potion without your assistance and lacks the self-confidence that he might've had, had he been forced to do them on his own and learn from his mistakes."

She was going to respond, but he continued. "Are you aware, Miss Granger, that Mr. Longbottom's marks on his essays are generally higher than your own?"

She shook her head, dumfounded by the revelation.

"However, although he has amassed a fair amount of knowledge on potion ingredients and their interactions, and the general uses of the potions, it will not enable him to carry Potions in his N.E.W.T. year."

She looked at her hands, and her gaze traveled to his knees as she contemplated what he'd said. She wanted to say *He is unable to concentrate in Potions because he fears, you, Professor Snape, and he can't shake his fears in class*, but held her tongue.

"But that is not why I asked you here tonight," he stated.

Her head snapped up as she stared at his face. "No?"

"No. First, we are aware of your illicit club."

"Sir, we haven't..."

"Do not lie to me," he growled out angrily, and Hermione flinched. "I know for a fact you have. Did you honestly think that the Hog's Head was safer for you and your friends than the Three Broomsticks? What were you thinking? The Hog's Head attracts a rough crowd, Miss Granger, unsavory types, the likes of Mundungus' sort, the Carrows...or even Macnair."

She knew that Mundungus was an unsavory sort. *But he is trusted by the members of the Order of the Phoenix, so how bad could he be?* Macnair was a name she knew. *Macnair was the old wizard from the Committee for the Disposal of Dangerous Creatures, of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, that had come to kill Buckbeak my third year.* In her opinion, he didn't look like someone anyone should trust. "They didn't say we couldn't go there," she started to say to defend herself, but stopped when he tilted his head with a look of skepticism. *He is only voicing his concern you know how protective he is.* "You're right, it wasn't the best option."

"No, it wasn't. Madam Puddifoot's might have been a better choice, and yes, she has a back room for parties." He relaxed his shoulders a bit. "Is there anything you wish to tell me about your club?"

Hermione couldn't meet his gaze. She shook her head as she stared at her hands. "We haven't, well, not really..."

"Fine," he snapped. "I will find out if you do."

He stared at her for a moment; Hermione refused to look up but she could feel the weight of his glare before he continued, saying, "The second reason I asked you here is regarding a matter the Headmaster is very concerned about. He has learned that Potter is having dreams. He wants to know...we need to know what these dreams are about to make sure they are benign and not something else. This is very important. Since Potter is not confiding what they are to the Headmaster or Professor McGonagall, you must relay them to me." He turned and picked up a bottle of ink. He held it out for her. "This is important, Miss Granger, I need to know. You are to use this ink and document the dreams on the back of your essays. The ink will vanish as it dries."

Hermione nodded. The fact Harry's scar bothered him so much and those dreams...visions he'd been having bothered her too. "Yes, sir, you can count on me."

"I know I can." Severus smiled, an actual smile, one like his younger self used to do, and for a brief moment, it was like being with his teenage self that she'd come to miss so much.

"Hermione, if you have questions, questions you cannot ask any other teacher about their curriculum, come ask me," he said softly, barely a whisper in the quiet office. "Or write them down on your parchment with my ink."

She let go of the breath she'd been holding as she nodded, trying to ascertain what exactly he meant. He hated her questions *Surely he would be irritated with me for wanting to discuss things my other professors covered. It's not like when we were together when he was young...we talked about everything then... Or could he mean... No, he wouldn't...couldn't...does he?* "Of course, sir."

After a long pause, he said, "You may go."

"Thank you, sir," she replied, rising to her feet. Hermione left, fully confused by his statement as if he'd hit her with a Confundus Charm.

That meeting hadn't gone as he'd expected. Severus sat at his desk, awaiting the arrival of Minerva and Dumbledore. Hermione hadn't been as forthright as he'd hoped, but then she hadn't lied to him either. He could read her well enough to know that. If he didn't know better, he guessed that they hadn't even met yet, which seemed illogical, and wholly illogical given Potter's and the Weasleys', all four of them, tenacity to break the rules. But for once, Potter, Ronald, Fred and George Weasley weren't being rash about their activities, which really intrigued Severus.

Still, the Headmaster and the Heads of Houses knew about the Defense club Potter had formed. Well, Severus was still convinced that Hermione had been the original instigator on this one; the fact alone that Umbridge wasn't preparing them to take their O.W.L.s was guarantee enough that she wouldn't have remained idle and allowed her scores to plummet. No, Hermione was a conscientious student with a thirst for knowledge, always wanting to excel in all her subjects, and she always had been. However, unlike his Slytherins, she hadn't turned to her Head of House. She'd turned to Potter of all people.

At first he'd been hesitant about showing his hand so openly to her, but she hadn't accepted his offer *It's possible that she hadn't understood my offer or accepted it as genuine. I've made it clear to her that I can't favor her... It's also likely that she was just caught off guard. Oh well, time will tell.* But time wasn't what they had a lot of...the Dark Lord could strike at any time. Although, for now, the Dark Lord was preoccupied with attempting to obtain the original version of the prophecy, since he was convinced that Severus hadn't overheard the entirety of it. At the time he hadn't. *But then...*

His thoughts were interrupted by a knock on the door. "Enter," he said, then steepled his hands as Dumbledore and Minerva approached his desk.

"So, has she confessed to the gathering?" Dumbledore asked, not mincing any words. He made a lazy swish of his wand and changed the chair Miss Granger had evacuated into a well-padded armchair.

Minerva sat on the ladder-back chair beside him. Her only modification was to add a seat cushion.

"No, although she did not deny it," Severus said smoothly. "I'm certain that they have organized the club, although I can't figure out when or where they are meeting. I had the impression that..."

"Ah," Dumbledore exhaled with a nod of his head. "As for when, that is being resolved; where still remains a mystery."

"And if the students are caught, what then, Albus?" Minerva asked, clearly frightened for her cubs. He wondered if any of her Gryffindors had sought out her help for their Defense O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s preparation. He knew that the Ravenclaws, those not enlisted into Potter's group, would simply rely on their books and practice on their own. The number of Ravenclaws in the hospital wing for minor injuries attested to that.

Dumbledore smiled and patted her hand. "Then I shall take full responsibility for the group." He turned to look at Severus. "And your group?"

"Simply reviewing for what I know to be on the exams," Severus stated softly. "For now. They are more interested in protection spells and wards."

Dumbledore looked at his hands, laced together on his lap, and nodded. "And will Miss Granger tell you about Harry's dreams?" the Headmaster asked.

Severus smiled. "Of course she will."

Hermione sat in the large chair by the fire, her quill poised above her notepad as she stared into the dying flames. Instead of revising, she was making a list of all the spells they knew. With a huge stroke of luck, both Harry and Neville had stumbled upon the Room of Requirement: Harry learned of the room through Dobby, the house-elf he'd freed their second year, and Neville as he'd paced in the corridor and happened upon the doorway. So far they'd had three DA meetings, learning how to cast the Disarming Spell, Impediment Jinx, Reductor Curse, and the Leg-Locker and Arm-Locker Curses.

She had written down all the hex and jinx deflection spells and fighting spells that Barty Crouch Jr. taught them in fourth year when he impersonated Mad-Eye Moody, as well as some of the spells Gilderoy Lockhart had mentioned in their second year, although most of those were not really practical for fighting. She ignored Lockhart's books for fending off banshees, ghouls, yetis, and hags, but his books on vampires, werewolves, and trolls seemed like a good idea to review.

Being Muggle-born, she wondered about the Defensive Charge...a surge of magical power, which seemed to simply emanate out from within a magical child, not unlike an electric shock, if someone was grabbing them forcefully or threateningly...but most of the books that mentioned it called it a reflex reaction of raw magic and considered it an uncontrollable magical outburst. Still, if she could figure out a way to do it intentionally, it could be rather handy. Except, she didn't know if wizards grabbed people like Muggle attackers might.

Ron had wanted to add the Silencing Charm and Conjunctivitis Curse to her list, but Hermione was reserved about those. Silencing your opponent only worked to disable them if, and only if, they didn't know how to do non-verbal curses, hexes or jinxes. She remembered watching Severus try to perform them in the small classroom in the dungeons. He had mentioned that the students in their sixth year were taught how to do them, and some of the Death Eaters, possibly all of them, had gone to Hogwarts too. The Conjunctivitis Curse only blinded your opponent...which meant he would be firing off spells blindly at any small noise or in total confusion. Not good.

She was hesitant to have them do the Jelly-Brains Curse. A Confundus worked just as well and didn't turn the brain into gel, which was difficult to reverse. She thought of having Harry teach the Repelling Charm to deflect spells, except that the caster had to be able to identify the spell instantly, and it took very quick reflexes. The velocity of a spell varied depending on the magical strength of the witch or wizard casting it. It also depended on the determination of the intent and the willingness to do the magical act.

The velocity of a curse by a wizard with self-doubt, or who lacked conviction or determination, emitted a weaker power charge, which could still shoot the curse at a speed of ninety to a hundred and ten feet per second. For some wizards, it could be even lower, about eighty feet per second if they didn't have their heart in executing the curse or didn't like to hurt others. For some, whose moral compass fell a bit off-kilter, their curses could fly with speeds up to two hundred feet per second, and there was a duelist on record who managed three hundred and sixty. That beat Professor Flitwick's record by only ten feet per second. So, since most of them were not as quick at that, she crossed the Repelling Charm off her list.

She looked at her revision guide, now color-coded with red, blue, and dark mustard yellow to represent Quidditch practices for the three houses, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff, green to represent the various clubs at Hogwarts and her own entries in brown and black... and sighed. The only time available to meet wasn't for two

weeks.

"Hermione, what'cha doin'?" Ron asked, plopping into the seat next to her.

Harry squeezed onto the chair next to her and glanced at her revision guide.

Hermione shifted as much as she could to give him room. "I'm figuring out when we can meet next and what spells Harry should teach," she admitted.

"So much for finishing the Herbology essay," Ron grumbled.

"I'll have it done tonight, Ron, don't worry. Of course, you could shock us all and write it yourself," she said with a chuckle, then turned to Harry.

"Awe, Hermione, don't be like that," Ron whined with a yawn as Harry looked at her expectantly.

She ignored Ron's comment. "Here is what I was thinking; have everyone read Lockhart's books over the next two weeks and review Mad-Eye Moody's notes on defensive spells."

"He was Barty Crouch Jr., Hermione," Ron pointed out helpfully. "A Death Eater."

"I'm aware of that, Ron, but he did give us a lot of good defensive spells...and people should review them. We got pretty good at them in class, even Neville did. From what I've figured out, *Travel With Trolls*, *Voyages With Vampires*, and *Wandering With Werewolves* might be helpful...especially if Voldemort recruits vampires and werewolves or uses trolls. There isn't much information on fighting giants in the library, but I'd consider... What?" she asked when both boys turned to look at each other, and Ron mouthed something to Harry.

"Hermione, his books are useless," Harry stated.

She shook her head. "No, *Lockhart* was useless...his adventures were real occurrences made by real wizards and witches that he simply took credit for. They are useful as a resource."

"She has a point, mate," Ron stated. "You tell Cho tomorrow morning, and I'll tell Hannah."

"We might have better luck telling Luna. She has Charms right before we do," Hermione said and smiled. "Oh, and I think I've solved the communication problem as well. I found a charm, the Protean Charm, and if I can get it to work, we'll be able to alert everyone to meeting times and dates."

"Hermione, that's awesome!" Harry exclaimed. "How close are you to figuring it out?"

"I've managed to do it between two coins easily enough, but now all I have to do is figure out how to link them all together. I need to connect thirty or so, right? That's a bit trickier."

Harry was all smiles as Ron said, "If anyone can do it, you can, 'Mione."

"Ron, please stop calling me 'Mione," she said with an exasperated sigh.

"Sure, 'Mione," he said with a mischievous grin.

Severus opened up his top right-hand drawer and pulled out the worn, battered diary his older self had given him as a teen...the visit that had changed his life all those years ago.

The older version of himself that had appeared to him when he was a teen had warned him to write down everything he could remember about the times Hermione arrived and anything of significance. He had been diligent with his entries, as had a previous self...that adult version of himself. However, the entries in the diary were very confusing; some dates had multiple entries apparently from the time loop before... as if the diary managed to escape the time paradox and existed outside the time loops.

Severus opened it up to a particularly favored page and carefully moved the brittle leaf aside. He'd written about their hike. He gently put the leaf back into place and turned to another favored entry...the day Hermione had transfigured a mouse into a spoon. He closed the book and held it on his lap. Now, those were the good times.

But the entries that always made Severus' blood run cold were in the same handwriting he had as an adult, not the one he had as a teen. They were written on the last pages of the diary, and one was written as a second hand account of one possible outcome. Apparently an older version of himself had told a younger version about the reason he'd traveled back in time the first time: the outcome of the end of the war...and because the Dark Lord had won. Things had been so bad he'd risked everything, all the warnings, the reasons not to go, and had gone back in time to change his past. It wasn't because of Hermione's death that he'd done this, but because of what her death changed. The cause and effect.

He opened up the diary to the entry. The first one, the second hand account.

Because of Hermione's death the dissension between Gryffindor and Slytherin had turned to a severe animosity between the two houses and had resulted in skirmishes, brawling, and dueling in the classrooms and corridors nearly every day. Students had been literally maiming each other. Hufflepuff had mostly sided with the Gryffindors, but some hadn't. Ravenclaw had been divided; over a third had sided with Slytherin. The animosity within Ravenclaw had grown so heated that the students that had sided with Slytherin had moved into the dungeons. Almost every student from his house, and many from Ravenclaw, had joined the Death Eaters. The Dark Lord's numbers had apparently been staggering. One fourth of the students from Hufflepuff and several from Gryffindor had joined the Dark Lord as well; the rest had sided with Dumbledore. Just as when he'd been a kid, recruited right out of school to join up with the Death Eaters.

One possible outcome. At least there were no small x's by the date. That time line had been erased completely, apparently, since the girl still lived.

But the second one, what he assumed was the second timeline, the one that read like a first hand account, that one unnerved him. It started with the bloody battle at Godric's Hallow during Potter's fifth year. The losses had been tremendous... It was worse than he remembered it being when he'd left Hogwarts before the first fall, much worse. The Dark Lord had lured Potter from school to go save his beloved godfather at the house where his parents had died.* The Dark Lord had won, and thousands had been killed...whole families eliminated.

That entry had only one x beside the date. Christmas Eve, 1995. As a teen, he'd marked his entries with two x's. It was the only way he knew that the other entries on the same days were from different timelines. The x's. The older version of himself that had visited him had marked single x's on his entries...the ones that were already in the diary when he'd received it. There were some...ones that didn't have x's, that were vague or didn't have a time placed next to the dates, or mentioned only an approximate date, and had been written in a dull, flat ink; those may have come from the first timeline. It was hard to tell. Severus knew, well, assumed that he was living in the third loop. Meddling with time was dangerous, and from what he could tell, he'd apparently done so twice.

He wasn't going to allow the same mistakes to happen again. Not in his timeline.

He quickly put the diary back in his drawer when a knock on the door broke the silence.

"Enter."

Three of his seventh-year Slytherins, Miss Serena Wilkes, and Messrs Darius Kennecott and Raithe Macrae, and two of his sixth years, Aldebaran Urguhart and Raymond

Aubry, entered his office. Messrs Urguhart and Kennecott led the group to his desk.

"Our parents have accepted the invitations from the Malfoys and the Warringtons," Mr. Kennecott stated, made a quick glance at the others behind him and then faced Severus, "and we know that... Well, Malfoy has been saying things."

That boy was going to be the death of him. "What has Malfoy said this time?" Severus asked with just a hint of annoyance to make the students relax, watching each student carefully.

"That the recruiters will be there," Mr. Urguhart stated.

Just like last time. Lucius recruited me as well. He knew the position these five students would take. They'd leave the country before joining the Death Eaters, but each knew that was futile as well. "You know that over Christmas holiday you will have to face the recruiters," Severus stated. "And you would do best to keep your opinions neutral until you finish school."

Miss Wilkes hung her head but not before he caught her look of dejection, Mr. Kennecott nodded solemnly, but Mr. Macrae squared his shoulders and held his head up determinedly.

"And how are you coming with your Occlumency?" Severus asked. He knew the answer...they had learned how...but as of yet none of them would be able to Occlude their minds from the Dark Lord. Messrs Kennecott and Urguhart might be able to protect their minds from invasion from a skilled Legilimens, but Mr. Macrae lacked the focus and Mr. Aubry lacked the strength of will to keep their minds clear and devoid of emotions, although with the proper incentive they might improve. Miss Wilkes, however, still couldn't master the ability to empty her mind or close off her emotions sufficiently. "Each of you can set up times with me for practice. But I'm a very busy man, so I expect your diligence."

All five promised and made appointments for the lessons. That in itself was hopeful, but he'd have to have Filch oversee his detentions if his entire Defense group made appointments with him.

The few students Severus had selected in his group were mostly sixth- and seventh-years, but there were a few of the fifth-years as well. Although it was unethical, he'd used Legilimency and a teeny amount of Veritaserum in pumpkin juice to weed out all the students who were most likely to join the Dark Lord's ranks. Thankfully, there were those who believed Dumbledore and Mr. Potter that the Dark Lord had returned and whose families well remembered what life was like under his control the first time around. The students of those families were more concerned with defending their families and using protection charms than fighting, but it was a start.

Hermione sighed heavily as she stared at her revision guide and really regretted giving Professor McGonagall back the Time-Turner.

Since Harry, Fred, and George were now banned from Quidditch, that left the hours that Harry would've been at Quidditch practice freed up to practice the spells he would teach the DA. She'd found a small classroom down the corridor from the common room with a door that normally looked like solid rock...unless you knew which flagstone to tickle to make the door open. It was a small space, and there weren't any cushions on the floor, which meant they had to bring their pillows, but for just her, Ron, and Harry, it was perfect.

Plus, since it was so close to the common room, they could sneak out at night under Harry's cloak. As soon as he became proficient in the Deflection Transfiguration and Deflection Charm, she'd arrange another DA meeting. Only this time it would be easier...she'd simply activate the Galleons with the date and time.

Another problem she was having was finding time to help Hagrid with his lesson plan...well, that wasn't true. Hagrid was more than understanding about them needing to know about magical creatures that would show up on their O.W.L. exams, but he found most of the creatures she suggested he use in class uninteresting. She wasn't giving up, though; she didn't want to lose Hagrid as a teacher, even if his lesson were a bit unnerving. She liked him too much.

She supposed that Thestrals were interesting creatures, if a herd of carnivorous winged horses that you could only see if you'd witnessed death could be considered interesting. But she'd just stood there in class and stared into the clearing...the empty clearing. She hadn't been the only one either. However, Seamus, Harry, Neville and Tracie Davis had seen them just fine. Parvarti had been terrified of them...or of the pieces of meat that vanished in midair. Plus all the books that had pictures of Thestrals either had sketches of the animals tearing flesh off cattle or sheep or had photographs of bare ground or empty paddocks.

Severus strolled casually down the corridor from the large room he'd selected for his secret Defense class. He walked the maze of the dungeons with confidence. It was perfect...as the detection spells he'd set up warned him if Filch or his ruddy cat were anywhere near that part of the dungeons. Not that Filch ever came down this deep into the old cells.

He was thwarting the efforts of the recruiters, and it made Dumbledore happy. *I sooo enjoy doing things that make the old fart happy* he scoffed sarcastically with a frown. It was simply a matter of numbers; if these students could see a different option, then the Dark Lord wouldn't have as many students joining him this time around.

He was counting on getting these students in his Defense class to take a stand against the Dark Lord...then they might help redeem Slytherin's reputation that all Slytherins would go bad, a thought that truly rankled him and many other Slytherin alumni. There were several past Ministers who had been from his house, as well as past and present Ministry department heads, successful entrepreneurs, past and present members of the Wizengamot, on the Board of St. Mungo's and the School Governors, and renowned Masters in their fields.

Just because his house comprised of students from pure-blood families and half-bloods whose families had four magical grandparents didn't mean that they would all turn to the Dark Arts or join the Dark Lord. But the recruitment among their families were heavy-handed and unrelenting. Many opted to be supporters, paying huge amounts of gold to the Death Eaters for protection. But once the seventh-year students left Hogwarts to make their way in the world, they would find themselves under the pressure of the Death Eater recruiters to join the Dark Lord and earn their places after his victory.

With luck, he'd have seven of the six seventh-years persuaded to remain neutral, or better yet, with little encouragement, he might sway some of them to join the Order's side when the time came. But for now, he had planted the seeds of fighting for their beliefs, standing up against oppression and tyranny, and was nurturing it slowly. So far his plan seemed to be working.

Severus swore softly as he watched four more Hufflepuffs scurrying down the stairs on their way to their common room. They were cutting it too close to curfew, and he knew for certain that none of these students had been in the library. He had no idea where they were meeting, only the most probable dates and times when they could.

Septima had taken the known dates and times of all the student activities and organizations, used her Arithmancy calculations, and had presented Dumbledore with a proposed schedule of meeting dates and times. On one of those dates, Filius had made arrangements with Umbridge to meet with him, pretending to want her clarification regarding what the Ministry deemed acceptable material for his lessons.

The week after that, when Septima's list indicated when a meeting of Potter's club meeting was likely to take place, Pomona had asked Umbridge for the same opportunity to evaluate her course curriculum, which had resulted in a rather unfortunate incident between Umbridge and the Venomous Tentacula and the giant horned-trumpet vine.

Even Minerva had used one of the dates to invite Umbridge to share an after-dinner tea in her office to discuss the formulation of a Transfiguration club, not that she hadn't offered advanced lessons for any student who was gifted in her subject in the past or who'd demonstrated the ability for Animagi transformation.

Tonight was Severus' turn, his second actually, but he'd be damned if he'd have Umbridge in his office for any length of time or endure two hours in that putrid pink and lace office of hers either. He'd rather have tea with Potter and talk about the good ol' days before he'd subject himself to that torture. No, instead he'd laced her sickening pink sugar cubes with an odorless and colorless sleeping draught, placed valerian root and chamomile tea in her tin and slipped out of her office unnoticed.

He followed a group of Gryffindors consisting of the Creevey brothers, Miss Brown and Miss Patil, and Messrs. Longbottom, Thomas, and Finnigan and paused at the conjunction of the corridor, watching the unlikely group gather in front of the portrait of the Fat Lady to gain entrance to their common room.

He waited. Within minutes, Fred and Gorge Weasley appeared, talking with their sister, Miss Bell, and Mr. Jordan. Severus stepped back into the shadows and waited. His patience paid off; Miss Granger and Mr. Weasley rounded the corner right in front of him. "Out a bit late, aren't we?" he asked, stepping out into the corridor. "Mr. Weasley, get inside," he snapped, casting a mild Confundus Charm on the boy. Mr. Weasley left without argument. "Miss Granger, follow me."

"Yes, Professor," Hermione said with a heavy sigh and followed him.

He turned, led her quietly past the main stairs, and told her to walk into a section of the wall between a statue of Thorance Welldinger of Kent and a huge tapestry of girls feeding unicorns. He was pleased that she followed his directions and entered the hidden stairwell. That boded well. She followed him downward until they stepped out into the fifth floor corridor. He crossed the corridor quickly and opened the door to a small classroom, ushering Hermione inside.

He cast a series of charms and hexes at the door to ensure privacy, something that could get him in quite a predicament if discovered. "Miss Granger, you do remember that I am in the Order," he said to preface what he wanted to say.

"Of course, sir," she replied politely enough, if not a bit suspiciously.

Fair enough. "And as such, I often am pressed upon to do certain things, to maintain my cover of siding with the Dark Lord," he stated. Judging by the way she held her shoulders, she was exhausted. He hoped that meant that they had been practicing spells in her Defense club.

Her head tilted in a way that told him she wasn't yet catching on to what he was saying. "I know that, yes."

"And in my Potions class there are students who are connected to families of known supporters of the Dark Lord."

She nodded, her expression starting to take on that serious look he knew so well. She was becoming more alert. *Good.* "And as such, any favoritism I show you would be misconstrued," he stated.

She nodded, her eyes focused on his face. "Yes, I realize that."

"The same goes for your friends," he stated.

"Yes, because we're Gryffindors," she replied.

"Because the Weasleys are considered blood traitors among the Death Eaters, and many of your friends are of the same ilk, half-blood or Muggle-born," he stated. He could see clearly in her eyes that she was affronted that he'd called the Weasleys blood traitors. "In fact, you've made some rather interesting friends this year."

"Pardon, Professor?" she asked.

His declaration threw her. She was still tired; he'd have to be more blunt. "You have formed an illicit club, one that could get you expelled," he stated flatly. "I don't know where you are meeting or how often, but this is a very risky enterprise you've undertaken. If you and Potter are expelled...you both would be in grave danger."

He smirked as she was about to protest and laughed at her. "Do not insult me by lying about it. I know. Dumbledore knows. And he approves. Why is beyond me, but he does. However, no one, and I mean *no one*...not even Potter...is to know that. You, on the other hand, I'm willing to trust."

Her mouth had opened of its own accord as she stood there staring at him.

"Close your mouth; it's unbecoming."

She immediately shut her mouth with a snap. "But, sir?"

He could tell she had no idea what to say. He knew and he wasn't expelling her. "All school organizations and clubs must have a faculty advisor, Miss Granger; I am to be yours."

She shook her head, uncertain that she heard him incorrectly. "Sir? How can you be an advisor to an illicit club?"

"Easily. The same way I can be a Death Eater and retain my position at Hogwarts: Dumbledore's sanction is, however secretively, given." He crossed his arms and resisted smirking at her wide-eyed amazement. "I assume you've been teaching the students the rudimentary spells you have been taught in your previous years?"

"Harry has," she admitted.

He snorted. "Of course, he has. And have you exhausted them yet?"

"Er, no, not really. We...I have other books to draw from," she replied with a slight blush to her cheeks.

"From now on, you will have regular meetings with me, in my office. You will bring your wand and wear comfortable clothes under your robes. These meetings will be arranged by means that may seem to others as detentions or disciplinary actions, but I will word them carefully so as not to mar your school records. Any points deducted will be rewarded back to your house when you arrive."

"Certainly, sir," she replied automatically. "Are we going to duel in your office the way we did when I stayed with you in the classroom in the dungeons?"

He smiled. "No, in an old classroom across from my office. But in that classroom, Miss Granger, it will be only you and I. Do you have any reservations or concerns about being alone with me in the dungeons?"

He knew her answer before she gave it. "Of course not, sir."

"This room will be keyed to your hand before we leave. The spells will remain in place as long as I live or until I dismantle them. You may bring Messrs Potter and Weasley here, but only Messrs Potter and Weasley, to practice anything I teach you. Then you three may teach the others. I expect full reports on the group's progress, and if any emergencies arise, I will be notified immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," she replied.

"There is a house-elf by the name of Toopsy. If you say her name and the message, even faintly, she will hear you and come get me. Also the pallid-faced witch across the corridor on this floor has a frame in my office. Her name is Altheda Crockford. Her friend, Rosalba Higgins, hangs on the seventh floor down the corridor from your common room. She may be trusted as well. Become acquainted with these ladies and get in the habit of greeting them."

Hermione nodded with each direction. "Sir? Why are you helping us?"

He inhaled deeply. "You know why. I also have my own reasons. You will come to my office this Saturday at eight. Make up a reasonable excuse. We will be spending quite a few hours together, so be sure you're ready for it." He indicated she walk to the door by extending his hand. "Shall we key your magical signature to my wards, now?"

Author's Notes:

Hermione makes three jumps in her third year in each timeline (the exception being the first timeline because she dies). There are actually only three timelines in the story...Severus' timelines. The Diary was introduced in chapter Four. This was not the same timeline as in Chapter One; it's the second timeline.

Think of a fork: teenage Severus's sixth year is the thick part of the fork..the conjunction which all the timelines diverge out from, and the tines of the fork are all different timelines. The first tine is Hermione's first jump back in time (Chapter One) when Hermione was beaten to death, the results of which made Severus decide to use the Time-Turner. This is timeline1.

The next tine is timeline2 (the timeline when Severus1 tells his younger self to keep Hermione safe in Chapter Two. When teenage Severus1 hid Hermione to keep her safe, it changed things, creating the second timeline.) However on this timeline, timeline2, Hermione makes two more jumps, both disastrous (one being when Hermione stayed in Gryffindor with Lily that was briefly mentioned in Chapter Four). So this teenage Severus grows up to be Severus2.

In Chapter Four, Severus2, goes back in time, he buys the Diary, then returns to ask his younger self to avoid a confrontation with Black and Potter so he can hide 'the girl', and tells her when she will appear for her next two jumps. When sixth-year Severus2 hides Hermione for all three of her jumps, finally fixing the wrong, (hopefully), that timeline, timeline2, is erased creating timeline3...and giving us the timeline we are currently following.

Note: assume that when Severus2 bought the diary he wrote down what he remembered and what the older version of himself, Severus1, told him when he'd been a teen. Thus timeline1 and timeline2 are both recorded in the Diary even though timeline one had been erased. Then teenage Severus2 recorded what he knew, what he did for all three of her jumps, and when Hermione arrived so what happened in all three timelines is recorded. Trust me on this, okay? Think of him as two different people: 1. adult Severus2 who went back in time and got his younger self to change things and 2. teenage Severus2 who grew up in this timeline and became Severus3.

But since the Diary is out of the time loops, because it's passed from an older Severus to his teenage self, the Diary is out of the effects of the time paradoxes and time loops. If you're still confused, email me, (workingforweekends@yahoo.com) and I'll be happy to explain it.

After this chapter, things will change slightly, but I will be maintaining canon as much as I can. Most of the stuff will be 'behind the scenes' or going on at the same time as other things that are from Harry's POV. Sorry, no sex this year... or kissing. But there will be more SS+HG time. And a surprise.

For us who use feet the translation of meter to feet would be:

The velocity of a curse by a wizard with self-doubt, or who lacked conviction or determination, emitted a weaker power charge, which could still shoot the curse at a speed of twenty-seven and a half to thirty-three and a half meters (about ninety to a hundred and ten feet) per second. For some wizards, it could be even lower, about twenty-four meters (about eighty feet) per second if they didn't have their heart in executing the curse or didn't like to hurt others. For some, whose moral compass fell a bit off-kilter, their curses could fly with speeds up to sixty-one meters (about two hundred feet) per second, and there was a duelist on record who managed one hundred and ten. That beat Professor Flitwick's record by only three meters (about ten feet) per second.

Chapter 26

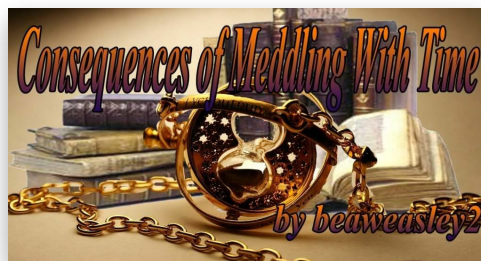
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Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to ArabelleBloodgood and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione walked down to Professor Snape's office feeling a bit of unease. She had no idea what he expected of her or what to expect from him. She saw a few of the Slytherins, Serena Wilkes, Aldebaran Urguhart, and Raymond Kennecott, leave his office just as she entered the corridor and slowed her pace so as to avoid a confrontation. Wilkes saw her and nudged Kennecott on his arm, making him turn to see what she was on about. He smirked and said something to his mates, making them laugh, but, thankfully, they walked on and left her alone.

Hermione sighed with relief. *If they had been Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle, I would've had to deal with an altercation all by myself. Well, maybe not. This close to Professor Snape's office, he might've heard something and come to help me, but it wouldn't be until after I'd been hexed or jinxed. Of course, then he would've been straightening me out or sending me to the hospital, and I'd lose house points or get another detention. Oh, yeah, being Muggle-born and being in the dungeons is always taking a risk.* Hermione knocked on his door and waited for his demand to enter. It was never a polite invite, just a barked out, "Enter," which made every student she knew feel an instant lump in their gut.

"Why haven't you used the room I set up for you?" he asked as soon as she'd entered his office.

She quietly huffed; he hadn't even bothered to look up from his writing. "I've been really busy with revision, and Harry...between his Quidditch ban and worrying about whether Hagrid will be sacked...he hasn't really been very attentive this week," she tried to explain, although it sounded lame even to her.

Professor Snape closed the ledger he had been writing in and set his quill down on his desk before he looked up at her.

"And his scar is still hurting him, although... At least he hasn't been in detention with Umbridge again," she added with a hopeful air.

"I wouldn't be overly concerned for Professor Hagrid," Professor Snape stated blandly. He sat back and regarded her as if he was weighing whether he should confide in her or not.

Hermione shifted nervously on her feet and laced her hands together, unable to suppress her own anxiety for Hagrid.

One side of Professor Snape's mouth drew back slightly as he watched her. "Regardless of whether Umbridge takes away his teaching privileges, he is still Keeper of the Keys and groundskeeper for the school." He stood and moved around his desk to face her as he spoke. "Dumbledore will not make Hagrid leave the school any more than he'd allow Professor Trelawney to. He has his reasons for keeping them here." Professor Snape crossed his arms and leaned against his desk. "As for Potter's scar...has he had any more visions?"

"You mean besides the typical adolescent dreams?" she asked and flinched at his answering scowl. She clasped the back of one of the chairs with one hand as he dropped his arms, placing each hand on the edge of the desk beside his hips. "The same...a corridor. A dark, dimly lit corridor and a door. That's where the dreams always stop...at the door. Only his perception has changed somewhat, and he thinks he's been there before."

His head dropped so that he seemed to be looking at the floor. "So, it's the same dream," he said smoothly, so soft she had to strain to hear him. He looked up and turned around as he said, "Take a seat please."

Hermione complied. She watched as he placed a piece of parchment on the desk beside him and picked up a quill. He tapped the quill with his wand, and the quill hovered over the parchment, quivering slightly as if in anticipation. "Tell me all of the spells you've learned in your Defense club."

She started rambling off the list as best as she could, trying to ignore the scratch of the quill on his desk. "This would be easier if I had my revision guide."

"I just want a general idea of what you've accomplished," he stated. When she'd finished listing all the spells she could remember, he nodded. He flicked his wand at the parchment, and it folded itself. It vanished as he asked, "How are their fighting skills?"

"Pardon?" she asked, taken off guard by the vanishing parchment and wondering where it vanished to.

"You heard me," he said impatiently.

"Adequate, I think," Hermione admitted. "We're sparring against each other and..."

"In other words, inadequate." He crossed his arms again as he said, "Gryffindors do not use full force on a friend, and Hufflepuffs are too timid to hurt someone they like."

"That's not true!" she exclaimed, even though she realized that he was absolutely correct. They hadn't been sparring with full force, only with enough strength to learn the spells.

"Follow me," Professor Snape said and walked across the room. Hermione had to scramble to keep up.

He led her to a room across the corridor from his office.

"These are sparring dummies. They light up to indicate the velocity, accuracy, and strength of the spells," he said, indicating the row of four human-shaped target dummies that stood against the far wall. "Velocity is indicated by the number on the forehead." He indicated the dummies on the left. "This model registers strength by color codes in shades of green, blue and purple: green...good, blue...better, purple...real damage." He then pointed to the dummies on the right. "This model displays ones accuracy as determined by the location and force of the hit. Where the spell makes contact on the target dummy it will glow anywhere from white, yellow, orange, or red. White is contact...but no strength, yellow...sufficient impact but low effect, orange...sufficient impact with moderate effect, orange-red is a good, solid strike with optimum effect, and red...damage done." He turned to face her. "Show me what you've learned."

Hermione drew her wand and aimed a Stunner at one of the dummies. The number on the forehead indicated her velocity as one hundred and fifty-three, and the spot she'd hit the dummy turned blue.

"Not bad; do another," Professor Snape said stiffly.

Hermione could feel herself practically glow from his praise. She tried another and another. His remarks stayed the same, "Not bad; do another," until she'd tried all the spells they'd covered in the DA meetings. Her velocity ranged between one hundred and forty to one hundred and eighty-six, with her strength in the blue shades and her accuracy in the orange tones.

"Now, defend yourself against me," he said with a slight smirk as he drew his wand. Hermione braced herself, trying her best to defend herself against his onslaught. He was unrelenting, only stopping occasionally to reverse a spell she hadn't been able to deflect. She only managed to hit him thrice, and tore a hole in his robe with a hex. She was sore, bruised, and aching when the sparring stopped.

He walked over to a cabinet, withdrew two vials and gave them to her. "Here, drink this. One is a rejuvenation potion...the other a strengthening potion."

Hermione, still breathless from the sparring, drank them, thankful for the immediate relief. "Thank you."

He nodded. "If you could tell me where you are meeting, I can supply you with target dummies," he suggested, giving her more of the potions, two doses of the Rejuvenation Potion and one of the Strengthening to take with her, as well as a jar of his Muscle Pain Liniment.

She held the jar in her hand and smiled, remembering the times she'd rubbed the same liniment on his back just two years ago. "I think we have them, but I wasn't sure how to use them," she stated. It wasn't a lie; she just had to ask the room for them. At least now she knew what to ask for.

"We will do this again next week," he said and crossed his arms. "Now, you need rest."

She looked up at him and smiled. "Thank you. Good night, Professor."

He nodded, a clear dismissal. Hermione put the vials and jar in her bag and left the room, heading straight to her dorm.

Severus watched her leave and exhaled as he swore under his breath. She'd lied to him. They didn't have the target dummies, and she was not confiding in him as to where they were meeting or when. Not that when was an issue anymore; Septima had given Dumbledore all the probable dates and times that they could be meeting. Severus was just not certain that they had been meeting on all the dates she'd provided him.

He pulled the piece of parchment out of his pocket that had the list Hermione had provided him. According to the list, and from what Hermione had demonstrated, they'd covered a fair number of spells, and she definitely had them down well enough to spar with him, even if he had been holding back on her. He was actually annoyed by her performance. Her spells had been accurate and strong, but not nearly strong or fast enough for what lay ahead of her. She'd have to become much more aggressive and quick to survive.

He left the room, heading for the Headmaster's tower to report to Dumbledore. The old fool would be pleased by Potter's progress, he was sure, but Severus was not. Had *he* been with them, instructing them, they'd be much farther along. It's why he wanted the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, well not initially, but the reason he'd wanted it this year...he knew what these students faced. First hand.

Well, he'd just have to train up Hermione and hope she taught Potter and Weasley well. It was the only hope they had at this point to get the boy ready for what he was to face, *if* he would ever be ready to face the Dark Lord. Severus had serious doubts.

Next meeting, he'd praise Hermione only for the spells that were in the purple or red ranges on the target dummies. He smirked. She thrived on praise, especially his, so that would definitely encourage her to push herself more aggressively in her training. All the better to make her a fighter, and keep her alive.

She thought that when Professor Snape had said he'd have her meet with him next week, that he'd meant Monday; but no, he waited until Friday. She had ten essays to write, and she had arranged another training day with Harry and Ron. At least she hoped it was a meeting and not a real detention. *It isn't my fault that Neville became flustered and he almost got his fleabane and aster mixed up. Neville always gets flustered when Professor Snape lingers behind him, even if he was watching me to see if I'd mess up!* Hermione took a deep breath before knocking lightly on Professor Snape's door.

To her surprise, the door behind her opened up. "Inside and quit gawking," Professor Snape hissed.

She hurried passed him into the room. "Now, let's review your spellwork, shall we? Take out your wand."

She didn't hesitate. She fired a stunner at the target dummy across the room. The indicator read one hundred and seventy, and the chest glowed a bright orange.

"Inadequate," he said with a sneer. "Try again."

Surprised by his comment, she tried again. This time the velocity number went up by seven points, and the chest glowed a dark orange red.

"Better, but not good enough," he stated coolly. "Again."

She tried harder, her anger making her whip her arm and flick her wrist forcefully. The velocity indicator read one hundred and ninety-eight and the dummy glowed a light blood red.

She could hear the smirk in his voice when he said simply, "Good; do another."

Now that she knew what he wanted, Hermione smirked in return. *So be it.* She fired an Impedimenta Hex with the same determination.

He stopped his pacing. "Not bad, do another."

Hermione aimed at another target dummy, pleased with the indigo-purple and high velocity score.

"Adequate, but you can do better," he said calmly. "Again."

Half an hour later, her arm was sore, her shoulder hurt, and her legs and back ached.

"That's enough for today," he said smoothly. "Now, face me." She turned to see him holding his wand. "You will dive, duck, anything to avoid being hit. To make this fair, I will only use verbal hexes."

"Wonderful," she murmured, and he straightened.

"Do you think this is a game, Hermione? It's not. Its war and you will be in it. Your association with Potter makes that an assurance," he said angrily. "You are behind in your knowledge and skills of magical defenses, and I have to get you caught up."

She lowered her arm as she stared at him. *Oh my gods...that's what it's about? He's worried I'll get killed?*

Professor Snape's wand lowered but a fraction. "What?"

"Nothing sir, you startled me...you called me by my given name," she said, taking a fighting stance.

"It will not happen again," he stated as he too resumed a fighting stance. "Now, anticipate my every action. *Impedimenta.*"

What seemed like an hour later, he stopped and offered her a hand up. Again. "You've improved. Are you hurt?"

"No, well, yes, but nothings broken," she replied. She hurt everywhere: shoulders, elbows, knees, hips, back... toes.

"I'll escort you to Madam Pomfrey," he stated as he handed her books to review. "These are Dark tomes with spells my fellow Death Eaters like to use. Memorize the signs of the spells: the wand movements, whether they are verbal or nonverbal, if they have the ripple effect, spell-light color, the reversal...if there is one. Your life may depend on what you recognize in the second before the spell hits you. And I want you practicing moving: bending, lunging... Believe me, your adolescent gymnastics will now come in handy."

"You remember me telling you that?" she asked, looking up at him in amazement.

"I remember a lot of things you told me," he said with a smile, so much like his younger self used to when he was pleased with her. Seeing it made her heart ache. "You know those martial arts movies we talked about, some of those moves are essential to learn, how to bend and dodge. You must be flexible and have excellent balance. I've drafted a list of stretches and yoga positions to have you learn." He handed her a thin book. "Here."

She took the book but didn't take her eyes off his. "Yoga?"

"Yes. Yoga. Flexibility. Stretching. What part of that don't you understand?" he asked as if she'd just made a huge blunder. "Miss Lovegood is accomplished at it as is Miss Chang; I have heard that they both practice yoga every morning. Have them teach the others. There is a room that has been emptied down the corridor from the kitchens and expanded. It used to hold the old dented and broken pots and pans as well as all the school's linens. The Hufflepuff prefects should know about the room; if not ask, Zacharias Smith."

She would rather ask Dobby the house-elf before asking that blow-hole. "My Mum does yoga," she stated. "Well, I used to, too, but I quit when I started school."

"Well, take it up again. Find someplace near your common room to do the same, or just use the common room, but start doing yoga," Professor Snape said, picking up her bag for her and opening the door. "And teach Potter and the Weasleys too. I mean it, Hermione; you must be flexible and have good balance to be a good fighter. I'll see you in a week." He held her bag out to her.

"Do you do yoga, sir?" she asked, taking her bag.

He tilted his head and looked at her, and she lowered her eyes. "Of course you do," she replied, blushing.

"Every morning," he said softly. "So I expect you to do the same."

"Yes, sir," she replied, making a mental note to talk to Cho and Luna about leading stretching exercises.

"Harry, we have to do this," Hermione urged him as she conjured up dozens of padded mats for the floor. After last night's sparring with Severus, Hermione knew that they'd been much too lax in their training. She'd learned to duck, dive, lunge, and roll to avoid being hit. Duck and fire. Lunge, fire, then roll. Dodge, fire, then duck, roll, and fire again. Roll so that she ended up in a squatted position and fire. Fire as she dived, rolled and got up quickly to fire again. It was like those martial arts movies her father liked, or all those ridiculous girl-fighting movies...only real. Thank gods her mum made her take ballet and gymnastics, not that she'd appreciated it at the time. Still, Hermione had spent Friday night in the hospital wing recovering.

"And why are you three sneaking into this room?" George asked, entering the small classroom they'd been using for practice.

"When there is a perfectly acceptable room across from the tapestry of trolls learning to do ballet?" Fred asked, closing the door.

"How did you find us?" Hermione asked.

George shrugged as Fred smirked at her. "Followed you, of course," they said in unison.

"Right," she replied and turned back to Harry and Ron. "If you don't learn these how are you ever going to be able to defeat You-Know-Who?"

"By sheer dumb luck," Fred and George stated.

Hermione turned to glare at them. "That's not helpful."

"It wasn't luck that got him out of the graveyard," Ron stated.

Harry looked put out. "If you're all done taking the mickey out of me, shall we just get on with it?" he snapped.

"Sorry mate," Ron mumbled, as Fred said cheekily, "That's the spirit, Harry," as he drew his wand.

"Guys, can we focus please!" Hermione said, raising her voice to get everyone's attention.

George pulled his out as well. "Let's have a go, shall we?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Now these are the spells I think we need to learn," she said, making the spells appear on the wall. Harry and Ron moved closer to read them.

"Oi! Where did you learn those?" George asked, coming up behind Harry.

"Those are not fifth-year level," Fred stated beside Ron.

"Good thing you're here then, isn't it?" Ron asked.

Hermione turned to face Harry, ignoring the twins. "Watch me. I'm going to use the first one on Fred."

"Oh, no, you're not!" Fred exclaimed, aiming his wand at her.

Hermione leveled her wand at him. "Then why are you here if not to help Harry learn these so he can teach them to the others," she asked with a wicked smirk.

Fred leveled his wand and took a defensive stance. "All right, Miss Perfect-Prefect, let's see what you can do."

Two hours later, Ron, Harry, Fred, and George sat grumbling on cots in the hospital as Madam Pomfrey sorted them out and put them to bed.

"You know, I had no idea that she was so good?" Fred grumbled.

Ron turned his shoulders to face his brother because Madam Pomfrey had supported his neck with an immobilization spell. "You're surprised? She's right scary when she gets that look, and you fell for it!"

"At least I know how to do those three for next lesson," Harry said as he struggled into his pajama top without moving his bruised shoulder too much. "Once everyone masters the Impediment Jinx, Stunning Charm, and Disarming Spell, we'll...I'll teach those."

"Le' me ge's des s'raigh'; she 'eaches you, and 'hen you 'eaches ush," George mumbled around the cotton in his mouth that madam Pomfrey had saturated with the Teeth-Strengthening Elixir.

Fred leaned forward, holding the compress to his forehead in place. "What my brother is asking is; she teaches you, and then you teach us? Is that what's going on?"

"I understood him," Ron grumbled as he leaned back against his pillows and tried to get comfortable. "But yeah, that's what we've been doing."

"S'hen why ishn' she 'eachn' ha 'lass?" George asked.

"I dunno," Harry stated, already feeling quite groggy from Madam Pomfrey's potions. "I suppose she didn't think anyone would want to... ahhhh, learn from... ahhhhh, 'er," he mumbled the last and fell asleep.

"Well, she is rather bossy," Ron said, smirking at the wall.

Madam Pomfrey appeared around the curtain. "Stop all this chatter. You're supposed to be asleep."

"Yes, ma'am," all three Weasleys mumbled and quieted down.

The last DA meeting of the term, they practiced the Impediment Jinx and Stunning Hex on each other, as well as reversing the spells, or testing themselves with the target dummies the Room of Requirement provided them. Hermione was disappointed that they didn't do any of the advanced spells she, Harry, and the Weasley boys had

worked on, but it might have been for the best. Some of the DA members just were not ready for the advanced spells. But in regards to the ones Harry was reviewing: Neville was really getting good, Colin was really becoming quite the fighter, and Cho really put forth the effort and was quite agile as well as strong. Even Ginny managed to make the target dummy glow red with most of her spells, enough for her brothers to take her a bit more seriously.

When Harry dismissed the lesson, reminding everyone to be careful and quiet as they made their way to their common rooms, Hermione spoke to Hannah, Susan, and Justin about the importance of learning yoga, Kung fu, or even gymnastics and stretching every morning. Justin promised to try and said his parents would be more than happy to have him start something over the holiday. Susan and Hannah both said that they'd try to get the Hufflepuffs together and practice yoga and stretching, too. Encouraged, Hermione sought out Terry and Anthony to discuss the same before they left for Ravenclaw tower.

Parvati and Padma cornered Hermione by the bookshelves as she helped straighten up the room. "Hermione, why yoga?" Padma asked.

She looked up, holding three books balanced on her lap and one in her hand. "Fighting, especially wand fighting, requires good balance, flexibility, and quick reflexes. So, far all we've done is easy dueling among friends, learning how to do the spells, but not really sparring." She cradled the books on her lap against her as she stood up. Lavender reached out from beside her and helped steady her. "Thank you, I didn't see you."

"Not a problem," Lavender said, withdrawing her hand. Hermione put the books she'd selected into her bag. "So, what now? We just practice on our own?" Lavender asked.

Hermione nodded. "Well, yes. I mean, term's over, and most of us are going home for Christmas."

"We could stay if Harry is," Padma said, nervously fingering the end of her braid.

Across the room, she could see Cho corner Harry between the mirrors and the target dummies. "No, he's not staying here over the holiday."

"I overheard what you said to Hannah, Susan, and Justin," Parvati said, and Padma made a nod as she glanced quickly from her sister and back to Hermione. "That is Muggle stuff, right? King foo and Jim-nogsticks."

"Kung fu is a fighting style that involves bending, jumping, twisting, and kicking, but yes, it's Muggle...Chinese martial arts actually," Hermione explained. "Gymnastics is tumbling, jumping, twisting, and knowing how to land on your feet. The thing is, the body movements would help us fight better. Or so I read."

Lavender absentmindedly handed Hermione a few more books off the shelf. "So, it's good if we learn this Kong fu and gymnastics?"

"Yeah, it is," Hermione agreed. "Or if there is a wizarding equivalent that I don't know about, do that."

Hermione followed the girls out, talking about the differences between Kung fu and gymnastics and how they would go about learning them.

Hermione sat on her bed reading, well, staring at one of the books from the Room of Requirement. Cho had kissed Harry under mistletoe the night of the last DA meeting, but Hermione wondered if maybe Cho's kiss tasting like tears had put Harry off her. He hadn't been all that enthralled by the kiss, not nearly as much as the hopeful anticipation of possibly kissing her had been. Time would tell.

Harry.

His dream about the attack on Arthur Weasley really had bothered Hermione. If it was a real vision from Voldemort, he shouldn't have seen it...if it wasn't, that meant he was having premonitions, and Hermione didn't believe in that rubbish. He and the Weasleys had returned to number twelve, Grimmauld Place that night, leaving Hermione at the castle all alone.

She decided to go to the room on the fifth floor and practice something...anything to get her mind off Mr. Weasley*Maybe I'll see if either Altheda Crockford or her friend, Rosalba Higgins, were in their frames.* It would definitely take her mind off this to spar with Professor Snape again. If not, there was always the Room of Requirement and the target dummies.

Altheda said that Professor Snape had not been in his office, and Rosalba informed her he was not in his lab either. So Hermione resolved to spend some time in the Room of Requirement, but she spent her time reading instead of practicing her spells.

By the time Hermione dragged herself off to bed, it was very late. She laid in bed staring at the canopy and thinking about, well, everything. When sleep eluded her, she pulled out one of the books Professor Snape had lent her to read to memorize the various wand movements and individual spell indicators.

When the Hogwarts Express came to a stop at King's Cross, Hermione looked though the window, hoping to see a familiar face. Any familiar face. She had been told to remain in the prefect compartment and that someone would be there to retrieve her. A tall woman wearing a beige blazer, red cashmere turtleneck, and black pants with her silky blonde hair pulled back in a barrette stared straight at Hermione, catching and holding her attention. The woman stood with her arms crossed, ignoring the rest of the parents gathered on the platform. For a moment Hermione thought she might be Narcissa Malfoy, but Mr. Malfoy was standing four meters away next to a squat stocky wizard, who greatly resembled a balding Vincent Crabbe, and another taller, burly wizard.

Hermione waited as long as she dared. She checked the compartments she was assigned as prefect for any stragglers, glancing out each window, hoping to see a familiar face, before disembarking the train. But as the last students disembarked, she still didn't see anyone she recognized. Finally, giving up searching, she inhaled to calm her nerves and collected her things.

As soon as Hermione stepped from the train onto the platform, the tall woman in black walked toward her. "My little Gryffindor," she drawled smoothly, leaning closely in Hermione's direction so as not to be overheard and stopped right next to her trunk.

But Hermione was scanning the platform for help and missed what she'd said. Several students and parents were all milling around, but there was no one looking in their direction.

The woman clasped Hermione's arm and pulled her aside, leaning close to Hermione again so as not to be overheard. "I'm Severus Snape," she said softly with a smooth whiskey voice. "Come with me."

Hermione, however, had tried to jerk her arm from the woman's grasp and stood staring at her, not trusting the strange woman.

"Do not make a scene," the woman demanded softly, urging Hermione to walk away with her with a firm grip, a very strong grip, on her arm.

She tried to pull her arm free, but her iron grip only tightened on her arm. "Will you...what? No!" Hermione looked around, feeling a wave of panic. "You're hurting me!"

"Stop struggling and listen. In your third year you met my sixteen-year-old self, and I hid you in the classroom I used as my lab. You made me a spoon; we went for two hikes together, on one, I harvested a unicorn," she...he rattled off as she...he flicked her wand at Hermione's trunk and Crookshank's carrier and levitated them onto the trolley with a flick of her...his wrist. "You gave me a magical journal and a black swan quill as a thank you gift..."

She had to be Severus Snape; Hermione hadn't told anyone about the spoon or the hike... or the unicorn!

"Do you really think I could come get you as myself?" she...he asked with a soft drawl that seemed hilarious with the prim features of the woman's face. "I took Polyjuice Potion for an augury's wail. You're a sitting Mooncalf here, and Lucius Malfoy, Krause Crabbe, and Eugene Nott are just a stone throw away. Now move."

"Are they...?"

"What do you think?" The woman...professor took her arm and pulled.

"What...?"

"Will you hush!" she...he snarled and guided Hermione with him...her though the station. "I have to get you safely out of here." She...he directed Hermione toward the public restroom and ushered her toward the handicapped loo. "Get in the stall and change. Now."

"You can't come in with me?!" Hermione started to protest as the Polyjuiced Severus Snape did just that.

"Just do as I say without drawing everyone's attention, please," he said as he flicked his wand a few times at the stall door. She...he handed her a flask. "It already has a hair from a young girl of approximately your size. Change into something Muggle. Now. I want to get away from this place quickly and without incident."

"Professor, why the disguise?" she asked in a whisper.

He...she turned to look at Hermione annoyed. "First, as I said before, I couldn't very well appear on the platform as myself; secondly, there are several Death Eaters retrieving their children on the platform, doing their parental duties: Crabbe, Nott, and Malfoy obviously...whom I named earlier...but there are others. And third, it would be noticed with whom you left. It couldn't very well be your own parents since they are Muggles and unable to protect you, so I volunteered. Now hurry up and change."

At least he had the decency to turn his back to her and began changing the color of her...his clothes to black. Hermione swallowed a mouthful of the potion and fought back the urge to vomit. She wondered briefly where he'd encountered the woman and girl, but shrugged it off. It was of no importance. When the nausea ebbed, she struggled to open her trunk. Taking a quick glance at how nicely he...she was dressed, Hermione pulled out her best jeans and a red top she received as a gift from her mum but hadn't had the chance to wear yet. Her body was changing as she pulled up her jeans, and she realized that the girl she would imposter was slightly narrower in the hips, but at least her same height. A quick swirl of her wand and the jeans shrunk to fit better. When she looked up she noticed that he'd changed his hair to a dark brown.

Hermione touched her braid and realized that her hair had stayed in place, only now it felt silkier and not so thick. She quickly tightened the band at the end so it wouldn't fall off, smiling at the dark, honey blonde color. When she buttoned up the red blouse, Hermione realized that the girl was definitely less endowed in the chest. Not sure how to adjust a bra and top without a mirror, she scrounged around for something to pad herself.

"What is taking...?" Professor Snape asked as he turned his head slightly.

Hermione had found a partial sock she hadn't finished yet and was stuffing it in her bra.

"Why are you doing that?"

"So my clothes fit," she stated as she searched for another of her handmade socks. She found one and began to unravel the yarn until it was the same size as the first.

"You knit... What was that thing?" he asked, crossing his arms.

"A sock," she replied as she adjusted its placement, then turned to look at him...her.

"Oh, yeah, I heard about your spew attempt," he said with a sneer and picked up the cat carrier.

"It's not spew, it's S.P.E.W....the Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare," she snapped back and then blushed, when he...she glared at her. In this form, for some reason, Professor Snape was far less intimidating.

"Fine, S.P.E.W. We can discuss that ridiculousness later," he said and turned his attention to her pet. "If I make your cage into a tote, will you stay in it until I can get you to Headquarters?" he asked the cat. Crookshanks meowed and started to purr. "I'm trusting you. Jump out and run away from us, and you'll be homeless. I haven't the time to chase you." Crookshanks made a soft mew, even though he looked grumpier than usual. Professor Snape set the carrier down, swirled his wand over it, and it transformed into a tote with Crookshanks still inside. Crookshanks squirmed a bit, making himself more comfortable, then settled down. Professor Snape then turned his attention to Hermione. "Aren't you ready yet?"

"What about my trunk?" Hermione asked. "Are we just going to haul it around with us?"

With an exasperated sigh, he said, "Dump your books out of your bag. Keep only your wallet and essentials in it."

Hermione quickly complied and put all her books into her trunk. After she locked it, he shrunk the trunk down to the size of a cigar box and handed it to her. "There."

Hermione shoved it in her bag.

"Now let's get out of here. Act like a Muggle."

He led her outside and hailed a cab. "Kingsbridge," he told the driver.

"What's in Kingsbridge?" Hermione asked softly.

"Hush," Professor Snape admonished her as the cab pulled out into traffic. He leaned over to Hermione and said softly, "We have an hour to kill before I'm going to take you to see your friends. Are you hungry?"

"Not yet. Sir," Hermione started to say, then amended herself when the driver looked in his rearview mirror, "er, ma'am. Might I suggest the British Library? It should be open, and there is a café not far from it for dinner."

Professor Snape smiled and aimed his wand at the driver's back. "Let us out at the British Library." The driver changed lanes and took the next right without comment. When they arrived, Professor Snape handed the driver some money and walked with Hermione toward the entrance. "I'd prefer the history section, and we will stay together. Do not leave my side. You are still underage and cannot do magic."

"Yes, ma'am," she replied politely as they approached the doors.

He aimed his wand at Crookshanks. "Sorry about this, but I have to make you unnoticeable as cats are not allowed in the library." He touched Crookshanks' head with his wand tip to disillusion him. "Stay with us; I'd hate for you to get lost," he reminded her cat.

They spent over half an hour reading together until his potion began to wear off. Severus slipped between the shelves and transfigured his pants into trousers, made the blazer into a proper coat, then transfigured his shoes into boots and enlarged them. Once he was finished dressing, Hermione indicated that they should leave. "The library will be closing soon. Maybe we could get a bite in the café I mentioned."

He shook his head. "No, there is a pub I like, a Muggle one, but there are booths where we can have some privacy." He took her arm and Disapparated with her. They arrived somewhere between establishments on a relatively quiet street. Once inside the pub, he led her to a corner booth and sat down, taking the spell off Crookshanks.

"Sir, my cat..."

"Can only be seen by us," he said smoothly. "Your cat seems to trust me more than you do." Severus ordered for them. The waiter didn't look surprised when he asked for

a booster seat, three bowls of beef stew, one bowl of water, one black and tan, and one coke. When the waiter arrived with the booster seat, Professor Snape made it into a large platform for Crookshanks to sit on and eat his stew.

They talked amiably until he interrupted her. "Your change is starting. Go to the loo and adjust your clothes. It's right there, past the door to the kitchen. I'll wait here."

After their meal, he Apparated her to Grimmauld Place and ushered her inside quickly. "I'll be seeing you soon," he said cryptically, handing her Crookshanks' tote before he walked down to the kitchens.

Hermione let Crookshanks out of the tote and ran up the stairs, looking for Harry and Ron.

Hermione diligently did her stretching and yoga exercises every morning and stretched before bed. She was feeling more limber as the days wore on. Even Ginny started doing the stretching and yoga with her, exclaiming that it might help her with Quidditch as well. Ron tried it a few times and then gave up; but Fred and George at least tried the yoga for six days, although they related every yoga position to something sexual. Harry just didn't want to, preferring to either hang around Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, read his Quidditch books, or sulking about being left out of the Order meetings.

And Hermione didn't see Severus until Christmas was nearly over. He was avoiding coming to Headquarters, and she privately knew that it was also to avoid seeing Sirius Black, but Professor Snape did send Hermione books on defensive spells and reversing hexes, jinxes, and curses every few days. She'd asked Hestia one afternoon to mail Severus her gift of a bottle of black ink with a glossy green sheen and a box of stationary parchment with a green border she'd bought him during their last Hogsmeade weekend. On Christmas morning she had received two books wrapped in silver paper entitled, *Defending Your Home and Person*, and *Edible Plants of Northwestern Europe* from him.

Ever since she'd arrived, Harry had been acting, well, strange. He had bouts where he'd leave the room and sit by himself, mumbling. She hated herself for doing it, but she'd used the Extendable Ears to eavesdrop on him. He kept mumbling about leaving, wanting to get away from everyone...to protect them by his absence. It was absurd. Just as absurd as his grumbling that Dumbledore was avoiding him. Dumbledore was the wizarding equivalent of a Commander-in-chief for the Resistance and busy...not avoiding anyone. Even after Ginny had told Harry what it was like being possessed by Voldemort, he was still unconvinced and had bouts of reclusiveness.

During their visit to see Mr. Weasley, he'd told them about Trainee Healer Pye's botched attempt of using stitches on Mr. Weasley's wounds, and Mrs. Weasley had been in a thither all evening.

But poor Neville, it was awful about his parents.

Hermione was nonetheless as elated as the Weasleys when Mrs. Weasley finally brought the family patriarch home. She followed the Weasleys as they pushed his wheelchair into the kitchen. "Cured!" Mr. Weasley announced, "Completely cured!"

Suddenly everyone became really quiet.

Hermione took in the scene before her. Both Professor Snape and Sirius Black had their wands aimed at each other. Black had his hand on Harry as if to push Harry aside, and Harry had both of his arms up as if standing between them to try and avert a duel. Professor Snape looked livid...well, affronted and incensed really, and Black looked as if he was asking for a fight...cocky and self-puffed up assured.

"Merlin's beard," Mr. Weasley said, the humor leaving his voice. "What's going on here?"

Professor Snape pocketed his wand and turned to leave. "Six o'clock, Monday evening, Potter," he snarled as he forced his way out of the room.

Hermione squeezed her way out of the room after him. "Professor," she called after him. "Professor." He didn't stop, and she ran to catch up to him. "Severus."

"Do not use my given name," he snarled as he turned around.

"You wouldn't stop," she stated as she skidded to a stop in the entry way.

"I have somewhere to be," he snapped at her.

She approached him, unfazed by his attitude. "Did you...was it you?"

"Was it me, what?" he asked, his hands clenched at his sides. "Out with it girl; I haven't all day."

"Mr. Weasley, the Healers couldn't figure out how to treat Vo...You-Know-Who's snake's venom. It was you, wasn't it?" She knew it had to be him. "I've been reading up on snake bites and nothing in the books matched Mr. Weasley's condition. How did you get the venom to make the antivenin?"

He uncrossed his arms and then pulled her into the drawing room. "You've read...of course you have."

"It was you!" she said with conviction. "You milked her? You must have...and made the antidote. It had to be you. That bite was unlike any I read about... the venom was...it's unique, isn't it?"

"You will keep that a secret," he hissed.

"Why?!" she asked, flabbergasted. "Don't you want credit for..."

"Because if the Dark Lord finds out what I did or for whom, he will kill me, that's why." He ran his hand through his hair. "Use your head," he snapped at her, but without the vinegar his tone had previously. "Have you been doing like I asked and making yourself limber?"

"Yes, every day," she assured him. "I spoke to everyone before I left school. Lavender and the Patil twins are going to try gymnastics and stretching over the holiday. Luna and Cho, they both agreed to teach yoga and stretching exercises to all the Ravenclaws, and I received a letter from Ernie that he, Hannah, and Susan will do the same...to do what they can to get limber."

He nodded. "And you've read the books I lent you?"

"Yes, I have, and I've tried to teach the information about the wand movements, spell indicators and the reversals to Harry and Ron...when they'll pay attention," she stated. "They are able to determine verbal ones, but not the nonverbal ones. Ginny, Fred, and George are getting really good with distinguishing the spell signs: wand movements, the ripple effects, spell-light colors..."

"Figures, Potter's just like his father. He never takes these things seriously," he said and turned his head to look at the Christmas tree

She automatically jumped to Harry's defense. "No, he's not like James Potter at all...he's himself!"

"You didn't know him like I did," Professor Snape said, refusing to look at her.

"No. I didn't. I only encountered him that one time in the forest, and I saw you hurt...several times...presumably by Potter and Black," she said, and he turned to look at her, his expression hard. "Do you remember when you were hospitalized, and I had no word from you for days? I may not have known him, but I can say I know how he was to you."

His hands clenched into fists. "You have no idea...you only saw it once. Once. I..."

"How well did you really know him, anyway? I mean, really know him?" she snapped and then held her hands up in supplication. She hated this argument. *Why can't he see past his own prejudices.* "It's like Malfoy; how well do you think I know him, eh? He's my bully...so are Pansy Parkinson and Millicent Bulstrode, or Crabbe and Goyle." She dropped one of her hands, extending the other toward the doorway. "However, I cannot tell you anything about them except that they are mean to me, blinded by prejudice, egotistical, rude, and malevolent. I'm sure you see them differently than I do."

He just stared at her and then turned to face the windows.

"However, as much as James Potter and Sirius Black were arrogant, bullying gits, however much as they hated and tormented you, Harry was *not* raised by his father or Black. He was raised by his aunt and uncle...two Muggles who are condescending and abusive to him and consistently try to suppress his magic. He never knew his dad, Severus, or his mother...knows almost nothing about them except what has been written about them in the history books and old newspapers."

He glared at her, his expression hard. "So his life isn't perfect," he snapped.

She let out her breath slowly as she counted silently to ten and then dropped the subject. "The information on the Dark spells, I wrote it all out for the others as well...a list to study...all of the wand movements, spell indicators and the reversals. But I can't give it to them until school starts."

"Send them to me, and I'll send them by school owls." His body relaxed as he faced her again. "Use the Weasleys' owl if you must contact me; don't use Potter's. The white owl is too recognizable." His hand rose as if to touch her and then dropped. "I have to go."

She wanted him to stay a while longer, but knew he wouldn't. "Thank you for my gifts."

He looked over her head at the doorway. "You're welcome; and I thank you for mine." He stopped just as he passed her. "Be good, my little Gryffindor."

"I will. Happy New Year, Severus," she said softly as he walked away.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

The lines of dialogue with the asterisks are taken directly from the book, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, of course, the American version.

Where the story gaps is what we have in canon, and I didn't want to type it all out. Hope that's all right with you.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, ArabellaBloodgood, and to my betas, EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia, for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Returning to school and to the daily routine she knew so well had been a relief for Hermione. There was the added pressure of all the added homework heaped upon them by every teacher, and with Harry having Occlumency lessons every Monday and Wednesday, it made it much harder to find time for the DA to meet. Umbridge was being ever more watchful of the Gryffindors, as if only Gryffindors broke the school rules, and was frequently seen in the corridors. Not only that, but Umbridge had given Hagrid his evaluation, and he was now on probation. Educational Decree Number Twenty-six was posted on the school notice boards, stating that teachers were not allowed to impart any information that was beyond the scope of their lessons, something that really amused Hermione.

Harry was at least more himself, even if he'd been having a horrible time with Professor Snape's Occlumency lessons. Hermione had researched everything she could on Occlumency for Harry, hoping to help him with the lessons, not that he wanted to actually practice clearing his mind with her when she'd suggested it to him...he wanted to practice defensive and deflection spells and shielding charms.

The first day of term, though, Harry had an unexplained fit of happiness, supposedly because something that Voldemort wanted had happened. Whatever that had been,

the implication was frightening.

Hermione thought she now knew why Professor Snape was so interested in Harry's dreams. In her opinion, something had reacted with the Killing Curse the night Harry's parents died, possibly something Harry's mum had cast, that had not only made the spell rebound back onto Voldemort, but forged some kind of connection between Voldemort's mind and Harry's, which is why Harry could see and feel Voldemort's thoughts and emotions. She suspected that if Voldemort ever discovered this, he could use Harry, bend and twist his mind or make him insane. That alone would've made Hermione strive to be the best darned Occlumens ever!

Harry, on the other hand, was putting himself wholeheartedly into the DA as if that was the only reason he'd returned to Hogwarts.

Hermione, Ron, and Harry snuck off to the small classroom down the corridor from the common room whenever they could...actually, whenever Hermione could, which was usually around eight or nine in the evenings...to practice as much as they could. Harry was as tenacious as he'd been when learning spells for the Triwizard Tournament, and Ron was even putting forth the same effort as well.

Harry's article for *The Quibbler* came out Monday morning. It was fantastic. By the time the first class let out that same day, Umbridge ensured its circulation by posting Decree Number Twenty-seven, making it an expulsive offense for any student to read or even have a copy of *The Quibbler* in their possession. Now, every student in school, and possibly their parents, would know Harry's side. Hermione was elated!

However, Harry was still having nightly dreams of the corridor. He'd told Hermione and Ron that he knew it to be in the lower levels of the Ministry of Magic...precisely where Mr. Weasley had been attacked, and she was worried as to how he knew that so assuredly. But, Harry was convinced that it was the same corridor where he'd seen Mr. Malfoy talking to Minister Fudge the day of his trial.

Just before Potions that same day, Hermione had written about the dream on her homework with Professor Snape's special ink. She was currently trying to ignore Malfoy's, Pansy's, and Millicent's snide remarks, keeping an eye out so that none of the Slytherins flicked anything into her, Neville's, or Harry's cauldrons, as well as paying attention to what Neville, Harry, and Ron were doing, as usual, all while trying to concentrate on her own potion. She barely noticed when Professor Snape stood behind her until she straightened up and collided with him, accidentally kicking the toe of his boot. "Er, sorry, sir," she stammered.

"I believe that another night with me is in order," he snarled. "Fifteen points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger. I'll expect you promptly at eight o'clock. Do not be late and be prepared."

Severus' door banged open just before he was ready to leave his classroom for lunch. Mr. Aldebaran Urguhart and Mr. Rayne Boughton burst in, Mr. Boughton dragging Miss Brambila Rusbridge by the hand with him. Severus stood and crossed his arms as Miss Tammorah Merkle and Miss Serena Wilkes filed in. "Do you have any idea what he's done?" Rayne Boughton demanded angrily as Mr. Darias Kennecott closed the door and stood behind the girls with his arms crossed, scowling darkly. Beside him, Mr. Urguhart stood with his arms crossed, apparently equally furious.

"Whom?" Severus asked, simply for clarification. He had a good idea who, and for what, which was quickly clarified by Mr. Urguhart.

"That bloody Harry Potter, that's who, and his sidekick Mudblood, Granger," the boy spat angrily.

Severus was about to admonish him for calling Miss Granger a Mudblood when Miss Rusbridge cried out, for once in her life acting boldly when in Severus' presence, "We saw them...Tracy, Terrance, Rayne and me...we saw Potter, that Granger girl, and Weasel in the Three Broomsticks sitting with Rita Skeeter. Rita Skeeter! Why her of all people? She never reports the truth!" Her grey-violet eyes looked as if they were brimming close to tears. Severus hoped she wouldn't start crying; there was plenty of things to be done for damage control.

"Well, she did this time," Miss Wilkes, his seventh-year female prefect, stated.

"She mentioned my Da!" Tammorah Merkle cried out, nearing hysterics.

"Quiet!" Severus snarled. "Will you all just calm down."

"But she mentioned my Da!" Miss Merkle reiterated as if Severus hadn't heard her the first time.

"And he *is* a Death Eater; you know this," Severus said patiently, facing the group calmly, hoping to head off Miss Merkle's hysterics.

Miss Merkle raised her voice, shouting, "HE'LL BE ARRESTED," as she stamped her foot.

Severus scowled at her, and Miss Merkle lowered her head, slightly, still gazing at him out from under her fringe. "Sorry, sir."

Severus nodded and looked at the rest of the group assembled. "No one will be arrested."

"But, sir, Aldebaran's, Raithe's, and Darias' dads were named as well," Miss Wilkes stated. "What if they are brought up on charges and arrested? The Ministry does that...Stun, arrest, then ask... guilty before proven innocent, and even then..."

"Not bloody likely," Severus stated with a smirk. "For now the Ministry is in complete denial. Fudge is doing everything in his power to ensure that the public remains ignorant of the facts...and arresting anyone on Skeeter's list would do just the opposite. It would mean that the Ministry is taking Professor Dumbledore, and for that matter Potter, serious enough to arrest wizards previously proved innocent of any associations with the Dark Lord." His words were having the desired effect; even Miss Merkle was quieting down. "However, war is imminent. You know this."

Mr. Urguhart said, "But he named..."

Severus turned on the boy. "*You* are not your father...*you* are your own person," he snapped. "You've chosen to stand up for your own beliefs. Nothing is going to happen until the Dark Lord decides to take action. Fudge will not do anything because he doesn't want the public to panic. That's why Umbridge is here: to ensure that every one of you remains ignorant, believing that your world is safe."

"But what happens when the Ministry finds out it's true...that he's back?" Miss Wilkes asked.

"Then the choices we make now will be put to the test; you'll have to take an active stance and choose sides," Severus stated. "The Dark Lord isn't gaining as many supporters and followers as before. You are being recruited...actively, which is still being conducted by his most devout followers, while the Dark Lord keeps a tight leash on his more unscrupulous followers. And when you leave school, you will be forced to choose...and forced to take his Mark. This time around, neutrality will not be an option."

"Against," Messrs Kennecott and Urguhart stated, echoed by Mr. Boughton. Miss Wilkes and Miss Rushbride nodded as well, although Miss Merkle bit her lip and hung her head.

"Now remember, hold your head up, keep your emotions under control at all times, play their game, and guard your opinions well," Severus stated. "You've all learned how to Occlude your mind. Practice...diligently."

They all nodded and appeared calmer.

"It's time for lunch." Severus ushered them out of his classroom, and he locked the door behind them. Despite his own words of reassurance, he had been seething about

the article all day. At least his group of Slytherins were holding fast, unwavering, although Severus realized he'd have to watch Miss Merkle more closely.

Severus was at his desk when Hermione entered his office. "Fifteen points, Miss Granger, for being on time," he said smoothly as she walked forward. Hermione smiled, apparently pleased that he'd upheld his promise to her, and dropped her bag on a chair.

"Have you held a meeting with your group since start of term?" he asked, setting his quill aside and looking right at her.

She shook her head, her smile fading as she sat down. "A few."

"It's been a month and a half," he sneered at her. "Are you not taking this seriously?"

"Of course I am!" she exclaimed, incensed. Why he was so angry eluded her. If she was in trouble for something she'd done, then he should just bloody well give her the detention and be done with it. Why was he mad about the DA when he'd told her he not only approved of it...but supported it? "I..."

"And yet you have plenty of time for romantic interludes with Mr. Weasley at Hogsmeade, and making idiotic interviews with gossip mongering reporters," he sneered.

She couldn't believe it. *He's angry at her over the article? Harry had only told the truth so that...*

"Have you any idea how important it is for you and Potter and your friends to actually learn this material?"

"Of course," she said, now confused at his abrupt change of subject. "But arranging meeting times for an illicit, illegal club isn't as easy as getting a detention, is it?"

"That is hardly an excuse!" he snapped.

"You're right, sir," she said, feeling chastised. "I have everyone's schedule and all the dates of the clubs and Quidditch practices, and I'm told if any changes are made, but still, sometimes it's hard to get everyone..."

"There is a staff meeting on the first and third Monday night of each month...mandatory for all professors. Umbridge likes to make a spectacle of herself at these meetings, so she never misses them. Thanks to her incessant blabbering, they go on for hours, two hours minimum, although they are usually longer. She questions bloody everything, loves enforcing parliamentary procedure, insists on reviewing point on all past meetings and is utterly unrelenting that we invest our time with such foolishnesses. Afterwards, Umbridge has meetings with the Minister of Magic on the same nights so as to inform him about everything going on in the school. So, that clears two nights a month for you. I can arrange for a meeting on the second Friday of each month...my monthly review with the witch...but I can assure you she will be too tired to investigate your activities on those nights. Professors Sprout and Burbage are on probation as well; they meet on the fourth Friday. Afterwards, Umbridge goes outside to hassle Hagrid about his lesson plans. Why are you not writing these down?"

Hermione reached for her daily planner and checked the dates on her schedule. Professor Snape slid his red inkwell in her direction. "Professors McGonagall and Sinistra have theirs on the second Wednesday, and Professor Flitwick's is on the fourth Wednesday of each month. Let me know which dates you select so I can ensure your evenings are unimpeded."

"Charms Club meets on Mondays," she stated. "Not to mention that Harry has Occlumency with you on Mondays and Wednesdays."

"Not this term, Charms Club will be on Thursdays," Professor Snape stated assuredly. "Professor Flitwick has other obligations on Mondays this term. Potter meets with me from six to seven, when he lasts that long, but we generally quit at six-forty, so you can meet from seven to nine on Mondays. Same goes for Wednesdays," he stated, but his tone was still cool.

Hermione made a quick note on each day he suggested in his red ink.

"Use the tenth to meet with Potter and Weasley in the room I provided for you, and then meet with your group on Friday. Review what you've discussed on Friday on the following Monday. By Tuesday I will have a meeting with you, then you can use the twenty-fourth for you and your friends to train on that which I teach you. The twenty-sixth and the twenty-ninth, hold your meeting. As long as you are careful about the dispersal of your friends, you should be fine. I will be teaching you the Disillusionment Charm and the Notice-Me-Not that I used on you when you bounced back in time, tonight." He slid a book over to her. "This is what you'll teach your friends this week."

After finishing marking the proposed unimpeded meeting dates in her planner, she set down her quill and picked up the book. Hermione read the three Defense spells he marked in the book and grimaced. They were very aggressive and could potentially really hurt the opponent even maim them. "These..."

"Are fighting spells, my little Gryffindor, and ones you should know," he said with a scowl. "But first, you are going to learn how to Disillusion yourself."

Darias Kennecott had waited until he saw the girl leave before he approached Professor Snape's office for his own appointment. "How is she doing?" Darias asked as he plonked himself down on the seat in front of Professor Snape's desk and crossed his ankle on his knee. His Head of House simply regarded him with that carefully controlled mask of indifference he wore when annoyed.

"I don't know what you mean," Professor Snape said softly.

Darias had the audacity to scoff at his Head of House and ignored the resulting scowl the professor's face. Not that Darias had paid much mind to Malfoy in the past, but the arrogant git had mentioned the girl's detention at lunch. "The girl, Granger, how is she coming along?" He could tell that Professor Snape was suppressing his feelings of annoyance at his impertinence, but this was important. "Look, we took a vow; I cannot betray you."

"If she knows the spells, so does Potter. Or at least he will. It's the best way to train the boy," Professor Snape replied.

"If you say so," Darias said off-handedly. He'd have trained the boy himself and not bothered with the girl. But this was Professor Snape's project.

Professor Snape crossed his arms. "And what exactly do you mean by that?"

"Nothing. You wanted to know the numbers, right?" Darias dropped his foot from where it had been resting on his knee and leaned forward. "My year, the same three are still mumbling about blood-loyalty, but Raithe and Duane are firm. Thortensen is still wavering, but I don't dare say anything directly because of his father. He'll come around in time, I think. Sixth year, Montague, Pucey and Warrington are lost, can't wait to join. Fifth year, Malfoy, Crabbe and Goyle are his, but Brambila is working on Longacre; I think she and Davis are wavering. I think they'll come around. Nott, he's been keeping to himself as much as possible, but Rayne is now socializing with Nott more frequently, so there's hope. Greengrass is giving Malfoy the cool shoulder, and she and Davis are not as tight with Bulstrode and Parkinson anymore. It's a matter of time before the girls try talking to Greengrass as well. Oh, and Vaisey wants to join. How he found out is a mystery, but he wants in."

Professor Snape shook his head. "No, no fourth-years. Any others?"

"Nope," Darias said and exhaled as he turned to look at a two-headed toad in a glass jar of yellow liquid. He hated all those disgusting things Snape had in his jars. "Too scared or frightened of their parents to budge," he said as he turned back to his mentor. "Others are biding their time, watching every move or utterance they make. Still, that leaves only three in my year who will join him, three in sixth and four in fifth...not counting the girls. Bulstrode would join the Dark Lord, but she's hoping to be matched with that boy from Durmstrang, and Parkinson is holding out for Malfoy. If he chooses her, she'll follow him in whatever he does. The dutiful wife."

Professor Snape nodded only once. "Very well. How are your Occlumency practices coming along?"

Darius sat up straighter. "That's what I'm here to find out," he said and tried to clear his mind of all emotions.

The onslaught hurt. Professor Snape never held back anymore, and Darius struggled to keep the man from probing too far and discovering anything... embarrassing.

Friday in Potions, Hermione approached Professor Snape's desk and slipped a piece of parchment on top of his ledger he'd been writing on. "My assignment, sir," she said politely and walked calmly to her seat.

Severus arched his brow, carefully concealed by his hair. He hadn't given the girl an assignment, which could only mean she was passing him information on Potter or her Defense club. He stood up and announced their assignment, scowling at the raucous manner in which they scrambled to retrieve their materials. As soon as the students were busy with their brewing, he used the nonverbal charm to reveal her message.

By the way, every time you have an Occlumency meeting with Harry, his scar hurts more than normal. Your lessons aren't working...Harry is having longer visions and his dreams are much more vivid than before, and he feels more of You-Know-Who's emotions than he should. He's not closing his mind...it's like he's more susceptible than before...he feels he has been blasted open by your sessions. He's definitely much more receptive.

He already knew this. Potter's lack of control was evident enough, but he certainly had not blasted the boy's mind open, the Dark Lord was doing that, or Potter was, by wanting to know what the Dark Lord was feeling.

Harry dreamed of being Voldemort last night and questioning Rookwood about the thing he wants, something in the Department of Mysteries. Apparently someone named Avery had told Voldemort that Bode would be able to remove 'it,' but Rookwood told Voldemort that Mr. Malfoy had put Bode under the Imperius to get 'it.' Only Bode knew he couldn't retrieve it so he resisted. Apparently, Rookwood is going to tell Voldemort how to get it.

This is not good news; Dumbledore will need to know right away, Severus thought. *Of course, the old man will want me to find out if this is true or not.* Bode had been in the Order. Severus knew that Bode had been strangled in his bed with that bloody plant because he couldn't have been allowed to survive and verify Dumbledore's claim that the Dark Lord was back. That's why he had been killed...to silence him.

Is this the weapon that Sirius mentioned to us in ... There was a smudge on the parchment obscuring the last word or words, which amused him, as if she'd tried to write headquarters or Grimmauld Place. *Thought you should know.*

Severus glared at the question. *Damn Black, what part of 'secret meeting' did that dunderhead not comprehend? That's another thing Dumbledore will need to know Black is feeding Potter information.*

Also, since you wanted to know, we are meeting again tonight. After that, I will inform the others of the meeting times we've arranged for March. Monday, I'll be in the classroom to help Harry learn the spells you've shown me. Please, don't give him a migraine like you did last Occlumency lesson. He can't concentrate when you do, and he can't do the spells at full strength or velocity.

Severus discretely used the charm to make the wording fade. *Very well.* But he needed to talk to Hermione. Alone.

Half way through class, at the critical stage when the stinksap should be added to the potion the students were brewing, Severus started his rounds. Most of the potions were dismal; Mr. Crabbe's was boiling and would be useless. Mr. Nott's was passable as was Mr. Zabini's. Both boys would be in his Advanced Potions, he was sure of it. Mr. Malfoy's potion was fine; however, as expected, Mr. Potter's potion was merely adequate, and Mr. Weasley's was too thin. When he stopped beside Mr. Longbottom to check his progress, his potion was already congealing. "Mr. Longbottom, add the hellbane and stir. Now." The boy predictably jumped and dumped the entire amount into his cauldron at once. From the corner of his eye he watched as Hermione carefully stirred her potion. "Miss Granger, remain after class," he sneered and glared at Potter and Weasley.

"What did she do?" Mr. Weasley hissed to Potter.

"Dunno. Breathed?" Potter whispered back with a shrug, but he kept his eyes on his own work. "Since when did the git need a reason to give Hermione a detention?"

Mr. Weasley made a quick glance in Severus' direction, and then turned his attention back to slicing his grubs. "Usually it's you he picks on."

"Mr. Potter, kindly allow Mr. Weasley to fail on his own," Severus barked as he checked on Miss Parkinson's potion. "Ten points each from Gryffindor." He nodded to Miss Parkinson and frowned at Miss Bulstrode's sludge-like attempt. He took the chance to slip into his storeroom, quickly grabbed two items and hurried back to the classroom, then checked everyone's potions again to assure himself that no one had done something idiotic in his brief absence.

At the end of class, Hermione waited until everyone left and then approached Severus' desk. He handed Hermione the two bottles. "Here is a Migraine Potion and one for strength. The bottles each contain a half a cauldron full of potion and should last the boy until the end of term. Do not tell Potter you got it from me," he said coolly.

"Of course not, he'd think it was laced with poison," Hermione said as she carefully examined the bottles.

"Of course he would," Professor Snape said disdainfully.

She put them in her bag. "The way you both talk to each other, your prejudice against him...his hatred of you, can you blame him?" she asked.

"No," he sneered. "That's not what I wanted to talk to you about. Potter's dream."

"I summarized everything that he told Ron and me." She looked up as she straightened and got right to the point, which he appreciated. "The way he talked about it, it was like he was there. As Vo...You-Know-Who," she corrected herself and continued. "He said he felt like he was in his body. I'm really concerned."

This is not good. Severus steepled his fingers and held them in front of his mouth. "And you say his connection is getting stronger?"

"Yes," Hermione said nodding. "He's always saying that you're not helping him close his mind as much as blasting him more open, making him more susceptible to the dreams. And the dreams are more vivid *after* your lessons. I read everything I could on Legilimency, and it involves opening up the subject's mind and focusing their attention on the subject's imaginative experiences, perceptions, sensations, emotions, thoughts or behavior."

"That's the usual perception of the art, Miss Granger," Severus scoffed at her.

"Deirdre Barrett defines susceptible subjects as Fantasizers and Dissociaters," she argued. "Fantasizers are easily acceptable but can block out invasion by shifting and creating.""

"She's a self effacing fool," Severus sneered. "A true Occlumens voids their mind of the emotional pathways associated to experiences, perception, sensation, emotion, thought or behavior. It's these emotional pathways that an accomplished Legilimens uses to delve into the mind."

"I know that," she admitted, but she pushed her argument further anyway, "however, Fantasizers find it easy to block out real-world stimuli with imagination, spend much time daydreaming, report having had imaginary companions as a child and grew up with parents who encouraged imaginary play, that's why they do best when using shifting or creating, like using a mental wall, corridors, or a lake to block a Legilimens. Dissociaters often have a history of childhood abuse or other trauma, and learned to escape into numbness or to forget unpleasant events.""

"It won't work, Hermione, the Dark Lord can blast right through such transient blockades, as can I, because the emotions are still there to be felt," he stated. "Unless you are willing to learn the principles, this discussion is pointless."

"I'd love to learn how to!" she exclaimed her eyes alight with avid curiosity and expectancy.

That wasn't what he'd meant. "I don't have the time to indulge you in this pursuit."

Her eyes were instantly downcast and her shoulders sagged slightly. Teaching her would be so much more preferable than teaching Potter, but he couldn't. "Go. I have work to do before lunch."

"Do you want any help?" she asked anyway.

He was surprised that she offered; most students couldn't wait to be dismissed. "Did you really want to wipe down worktables and straighten up the supply cupboard?"

Hermione dropped her bag on the nearest stool. "Which did you want me to do first?"

"The supply cupboard," he stated, actually pleased for the assistance. "Please make note of anything that is empty or in low supply, so I may replenish it."

She nodded and went straight to work. Severus began levitating the cauldrons to the sink as he wiped down all the worktables, periodically glancing up at the girl sorting out his cupboard. Any other student would have considered that chore a detention, but Hermione was actually humming as she wrote a notation on his supply list on the clipboard.

When he'd finished the worktables, he walked over to check her progress. She was two thirds the way complete, and every container she'd checked was neatly aligned with the labels showing. "Miss Granger, you will stop. It's time for lunch," he said softly.

"Yes, sir," she said happily as she scrambled to her feet. "Good bye, Professor."

He simply nodded and watched her leave before leaving himself, locking the door behind him.

On the tenth, as arranged, Hermione took advantage of the small classroom on the fifth floor to hold a training session for Harry. Fred and George insisted on coming since they didn't have Quidditch practice to occupy them, or apparently homework, and stubbornly followed them anyway, so Hermione relented. She was surprised when the wards allowed all five of them to enter. "Messrs Potter and Weasley," she mumbled, remembering what Professor Snape had told her, "but only Messrs Potter and Weasley. Bet he didn't think of that."

"Pardon Hermione?" Harry asked. "Who didn't?"

"Nothing," she said with a smile. "We only have an hour. So let's practice, shall we? The Disillusionment Charm is really helpful if you need to..."

"Oi! That's not a fifth-year charm," Fred stated.

"It's not even a sixth-year charm," George pronounced.

"So, how did you learn it?" Fred asked, crossing his arms.

"A book," Harry and Ron said the same time Hermione did. She scowled at them, but they were snickering.

"That's not one you can learn from a book," Fred stated, tilting his head slightly and narrowing his eyes.

"You can seriously damage someone's brain with that one if you get it wrong," George argued as if she were mental.

"Don't be silly," Hermione said, more to Harry and Ron than the twins. "It's not that hard if you're concentrating and are sufficiently determined." She drew her wand.

"Watch, I'll Disillusion you, Harry. *Evanescere-occare*," she said as she flicked her wand on Harry's head as Professor Snape taught her. Harry appeared to dissolve from head to foot.

"Whoa," Ron, Fred, and George all said in unison.

"It worked, I'm invisible!" Harry exclaimed. "It felt just like it did when Mad-Eye did it!"

"Of course." Hermione smiled, saying, "*Appareo*," while tapping Harry on the head to make him visible. "See."

Fred and George both looked astounded. "When did Mad-Eye show you that?" Fred asked.

"Why did Mad-Eye show you?" George asked, narrowing his eyes at her.

"Who cares!" Ron exclaimed. "Do me!"

Hermione demonstrated the wand movement to Harry as she Disillusioned Ron.

Just as she predicted, Monday in Double Potions, Professor Snape snapped at Hermione, first for holding her knife incorrectly, secondly for whispering to Ron when he'd nearly spilled her Amarillo bile.

"What time do you want me to show up tonight?" she asked with a sigh, moving her ingredients away from Ron's elbow.

"Don't be ridiculous, girl, Potter has Remedial Potions on Mondays. You will be here seven o'clock on Tuesday. Now, do. Your. Own. Work."

"He hates you," Ron uttered.

"Sorry, Hermione," Harry apologized.

Hermione shrugged. She'd expected it to happen, just not for him to embarrass Harry.

"You are getting lazy," he barked at her.

Hermione was massaging her wrist. "I'm exhausted."

"Hardly an excuse," Severus stated.

"It's not like he's going to attack tomorrow," she complained, stretching her back.

He straightened up and relaxed his arm. "And just when did you think he would make his move? Do you have some insight into his plans of which I am unaware? He tried to kill Potter your fourth year and failed. He attempted to get to Potter over the summer, twice that I know of, but couldn't, and he tried again...twice...over Christmas holiday," he sneered at her. "Oh that's right, you were unable to eavesdrop on those meetings, weren't you?"

Actually Hermione had heard about the attempts, not that she'd say how the twins managed it. She rolled her shoulders and faced him, wondering what had put him in such a foul mood.

"It's only a matter of time before he finds his opportunity. Now, if you're finished moaning like a first-year, defend yourself."

Hermione braced herself for his onslaught. His movements were wicked fast, and she struggled to keep from being hit. She managed to lunge away from one spell while casting one at him, and then ducked, barely avoiding his hex. He was quick, making her dive out of the way, but she'd not been fast enough on her feet, and he nailed her on her side. She shook her head as she tried to rise, feeling the effects of the hex abate.

"On your feet," he said as she straightened.

She'd barely had time to ready herself before his onslaught resumed. She deflected one curse, fired a stunner as she ducked from another, deflected and parried his fourth and fired at him. He smirked and fired a hex, which she managed to block. She fired a stunner at him, which he easily blocked, and fired again, their spells colliding, making a huge, white explosive-flare in the space between them. She immediately cast a shield and jumped to her left, firing a spell where she thought he'd be. His responding hex came from the other direction, barely missing her. She fired again while dodging his curse, lunging as she fired a stunner, then drew back upright to avoid another, and took his third curse in her hip, making her fall to her knees.

"You're too slow," he remarked as he cast the counter curse.

She stayed on her knees as she caught her breath. "Are you upset at me?"

"No, I'm not upset at you; I expect you to do better," he said, slightly breathless with his hands at his sides.

She looked up at him. "You *are* mad about something; I know you well enough to see that."

He took a step back and squared his shoulders. "It has nothing to do with you."

"Harry?" she asked, refusing to continue if he was going to take his anger out on her.

"No, not Potter," he said coolly.

She hung her head a moment and then slowly stood up. "We're done."

"No, we are not done until I say we are," he growled and resumed a dueling pose.

She shook her head, keeping her arms at her sides. "No. I didn't come here *to fight* you; I came here to *duel*."

His arm dropped as he glared at her. "You'll..."

"I came here to practice...dueling...not all out fighting. I'm not your practice dummy," she said, her pitch rising as she spoke.

He stepped closer to her, his eyes flashing with anger. "Do not raise your voice at me."

"THEN STOP TRYING TO KILL ME!" she shouted as she backed up.

"IF I WAS TRYING TO KILL YOU...YOU'D BE DEAD!" he shouted back. "Now defend yourself!"

She let her wand fall to the floor. "No."

"Pick it up!" he snarled, aiming for her heart.

"Severus, if you're upset about something, you can talk to me." She stepped forward, and he took a step back, his wand never faltering. "I'd never betray your confidence."

He stepped back again as she continued to walk toward him. "It doesn't pertain to you," he said, his body rigid.

"But you do know I'd never betray your confidence?" she asked, closing the distance between them.

He summoned her wand and held it out to her. "Take it."

She shook her head. "You don't trust me," she said and hung her head again.

"What do you mean I don't trust you?"

She knew he did; he'd shown his hand to her too many times for her to reasonably question his trust in her. She looked up at him, trying to assess what could have him so agitated.

His hands were at his sides, each holding a wand. "With everything you know about me, with everything I have revealed to you...*have* to believe in your discretion," he said smoothly, but his tone was forced.

"Because if he knew that you were training me, he'd kill you," she said with a sigh.

He laughed, a cold, impersonal laugh. "You think highly of yourself. I'd be punished, yes...killed, no. He'd want a detailed account of our association and a full explanation of my reasoning, *after* he used the Cruciatus on me."

"Do you get summoned to him frequently?" she asked.

He scoffed at her. "Not while school is in session. I must make a monthly report and send a message if I learn of anything of import. However, if I leave the school too much it would be noticed."

Hermione nodded in understanding. "Umbridge."

"Students. The other professors," he stated, putting both wands in his right hand and crossing his arms. "It would not be good for the school governors or any Ministry personnel to know I departed or for them to see me away from the school grounds."

"So how do you manage it?" she asked, curious now that he practically admitted that he did leave the school.

He relaxed his stance somewhat as he regarded her. He unbuttoned his cuff and pulled his sleeve up exposing the Dark Mark on his left forearm. It was the first time she'd seen the Mark, and she inhaled in shock. "Through this I can go to where he is, anywhere he is."

It looked alive. The snake, although it didn't actually move, seemed to undulate in his skin, and the skull looked like it was hard as bone. She involuntarily reached out to touch his forearm, but he jerked it away from her and quickly yanked his sleeve down. "Enough." He held her wand out to her. "Take it."

She grasped the handle of her wand and slid it from his fingers.

He stood staring at her, but his body was more relaxed than before even though his expression remained neutral. "Well?"

She nodded and assumed a sparring stance. "Just don't put me in the hospital tonight. I have four essays to review for tomorrow and my Arithmancy equations to finish."

"Fair enough," he said smoothly, resuming the dueling stance and beginning to circle her.

She sighed as she turned to face him, her wand held at the ready.

Every one of the dates Severus had mentioned for DA meetings had turned out to be good; everyone in the DA had had the evenings free. However, instead of teaching what Hermione had worked out for them, Harry had decided to introduce Patronuses. By the second DA meeting on Patronuses, not at all surprising, Hermione, Cho, Luna, and Ginny had all produced corporeal Patronuses. Ron had almost produced one, a dog...well it had looked like it could've been a dog.

Lavender hadn't...hers was still nothing more than a mist, and Neville had still been having trouble; he could produce a shielding Patronus, just not a corporeal form. Even though it had been Seamus' first DA meeting, he'd managed to make his Patronus form...well, sort of. It had been hairy, possibly, but had looked like it had four large wings, not four legs. Unfortunately, Dobby had interrupted the meeting to tell them they'd been found out, and everyone had scattered as quickly as they'd could.

Hermione was pacing by the portrait hole in the common room, wondering who had been caught. Since Harry wasn't back, it was very highly likely that he had. She stared at the door, willing to see Harry coming through. "It's all my fault. I should've warned him," Hermione mumbled. She pivoted near one of the tables to cross the room again, uttering, "Then he'd have ensured that she wouldn't know." She turned again. "How could I have been so stupid..."

"Hermione, it's no use pacing," Ginny said, trying to draw her to the chairs by the fire.

"Damn Malfoy!" Hermione snarled. "I bet it was him."

"How could it be?" Ron asked. "C'mon, at least sit down. You're making the first-years nervous."

Just then Harry scrambled through the portrait hole, stormed across the common room, and ran up the stairs to his room. Hermione ran after him; Ron, Seamus, and Neville quickly followed as did Ginny, Fred, and George.

Hermione burst into the dorm room, to see Harry pacing angrily. "Marietta Edgecombe turned us in! She has SNEAK written across her face in pimples!" Harry announced as the room quickly filled up with the Gryffindor DA members. "It was Willy Widdershins who told Umbridge that he'd overheard us in The Hog's Head, just so he'd not get prosecuted for putting regurgitating toilets in public Muggle loos!"

Lavender and Parvati scooted over to stand between Seamus' and Dean's beds. Even little Colin and Denis Creevey had snuck in.

"Dumbledore took blame for the group...said it was his! Dumbledore's Army...and now he's gone!" Harry shouted unnecessarily, since no one was talking but him. "Dumbledore made a huge flash of silver light and then...and then...both Aurors, Shackbolt and Dawlish, the Minister and Umbridge were on the ground unconscious... then he vanished."

"Who vanished?" Hermione asked perplexed. Harry wasn't making any sense. It was time to calm him down.

"He...Dumbledore...Fawkes!" Harry stammered angrily, his hands in fists at his side. "They vanished! Dumbledore grabbed onto Fawkes' tail, and they vanished in a ball of fire."

Hermione tilted her head and reached out to touch Harry's arm to get him to stop pacing. "Fawkes is a Phoenix, Harry, it's possible that..."

"I know that, Hermione!" Harry shouted, turning his shoulders to avoid being touched.

"Harry, mate, just calm down and tells us what happened?" Ron said, sitting on the foot of his bed.

"It's what I told you...he's gone. Dumbledore's gone and it's entirely my fault," Harry said, finally lowering his voice somewhat. "The paper we all signed, Umbridge had it...she gave it to Fudge, and now Dumbledore's gone!"

"It's my fault, Harry," Hermione stated as Ginny placed her hand on Harry's arm saying, "If it's anyone's fault it's mine."

Ginny looked up at him, imploringly. "I suggested Dumbledore's Army, not you. We should've been the Anti-Umbridge League or the Defense Association but we chose Dumbledore's Army instead."

"Now what do we do?" Lavender asked.

"We fight back," Fred and George stated.

"And I know just how to," George added.

"...Get even," Fred finished for him.

The look in Harry's eyes startled Hermione...it was the same as Fred's and George's...only darker.

The next morning, notices for Decree Number Twenty-eight were posted on every notice board and tacked up on every wall. The Minister of Magic had made Dolores Umbridge Headmistress of Hogwarts. Everywhere the students were talking, mostly under their breath if one of the Inquisitorial Squad were near.

Severus strode down to his office feeling the full weight of the castle, every stone, on his shoulders. The words of his vow echoed in his mind, 'If anything should happen to me, Severus, you must protect the students. Promise me, boy, you'll protect the students.'

How the bloody hell am I to do that now? He snarled to himself. *That Umbridge bitch has made herself Headmistress!*

At least the other Heads of Houses, and several of the teachers who'd shown up in Pomona's rooms, were just as angry about the situation. When Pomona had invited Severus to 'tea,' he'd known that Filius and Minerva had been likewise invited, as were Poppy, Wilhelmina, and Septima since they were also in the Order. Minerva outlined the situation quickly, suggesting appropriate steps to secure the school, and Severus and Filius both filled in what they knew, offering both their suggestions and supporting Minerva's. For once they were in accordance.

However, Bathsheba, Aurora, and Charity had arrived forty minutes into their discussion.

Severus hadn't wanted to deal with Charity's or Bathsheba's hysterics, but thankfully Wilhelmina and Poppy had calmed them down.

Minerva had used the impromptu meeting to stress the importance of protecting the students at all costs and ensuring the integrity of the school. What that boiled down to was the four Heads of Houses had to reinforce the spells protecting the school. But that meant that if any one of the four Heads were eliminated the spells could fall and the school would be vulnerable. A fact Severus had never told the Dark Lord.

Wilhelmina left the school that night to alert the Order; Hagrid was told so he could alert the Merpeople and the centaurs, and to make sure the school perimeter was protected.

When the meeting was called off, Minerva asked Severus to walk her to her rooms so they could talk in private. Amusingly enough, when they walked up the stairs to the sixth floor, they heard Umbridge snarling loudly and cursing someone or something. Curious, Minerva and Severus walked up the stairs to the seventh floor and spotted Umbridge shouting at the guardian gargoyle to the Headmaster's office to let her in.

The statue stood resolute, unmoving, and unresponsive.

Smirking with satisfaction, he offered Minerva a cup of aged brandy in his quarters instead, which she accepted, her eyes sparkling with what looked like amused delight.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Hermione's dialogue denoted by an asterisk is borrowed from article on Hypnosis under susceptibility<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypnosis>

The Latin used is from: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl> Any errors in my choice of words is my own.

Evanescere means: to vanish, disappear, pass away

Occare means: to make blind, to blind, to darken; to conceal, make invisible, to make dull or numb

Appareo means: to become visible, appear, be manifest

Chapter 28

Chapter 28 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to Arabellabloodgood and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



As far as Hermione was concerned, things couldn't have gone more bottom-end-up if she'd turned over the cauldron herself. The notices went up all over the school overnight: Dolores Umbridge was Headmistress of Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, and the entire school was buzzing about Dumbledore. Since Harry and Marietta were the only two students to have witnessed Dumbledore's escape, and Marietta still remained in the hospital wing...not allowing any visitors to see her until Madam Pomfrey could sort out the curse which gave the girl pimples which spelled out 'SNEAK' across her nose and both cheeks...that meant that Harry had once again become very popular. He was constantly bombarded with questions wherever he went, which he answered with way too much enthusiasm, in Hermione's opinion.

Not only that, but Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad were walking around the corridors like peacocks, deducting points from anyone not in Slytherin, and Malfoy was acting like he was the king of Hogwarts, not just the self-elevated Prince of Slytherin.

The frightening thing was that Fred and George had declared that they didn't care about getting into trouble anymore. She'd always thought they hadn't cared about getting into trouble all along, considering how reckless they had always been, but the look in their eyes...it was, well...terrifying wasn't exactly right. They were planning something...something big. They had even said so, and that it would happen today, at any moment. For Hermione, there was a sense of anticipation in the air about her, oppressive and nerve-wracking...like waiting for exam results when you know you've missed several answers, and everything was riding on the scores. She turned to look at the door again, carefully avoiding the smirk she caught on George's face or the wink from Fred.

Harry was with Umbridge. In her office. For questioning. Hermione sat in her usual spot for meals, continuously glancing nervously at Ginny and trying very hard to not look

at either Fred or George. Even though they sat down the table from her, directly in her line of sight, between her and the doors, smirking and laughing with their friends.

"What do you think they're planning?" Ron asked for the umpteenth time.

"I have no idea," she hissed. "Eat something."

"Might want to take your own advice," he hissed back.

Hermione glanced at the doors again and saw George nudge Fred, who turned his head slightly and nodded to his twin with a very cocky smirk. Hermione inhaled, realizing that the moment had come.

BOOM

To say that the explosion shook the room was an understatement...it jolted, rocked, and shook the room like a mega bomb exploding during an earthquake. Everything on the tables, including the tables themselves, bounced. The benches bounced, and several students even fell off the benches onto the floor. The windows above them rattled so threateningly that the students sitting at the house tables along the walls covered their heads or ducked under the tables. The candles floating above them shook, sending wax everywhere. Most of the goblets toppled, and dust floated down from the ceiling. Even the magical sky flickered and disappeared, leaving the rafters and support arches visible.

Loud, sizzling cracks, more deafening-loud explosions could be heard from within the castle over the terrified screams and panicked cries of the students. What sounded like multiple rapid gunfire and more sizzling, echoing cracks and explosions made it seem that World War III had broken out in the castle. Every teacher was now on their feet.

"SILENCE! WILL YOU STOP SCREAMING," the magically enhanced voice of McGonagall could be heard above the screams and cries of the startled students, not that it did much good. Students were running for the doors, ducking under tables and clinging to each other. "STOP THIS. STOP THIS! WILL YOU PLEASE CALM DOWN!"

No one paid her any attention at all; the students were screaming and crying while scrambling to escape the confines of the Great Hall, or clinging to each other under the tables, or simply running in blind panic, their cries punctuated by hundreds of loud explosions and sizzling cracks, things crashing...

"PLEASE, CALM YOURSELVES!" the magically enhanced voice of Professor McGonagall shouted over the din.

As soon as the doors opened, two huge dragons comprised entirely of green-and-gold sparks soared into the Great Hall, followed by a shocking-pink Catherine wheels that had to be at least a good six feet across, whizzing lethally through the room. Multiple rockets were zooming through the air, rebounding off the walls and ceiling. Firecrackers were exploding in the Entrance Hall, the smoke wafting in through the doorway.

"DO SOMETHING!" someone screeched.

Several of the older students, and possibly a teacher or two, aimed their wands at the fireworks. *'Stupefy!'* Hermione heard the seventh-year Gryffindor prefect shout, also repeated by several others in the Great Hall. Several jets of red light and a few orange ones shot upward, some hitting the fireworks...only instead of immobilizing or vanishing them, several fireworks exploded with such force as to melt all the candles floating in the air, almost shatter the windows and made chunks of stone fall; and three of them multiplied...by half a dozen it seemed...filling the Great Hall, zooming wildly and whizzing about above everyone's heads.

"WANDS DOWN," the magically enhanced voice of Professor McGonagall shouted.

Ron grabbed Hermione's robes as he pulled her with him. "Ouch! Ron!" she exclaimed as someone stepped on her foot.

Hermione turned, hoping to see Professor Snape, but he was nowhere within sight.

"DO SOMETHING!" someone behind her yelled.

"Follow Fred," Ron was saying as another dragon exploded, multiplying in the air.

"Ron, there's nowhere to go," Hermione said, following him while trying to remain as low as possible.

"Better out there than in here with that nutter who's making them multiply!" he shouted as he pulled her from the Great Hall.

The scene in the Entrance Hall and the main stairs was worse than in the Great Hall; besides the green-and-gold dragons and pink Catherine wheels, there were long-tailed silver rockets ricocheting off the walls and ceiling, sparklers in all colors, swirling in the air, writing swear words, and huge, ominous bats made up of purple sparkles that left thick smoke in their wakes... and firecrackers, thousands of firecrackers that seemed to be exploding everywhere, then re-exploding continually...obviously charmed to do so. Students were scrambling to get away, running in every direction, crying and screaming, grouping together in tight clusters along the walls and even in the middle of the floor. Hermione stayed low, weaving her way, following the crowd, trying to encourage the cluster of terrified students to move. Only she had no idea where to tell them to go...the fireworks were everywhere!

She could hardly wait for Care of Magical Creatures. At least it would be outside.

Across the hall, someone was holding up a shield charm as students crammed into the stairway which led to the basement level. "Go there," she said to some frightened girls, pointing to the shield charm. That was when she spotted him, Professor Snape, urging the students into the dungeons as he held his wand up holding a shield charm over his head. "This way!" she urged those closest to her.

Someone barreled into Ron, making him stumble, and a rocket shot past her head, making Hermione jump back into another group of students. Hermione turned, heading for Professor Snape.

"Get below," Professor Snape said, urging some students, mostly Slytherins, to go past him. Hermione realized he was holding the shield charm not to protect himself but to protect entrance to the stairs, to keep the fireworks out of the dungeons. As she approached him, he hissed, "My office, Miss Granger."

She nodded and grabbed the hand of a second-year girl who was huddling with her friends in a cluster against the wall. "We'll be safe down in the dungeons."

The sounds of the explosions and screams faded as she descended the stairs followed by a group of whimpering second-years. "Go to the Potions class room," she said kindly to the girls that had followed her. She turned and saw another group of frightened students exit the stairs and look around in apprehension. Hermione waved them over. "Over here, your safe," she called out. The students flocked to her. "Go on, go to the Potions classroom. You'll be..."

"Not so fast, Granger."

Hermione turned, finding herself face-to-face with the Slytherin sixth-year prefect, Aldebaran Urguhart. "Too many jars and ingredients...they would be far safer in some of the old dungeon rooms."

"I-I'm n-n-not go-going in a-any of th-those!" one of the girls stammered with a pronounced stutter, which must have been exaggerated by her fear of the rumors she'd heard. "Th-ther-there're chains and r-r-racks and ta-tor-torture devices in..."

"There is a large room down that corridor. It's got thick walls, an iron door, and the vaulted ceilings are supported by load-bearing arches, it's the safest place, believe me," he said calmly, interrupting her. Several of the girls clung to each other, and a few were backing away for the stairs, even though another group of students were entering

the corridor.

Hermione scowled at him and reached out to try and reassure the frightened girl. "I'm sure that the place he mentioned is...," she started to explain, but Urguhart interrupted her as well.

"I'm not going to torture any of you. It's safe; I swear on my wand."

Hermione nodded.

"See. I'm sure he's right, c'mon," she urged everyone. "He would know these dungeons better than us."

A little boy took her hand and she held out her other, smiling when the second-year girl grasped it. They followed Urguhart down the corridor and around a bend, stopping in front of an imposing door. The door opened easily with a soft, rusty-sounding moan. Urguhart walked in confidently and began lighting torches with his wand, so Hermione did the same. The room was cavernous, exactly how he described it, and there wasn't a chain or shackle in sight, although some of the walls and the arches showed signs of having been hit with spell blasts and rebound burns.

Tammorah Merkle entered with another group of kids. "It's bedlam up there," she said as her charges ran over to their friends and housemates.

"The teachers will have it sorted out," Urguhart stated, but Merkle shook her head.

"Nope, not doing a thing. Flitwick and McGonagall were escorting the Ravenclaws and Gryffindors down the safer corridors to the north wing, and from there the Ravenclaw and Gryffindor prefects are escorting them to their common rooms until things are sorted out. Professor Sprout is sending students down to the kitchens." She moved aside as a group of frightened students entered the room, most in their first, second, or third year, but quite a few were also from fourth year. "Kennecott and Hartshorne are holding the shield at the entrance to the stairs, while Professor Snape is trying to get all the students he can to come down here. Wilkes, Reilly, and Macrae are escorting them here."

Hermione knew that Serena Wilkes and Penelope Reilly were also Slytherin prefects.

"What's Miss Parkinson doing?" Urguhart asked.

Merkle shrugged. "Haven't seen her."

The door opened, and Tracy Davis ushered more frightened students inside, mostly lower years, many of them Slytherins. Tracy walked up to Merkle and Urguhart. "According to Kennecott the fireworks have spread to the upper floors. There are still students trapped in loos, alcoves, and doorways, but at least the Great Hall is mostly empty now. I have to go...in case there are more students being sent down here."

"So, what do we do now?" Urguhart asked, looking at all the scared lower years huddled together in groups. Penelope Reilly entered with another group of kids.

Merkle shrugged. "We wait until Professor Snape or one of the other professors comes to escort them to where they should be."

"So what do we do with them in the mean time?" Reilly asked.

"I have an idea," Hermione suggested, digging in her bag for two of the scarves she'd made the house-elves.

"What is this?" Merkle asked when Hermione handed her a scarf.

"We can play capture the flag," Hermione said, holding the second one. She quickly outlined the game to the older Slytherins. "We can practice basic Defense spells: stun, freeze, disarm, or gently sting each other, but *no* fighting. Teammates can reverse the spells on each other."

Urguhart and Reilly smiled. "Not bad, Granger," Urguhart said with a grin. He quickly divided the teams by pointing to each person while counting, "one, two, one, two," as he walked by each group of students and made himself captain of one side. "Okay, all the ones, you're with me. We're the... Normans. Granger is the captain of the twos, and they will be the Saxons. Wilkes you go with her."

Wilkes nodded and walked confidently over to stand next to Hermione. "Good call," she said softly.

"Er, thanks," Hermione replied, then asked three of the boys on her team to take the scarf to the far end of the room and guard it. They grabbed the scarf, took off running and quickly disappeared from sight.

They were well into the game when Professor Snape, followed by Kennecott and Macrae behind him, entered the cavernous room. "What is going on here!" he shouted, making every one stop and turn to face him. Well, except for the few students who'd been frozen or stunned and lay on the floor waiting to be revived.

Urguhart stepped out from behind a stone arch. "It's a game, Professor, to pass the time. Capture the scarf."

"A game? You were fighting...revive those students," Professor Snape demanded, and Kennecott stifled a laugh.

Wilkes and Reilly walked up to their Head of House. "It really is only a game, Professor," Reilly protested, and Urguhart quickly explained the nature and rules of the game.

Professor Snape relaxed somewhat. "Very well. The game is now finished," he said. "Go check the back of the room for any stragglers or students who need reviving." Kennecott, Urguhart, and Reilly went to check the back of the room for strays.

Severus turned to Miss Wilkes. "Was anyone hurt?"

"No, sir!" she replied a bit too quickly.

"Good," Professor Snape replied and turned to face the collected group. "The fireworks appear to be relatively harmless as long as you stay low and move next to the walls. They have dispersed throughout the castle on every floor, and a few have escaped outside. However, *do not* under *any* circumstances try to vanquish or stun them," he warned them. "You all have lessons to attend to. My prefects will escort you to your classrooms and ensure that you are not harmed. Now go quietly."

"Professor, a lot of them seemed to have left their bags in the Great Hall," Merkle pointed out.

Professor Snape nodded thoughtfully. "The fireworks in there are staying up in the rafters. If you crouch low, staying below the height of the tables, you may collect your things."

Hermione ran to get her scarf and bag. On the way out, Professor Snape grabbed her arm. "No doubt this capture the scarf was your idea," he said smoothly.

"Yes, Professor," she replied.

He smiled and let go of her arm. "Thank you. I'd appreciate it if you'd also help the students to their lessons," he said.

Hermione smiled at him, relishing in his apparent gratitude. "Certainly, sir."

Throughout the day, the fireworks continued to cause havoc. The students, now less afraid of the beautiful sparking dragons, Catherine wheels, rockets, and obscene sparklers, moved in groups as much as possible, staying low and keeping shield charms in place as they moved about the castle. Every so often, and when Umbridge wasn't around, one or more of them would hit a passing firework with a Vanishing Charm, grinning mischievously as the firework multiplied and shot off in ten different directions, or Stunned one, laughing at the loud explosions. None of the staff did anything to stop the fireworks, following Decree Number Twenty-six to the letter, and some even granted Gryffindor points to secretly thank Fred and George for the entertaining mayhem.

Professor McGonagall, after checking that there weren't any students around to witness her mischief, cornered a pink Catherine wheel and made it crash into a green-and-gold dragon, just to see what would happen. She smiled when the result created a fiery red-and-green dragon with pink wings and spewing pink flames. Loving her creation, she hit the new firework with a Vanishing spell a few times and then ducked back into her classroom to give her animals that she maintained for her lessons a bit of Calming Draught for their nerves.

Twice, between lessons when the students were not around, Professor Flitwick slyly Vanished a few passing Catherine wheels that afternoon, his favorite of the lot, grinning like a young wizard for a moment before once again assuming the proper decorum expected of him in case any student would happen by.

Professor Burbage assigned her students an essay on the difference between Muggle Fireworks and Fred and George's magical ones, giving extra credit for illustrations.

Professor Vector trapped a rocket in a classroom with a vaulted ceiling and high windows to test her theory on how many times it could be vanquished before the firework put itself out. She never found out the answer, although every window had been shattered and hundreds of rockets soared out into the sky above the castle.

And Professor Sprout, who was caught flicking her wand at some of the sparklers by Filch, told him she was simply trying to make them write out less offensive words. However, all she did was to add Umbridge's name to the profanities written by the sparklers she'd 'fixed' instead. She walked away, trying to suppress her smile as she sought out a few more.

That night in the Gryffindor common room, Fred and George were thrown a huge party as heroes of discord and mayhem, and a framed picture of them was placed upon the mantel above the fireplace.

Unbeknownst to the celebrating Gryffindors, the Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw students were rejoicing as well. The Ravenclaws, having captured one of the green-and-gold sparkling dragon fireworks in their common room, took turns making the dragon soar harmlessly overhead in the rafters as they toasted Fred and George with sparkling razzleberry frizzes and butterbeers.

A few of the older Hufflepuffs, after escorting several students safely to their common rooms, hit several of the fireworks with a few well aimed Vanishing Charms to ensure they would last the night and possibly the next morning. They returned to the common room to share in the large variety of refreshments and drinks and revel in the stories of how inept Umbridge had been in dealing with the chaos.

Justin Finch-Fletchley tapped his wand on his glass, and several people turned to look at him. "I think I'd like to make a toast," he said, once he had almost everyone's attention. "To Fred and George," he started to say.

"Why them?" Arnold Stebbins asked, apparently confused.

"Who else would have had the audacity to release dozens of fireworks in the castle in protest of Umbridge sacking Dumbledore and making herself Headmistress?" Ernie Macmillan asked with a mischievous grin on his face.

"Is that why they did it?" Hannah asked.

Justin shrugged. "All I know is that they are bloody brilliant, and I, for one, enjoyed seeing Umbridge scurrying around trying to deal with them," he said and raised his glass once again. "So, to Fred and George, thank you for the show."

"Hear, hear," many of the Hufflepuffs cried out and took a sip of their drinks.

Up on the Astronomy tower, the professors Minerva, Filius, Poppy, Wilhelmina, and Septima gathered to enjoy a glass of elf-made elderberry wine to welcome their newest members, Aurora and Rolanda, into the Order of the Phoenix and to watch the fireworks in the night sky as they discussed how best to keep the students safe from Umbridge's foul temper, especially the students who were in Dumbledore's Army.

Madam Hooch aimed her wand, making a rocket collide with a Catherine wheel, smiling in delight as it exploded into a huge Chrysanthemum, creating several sparkling pink-and-silver winged pigs.

"Rolanda!" Minerva exclaimed with her lips purse. "Not so close to the windows," she added, trying her aim with one of the Catherine wheels too.

And in a huge, cavernous room in the dungeons, seventh-years, Raymond 'Darias' Kennecott, Raithe Macrae, Duane Hartshorne, Serena Wilkes, Valeria Franklin, and Tammorah Merkle, sixth-years Aldebaran Urguhart, Raymond Aubry, Penelope Reilly, Mary Nolan, Winnifred Maguire, and Mary Dorothea Langley, fifth-years Rayne Boughton, Brambila Rusbridge, and fourth-years Gasper Vaisey and Eddart Terrance stood around a small bonfire and toasted the Gryffindor miscreants, Fred and George, for their fireworks. "And may I also suggest a toast to Miss Hermione Granger," Darias said while holding up his butterbeer, "whose game of capture the scarf not only helped ease the tension down here today in this very room, but allowed us to show that Slytherins aren't all bad."

"It did allow house animosity to be put aside in favor of fun for a full hour," Aldebaran pointed out.

"Hear, hear," several people chanted.

They all raised their glasses. "To Hermione Granger," Darias said, and everyone drank.

Even Hermione fought her way through the crowd to congratulate Fred and George, and to exclaim about the incredible fireworks. "They were wonderful fireworks!" she exclaimed, giving a startled George a hug. "I loved them!"

"What? Miss Perfect-perfect actually approves?" George said as he let go of her and watched her turn to hug his twin.

Fred held his arms out as wide as he could, considering the crowd surrounding him. "Thanks," he said as he hugged her back and set her on her feet. Others started pressing forward, and Hermione was none too gently shuffled and squeezed aside as George said, "Weasleys' Wildfire Whiz-bangs!"

"Only thing is, we used our whole stock..." said Fred.

"We're going to have to start again from scratch now..." said George.

"But it was worth it, though. If you want to add your name to the waiting list, Hermione," Fred was saying as Hermione backed away from the crowd.

"It's five Galleons for your Basic Blaze box, and twenty for the Deflagration Deluxe!"

She saw Ron and Harry at a table between two of the windows, both of them staring dejectedly at their schoolbags. "Oh, why don't we have a night off?" she asked

brightly, hoping to lift their spirits. A silver-tailed Weasley Rocket zoomed past the window, making Hermione smile. "After all, the Easter holidays start on Friday, we'll have plenty of time then..."

Ron was staring at her in disbelief, which made her laugh. "Are you feeling alright?"

"Now that you mention it," Hermione said happily,* plonking herself on the seat across from Harry and dropping her bag on the floor at her feet, "d'you know, I think I'm feeling a bit..." She smiled as a Catherine wheel spun lazily outside the window near the boys. "*Rebellious.*"

"You mean it?" Ron asked as a sparkling rocket zoomed into view and collided with a Catherine wheel, making a huge Chrysanthemum and creating several sparkling pink-and-silver winged pigs.

"Why not," Hermione said, grinning happily at the fireworks in the sky.

Severus stood out on the battlements, holding a flask of Firewhisky in his hand. He knew that he shouldn't be drinking, especially where any wayward student might happen upon him, but he felt like celebrating. From his vantage point, he could see Gryffindor tower, the lights shining brightly from every window. He raised his flask to his lips and swallowed a mouthful of the fiery liquid. Around him, floating lazily in the sky were dozens of the remaining fireworks. He liked the green-and-gold dragons best, scoffed at the fiery red-and-green dragons, and watched in amusement as the glittering pink-and-silver winged pigs collided and multiplied. Taking out his wand, he hit a passing green-and-gold dragon with a Vanishing Charm, watching it burst into ten more, one that collided with a rocket, creating half a dozen gold-and-silver versions.

He was surprisingly pleased with the mayhem the Weasley twins had created, mostly because Severus had felt an immense satisfaction watching Umbridge spend her entire day disheveled, soot-blackened, and snarl-faced as she was summoned from one classroom to another, unsuccessfully trying to vanquish the fireworks. The school governors would surely have plenty to say about her inability to maintain order. He scoffed at the thought and took another sip of his drink. It served her right.

He turned to look at the Gryffindor tower. He had been so proud of Hermione that afternoon. His prefects had told him everything. With so many kids, mostly the younger years, flocking into the dungeons for safety, she had taken upon herself to start a game, one in which house affiliations played no part, where Slytherin students teamed up with the other houses for a common goal, practicing basic Defense spells, and promoted a sense of unity. If only for an hour. "Ten points to Gryffindor," he said softly, knowing that the points would be granted no matter how softly he said them, "to Miss Granger for her quick thinking and unbiased..." *No, that will show up on the Award Register. Shite. Too late. Attempt at fair play.* Minerva would surely call him on this one. *Oh, well. Surely she heard about the game by now?*

He wished there were more opportunities for such games. Hermione was an amazing girl, quick thinking, smart, and caring.

He knew that his little club of Slytherins were celebrating in the same room in the dungeons. They had every right to do so. They had done well to help protect the students, of all houses, as they moved about the castle between lessons.

A shadow crossed a window on the fourth floor of the Gryffindor girls' dorm room turret, and Severus wondered for a moment if it might be the fifth-year girl's dorm room.

Sighing, he turned, watching a pink-and-silver pig roll by and headed for the stairs.

Hermione sat in her favorite chair in the common room by the fire, the one that allowed her a clear view of the portrait hole entry, with her feet on the coffee table and book propped up on her thighs. Not that she could concentrate on a word of the book. Harry had his Occlumency lesson with Professor Snape tonight, and she was certain that he wouldn't tell Professor Snape about the dream. Harry had made it through the door into a circular room of multiple identical doors, through a room of clicking...ticking, possibly clocks... and into a room of rows upon rows of towering shelves, holding thousands of glowing, dusty, spun-glass spheres. And Harry had said it made Voldemort... happy. Happy!

If Harry didn't tell Professor Snape, she'd have to wait until Potions on Thursday or make up an excuse to see him.

Just then Harry scrambled through the entrance of the common room and headed straight for the stairs to the boys' dorms. "Harry?" He was back early, much too early, and he looked angry. Well, that wasn't unusual after having Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape, but still. She started to get up. "Harry!"

"Not now, Hermione, I've got a headache," he replied angrily over his shoulder, not even bothering to look at her.

"I can get some of the Pain Po-tion," she stammered, watching his retreating back. Something was wrong...something had happened...and she wasn't sure what to do: follow him or seek out Professor Snape.

"I'll go," Ron suggested, jumping to his feet and following Harry up to the dorm.

Hermione waited...wondering...worrying. Finally, she decided that she had to know what happened. Did Harry tell Professor Snape about the dream, or was it something else that made Harry mad? Not knowing, but needing to, she rose and left the common room for the dungeons. She was thankful that the castle was quiet. The Bloody Baron passed in front of her, slipping out of the rock and disappearing through the other side of the corridor, apparently not noticing her approach as she hurried down to Professor Snape's office. She knocked on his door and waited.

Nothing happened. She didn't hear his usual bark to enter, but determined to see him, she knocked again. Nothing. No sounds; no snarling demand to enter.

"Professor?" Hermione asked, pushing open the door. She felt and heard something crunch under her foot as she stepped into his office and nearly slipped on something hard. She looked down and illuminated her wand. Cockroaches, beetles, Globe thistle seeds, and shards of broken glass littered the floor.

"Put that light out," Professor Snape snarled from across the room.

"Professor Snape, is everything all right?" she asked, extinguishing the light as she cast a Reparo on the broken glass. Five glass jars quickly reformed.

"Get out," he growled, from somewhere in the back of the room and to her right.

"What happened?" she asked, looking around at the dark room. The only illumination, a barely effective silvery-blue shimmer, seemed to come from a bowl on his desk. "Did Harry do something?"

"Yes, that imbecilic, mediocre, arrogant, impertinent, nosey, bane of my bloody existence..."

"What did he do?" Hermione asked as Professor Snape continued to curse Harry and his father.

"...did something! *He invaded my privacy!*" Professor Snape snarled venomously at her.

She'd read that could happen, Backtracking or Backlashing, when researching Legilimency and Occlumency in the library, but that was difficult to do, especially on someone who was as gifted an Occlumens and Legilimens as Professor Snape. "He did? Did he learn how to Backlash...?"

"No," Professor Snape spat out angrily.

She walked toward him. "You're not making any..." she started to say and tripped over a chair, which made her land painfully on her hands and knees. Her wand went skidding across the stone floor.

Suddenly, she felt a firm hand pull her to her feet. "I don't have to clarify it to you," he snapped. "Now get out." He pulled her roughly with him toward the door.

"Did he tell you about the dream?" she asked.

He stopped. "What dream?"

"The Department of Mysteries! He saw into the Department of Mysteries, I know it! Harry saw past the black door into a circular room lined with more doors, through that to a room that had clicking or ticking sounds and into a room full of shelves of dusty glass spheres...thousands and thousands of them on shelves. He said there was something in there that *He* wanted, that he knew exactly where, and was running toward it."

He stood next to her, still holding her arm in a vice grip, unmoving. Hermione could feel her heart beat and refrained from counting each pulse. Finally, after what seemed to be several minutes, he said, "Fine, you've told me, now go."

"But, sir," she pleaded. She wanted to know if Harry had found the weapon Sirius had mentioned last summer in Grimmauld Place. She wanted to know what had happened, why he was so angry. Why he was standing in the dark with that simmering bowl...

"You've told me, now go." He jerked her arm, thrusting her toward the door.

She pulled back. "But my wand!"

"Accio Hermione's wand," he said in a cold tone. She heard it lift off the floor, and a second later, he thrust it at her, poking her in the stomach. "Here is your wand." He yanked open the door, the light of the dungeon corridor bright compared to the dim silvery-blue light in his office. "Now go."

"Severus, please..." she pleaded as he thrust her out the door.

"*Never* use my given name," he snarled and slammed the door in her face.

Sighing, Hermione placed her hand on his door, willing for him to let her in, to talk to her. The silence of the dungeon corridor became eerie, and she realized that the hour was very late. She decided that if she were going to find out what happened, she'd have to ask Harry. Reluctantly, she turned and headed back to her common room, hoping that Ron had calmed Harry down.

Harry refused to talk about what happened between him and Professor Snape, only saying that he wasn't having anymore Occlumency lessons. Ever. Ron, instead of helping her find out what had happened, was instead actually focusing on his exams, having only just realized that they were only weeks away. Whenever Hermione tried to press Harry for information, he would bury his nose in a book...a school book...to avoid her, or read one of the career pamphlets that were strewn about everywhere. But Harry was moody, withdrawn, occasionally waspish, and she knew *something* was bothering him.

Try as she might, she hadn't been able to get him out of his funk or get him to tell her if he was having any more dreams about the room with the glass orbs.

However, Fred and George did manage to cheer Harry up. They'd promised to create a diversion so Harry could speak to Sirius through the Floo in Umbridge's office. That really lightened his mood and worried Hermione tremendously. Umbridge hated Harry, and if she caught him in her office, he would be expelled!

She tried to persuade Harry from such foolery, but he wouldn't listen to her. By the time History of Magic let out, neither Ron nor Harry were talking, or worse, listening to her anymore. At lunch, the boys sat with Neville and Seamus, so Hermione sat next to Ginny and the girls in her year, but it wasn't the same.

She went to Ancient Runes, silently pleading to any gods she could name that one of them would make Harry see reason. In Defense, she tried again to dissuade him. "I hope you've thought better of what you were planning to do, Harry,"* she hissed as she opened her book to chapter thirty-four, like the directions said on the backboard. Umbridge plodded in, looking harried and winded as if she'd run a kilometer after lunch. "Umbridge looks like she's in a really bad mood, already."*

Harry simply opened his book to chapter thirty-four and began reading, ignoring her.

She scowled, leaning over to him and whispering, "Dumbledore sacrificed himself to keep you in school, Harry,* do you hear me? And if you get thrown out today it will all have been for nothing."*

Harry didn't even flinch, snort or make any indication that he'd even heard her. Frustrated, she tried to concentrate on the book, but she couldn't. Umbridge sat down at her desk and stared at her and Harry, well, mostly at Harry, and if looks could kill, they'd have a funeral the two of them that evening.

Hermione lowered her gaze back to her book and tried to practice clearing her mind, emptying herself of all of her emotions, remaining focused. Harry had said that throwing off a Legilimens was like resisting the Imperius Curse...refusing to obey, denying the Legilimens access while pushing back. She'd been using her reading time in Defense for the mental exercises, and building a block around her emotions as best she could. She had no idea if it was working.

When the bell rang at the end of lessons, she set her book aside and leaned toward Harry again. "Harry, don't do it, please don't do it,"* she pleaded with him. He didn't answer her. She opened her mouth to try and make him see reason, but Ron nudged her shoulder.

"Give it a rest, Hermione," Ron hissed. "He can make up his own mind."*

She followed Harry from the classroom, ignoring Ron's reprimand. "Harry...please,"* she said, but she knew in her heart he was going to anyway.

The story of Fred and George's flight to freedom was retold so often, and in every corner of the castle, that Hermione knew that it would soon become a Hogwarts legend. She fully expected to see it mentioned in all its glory in the next edition of *Hogwarts: A History*.

The swamp Fred and George had created as Harry's diversion still remained, filling an entire section of the fifth floor corridor in the east wing. Although either Professor McGonagall or Flitwick could have easily removed the swamp, Hermione was glad in a way that they hadn't. It was a remarkably complex, very intricately woven bit of magic, and the swamp was truly both amazing and beautiful. Filch was given the task of punting students across the swamp in a flat bottom johnboat, and Hermione waited in the lines a few times simply because she enjoyed the scenic ride through the miraculous magical swamp. Another thing Hermione expected to see made immortal in future *Hogwarts: A History* editions.

Umbridge's door with the two large broom-shaped holes had to be removed because they gained too much attention, and it was rumored that the door and Harry's Firebolt were placed somewhere in the dungeons, guarded by a security troll.

Meanwhile, all over the castle students from every house, and in every year, seemed to be vying for the much coveted newly vacated position of Troublemakers-in-Chief. Filch carried a horsewhip in his hand when he wasn't punting students across the swamp, although as far as Hermione knew, he'd been unable to use it on anyone, there were so many breaking the rules. Umbridge was beside herself with solving the numerous crises and problems, and her Inquisitorial Squad tried valiantly to help her, but odd things kept happening to its members, frequently landing them in the hospital wing for days.

In addition, Peeves, who had never in all of Hermione's years in Hogwarts, was actually, happily, following Fred and George's last request as if given a command...to give Umbridge, well, hell. The poltergeist followed Umbridge everywhere. Well, everywhere but the Great Hall, pelting her with such things as sopping wet objects, dusty blackboard erasers, dungbombs, stink pellets, and even clumps of muck from the swamp while taunting her rudely and blowing raspberries.

On one occasion, when Hermione, Ron and Harry saw Umbridge trying to evade Peeves in the corridor as the poltergeist pelted her with socks full of chalk, they saw the Bloody Baron float into view. Peeves paused, one sock dangling from each hand and his eyes wide as he floated back a ways. That was until the Baron said calmly, "Missed a spot there," and leaned against the wall to watch.

Peeves' wide mouth stretched into a huge grin as he saluted the Baron, replying, "Yes, your bloodiness, Mr. Baron, Sir,"* as he floated after the retreating Umbridge. "Oh, Umbridge, oh, Umbridge, you can't be dodging Peeves. I can follow you, you see, wherever I please..."

And, even though Fred and George were not selling any more Skiving Snackboxes in the corridors or loos anymore, it was evident that they were still for sale and available to any student in the school by the number of students who fainted, vomited, broke out in horrible boils, developed dangerous fevers, nose bleeds and swollen glands or appendages in Umbridge's class, that hardly anyone actually attended Defense anymore. Called Umbridge-itis, it was very likely to show up mentioned in the forthcoming editions of *Hogwarts: A History* as well.

And every time Hermione brought up the idea of Harry resuming his Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape, or asked Harry if he'd been having any more of the dreams, he got angry with her and refused to answer. Well, he would, but he'd make up some rubbish about his dreams being about Quidditch or Fred and George's escape.

But worse was the cold treatment she received from Professor Snape. He ignored her and refused to meet with her anymore. She'd written him apologies in his special ink on her papers, and told him what little bits Ron told her about Harry's mumbblings at night when he was dreaming, but Professor Snape didn't seem to care anymore.

Not only that, but Hermione found herself having agreed to being both company and English tutor to Hagrid's baby half-brother, Grawp, a sixteen foot tall *unt* of a giant. And the centaurs of the forest didn't exactly like the idea of Grawp living there, any more than she did.

Telling Ron that she and Harry had missed the Quidditch game, Ron's finest hour, to go traipsing after Hagrid into the forest to meet his giant half-brother had gone quite well. Ron had literally gone from disappointed indignation to disbelief and incredulity by the time Harry and Hermione had finished their story. At least Gryffindor won the Quidditch cup. That was at least one thing worth celebrating. That was if Hermione didn't feel the weight of everything that had been happening pressing down on her when she should've been concerned with little more than revising for her upcoming O.W.L.s.

Author's Notes;

For any parts of the story in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix* that I've skipped over or didn't mention, assume that it happened just as it did in the book.

Sentences with an asterisk are copied, well borrowed without permission, from *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. No plagiarism is intended; I just used them so you'd know where in the book we're at and to show those conversations from Hermione's point of view.

Chapter 29

Chapter 29 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to ArabelleBloodgood and to EverMystique and DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



The week leading up to the O.W.L. exams was daunting as every professor devoted every minute of their lessons to reviewing every topic, every spell, and every theory that they thought might come up in the exams.

Hermione was in a state of fevered preoccupation, having decided to review everything they'd covered in the last five years, as well as any related material that she thought would help her. Even Harry and Ron were buckling down to revise. There was also an inordinate amount of black-market trade in every conceivable concoction for concentration or recollection...none of which were valid in Hermione's opinion. Many were not at all what they claimed to be, nor contained what the labels said they did, and she found herself confiscating these substances throughout her day, every day.

Monday, Professor Snape began his lecture with a warning to avoid any and all illicit black market brain stimulants and to refrain from brewing any mind enhancement potions on their own. "You dunderheads either know this material by now or you do not; so instead of assigning an essay for you to plagiarize, I suggest you spend your evening revising all my lecture notes to date. If you review what I've taught you, and manage to retain any of it in those thick heads of yours, you may actually pass your O.W.L.s. However, I don't expect to see many of you in Potions next year."

He waved his hand, and a potion Hermione had never seen before appeared on the blackboard. "This potion requires all the techniques I've tried to instill in you over the last five years. If you are successful in completing an acceptable version of this potion, you should do well on the practical aspect of your exam. Now begin."

Hermione carefully copied the potion down on one of the blank 'notes' pages in her Potions book, double checked the directions, and went to collect her ingredients. As she carried her ingredients back to her worktable, she realized that whatever the potion was, it was a healing potion, since she recognized that many of the ingredients were typically used in regenerative potions.

Halfway through class, Professor Snape began his rounds to check on their progress. He actually whispered, "Keep calm during the exam, read everything carefully, and you'll excel," to Hermione as he leaned over to check her potion. "I do expect to see *you* next year."

She was so surprised, she nearly dropped her ground sponge moss into her Re'em blood.

"Then again, maybe not," he said with a quirk of his lip and then walked away. Hermione had to stifle a laugh at his small joke at her expense.

I expect to see you next year as well she thought to herself as she carefully removed the steely-blue cylindrical umbels and silver bracts from her sea holly. She read the next line of the directions: *Slice, without crushing, the silver bracts crosswise.* She smiled, remembering the technique Severus had shown her during her stay with him after her second mishap in time. In her mind's eye, she could almost see his hands holding the knife and hear him saying, "Make sure the blade is super razor sharp and glide it through the leaf, rolling the blade like this, at an angle, so the knife does the cutting..."

At the end of the class, her potion was a deep, ruddy red with a silvery hue and had the consistency of blood. When she'd set her vial on his desk, Professor Snape nodded to her with an expression that he'd expected nothing less from her, and set her potion aside. "Miss Granger, I would like you to bottle the rest of your potion and bring it to me."

Surprised, Hermione did as he asked, grateful that neither Harry nor Ron had helped her clean up and dispose of the remaining potion. But then Harry had been rather moody around her ever since his last Occlumency lesson fiasco with Professor Snape, something he still adamantly refused to speak to her about. She filled four pint-sized potion bottles nearly to the brim and cleaned up her work area. "Here, sir," she said as she gave him the four bottles. "Are you going to give these to Madam Pomfrey?"

He vanquished one of her classmate's samples and placed the vial in a rack on his desk. He looked up as he picked up his quill, and his lip curled as he chuckled softly. "This?" he said, tapping one of her bottles with the feather end of his quill. "No."

She nodded, admonishing herself for thinking it might be acceptable for the Healer to use.

"I'll be sending it to St. Mungo's," he stated as he recorded the student's mark on his ledger, and she looked at him in shock. "This is not an easy potion to make, and few know all the proper techniques to accomplish a viable potion. If it doesn't coagulate in the next hour, the Healers in the Infectious and Venomous Bites Ward will greatly appreciate your efforts."

"Infectious and Venomous Bites...? Is this...?" she asked.

He smiled slightly. "It is the only known counter to the nerve damage caused by Nagini's venom."

Hermione stared at the bottles for a moment in shock. "It's one of the potions that saved Mr. Weasley?" she asked, suddenly catching his meaning. "You...you invented this one, didn't you?"

"Yes," he admitted as he vanquished another of her classmate's samples. "Now go. You have another lesson to attend."

"Thank you, sir," she said and turned to go, feeling utterly elated at her accomplishment and his confidence in her ability.

Tuesday, during their Transfiguration review, Professor McGonagall's lecture began with a warning about the anti-cheating precautions that would be used and ended with her passing out the exam schedule to her students. The DA still met occasionally in the Room of Requirement, but mostly to revise together, although there were a number of students who used the target dummies to practice their Defensive spells.

However, all the worry over exams didn't stop a number of students from relieving their stress by pulling some mischief in the castle corridors or doing multiple pranks on Umbridge, although Hermione suspected that they were being done by those students in years not revising for their O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s.

Nevertheless, Umbridge looked positively haggard every time Hermione saw the witch, and Filch was always scurrying around either cleaning up some mess or trying to catch the miscreants.

Sunday night, Harry excused himself saying he was tired and wanted to go to bed. Hermione watched him go, noting the slight slump of his shoulders and his sluggish movements with concern. "Ron, is Harry all right?"

"Yeah, Hermione, he's fine. He's just tired is all, nothing to worry about," Ron replied, never taking his eyes off his book, leaning with his head propped up on his hand.

"He wanted to revise with me for Charms," she said and bit her lip, slowly releasing it. "And he hasn't, you know, been eating all that much lately."

"It's just stress," Ron said as he shuffled one-handedly through the two years of notes scattered in front of him for something. "He's not been sleeping all that well, what with exams and his nightmares."

"Nightmares?" She looked at him, now greatly concerned. "I want to know, is Harry still having, you know *those* dreams?"

"Hard to say, he won't tell me anything," Ron admitted, looking at her. "I mean he tosses sometimes and mumbles a lot, but it's mostly incoherent ramblings." He lowered his arm, dropping his hand, still clasping several parchments, on his book. "Why? Why are you always on about his dreams?"

"I have a theory about them. We know they are not prophetic dreams...it's something much deeper, a connection of sorts. I read everything I could about Legilimency when Harry said he'd be having lessons, you know, in case he'd need help," she started to say, knowing full well she'd read them so she could try doing Occlumency on her own, however unsuccessful that had been. "It's not in any of the books...this," she said, pausing as some students walked by, "connection. Like Harry surviving the Killing Curse...it's never happened before...at least *I* can't find any references that it has ever happened before. And this connection...it's, well, even Professor Dumbledore is really concerned about it." That wasn't a lie; Professor Snape had told her so.

"Okay, now you're scaring me. McGonagall asks me about Harry's dreams sometimes, too," Ron admitted and leaned forward with his arms crossed on the table.

"Professor McGonagall," she interjected, correcting him, before he said, "So, now tell me your theory."

She looked about nervously.

"You brought this up, tell me."

"Harry's dreams, sharing You-Know-Who's thoughts, emotions and his visions... Harry told us ~~how~~as You-Know-Who's snake, remember? And sometimes Harry acts..."

odd, out of character, like he's... I dunno, different, distant. Maybe I'm reading more into this than it is?"

"No, go on," Ron urged her, his expression earnest as if he believed her.

"I think Harry dreamed that he was the snake because *that* is where You-Know-Who was. I mean, what if You-Know-Who can possess his snake? We know he possessed Professor Quirrell, remember?" Ron was about to answer, but she cut him off. "Wait, do you remember your dad telling me about You-Know-Who? When I was terrified last summer and having nightmares?"

Ron snorted a chuckle. "Yeah."

"You-Know-Who is a highly skilled Legilimens. Your dad, Lupin, and Sirius, too...they told me he can always tell when someone is lying to him, and he can use Legilimency to unhinge or bend and twist people's thoughts, remember? What if that's what he's doing, trying to unhinge Harry's with his thoughts? And the one time when Harry is most susceptible would be when he's most relaxed...in his sleep," she said.

Ron turned to look at the stairs to the boy's dorm. "But that would mean," he started to say and then turned back to her. "But Harry said he'd mastered Occlumency from Snape."

"Professor Snape," she automatically corrected him. "I think something happened between Professor Snape and Harry, something that angered Professor Snape into ending his lessons; it's called Backtracking or Backlashing, I read about it. Harry may have pushed back at Professor Snape, entered his mind, seen something he shouldn't have. But think about it...why does Harry keep having the same dream all the time. He even has visions of it during the day, only he...he seems to get closer to a particular goal...to some object...like maybe one of these shimmering orbs he mentioned. How many people do you know have reoccurring vivid dreams about a place they've never been and then wake up and remember every detail of the dream, every object and even the smells, sounds, and colors... Unless Voldemort had been there and is showing it to Harry."

She paused and hoped she was wrong, but Ron's expression turned thoughtful. "See, it's a connection, between them, and what if You-Know-Who is using this connection to make Harry *want* to go to the Department of Mysteries? Wasn't Sturgis Podmore arrested by Ministry security for trying to break into the Department of Mysteries? And the door, wasn't that the same place where your dad was bitten?" she asked, and Ron's eyes glazed over, the same thoughtful look he had when he played Wizard's Chess against someone who actually challenged him. "Remember the dream Harry had where You-Know-Who was questioning Rookwood about the thing he wants, something in the Department of Mysteries. That Avery had told Voldemort that Bode would be able to remove it."

"So you think that You-Know-Who is trying to lure Harry there?" he asked. "Blimey!" He rubbed his forehead with his palm and brushed his hair back, then dropped his hand on his book again. "You could be wrong."

"What if I'm right?" she asked, dreading his answer that he'd confirm her suspicions.

He turned his head again to look at the stairs. "It all adds up, what Sirius said about You-Know-Who wanting something he didn't have last time," he said and turned to face her again. "I mean, what if it is, then what?" He didn't allow her to answer. "I'll stick with him. I'll go. Someone has to have his back."

She mentally cringed at his statement. "You know I will too," Hermione said and sighed. "But I think we should tell some of the others, too. Just in case. We won't be able to do this on our own. It could very well be a trap...I know it's probably going to be a trap so You-Know-Who can get whatever it is he wants and have another go at Harry, to get him alone where he'll be vulnerable."

"Okay, who?" Ron asked. "I'll tell Neville, Seamus, and Dean. They are getting good at fighting."

"And Colin, he's good," she suggested. "Luna and Ginny..."

"No way, leave Ginny out of this," Ron snapped.

"Cho, Hannah, and Susan..." she was saying, then realized what he'd said. "What? Why? She's really good, accurate, quick reflexes, and strong!"

"*She's my little sister,*" he snapped and stood up, grabbing his things as he added, "I'll let the guys know, but leave Ginny out of this."

No, Ron, Ginny will hate us if she's left out, and she's too good in Defense she thought to herself, already selecting who she'd want in a fight with her to watch her back if needed.

Sunday, Neville, Seamus, Dean, Luna, Cho, Katie, Angelina, Terry, Susan, Michael, Colin, Anthony, Ernie, and Ginny all gathered in the Room of Requirement and listened to what Hermione had to tell them about Harry's dreams. Even Fred and George had snuck into the castle somehow to attend.

"Blimey!" Michael said when she'd finished. "I remember the rumors that Harry had a vision about Mr. Weasley being attacked, but I thought that he'd had, I dunno, Seer abilities or something. I mean, he's taking Divination, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is; but no, he's been having visions, and he can feel You-Know-Who's thoughts, sometimes," Ginny said, looking at Michael, "and because he did, my dad is still alive." She turned back to Hermione. "So you think that You-Know-Who is going to attack the Ministry?"

"I think he's been trying all year to attack the Ministry," Hermione stated. "He had Bode killed because he wasn't able to get the thing You-Know-Who wants, and Sturgis Podmore was arrested for trying to break into the Department of Mysteries, and two people named Runcorn and Avery have tried to get in there..."

"I heard about that from Aunt Amelia," Susan said. "Mum was rather upset by it. But are they...do you think they are...?"

"Death Eaters?" Cho finished for her. "Could very well be. Both were acquitted after the first time You-Know-Who tried to take over, weren't they?" Hermione wasn't surprised that Cho knew that, she knew that Cho wanted to be an Auror after leaving Hogwarts.

"Yeah, they were," Ginny stated, and Fred and George nodded in agreement. "I'm certain that You-Know-Who is trying to take over the Ministry; he tried last time, but was unable to. And, if he can get Harry to go to the Department of Mysteries, thinking he can manipulate him into trying to get whatever it is he wants so badly, he'll have managed two goals at the same time, getting this...whatever it is...and luring Harry some place so he can kill him."

"Blimey, you're right!" George said, glancing at his brother, concerned.

"He's had these dreams...visions from You-Know-Who all year, eh?" Fred asked.

"So you think You-Know-Who will try to break in again?" Neville asked, his expression one of thoughtful determination. "Well, I'm ready; just tell me the next time Harry has a vision. I'll go."

George uncrossed his arms. "I'm with Neville; if Harry is tricked into going, I'm in. Someone has to watch his back, and who knows, we might defeat You-Know-Who once and for all."

Hermione felt a sense of dread as well as a swelling of pride in her friends. She knew they would help, but at the same time was worried that they'd be hurt if this actually happened.

"Or go down trying," Fred added. "At least the Ministry will have to finally admit that he's back."

Hermione hadn't considered that, but still, Severus was in the Order of the Phoenix as was Professor McGonagall. If she could get a message to them whenever Harry's visions from You-Know-Who made him want to go, they could notify the Order as well. There was safety in numbers, and hopefully they'd have the upper hand.

"Keep your coins with you," Ginny was saying, "and Hermione, Ron, and I will keep a close watch on Harry. One of us will set off the coins and alert you all."

Hermione nodded firmly to affirm her statement. That was it, they were in. For better or worse, these steadfast members of the DA knew and would be ready. Hermione just hoped that they'd have time to alert the Order as well when the time came.

It happened during their last O.W.L. right in the middle of the Great Hall, near the end of the History of Magic exam. Every single fifth-year was there. One minute Harry was writing away on his essay answers for the exam, two desks over from Hermione, the next minute he screamed so loud...a desperate, pain-filled, ear-shattering scream...that everyone in the Hall turned to look at him in stunned disbelief.

Harry jerked, suddenly went rigid, then fell out of his seat onto the floor, screaming and writhing in pain as if he was being hit with the Cruciatus, and Madam Wertzell scolded Neville to stay in his seat or she'd take away his exam booklet. Then Harry simply went limp, lying there moaning.

Professor Tofty told everyone to remain in their seats as he moved quickly to Harry's side, but Hermione was not really paying attention to anything but Harry. However, she remained in her chair as if rooted, sighing in relief when Harry began to get up. Professor Tofty, trying to help Harry get on his feet, was insisting that he go to the hospital wing.

Hermione looked at Ron, who simply shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, then pointed to his forehead. Hermione inhaled in shock. 'No,' she mouthed, but he nodded and pointed to his forehead again. Three seats to her left, Susan was whispering to Ernie. In front of Ron and to his left, Anthony was trying to get Neville's or Dean's attention. She turned her head, noticing that the Slytherins, Crabbe, Goyle, and Malfoy, were snickering at Professor Tofty trying to drag Harry out of the Great Hall...

"Everyone, eyes forward, no more cheating," Madam Wertzell admonished them.

Hermione was torn: she wanted to run up to the hospital wing to see if Harry was all right. She wanted to talk to Professor McGonagall, but didn't know if she was even alert enough after her attack from last Friday night. However, she couldn't tear herself away from her exam. She needed her marks, and there was only twenty minutes to go, and she had three more questions to answer. And, Professor Tofty was escorting Harry to the hospital wing...

"Everyone, the exam is not over," Madam Wertzell called out, clapping her hands, drawing everyone's attention. "You have only eighteen minutes left to finish. Back to work."

Ron shrugged, closed his test booklet and began to collect his things. So did Seamus and Dean. "Mr. Weasely, you will remain until the end of the exam," Madam Wertzell demanded. "You too, Mr. Longbottom and... er, Mr. Finnigan, you too. Finish your exam."

Seamus gave her a cross look, and then turned around to look at Neville and Dean.

Ron simply crossed his arms and glared daggers at the examiner, as Dean shook his head and rolled his eyes at Seamus.

Dean and Neville resumed writing as did Terry and Ernie, but they were writing feverishly. Hermione forced herself to concentrate on her exam, but her answers were shorter than she'd normally have done, direct and to the point. As soon as she'd finished the last one, she closed the booklet and rose to leave.

"Miss Granger, the exam is not over," Madam Wertzell called out.

"I'm finished," Hermione stated, noticing Ron jump up as well. "I'm going to see Harry."

"Miss Granger, I must insist..."

Neville, Seamus, Dean, Terry, Michael, Anthony and Ernie all jumped from their seats as soon as the bell tolled, drowning out whatever Madam Wertzell was going to insist upon. They all caught up with Hermione and Ron in the Entrance Hall as the students began pouring out.

"What happened to Harry? Did he...was it You-Know-Who?" Neville asked as Hannah, Susan, and Padma approached.

"What's going on?" Susan asked. "Did Harry have..." She paused as the Slytherins walked by, still snickering. "Is it You-Know-Who?"

"I don't know. But, this is just like what happened in Divination that one time and when he saw my dad getting bit by You-Know-Who's snake," Ron said, heading for the stairs.

"I'll find out and let you know," Hermione stated and hurried after Ron.

The fifth-year DA members were now gathering together in the Entrance Hall to find out what had happened.

Severus had seen all he needed to see in Potter's mind. The Dark Lord had either managed to entice that arrogant hothead, Black, out of his safe little hidey-hole, or the Dark Lord had convinced Potter that his godfather was in danger. From the way Potter was acting, it was the latter, but Severus knew he'd have to make sure. "I have already told you," said Severus smoothly, "breaking contact with Potter's mind and turning to Umbridge, "That I have no further stocks of Veritaserum. Unless you wish to poison Potter...and I assure you I would have the greatest sympathy with you if you did...I cannot help you.""

Potter stared at him, his expression hardened, but Severus knew the boy would be too dense to understand his meaning. "The only trouble is that most venoms," he said and turned to look Hermione straight in the eye as he enunciated carefully, "act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling..." He looked quickly at Potter, with a very subtle nod of his head, hoping she'd get his meaning and then slyly glanced at her from the corner of his eye. Her eyes widened slightly, and he hoped that Umbridge would be too angry to notice.

Potter glaring at him, apparently too frantic to pick up on his subtle innuendo.

"That's it! You are on probation," shrieked Umbridge.*

Severus looked back at her, his eyebrows slightly raised* as he feigned surprise at her statement, and it was all he could do not to smirk at the little rant she went into about his loyalties, considering he'd never given her any loyalty to begin with. *Imbecile. How easily she can be manipulated.*

"Now get out of my office!"* shrieked Umbridge, her face contorting in rage.

Severus was happy to oblige. He gave her an ironic bow and turned to leave, glancing at Hermione as he did. He twitched his eye ever so slightly at her, hoping that Miss Bulstrode was too preoccupied with Hermione's continued struggle to throw the Slytherin girl off her.

"He's got Padfoot,"* Potter shouted as Severus' hand touched the door handle. He forced himself to remain calm, as if unaffected and indifferent.

"He's got Padfoot at the place where it's hidden."*

"Padfoot," cried Umbridge.*

Great, Severus sighed to himself. *The boy has no tact at all, no subtlety.* He needed to leave so he could alert someone in the Order to go check on Black.

"What is Padfoot? Where is it hidden? What does he mean, Snape?"* Umbridge rattled off, insistently.

The boy has already given her too much information, although Umbridge is too high-strung at the moment, thankfully, to figure any of it out. He turned slowly, keeping his face expressionless. "I have no idea," said Severus coldly, staring at Umbridge. "Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage."* Mr. Longbottom made a strangled sounding grunt, and he glanced quickly at the boy, noting that Crabbe was choking him. "And Crabbe, loosen your hold a little, if Longbottom suffocates it will mean a lot of tedious paperwork, and I am afraid I shall have to mention it on your reference if you ever apply for a job."* *If the boy ever applies for anything other than Thug.*

He gave Hermione one more direct stare as he turned for the door. He had to get out now; he had to find a way to send a message to *Who?* He closed the door firmly behind him and ran for the Headmaster's tower. Unlike Umbridge, *he* had the password to get in, in case of an emergency, and this was definitely going to be an emergency if Hermione didn't interpret his implied messages correctly. *But to whom? Arthur? Most definitely if things go wrong. Kingsley or Tonks would be best; Lupin would be easiest.*

Ron, Hannah, Dennis, and Padma, plus the DA members who had met with Hermione in the Room of Requirement, were all standing there looking at Harry and Hermione with expectant faces. Ron and Ginny had explained how they'd escaped Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad, and Harry and Hermione had explained that the centaurs took Umbridge away.

"I just hope Grawp is all right, you know," Hermione stated, having just finished telling them how Grawp had saved Harry and her from the centaurs.

"Who's Grawp," Luna asked*, very interested in Hermione's story.

"Hagrid's little brother," said Ron promptly, and Susan furrowed her brow in confusion. "Anyway, never mind that now. Harry, has You-Know-Who got Sirius or what?"*

"Who's Sirius?" Katie asked and then her eyes went wide. "You don't mean Sirius Black?"

"He's Harry's godfather, and, no, he didn't kill Peter Pettigrew, he's one of the good guys. Peter Pettigrew was my rat, Scabbers...long story, and I'll tell you all later," Ron said and turned to Harry. "So..."

"The one who brought You-Know-Who back the night You-Know-Who killed Cedric?" Cho asked.

Ron nodded as Harry hissed loudly and his hand flew up over his scar. "He's... Yes, he is...he's really angry," Harry stammered, curling his hand into a fist. "Sirius is alive, but I can't see how we are going to"...URGH!" Harry clamped his hand over his scar as he bent forward slightly in pain.

Ginny reached out to try and comfort him.

Hermione looked at Cho, Katie, and Angelina, since each one of them were holding their brooms, and thought, *Too bad the others hadn't brought theirs as well.*

"Well, we'll have to fly there, won't we?" Luna said in the closest thing to a matter-of-fact voice any of them had ever heard her use.*

"Too bad all of you didn't bring your brooms," said Hermione as she stepped forward, getting worried about the situation as well. "I suppose those of you who have ones could summon them... or we could break into the Quidditch lockers for school brooms."

"Nah, the school brooms are all old," Katie stated. "They're not capable of flying us all the way to London."

"I can summon mine!" said Dean as he turned and aimed his wand.

Ginny smiled, saying, "I have a broom!" as she drew her wand.

"Okay, wait," Harry said, finally coming back to himself. "We aren't going anywhere."

"Yeah, well you are not coming,"* Ron said to Ginny, making her glare at him, which only sparked an argument between Ron, Ginny, and Harry.

"We are all in the DA together," Neville said* loudly over the three of them. "It was all supposed to be about fighting You-Know-Who, wasn't it? And this is the first chance we've had to do something real,"* he said, and many of the others voiced their agreement. "Or was that all just a game or something?"*

"No...of course it wasn't..." Harry stammered, which unfortunately started another outburst of more protests; Harry not wanting his friends to die for him; Neville, Seamus, Anthony, and Ernie insisting that they *were* going; Katie, Cho, and Susan adamantly arguing that girls could too fight, and Ginny arguing with her brother about being included.

Angelina whistled shrilly, making everyone stop and look at her. "Oi! Will you all quiet down."

"Thank you," Luna said with a warm, dreamy smile. "I can never quite figure out how to do that." She turned to the others.

"And like it or not, we're all going," Neville stated with definite finality.

Harry, abashed, nodded. "But I can't ask you to risk yourselves..." which renewed the arguments.

"Are your adventures always like this?" Seamus asked Hermione, as Dean's broom flew into the clearing. She turned to face Seamus, and he smirked at her. "I mean, if you go through this each time, how is it you get anything done?"

"No, Harry just has...he doesn't...it's usually just the three of us, so we sort of agree as we're heading out the door," she stammered.

"Ah," Seamus said, nodding. "So, no planning...just go on impulse."

Put that way, it didn't sound so good.

The sound of snapping twigs made Harry whirl around, Neville's eyes grew wide, Seamus' jaw dropped open, Katie screamed, and Susan's face went extremely pale. Hermione turned to see what was causing the commotion as Luna serenely said, "... but they can, and Hagrid says they are very good at finding places their riders are looking for.* Besides, the herd is quite large; there is one for each of the school carriages, and there are about seventy of those."

"Yes! Brilliant, Luna," Harry said, walking forward with his hand raised. He looked really odd, petting thin air. "But there are only two."

Both Dennis and Colin were beaming in delight and walked forward, their hands raised as well.

Hermione swallowed, remembering Hagrid's lesson on Thestrals. *The winged, meat-eating, tamed...or so Hagrid claimed...horses, which are invisible to anyone who hasn't*

seen someone die. Delightful.

"And we'll need... ten," Seamus said, counting heads, as Luna said, "More will come, you'll see."

"That is, unless they are strong enough to carry two." Seamus pointed at the three girls and Dean. "You four have good brooms," he said, then indicating the Creeveys, added, "and those two are small, so they can ride double with..."

But with who, Hermione didn't catch since, for some reason, Harry said something that started an animated discussion between Ron, Harry, and Luna about all twenty-four of them going to fly to London on two Thestrals and four brooms.

Angelina whistled shrilly, again. "Oi! Quiet down, will you, and listen to Luna."

Luna turned to the others and pointed in the direction of the trees. "As you can see, the blood on Hermione and Harry has attracted seven more. But they don't like the loud noises, so if you still need to argue, I suggest that you quiet down a bit."

"Luna has a point, Harry," Seamus stated.

Moments later, Hermione was sitting astride an invisible emaciated-feeling, horse-like body, wondering how she was going to hang on when she couldn't even see the Thestral beneath her. Luna was sitting comfortably in thin air as if sitting on an invisible branch, but Susan stared at the space in front of her as if she were going to change her mind. Terry was definitely amused, watching Ernie trying to mount his Thestral, considering he apparently wasn't getting his leg high enough, and kept sliding off. On Hermione's left, Neville, who had mounted his Thestral behind Padma, was trying to figure out the best way to hold on without inappropriately touching her, while Ginny and Michael, already mounted on their Thestrals, were watching as Seamus gave Hannah a hand up to mount behind Harry on his.

"This is mad," Ron said faintly,* moving his hands in the air, apparently trying to determine which end was which and how to get on by touch. "Mad... if I could just see it..."*

"Need a hand up, mate?" Seamus asked. Ron nodded. "Grab onto the mane, here," Seamus suggested, placing Ron's left hand in what must have been the right place. "Now put your left foot in my hands," Seamus said, lacing his fingers together like he'd done for Hannah, "and swing your right leg over its back."

Ron looked at him rather dubiously. *'Over its back? I can't bloody well see it's back.'*

"But you can feel it, can't you?" Seamus asked, as Ron placed his foot on Seamus' hands.

"This is *soo* wonky," Ron mumbled as Seamus hoisted him up. On the second go, he finally made it up. "Blimey, but this is weird," Ron mumbled, and Hermione wholeheartedly agreed. Seamus offered to let Susan ride with him, and she readily agreed.

Dean, Cho, Katie, and Angelina were all holding their brooms, ready to lift off, with Colin perched in front of Angelina on her new Nimbus and Dennis with Cho on her Comet Two Sixty.

Seamus finally mounted his Thestral and then helped Susan climb up behind him as Anthony gave Ernie a hand up on his Thestral. Seamus gave Ron a thumbs up when Susan placed her hands on Seamus' waist. Ron only nodded, apparently holding the mane of his Thestral with both hands and afraid to let go.

Hermione was amazed at just how patient the Thestrals seemed to be.

Apparently Seamus had ridden horses a great deal, or had ridden a Thestral before, since he started giving pointers. "Listen up. It will be better if you bring your knees up and lodge them behind the wing joints for the best grip," he was saying, "and relax your lower back and slump a bit so your center of gravity is over the Thestral's shoulders since we are riding bareback. If you're riding double, try not to squeeze the person in front too hard and hold on with your legs...but don't try to wrap your legs around them; it will confuse the beasts."

Hermione looked around. Others were nodding and adjusting their bodies to do as he'd directed, so she tried to feel where the wing joint was so she could do the same. It wasn't too hard to tell, the Thestral's body felt rather skeletal under her hands.

"You got it," Anthony said, suddenly appearing on Hermione's left. "Mind if I ride double with you?"

She looked at him in mild surprise, then frowned in concern. "Er, sure, if you think it can handle both our weight?"

"Nah, they're strong beasts," Anthony said as he took hold of something between Hermione's legs and swung up behind her with well-practiced ease. "And they are magical, so even though they look scrawny, they're all wiry muscle." Anthony scooted closer to her with his legs positioned right behind hers.

She was glad *he* was confident about this, and, in a way, feeling him behind her made her relax a bit.

"Lee went to get Fred and George; they are on their way to the Ministry," Angelina said, putting her coin back in her pocket. "They'll meet us there."

Now that they were all mounted, ready to go, everyone looked at Harry with expectant faces for him to give the signal.

"All right let's go," Harry said* and looked down at his, well... Hermione assumed what was the creature's head, but it looked like Harry was looking lower than he should be. "Ministry of Magic, visitors' entrance, London, then. Er... if you know... where to go..."*

As if on cue, Dean, Cho, Katie, and Angelina all kicked off the ground as Seamus spurred his mount forward, making Susan grab onto him around the waist. Neville did the same, grasped Padma around the waist, apparently thinking that was the best way to hold onto her, when he and Padma both lurched forward as their invisible mount bounded forward and leapt in the air.

"Don't worry, Hermione, I won't let you fall," Anthony said as Ginny and Michael both lurched into the air side by side. "I've done a fair bit of riding myself."

Anthony kicked the sides of their Thestral with his feet, urging the beast to go, and Hermione clamped her mouth shut tightly so as not to scream as she felt the Thestral she and Anthony were riding spring forward and flap its wings, lifting them off the ground. Hermione closed her eyes, thankful that at least Anthony had her held firmly in his arms.

And now everyone was flying off to London.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Hermione's reference to during her stay with him after her second mishap in time' is from her perspective in this timeline, timeline3, and refers to her second bounce back in time in this timeline, not meaning her second jump in time in the story. From her perspective, she made only three jumps, because those are the ones she remembers. Severus is the only one who knows of all her jumps and his three timelines because of the Diary.

Dumbledore and Mr. Latimer, know about most of Hermione's jumps, and only some details of what happened only because Severus told them. If confused, email me or ask in a review and I promise to explain it better. However, if you remember the explanation where I used a fork as a representation for the timelines, this should make

sense. I hope.

The sentences and dialogue denoted by an asterisk* were borrowed/quoted from the American version of, *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*. No plagiarism is intended, I merely used it to show what is going on from another character's POV from what Harry's was in the books. Those lines are totally JKR's and her incredible work.

Things that happened in the book that I don't mention, (the events, occurrences, and conversations that I basically skipped over), for example, such as the other O.W.L. exams, Professor McGonagall's attack, and Harry's attempt to talk to Sirius in the Floo in Umbridge's office, are what happened in the book...pretty much as they happened in canon.

Chapter 30

Chapter 30 of 54

Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of the fingers can make the user jump irregularly, and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self who becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to ArabelleBloodgood and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione had woken up in the hospital wing and immediately looked around. Ron was sleeping on the cot beside her, covered in bandages. When she sat up, she saw Dean, Dennis, Lee, Susan, and Luna lying on cots as well. Neville lay on a cot to her left with Angelina on his other side, and down at the end of the room lay Dolores Umbridge.

Madam Pomfrey walked over to her cot, followed by Kingsley Shacklebolt, Headmaster Dumbledore, Minister Fudge, a square-jawed witch with very short, gray hair, and a balding wizard with glasses in dark robes. "Miss Granger, may I introduce Madam Amelia Bones from the Magical Law Enforcement Department," Dumbledore said as Madam Pomfrey helped Hermione sit up, propping her back with magically enlarged pillows.

The woman nodded in greeting, but made furtive glances in Susan's direction.

"I assume that since you take the *Daily Prophet* you recognize Minister Fudge, and this is Auror Kingsley Shacklebolt," Dumbledore continued. The balding wizard with glasses stood behind her guests, but Dumbledore didn't introduce him. Hermione wondered why. "We're here to inquire after the events from last Thursday night, if you'll be so kind as to answer a few questions."

"Sure, Headmaster, I'll be happy to tell you what I know," Hermione said, watching the balding wizard with glasses who stood there with his arms crossed.

"Miss Granger, could you please tell us how you got to the Ministry?"

Hermione looked at the witch. "We rode Thestrals. Well, most of us did; Dean, Cho, Katie, and Angelina had their brooms," she said in answer to Madam Bones' question.

"I'm well aware of how you got to the Ministry, Miss Granger," Minister Fudge said, staring at her crossly. "Rubeus Hagrid had to come collect the Thestrals. Very irresponsible leaving them to wonder about on the street; Muggles saw them of course. The Oblivators had to..."

"How did you gain entry, is what the Minister is asking," Kingsley repeated the question, his tone much more congenial, but still authoritative.

"Through an old, battered telephone box," she admitted. "Fred, George, and Lee met us in the Atrium. I'm not sure how they got in."

"You came in through the visitor's entrance, but you didn't register your wands at the security desk," Minister Fudge said, looking at her accusingly.

"There wasn't anyone there," Hermione stated, refusing to let his attitude bother her. "Once everyone crowded into the lifts, Harry took us to level nine to the Department of Mysteries."

Kingsley frowned. "No one stopped you?"

"No one was there. The place was completely empty; we were the only people there," she said, looking at him. She took a deep breath. "Harry led us down the corridor into a large circular room in the Department of Mysteries. Harry told us what to look for, a room that glittered, so we all tried different doors, but you could only open one at a

time, and the circular room kept spinning each time we closed a door. The first room we tried had a huge amphitheater room with a stone arch that Harry called a veil... Harry could hear voices, so did Luna, Katie, Seamus, Colin, and Dennis... They were entranced...so were Ginny, Susan and Cho...the rest of us had to drag them out of there." She shivered involuntarily, and the wizard with the glasses frowned. "The third door we tried was locked, and the fourth door...the room was dark, we couldn't see anything, but the fifth door was the one Harry remembered..."

"Potter remembered," Fudge interrupted her. "He was never *in* the Department of Mysteries before."

"Voldemort had been," Dumbledore said firmly, scowling slightly at Fudge and the wizard with glasses, who so far hadn't said a word, just looked at her with his arms crossed. "He's been using magic...Dark magic...to entice Harry there for a while now." He turned and looked kindly at Hermione. "Go on, Miss Granger," he said patiently.

"The room had a huge crystal bell jar with a tiny bird in it that molted and fell, turned into an egg, then hatched... sorry. There was a cabinet of clocks and a small case of Time-Turners..." Hermione said, trying to remember everything as best she could. "But Harry led us through that room into another."

"Yes, yes, the Hall of Prophecy," Fudge said, and Kingsley scowled at him. "Get on with it."

"Harry had us divide up. We were looking for row ninety-seven...that's where Harry said Voldemort had Sirius...so we divided in thirds: Neville, Luna, Ginny, Harry, Ron, and I went right; Dean, Cho, Katie, Colin, and Dennis went left, I think, I'm not exactly sure, but Fred, George, Angelina, Susan, and Lee went straight ahead. But when we reached the end of row ninety-seven, there was no one there. I could see Katie and Colin a few rows down to our left and Fred and Lee were several rows down on my right, but no one else. That was when Ron spotted a tag on one of the orbs, *S.P.T to A.P.W.B.D., the Dark Lord and Harry Potter*. Anyway, even though we were telling him not to, Harry picked it up. That's when it happened."

"Yes, Miss Granger?" Madam Bones asked, clearly interested in any information she could get, and the wizard behind her uncrossed his arms as he stepped forward slightly.

"These black shapes began to appear...like smoke solidifying...Death Eaters," Hermione said. "Lucius Malfoy was one of them as was Bellatrix Lestrange." She looked up at Dumbledore, and he nodded for her to continue. "Bellatrix was taunting Harry, but Mr. Malfoy was keeping her in line, trying to get Harry to hand him the orb."

"Malfoy struck against kids?" Fudge asked, clearly not wanting to hear that his benefactor was involved.

Hermione wanted to tell him 'struck,' but refrained and shook her head. "No, he tried to talk Harry into giving him the orb and to keep the others from doing anything to us. Bellatrix threatened to torture Ginny, but Mr. Malfoy wouldn't let her. However, when Harry told them...the Death Eaters...the truth that Voldemort was a half-blood, Bellatrix tried to stun Harry, and that started the fighting. We were cornered, Harry, Neville, Luna, Ginny, Ron, and I. I heard Dean, Cho, Katie, Colin, and Dennis fighting in one of the other rows, and I heard Fred tell George, Angelina, Susan and Lee, saying to split up, but they sounded like they were on the other side of the room."

Madam Bones was trying very hard to remain calm, but Fudge and the balding wizard with glasses were glowering at her. So, Hermione tried not to look at them, finding it easier to focus on Dumbledore or Kingsley.

"Mr. Malfoy tried to get them to stop fighting, but the others wouldn't listen anymore. You see, all Mr. Malfoy wanted was to hear the prophecy. We all used *Reducto*, and I'm sure that I heard the twins use it as well, and the shelves started to fall, the orbs were breaking, we were dodging spell-fire and casting whatever came to mind... We...Harry, Neville, Angelina, Lee, and I...ran into the room which we came from; and Ron, Luna, Ginny, Fred, George, and Susan went through another door. I think Dean, Cho, Katie, Colin, and Dennis...they were behind us..." She wasn't sure; she hadn't seen where they had gone. "I heard Mr. Malfoy say to leave someone named Nott behind, and he divided them into pairs..."

"Do you remember their names, Miss Granger?" Dumbledore asked kindly as if discussing the weather.

She thought for a moment. She knew a few of them were Severus' friends from school, but she didn't want to admit that she recognized them in front of the Minister. "Besides Mr. Malfoy and Nott? Jugson, Rosier, the Lestranges...Rodolphus and Rabastan, and Bellatrix, of course, I've mentioned her. Crabbe, Dolohov, Macnair, Avery...er, Walden, Mulciber, and Rookwood..." She checked her memory, trying to remember all the names. "Hurshiser and Rowe...Rowle, and a *you*. He said, 'and you, with me,' so there might have been another. Yeah, I think that is everyone I heard Mr. Malfoy mention."

"So, what happened next?" Dumbledore asked.

"Two of them followed us into the Time Room, but Harry Stunned one, and Neville made the other trip...he fell into the Bell Jar of Time. I saw another Death Eater enter just before we ran into the office." Hermione said.

The wizard with glasses was listening intently, as were Kingsley and Madam Bones. Minister Fudge was still glaring at her. However, Dumbledore was smiling slightly like a proud grandfather.

"Harry, Neville, Angelina, Lee, and I hid under desks; I silenced one, Harry bound the one I'd silenced, and Angelina Stunned the Death Eater who'd hit Lee with a curse I've never heard before. Lee hit the wall hard from the curse, and I was hit with a purple flame and knocked out. That's all I remember."

Neville sat up, leaning on his elbow. "We got at least two of them good in the room with all the Recollection Orbs; I got Antonin Dolohov. I remember his face from the *Daily Prophet*...he's the one who killed the Prewetts. Jugson, Walden, and Mulciber, I know they were hit...I heard their names called out, and like Hermione said, someone named Nott, too. I heard him mentioned. Anyway, Dolohov must have been revived, 'cause he's the one that hit Hermione in the office with the purple flame curse, and Rabastan Lestrange kicked me and broke my nose and my wand, but Harry Stunned him. The Death Eater I hit with a Tripping Hex who fell into the bell jar...he was Crabbe's dad; I've seen him on the platform in King's Cross before. He came in...he'd turned into a baby, well his head had anyway...he started falling around and got the other guy, so we escaped. Lee was pretty badly singed, but he was all right after Angelina Rennervated him."

"Harry and I carried Hermione, and our group hooked up with Ron, Luna, Ginny, Fred, George, and Susan in anteroom, so we retreated in to what looked like a study room with loads of books and instruments in shelves on the walls. Harry, Angelina, and I started sealing the doors. George and Susan told us that they had fought four of them in the Planet Room, I think. George said Ron had used the *Reducto* to blow up Pluto, taking out one Death Eater, but Ron had been hit with a spell that had him acting all pissed-drunk. Ginny's ankle had been broken bad, Fred was pretty badly singed, but doing okay, and George had a cut over his left eye. Susan's arm was bleeding, and she was staggering a little, but Luna stopped the bleeding with a healing spell."

Madam Bones gasped and Kingsley put his hand on her back reassuringly as Neville continued, "But Bellatrix, Rodolphus, and two others were breaking in through one of the doors, so we ran into the Brain Room. Luna was knocked out with a curse before she could close the door, but Harry and George got it closed. That's where Dean, Cho, Katie, Colin, and Dennis were. Dean was hurt bad."

"I see, please go on," Dumbledore said as if they were discussing a rather exciting movie, so Neville sat up to get more comfortable. The wizard with the glasses crossed his arms, scowling.

"Well, Dennis had been hurt by a brain's tentacles. Cho and Katie had been trying to get the brain's tentacles off Dennis when we got there...they did it too. Ron, for some reason, summoned one of the brains and was attacked by its tentacles, too. So, Cho helped Fred get Ron's off him while the rest of us tried to fight the Death Eaters. But Harry made a dash for it, holding the Recollection Orb with Harry's prophecy above his head, and most of the Death Eaters, four or five of them, I think, followed Harry. We subdued the two who stayed, and everyone who could still fight ran into the spinning anteroom. We got there just in time to immobilize one Death Eater and to see which door they went through. Katie marked it before they started spinning."

Dumbledore nodded encouragingly, and Fudge fidgeted nervously while Madam Bones wrung her hands a bit. The quiet wizard with the glasses was still scowling at Neville.

"When I entered the amphitheater room with the stone arch in it, the one with the veil, there were ten Death Eaters surrounding Harry. Cho, Katie, Colin, Angelina, Fred, George, Susan, and me...we tried to protect Harry, but we were outnumbered, and I was using Hermione's wand, so it wasn't, well, obeying me. It wasn't the same as using my dad's."

"So who attacked whom?" Fudge asked.

Neville shrugged his shoulders, grimacing slightly as he did. "Gosh, it was all happening so fast. I tried to Stun any of them I could, but couldn't say it right because of my nose. Mr. Malfoy was still trying to get Harry to give over the Recollection Orb...he wasn't doing much. Bellatrix was using a spell with a red-orange spell-light or the Cruciatus at any of us she could. One named Avery was using the some curse with a blue spell-light...he got Susan with it," he said, and Madam Bones inhaled sharply, but Neville gave her an apologetic smile and continued. "Dolohov was using a purple zigzagging one... It's hard to say. There were so many curses and defensive spells flying around. Then the adults came in; not all of them were Aurors either. Professor Lupin was there and Sirius Black; I recognized him from the papers. He was there," Neville said, pointing to Kingsley. "And Professor Moody...actually the *real* Auror Moody, huh, since he wasn't really Professor Moody to begin with? And I saw Ron's dad fighting too."

Hermione listened with a sense of awe as Neville described the fight.

Madam Pomfrey had delivered Hermione's Saturday edition of the Daily Prophet with her cards and mail after she'd finished her breakfast. Harry and Ginny came in a bit later and told Hermione, Neville, Luna, and Ron what had been going on in the castle while they'd been laid up. Harry was sitting on the end of Ron's bed, and Ginny, whose ankle had been mended hours after she'd been brought to Madam Pomfrey Thursday night, sat on the end of Hermione's bed. Luna, still in her hospital pajamas, was sitting cross-legged on the end of Neville's bed, balancing his *Mimulus mimbletonia* on her ankles. The plant was now three times the size since Hermione had last seen it. A few cots away, Colin was visiting with his brother, playing exploding snap, and Hannah and Justin were visiting quietly with Susan, no doubt catching her up on the events as well.

"Bet Dumbledore wishes he could've got rid of Trelawney for good," said Ron, now munching on his fourteenth Frog. "Mind you, the whole subject's useless if you ask me, Firenze isn't a lot better..."

"How can you say that?" Hermione demanded, cutting him off. "After we've just found out that there are real prophecies?"

Harry looked away, troubled. "It's a pity it broke," Hermione said softly, shaking her head, but then looked up at Harry.* He wasn't engaged in the discussion anymore, in fact he wasn't looking at any of them either, just staring at the wall with a pained expression on his face.

"Yeah it is," Ron was saying, but Hermione had stopped paying attention too, watching Harry with concern. "Still, at least You-Know-Who never found out what was in it either..." Hermione was as surprised and disappointed as Ron when Harry suddenly stood up. "Where are you going?" Ron asked.*

"Er...Hagrid's," Harry said. "You know, he just got back, and I promised I'd go down and see him and tell how you lot are..."

"Oh, all right then," said Ron grumpily, crossing his arms and staring out of the window at the bright blue sky. "Wish we could come..."

Say hello to him for us!" Hermione called after him as he walked away. "And ask him what's happening about..." She paused, not sure what to call Grawp considering she could be overheard, "about his little friend..."

"You mean his little brother," Luna said, stroking Neville's spineless, cactus-like plant, making the plant move as if tickled and produce odd cooing noises. "He's sad about his godfather," she said.

It took a moment to for Hermione to catch on to what Luna meant. "Of course he's sad about him," she said, her brow furrowed in confusion.

"No, I mean, he thinks it's his fault," Luna stated, making the plant shiver in delight. "If he hadn't believed You-Know-Who, then we wouldn't have gone, and Sirius Black wouldn't have gone to save us."

"So it is our fault that he's dead?" Ron asked, incensed.

"No," Neville said. "It's *You-Know-Who's* fault, *he's* the one who lured us there. But Luna's right, Harry is probably blaming himself." He glanced around before propping himself up on his elbow to lean closer. "I was on the ground, dodging a curse, when Harry tripped and the orb broke. It was right in front of my face, and this little misty figure appeared... so, I did hear part of the prophecy though. I heard the voice say, 'either must die at the hand of,' then I think it said, 'the other,' however, there was an explosion of rock and someone was yelling so I can't be sure, but I think I'm right. Although, I *did* hear it say that the one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord will be born as the seventh month dies."

"NO!" Hermione gasped as she sucked in her breath.

"Blimey," Ron said, quickly looking at Hermione. "Do you think? I mean, it has to be, right?"

Neville shrugged one shoulder. "It said 'as the seventh month dies.' That is the thirty-first of July, right?"

"Do you reckon he knows?" Ron asked, looking at Hermione again.

"I'm sure *someone* knows the prophecy," Luna said. "Ron said that the tag on the orb read, *S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D., the Dark Lord and Harry Potter*. I don't know who S.P.T. is, but A.P.W.B.D. are Headmaster Dumbledore's initials. So *he* knows, unless someone else has the same five initials, but that's not really likely, is it? *And someone* placed the memory into the Recollection Orb, since it was on the shelves."

Hermione looked pointedly at Ron, but he only shrugged his shoulders and opened another Chocolate Frog.

Most thought that Severus' heart was made of ice and that he had no feelings whatsoever. Not at all true, but although he had perfected his ability of controlling his emotions, he did still have them. He was human after all, just not a bleeding heart Gryffindor, regardless of how many times Dumbledore insisted that the Sorting Hat had placed him in the wrong house. Slytherin suited him, his personality, his ambitions, his intellectual pursuits, and the dungeons suited his need for quiet solitude.

Although, in truth, even though he'd been in a foul mood ever since Thursday evening, he was feeling a bit amused presently, watching Crabbe and Goyle, who'd been cornered into assisting Minerva with her carpet bag and cloak, trudge up the stairs ahead of their professors. He'd just finished brewing another batch of the potion for Messrs Weasley and Creevey, which he was taking up to the hospital for Madam Pomfrey, when he'd run into Potter, Malfoy, Crabbe, and Goyle. Of course he'd heard the exchange between Potter and Malfoy; voices carried well in the Entrance Hall. He'd been most surprised at Potter's blatant cheek about deciding which curse to use on Malfoy, shocked even. When Minerva had arrived, looking weary and out of breath, she'd handled the situation, not exactly how he'd have done, but actually considering the circumstances, well enough, he supposed.

He'd walked with her to her office because seeing the usually spry old witch leaning heavily on her walking stick while also pulling herself along up the stairs using the banister deeply concerned him. If she hadn't enlisted the aid of his two Slytherins, he'd have levitated her bag and carried her cloak for her himself.

"So, fill me in," Minerva said casually, once they were alone. "What has been happening in my absence?" A house-elf appeared and collected her cloak and carpetbag. "Oh, thank you," she told the elf then turned to look at him.

He set his crate of potions on a chair and faced her. "As I know you are aware, Potter and twenty-three of his friends went on a foolhardy mission to rescue Sirius Black, who, by the way, was not in anyway in any danger, all because the Dark Lord gave Potter visions, breaking nearly every..."

"I'm well aware of what happened on Thursday, Severus; Emmeline came to tell me everything, and I had a nice long visit with Nymphadora," Minerva said as she lowered herself gingerly into her chair. "What about the school? Dolores; is she still here?"

"Unfortunately," he said smoothly. Her slow movements, the sheen of perspiration on her face and neck, and the heavy breathing worried him.

"I see." She laced her fingers and placed her hands on her desk. "Dumbledore has resumed control of the school."

"Yes," he replied smoothly, although she'd said it as a statement. *Why is she asking me if she's already been informed?* "Dumbledore has resumed his duties as Headmaster."

"You are on your way to see Madam Pomfrey?" she asked after breathing in deeply and exhaling slowly, as another house-elf appeared with a tea service for two.

She indicated the other chair before her desk with her hand, but he shook his head, declining the offer. "Yes," he said, his hands clasped behind his back. "Yes, I created the potion she needs for the students recovering from the damage caused by the magical brains." Incapacitated by the tentacles of thought emanating from the brains of two of the most powerful wizards in wizarding history, to be precise, if what Dumbledore had said is correct. He also had potions for Miss Granger, one to help boost up her strength and another to aid in her recovery.

"Wonderful," she said with a smile. "Please let Poppy know I'll be up as soon as I catch my breath."

"Certainly," he said, inclining his head and turning to pick up his crate.

"Severus." He turned around. "Thank you for everything." He raised an eyebrow at the remark, and she smiled. "I know you alerted the Order and did what you could to protect the students while Albus and I were gone."

"I did what I could," he intoned, returning her smile with a small one of his own. "Minerva."

He left her office and made his way up to the hospital wing to deliver his potions. He followed Madam Pomfrey as she checked on Messrs Weasley and Creevey.

Madam Pomfrey and Severus stopped by Dennis Creevey's bed first, making his brother skedaddle away, so that Severus could use Legilimency on the boy's mind to see how he was adjusting to the alien memories of Mordrid Swithin Wroithesley, the brilliant, yet slightly demented, eighteenth century Necromancer and Alchemist. The boy was altogether too trusting, eagerly allowing Severus' penetration. Creevey's mind was a whirl of thought and images, but the memories of Mordrid Swithin Wroithesley were still in the forefront amid the exhausting array of the boy's thoughts. Severus pulled out of the boy's mind quickly since the connection was threatening to give him a bloody migraine. Surprisingly, the boy was handling the additional memories quite well, as if he'd assimilated them from either watching a movie or from reading a rather disturbing book. Then again, Muggle-borns were resilient that way...everything about their world was new, exciting and an adventure, so the boy's acceptance of the memories and thoughts were understandable. It was still too soon to tell whether or not the new memories would become permanent personality imprint on the boy.

He then repeated the interview with Mr. Weasley's to check on his progress; Mr. Weasley's injuries were somewhat more involved, and the assimilation of the alien memories from Lucien M. Underwood's brain was a bit more befuddled. Lucien Underwood had been a noted Slytherin, a cunning and brilliant intellect who had a thirst for knowledge, was known for his experimentation, and the joy of discovery. However, he cared more about the discoveries he created than in the practical applications that someone would make of them, which drove him to become a Dark wizard and the right hand of Gellert Grindelwald. Nevertheless, Weasley still showed signs that Underwood's brain might leave permanent, indelible personality imprints, but Severus was hopeful that the boy could assimilate the alien memories so he'd not have to use Legilimency to remove them.

Hopefully, the boy's lazy attitude toward scholastic pursuits will override Lucien Underwood's influence. He'd have to talk to Minerva and Dumbledore about extra lessons in Charms, Transfiguration and, of course, as much as he dreaded the prospect, Potions, if the boy decided to enact on the drive to experiment.

Madam Pomfrey then walked over to check on Susan, which left him free to check on Miss Granger.

"Miss Weasley, may I have a word with Miss Granger?" he intoned, and Miss Weasley looked up at him in shock. "Alone."

"Of course, Professor," she said as she scrambled from Miss Granger's bed and then walked over to sit in the chair by her brother. He drew the curtains around Miss Granger's bed and cast several swift spells to ensure their privacy.

Miss Granger looked up at him, her soft doe-like eyes curious but unwavering. Merlin but he'd missed the way she'd looked at him like this, but that didn't negate the fact that he was livid with her. He crossed his arms and glared at her, and she lowered her head as if shamed. After counting to nine, he said, "Why didn't you trust me, Miss Granger?"

"Sir?" she asked, her wide, soft brown eyes showing her confusion.

"You heard me, why did you run off to the Ministry of Magic, on Potter's whim, before I had the chance to check out if Black was indeed in any danger?" he spat at her.

"I-I...I didn't know!" she exclaimed, her eyes widening even more.

"You didn't think," he snarled as he pocketed his wand lest he use it.

"Harry was sure...he was going, I couldn't very well let him go alone," she babbled, as if to justify her actions.

It didn't in his opinion. "So you hold no trust in me what-so-ever," he said coolly.

She shook her head as she replied, "I had no idea you were taking Harry seriously!"

"I told you not too act too fast to give me time to determine the truth," he snarled, staring down at her.

She bristled at his accusation. "No you didn't! You told Umbridge that you didn't have any further stocks of Veritaserum, and you would have the greatest sympathy with her if she'd wanted to poison Harry!"

He crossed his arms and glowered at her. "That's what you remember..."

"I remember it perfectly!" she interrupted him.

His fingers tightened on his arms. "I also implied that I would go and discover the truth before you went..."

She sat up straighter. "You were looking right at Harry when you said 'I cannot help you.' What was I supposed to think?"

"And I was looking directly at you when I said," he paused to remember his exact wording, "That they act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling." She opened her mouth to say something, gaping at him like a guppy, then shut her mouth with a snap. "Precisely. I am in Dumbledore's Order of the Phoenix. I am honor bound to help protect Potter by more than just simply my word *and you...you* should know that. You of all people should know what side I'm on."

"How could I?" she asked, staring up at him akin of any petulant student.

"Really?" he intoned dryly. "You are not that dense, nor are you uninformed as to my actions this past year...or your previous years! Or are you completely ignorant as to the position I set myself up for as your personal Defense Club, er, Dumbledore's Army, group, advisor? You think I wasn't aware of *exactly* which door Potter was seeing in his visions...*I knew!*"

"But you didn't come!" she insisted, snapping at him in a manner no other student dared. "At the Ministry, you didn't come."

His arms unfolded and fell to his sides. "*Someone* had to stay here and protect the castle and the other students!" he snarled. "For someone so brilliant you are incredibly naïve and *stupid*." Her mouth gapped open again as she stared at him in shock, then shut with a snap again. *I* went to Grimmauld Place myself; *I* spoke to Black, and then *I* was able to reach *both* Kingsley and Tonks, as well as Lupin. *I* knew how to reach Dumbledore when *I* found out that you and your friends had gone to the Department of Mysteries. *He* told me to return to the school and to not participate in the battle."

"So your cover would not be blown," she said, looking down at her hands lying on her lap.

"No, so *I* could be on hand to safe guard the students under my care," he said, and she looked up at him. "Filius was alerted as were the other Professors on our side. Did it not occur to you that Dumbledore had selected his staff with care, with one purpose? That even the imbeciles he chose for the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts were chosen because of their position in this war?"

"Except for Umbridge," she pointed out unnecessarily.

"Obviously, and that idiot fop, Lockhart," he intoned dryly and crossed his arms again. "He'd had Greer Meckintyre in mind for the post; the idiot agreed to take a year's leave of absence from the Aurory to do so."

Her chin lifted slightly. "But Harry, he was going! I had little choice," she said, raising her voice slightly in her need to make him understand her idiocy. "He was frantic to go, and there was no stopping him."

He refrained from snorting. "Yes, that dunderhead friend of yours is just like his father, always so cocksure, always doing what he wanted, careless of others, arrogant enough to believe he was invincible..."

"**HARRY IS NOT HIS FATHER**" she yelled at him, then lowered her voice but only slightly, "Why can't you accept that?"

"Actually, for your information, Potter *is* very much *like* his father," he snarled, losing his temper, his arms once again unfolding and falling at his sides. "Like James Potter, his son is a bigot when it comes to Slytherins. Like his father, he enjoys it when a Slytherin gets hurt. Like his father, he has no respect for rules, romps about the castle at any hour he chooses, involves himself in matters best left to the teachers to handle, will use the tunnels to go to Hogsmeade and steal sweets, uses his Invisibility Cloak to terrify a fellow student, will throw fireworks into his Slytherin classmates' cauldrons to create a diversion so he can steal ingredients for an illegal potion. And they both have a blind, prejudicial aversion to anyone who knows and understands the Dark Arts, and they both despise me."¹

He took a breath to steel himself. "But yes, there are a few differences: James Potter knew how to charm adults; however, his son is a sullen boy who would've received a clip on the ear of many an adult in the wizarding world if not for his 'Boy Who Lived' status and Dumbledore's protection. However, I will concede that James Potter wasn't as lazy as his son. James Potter did take his academics much more seriously than his son, and he was a more avid reader, strived harder in lessons, and carried nine NEWT-level classes while Harry Potter will only carry five, the minimum necessary to be an Auror. But as for his behavior and attitude, he is James Potter all over."¹

He turned on his heel and strode out of the hospital, away from her. Damn her. Bloody well damn her and her devotion to that idiot boy.

Neville, Dean, and Lee were released on Monday, but Ron, Dennis, Luna, and Hermione were kept in the hospital until Tuesday night. Susan and Angelina were going to have to stay another day or so, because of the resilience of the curses that had hit them.

Hermione wanted to talk to Harry about Sirius, knowing that Luna had been right, he'd have taken Sirius' death personally, and yet Harry was withdrawing from everyone and everything.

Professor Umbridge had left the hospital Tuesday morning, probably because she was unnerved by the clomping sound, somewhat reminiscent of horses hooves, that could be heard from outside the hospital windows over her bed. And the students hadn't let up on her all day, so many wanting to get one last prank pulled on Hogwarts' most hated professor ever. Hermione had been told that she'd tried to sneak out unnoticed during dinner, but the students started chucking their dinner rolls at her as she passed, and Peeves had chased her from the Entrance Hall all the way to the school gates, alternately whacking her with Professor McGonagall's walking stick and a sock full of chalk, as many of the students followed behind them cheering and jeering Umbridge's departure.

Susan was released on Wednesday.

The last evening, at the leaving feast, Hermione asked Ron, "Where's Harry? Didn't he come down with you?"

"He's still in the dorm, packing," Ron said.

Angelina entered the Great Hall, apparently released from the hospital. She waved at Hermione and Ron before she sat down between two of her friends at their end of the table.

After dinner, Hermione spotted Luna tacking up a list on the notice board. "They take your stuff again?" she asked, looking at the list. "I think I saw red boots on one of the suits of armor on the seventh floor, and blue cloak hanging on a gargoyle. I'll go get them for you."

"Thank you," she said serenely. "I saw Harry earlier."

"How is he?" Hermione asked.

"Unhappy...well, I'd say disturbed, but people mistake that term," Luna replied, turning for the stairs.

"About his godfather?" Hermione asked, wondering if there was more to his moodiness or not. Luna had a way of perceiving things others missed.

"It is the second time he's lost someone close, and he knew his godfather fairly well, didn't he? I mean enough to go and try to save him and all," Luna said as they walked up the stairs together. "It's too bad he couldn't have spoken to his mum and dad."

"Yeah, considering they died when he was so little," Hermione agreed. "He never knew them at all, not like Sirius. At least they got to know each other."

"It's who he heard in that room with the archway...his mum and dad," Luna stated with a wistful smile. "I heard my mum, I think, it was hard to tell, couldn't really make out what she was saying."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, feeling awkward. She remembered Harry's and Luna's reaction to the stone arch. Is that what Harry and the other's heard? Now she understood what had drawn her friends toward the stone arch. "I must be awful losing a mother." She never knew what to say to someone who'd lost a parent. "I haven't..."

"No, you couldn't see the Thestrals," Luna said with an understanding smile.

"How did she...?"

Luna looked up at the candle in the wall sconce. "My mum was quite an extraordinary witch, but she did like to experiment and one of her spells went rather horribly wrong. I was nine. You want me to tell you what Harry said, don't you?"

"Yes, please," Hermione said, and listened with growing concern as Luna told her about her conversation with Harry.

Down in the dungeons later that same night, Darias, Raithe, and Duane sat at on the makeshift benches in an unused classroom with Serena, Valeria and Tammorah on another, facing them. Grantham Thortenson had finally taken a stand and was straddling a chair he'd conjured, and Professor Snape leaned against an old desk with his arms crossed, listening to his chosen decide their fate.

"So, it's settled, we're choosing to decline?" Darias asked, after a long pause of silence.

Everyone nodded, some more fervently than others, and Severus's lips pulled back in a small, pleased smile.

"Okay, so we'll need a safe word and a possible safe house arranged if you find yourself pressed to the wall." Darias pulled out a box from his bag. "These are charmed with the Protean Charm," he said, handing each of his friends a small pouch. They each pulled out a red-flecked, green stone pendant, bezel set with symbols engraved in the thick silver setting. "The symbols can be changed into words, but keep in mind it will appear on all the others since they are connected. The stone is bloodstone, from a dragon's den, and enhances the magic of the charm. You can also use it to get to a small beach house I own. My parents don't even know about the house, so it's safe for now."

"It's a Portkey?" Valeria asked, turning the pendant over.

"Yes," Darias admitted, and Severus nodded in affirmation, but allowed Darias to continue. "You can activate it by tapping the back with your wand, and it will take you to Darias' Hold. My family all call me Raymond, after my father. No one but you six know about my house. I purchased it under the name Darias Holden."

"I still can't believe you bought the place," Duane stated.

"It's nice; small, but cozy," Serena stated. "Is it still under the Fidelius?"

"Yes," Darias stated, leaning forward with his elbows on his thighs as Severus nodded again. He and Darias had personally placed the Fidelius as well as other protections spells on the property as well as the house.

"Oh, and Professor Snape knows of the house as well. He, too, has one of these in his pocket. He said he'd do what he can if we run into trouble."

Severus nodded in affirmation, again. "As I have promised you I would."

"What about the sixth-years?" Grantham asked, putting his pendant back into his pouch. "I know that they are on the recruitment lists as well."

"Montegue, Pucey, and Warrington are going to join; when is up to them and their parents. Urguhart, Aubry, Higgs have told me they will ask their parents to wait until they finish school. That gives them a year reprieve. The Dark Lord will wait until they finish school...he waited for us," Darias stated.

"The Dark Lord prefers to wait until his recruits are of age of consent," Severus said smoothly. "However, it's very unlikely he'll force the Mark on any students returning to Hogwarts."

"What about the girls: Reilly, Nolan, Maguire, and Langley?" Raithe asked.

"Penelope said that she, Mary, and Winnifred are going to the south of France with her parents," Tammorah said, smiling, but there was little of it reflected in her eyes, presently. "Mary Langley and her mum are going to visit her mother's family in Austria and Russia this summer."

"That leaves Catherin MacTirdelvach out. Wasn't she swaying?" Raithe asked, and Severus was surprised by the undertones he read in that question.

Darias smirked; apparently he knew that Raithe liked the girl. "She's not a fighter, Raithe, and her father has too much control over the family. However, he's not likely to make any arrangements for her until her seventeenth birthday."

"Egraine Whyte, Lassarina Fitzgerald, Sybilla Grey...are they still siding with You-Know-Who?" Grantham asked, still refusing to call Voldemort the Dark Lord.

"I couldn't sway them; Penelope and Mary tried to see if they would sway, but they are too ensconced in the pure-blood prejudices and way of thinking," Serena stated. "In fact, Lassarina and Sybilla may be betrothed this summer; if not, they will be by next Christmas."

Darias nodded, staring at his hands clasped between his knees. Raithe leaned back, his hands clasped into a fist. The others simply sat there reflecting on their thoughts. Darias looked up. "Urguhart said he'd look after the fifth- and sixth-years when they return, and keep up what we started," Darias said, looking at Severus and then his friends. "He's already made a list of the fourth-years who might be swayed."

Severus knew that Urguhart was the best choice to lead his recruits next year, and he was a candidate for Head Boy, although he knew that the Headmaster would not consider the boy. There hadn't been a Slytherin Head Boy or Head Girl during Dumbledore's years as Headmaster. And the old man bemoans about the pure-bloods prejudices, he thought ruefully. He himself is as prejudiced against Slytherin as any hotheaded Gryffindor.

"He has pendants similar to ours, but I didn't make them Portkeys. Since they are all coming back here, I didn't think they'd need them to escape," Darias was saying. "But Raithe, Duane, and I will keep in touch with them. We've worked out means of communicating and some codes. Hopefully, Nott will decide next year which side he's on. I think he'll choose ours. Brambila Rushbridge said she and Penelope would keep at Candice Longacre and Tracy Davis, see if they can pull them as well."

"Right, so we're on our own," Grantham stated, crossing his arms.

"No," Valeria said, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "We stick together, as friends and comrades. We ride this out until it comes to a head, but we stick together."

"She's right," Duane stated with a firm nod, and Severus smiled again in reassurance. "We ride this out together, and keep our wits about us. Snape didn't risk his neck to have us fail. If we stick together, keep practicing our Occlumency, we should get through this."

"Merlin, I hope Dumbledore wins," Serena said with a heavy sigh.

"And when the time comes, I'll be here, wand in hand to see that he does," Raithe stated.

Darias' mouth curved into a crooked smile at the determination reflected on his friend's faces. "So will I," he stated. "No matter what side my dad takes, I will stand up for what's right."

Serena looked at him nervously, but nodded her head as the others voiced their agreement to fight.

Over all, Severus was pleased with the meeting; however, he was still going to keep an eye on Miss Merkle and now Miss Wilkes as well. And as much as he hated

involving himself in their petty love lives, he'd have to talk to Mr. Macrae regarding his association with Catherin MacTirdelvach.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

The sentences and dialogue denoted by an asterisk* were borrowed/quoted from the American version of, Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix. *No plagiarism is intended, I merely used it to show what is going on from another character's POV from what Harry's was in the books. Those lines are totally JKR's and her incredible work.*

I didn't want to type out the entire Battle in the Department of Mysteries; I thought it would be too redundant, so I only gave you an overview. Everything that that happened in the book that I don't mention, everything that happened in the Ministry atrium, for example, and the conversation between Dumbledore and Harry in his office, up to Hermione waking up in the hospital, are what happened in the book...pretty much as they happened in canon.

Severus dialogue denoted by the superscript¹ to Hermione in the hospital comes from a review I received from a reader, and I absolutely loved her comments, so much so I saved them. However, I'm having a hard time finding that wonderful review in order to credit her/him. When I do, I'll definitely give credit as due.

Chapter 31

Chapter 31 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. And a huge thank you to MagicalPresence for helping me understand the Muggle school system in the UK as well as for some 'site' information. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

A huge thank you to Snitchette and Proulxes for the help correcting my dismal attempt at French. I really appreciate it very much! I would have utterly butchered your beautiful language without your help.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Mrs. and Mr. Weasley, Tonks, Mad-Eye, and Lupin had seen Harry off the train and then had had words with Harry's aunt and uncle, warning them to not mistreat him, much to Hermione's delight. She hoped his horrible aunt and uncle would heed the warning, and Harry would have a decent summer. Hermione made a mental note to send Harry snacks at least once a week just in case. The way he was growing, he'd need the extra calories. Hermione hugged Harry, saying, "Write to me. That way I can send stuff back with Hedwig." Adding, as she let go, "I mean it, Harry, tell me, anything, even if just to complain about Dudley."

"Er, right, okay," he said, but she hoped he would. He was still rather sullen and withdrawn around her.

Hermione walked away from Harry, and her parents hugged her the moment she approached them. "Oh, it's so good to see you, darling," Jean Granger said, holding her tightly.

"It's wonderful to see you, too," she said, wondering why her parents had a pile of luggage with them on a trolley. "Are we going somewhere?" she asked as her father set Crookshanks' carrier on the trolley holding her trunk. Hermione had expected to leave the station for London Charing Cross to take the train to Bexleyheath Station and then home as they'd done every summer before, but obviously her parents had other plans.

"Your Mum has been planning this trip all year," her father said proudly.

"But where are we going? What about my trunk?" Hermione asked, confused.

"Can you make it smaller?" her mother whispered. "We're going to France! I've found the most adorable beach house to rent for the next three weeks! Shopping, great food, I know you like the beach, sweetie. I've packed you a bag. Oh, and I checked; since Crooks is already in a carrier, we can take him as he is."

"Let me guess, St Jean de Luz?" she asked her mum as her father led them to the London Paddington line to take the express service to Heathrow airport.

Her mum smiled. "Of course."

Hermione tried making her trunk about the size of a carry-on as discretely as possible. St Jean de Luz was a large, working port and resort, famous for its gorgeous architecture of seventeenth and eighteenth century houses and its fine, sandy, protected beach. The charming port town was loaded with shops and some of the best seafood restaurants on the Cote Basque, as well as many terraces from which to see and enjoy the regular musical events in the square. Everything was within walking distance. It was her mum's favorite place to spend a summer vacation.

They flew Air France from Heathrow Airport to Biarritz Parma Airport and then made the twenty-minute drive from Biarritz to St Jean de Luz in a taxi.

As soon as they got to the beach house, Hermione let Crookshanks out of his carrier and started to pull out what Muggle clothes she had with her. Most of them were winter clothes, so they wouldn't do at all, and the ones her mum had packed were all from last year, so many of them were a bit too tight, especially in the bosom, which meant that her mum would want to go shopping. Hermione almost groaned at the thought. However, she did her best to select something appropriate to wear for dinner. She changed her clothes, thankful that the house-elves had pressed her blouse and jeans before setting them in her trunk back at school. She would try to find something, some shells perhaps, or a few small bangles, for the house-elves that cleaned her dorm room and did her laundry.

She pulled out her journal and turned to look out the window. She had to admit, she loved the view of the sandy bay from her room, and the quality of the light, especially at sunset, was breath taking. She finished her entry, set her book down on her bed, petted Crookshanks, and headed down for dinner.

The next morning after breakfast, Jean announced that she was taking Hermione shopping. "Do leave some money in the bank, dear; you don't want to spend it all in one day," her father called out as they headed for the door.

Hermione and her mum walked to the town. Her mum's enthusiasm for anything French, such as the two tiny French bikinis her mum bought her and the French fashions, nearly made the exhausting endeavor of purchasing a 'suitable' summer wardrobe bearable, although not all the outfits they purchased were strictly for the warm sunny weather of the southern French coast, since a good deal of the clothes could be worn comfortably back in England, too.

Her father joined them for lunch, choosing a lovely café where they could hear street musicians playing in the background. However, the topic of discussion George and Jean wanted to have centered on the letters they'd received from Hogwarts, the fight at the Ministry Hermione and her friends had been in, the You-Know-Who person who was apparently back and of great concern in the wizarding world, and Hermione's involvement with Harry.

"All I'm saying, darling, is that you frequently get hurt at this school, and the letters, although they say you're fine, healed... concern your mother and I," her father said. "It seems every year we get notices...it's disturbing."

"And this You-Know-Who that no one will say the name of," Jean said, her expression one of true parental concern, "reminds us of the London gangsters called the Kray Twins."

"How do you know about him?" Hermione asked, wondering to what extent her parents knew.

"He's the most evil wizard in hundreds and hundreds of years, according to your Ministry official who came by our house to apply some magical protections," her father replied. "He was quite informative."

"They what?" Hermione asked in shocked disbelief.

"He wasn't the only one; an old man, your Headmaster Dumbledore, I think...long, grey beard, wearing rather outlandish robes and pointy hat...he came to cast spells on the house a week before your school let out, and your Professor Snape, the one you've written to us about, he was at the house to check on the wards..." Jean said, then turned to look at her husband, "wasn't it, George? Wards?"

"That's what he said, Jean," her father replied. "Although, from what we've been told, this You-Know-Who or He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named sounds a lot like a Joseph Stalin."

"Anyway, we have plenty of time to talk about this," her mother said as the waiter arrived with the bill.

However, as they left the café, Hermione excused herself from any further shopping in order to take a walk on the beach, mulling over her discussion with her parents. Apparently this family vacation was a ploy, not only to get her out of England, but so her parents could talk to her about the goings on in her life, which was precisely why she hadn't told her parents anything. Hermione wasn't sure she wanted any more discussions about it either.

The second day wasn't any better than the previous day. By her fourth day of vacation, her parents tried another tactic to get her to open up about the events they'd read about in the *Daily Prophet*. Hermione was shocked that they had even received the paper, let alone every day since the fiasco at the Department of Mysteries! That was over a weeks' worth!

The next day her father had mapped out some sightseeing along the Quai de L'Infante, Rue Mazarin, and Rue Gambetta to see several of the famous residences built in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the Church of St. John the Baptist, Alexandrenia home, the Three Canons House, the Maison Lohobiague of Louis XIV known as the Place Louis XIV, and the "Maison de l'Infante", a popular tourist attraction and museum. Thankfully the sightseeing distracted her father most of the day since he loved the local history: the Basque corsaires, the royal marriage of Louis XIV to Maria-Teresa, the Infanta of Spain in 1660, and the evacuation of the Polish army, diplomats and officials of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 1940 after the German invasion of France.

The sixth day, Hermione slipped out of the house early so she could spend some quiet time on the beach. Her parents insisted on going into town to have lunch in another café, but she avoided any more shopping by suggesting that they rent bikes and go riding along the beach. Talking was difficult when lined up on bikes and avoiding pedestrians.

Later that afternoon, Hermione wanted to take a swim before dinner. She put on one of her new swimsuits, grabbed a towel and headed out for the beach. "Mum, Dad, I'm going for a swim," she called out as she headed for the door.

"All right, dear, but be back in an hour," her father called out from the lounge as she passed.

As she strode across the sand for the ocean, Hermione let the warmth of the sun and the sounds of laughter erase her concerns. The water chilled her at first, but she quickly got used to it. Not too far away, a group of kids on surfboards were waiting for the next wave. Hermione swam past them, just past the point where the waves broke, lazily swimming on the swells. When the next large swell came, she let it pull her toward the shore, as well as the next smaller one, and then rode the next wave all the way in until she could stand up. However, the next wave plowed into her, making her tumble and roll with it, until the force of the water lessened. Hermione pushed herself up, but the receding flow of the water drew her back away from shore slightly, as another wave crashed into her, making her fumble.

"Need a hand?" a boy asked.

Hermione looked up to see a rather handsome boy, about her age, or a few years older perhaps, holding his hand out for her. "Okay, thanks," she replied, grasping his hand before the next wave plowed into her. Apparently, it would take her a while to get used to being in the surf again.

"Tide is coming in," he said with an adorable crooked smile as he pulled her to her feet and grasped her arm to steady her. He had a definite French accent, although his English was really quite good.

She looked up at him, momentarily taken aback by his good looks. His teeth were straight and white, and his brown hair was hanging in his face a bit, still dripping wet, slightly obscuring his incredible turquoise blue eyes.

Another wave pushed her into his chiseled torso, and he laughed. "Let's get you out of the water," he said with a smirk.

Hermione shook her head slightly, mostly to shake her hair out of her face. "I don't usually fall so much," she said in way of apology as she allowed him to lead her out of the water.

He looked down at her, one side of his mouth pulled back in a grin. "You're really petite to be out when the water is so rough."

Hermione smiled as she tucked a few strands of her hair that had come loose from her braid behind her ear. "I didn't know the water would be so rough today."

"Normally it's not, but there is a storm out over the ocean. They say it should sweep past us, but it's making the water great for... surfing," he said, and she definitely noticed that his gaze swept down her body to her chest and back to her face as he spoke, and she bowed her head for a moment to hide her blush.

"I'm Pierre Baudelaire."

"I'm Hermione," she replied, smiling. "Hermione Granger." She bent down to retrieve her towel and wrapped it around her hips, amused that he almost looked disappointed. "Do you live here or are you vacationing?"

"We have a house here," he said, walking effortlessly through the sand with her. He pointed toward the shoreline houses in the distance. "It's over there." He dropped his arm. "So what do you do when you're not drowning in the surf?"

Hermione chuckled softly. "Oh, you know, attend school, map the stars, lead a dueling club, read books, ride horses, drown in the surf," she said flippantly, watching his face flicker from amusement to curiosity at her choices. "The usual girly stuff. You?"

"Polo matches, sailing, cycling, swimming, surfing, riding horses, reading books, rescuing damsels in distress...the usual guy stuff."

They talked as they strolled through the sand and along the boardwalk. Hermione really liked him. He was easy to talk to, seemed intelligent, and was well versed in the history of St Jean de Luz and the Lapurdi of the Basque Country. "This is where we're staying," she said, realizing they'd walked back to her house. "Maybe I'll see you around, Pierre?"

He smiled. "Yeah, I'd like that, Hermione."

She turned to go, glancing over her shoulder as she walked onto her patio, and grinned when she saw that he was still standing there, watching her.

"Now, he seems like a nice boy," her mum said as Hermione headed for the stairs. Hermione nodded as her mum added, "Your father and I thought we'd walk to town tonight for dinner. That will give us more time to catch up."

Hermione sighed. Tonight would be another discussion about her activities in the wizarding world, and she was not looking forward to it.

The seventh day, her mum asked Hermione about the young man who'd walked her home. Hermione shrugged. She'd seen him in passing a few times, and he'd waved at her, smiling, but that was all. Truth was, Hermione had felt elated that he'd waved at her. He was incredibly handsome and had the most charming smile.

"So, why not go out with a nice boy like him?" Jean asked when they saw Pierre with a man with long blond hair and a dark tan leaving a bistro that afternoon.

"Mum, I only talked to him once," she said in exasperation. "Besides, he's a local. I'm sure he isn't interested in me."

"All I'm saying is that there are nice regular guys," her mum stated, holding her hand up to shade her eyes as she scanned the street. "You know, what do you call us *normal* people? Muggles?"

Hermione refrained from sighing out loud by exhaling very slowly.

"It would be better, don't you think, having a normal life," her mother said casually. "Let's get a coffee."

"My life is normal," Hermione said and immediately regretted giving her mum such an opening for that discussion again.

Jean dropped her hand and turned to face her daughter. "Ever since you've gone off *that* school, your life has been anything *but* normal."

Here we go again, Hermione grumbled to herself.

Eighth day, her parents friends, Dr. Monroe Hoffer and his wife, Denise, joined them for a few days. To Hermione their arrival felt like a reprieve, even if she had to play nice to the Hoffer's spoiled, seven-year-old twin daughters, Ellen and Louise, under the watchful eye of her mum and Mrs. Hoffer.

However, the day after the Hoffers left, Hermione's mum insisted that they have another girls' day out shopping, much to Hermione's chagrin. After three exhaustive hours of trying on clothes, her mum insisted they break for lunch. Hermione shrunk their bags so that they would fit into her mum's tote. At the restaurant, Jean ordered, "Brochettes de poissons marinés et grillés," for herself and "Le Saumon Froid Poché et Concombres," for Hermione in perfectly spoken French.

Shortly after the food arrived, her mum was back at it again. "You've only missed five years of normal schooling. Your primary school marks were exceptional. That leaves only five years of comprehensive school to figure out. What I think is that we'll have to say you've been to an international school or that you've been home-schooled."

"Mum, what are you on about?" Hermione asked, not believing what she was hearing.

But her mum wasn't actually listening to her. "Your father is still quite friendly with the principle of Bexleyheath School. Of course, Mrs. Ferkle is qualified to give you the exams through the Girls Comprehensive School in Bexleyheath if we tell her that you were in a school abroad. You will still need the qualifications to get into university though, but I think we can manage that. Your classes are odd, but with a bit of creativity, I think we can assure them that you have the qualifications. Your Languages and Literature class is an English course, Potions is basically Chemistry, and Runes...well that is a language course, of some sorts, right? Plus you've learned quite a bit of Latin, from what I can tell. And History of Magic is History, we'll just not mention the magic part. Herbology is basically Biology or Botany, and you had that Care of Creatures didn't you, so that can count as a Biology class as well, don't you think? And Arithmancy is maths... Alchemy is science... It's a stretch, I know."

Hermione shook her head. "They will never accept that..."

"It's being creative, darling," her mum said, waving her hand dismissively. "Maybe if you use a bit of magical *persuasion* on the forms...?"

"Mum!" Hermione gasped, not believing what she was hearing.

"Currently, to get into university you can apply through a website that deals with all the applications for every university. Since you're sixteen, you could go the route of a further education college like Baxley College, and then you could possibly apply to Oxford after a year," her mum rattled on.

"Mum!" Hermione exclaimed. Suddenly her cold poached salmon with cucumbers wasn't all that appealing. "I can't just leave Hogwarts and go to a Muggle school now!" Hermione was beginning to get angry. She couldn't believe her mum was suggesting such a thing. "I don't want to leave the magical world..."

"Yes you can; all we need to do is fill in the qualifications and your marks. Now, what I could have done is to have the forms filled out so that you could take exams separately... The problem with this is that you'll need references, too. I don't suppose any of your teachers will do that for you, would they?"

Hermione shook her head. "I dunno, but that's not the point..."

"Perhaps a well-placed Confundus or two will suffice!"

"MUM!" Hermione said, raising her voice to get her mother to stop talking. Jean looked at her daughter as if she'd just had a magical outburst. "I don't want to leave Hogwarts!"

"But, darling..."

"No buts. I'm finishing at Hogwarts and that's final."

"But it's dangerous, and the papers say that this dark wizard is back, and that you fought him and his Death Eater followers in their Ministry of Magic..."

"My Ministry of Magic. *My life...my choice*, remember?" Hermione said, dumping her napkin on her unfinished poached salmon.

"Hermione, wait," Jean said, scrambling to leave the appropriate francs on the table.

"No, Mum," Hermione said with a shake of her head and leaned closer with her fists on the table so she could lower her voice a bit. "You'll have to respect my decision. I'm not going to follow the dream you had for me...this is mine. I want this." Hermione stood up. "I'll see you later."

"Hermione Jean Granger! Don't you turn your back on me!"

But she walked away, fuming at her mother's impertinence, knowing that she'd only face the same argument when she returned to the house. But for now, she needed to really think things through. Her mum had caught her entirely off guard, and she needed to really think things out so she'd be ready to have this discussion again, to be prepared with well thought-out arguments and points to make her parents see her side of this.

Hermione saw Pierre ahead of her, leaning on a short wall and staring out at the beach. His head turned as he watched a family walk by, so she waved at him. He smiled and waved back.

"What are you doing out here?" she asked as she approached him.

He laughed. "I live here, remember?"

"Oh," she said, feeling silly. *Right, it's not like he's been waiting for me or anything. He's just out enjoying the beach.*

"You? Shopping or just out for a walk?" he asked.

"Lunch with my mum," she replied, not really wanting to talk about their argument with anyone yet, least of all him.

"So, asking you to join me for lunch would be out of the question," he said with an adorable crooked smile.

She thought about the barely-eaten poached salmon and cucumbers. "I could possibly have a light bite," she replied, and he cocked his head at her, his smile morphing into a questioning smirk.

"You're still hungry...you just ate," he said, confused.

Hermione looked away at the beach. "Mum and I...we sort of...had a misunderstanding," she stammered, hoping he'd not ask for details.

"Oh," he said and smiled. "Then maybe you'll come have poissons grillés with me. I've fresh fish I was going to cook. Do you want to come?"

Hermione smiled back. "Sure, that sounds great."

Pierre pushed off the wall. "This way," he said with a jerk of his head, and she walked with him along the beachfront. He stopped right in front of a gorgeous, beachside house. "Some of my friends will be coming over soon. I hope that's all right."

"No, that's fine," she said with a smile, pleased that he didn't mind introducing her to his friends. "Where did you learn English so well? Have you been to school in England?"

"No, I attended a boarding school in France, however, I speak several languages, Spanish, some Italian, and German, although my German is not so good," he said, opening the door for her. "My family travels to England quite a bit... for business, so I've had practice."

"Where are your parents now?" she asked, curiosity getting the better of her.

"Ma Mère is in Paris, shopping, and mon Père is away on business at the moment," he said and grinned at her. "Not afraid to be alone with me, are you, ma petite chérie?"

She was about to say no when a curly-haired French boy in need of a good shave entered the room, saying, "Ah, so es dis ze girl you speaks of?" He brushed his sandy-colored curls out of his face, but they simply flopped back into place.

"This is the girl I rescued from the sea. Hermione, this is Philippe LeFèvres," Pierre said, giving his friend a warning glare. "Where's Ciarán?" he asked, and Hermione was surprised to hear the Gaelic name.

"E 'as some zings to pick up, but 'e says 'e'll be by soon. What's for lunch...let me guess, fresh poisons... fish," Philippe said and walked into the kitchen. He returned with three cold beers.

"Er, no thanks," Hermione said, refusing the beer. "I don't drink, much."

"Would you prefers a glass of wine, per'aps, 'Ermione?" Philippe asked, indicating the kitchen with his hand. "We 'ave a nice rosé. Englesh girls like de rosé wines, no? I can make you an aperitif, or we have a very good la bière et le cidre?"

"I'll try the cider then," Hermione suggested. She wasn't about to start drinking. Knowing her, she'd have no tolerance and didn't want to get tipsy.

"Philippe, is Lucien coming?" Pierre asked, opening his beer and tossing the bottle lid into a gorgeous glass bowl on the glass coffee table. He sat on one of the stools at the counter that divided the spacious front room from the kitchen while Philippe went to get her a glass of cider.

"E es coming," Philippe said.

Considering he had suggested he was going to be cooking, she didn't see any evidence of food preparation. "Do you need a hand preparing the fish?" she asked. Back in the kitchen, Philippe was shuffling around, making plenty of clinking noises.

"We have to wait for Ciarán," Pierre said between sips of his beer. "He has the fish."

Hermione turned, looking around the room. There was a sculpture of a nude female torso standing across the room, and the art on the walls looked like they were originals, modern, but exquisite. There was a huge charcoal and beige rug on the slate floor under a white padded sofa and armchairs with black wood accents and turquoise and pale sunset-colored throws. The tables and coffee table were black frames with glass tops. The matching glass table against one wall had two beautiful seashells and a large crystal sculpture of dolphins. The place screamed money.

Philippe walked over to hand Hermione her glass of cider. She took a sip of her cider, scrunching her nose at the odd taste, cinnamon and mint... but there was a sharp tang with a strong peppery aftertaste.

"Sorry, ez eet not to your liking?" Philippe asked, indicating her glass.

"No, it's fine," Hermione said and faked taking another sip so she could smell the cider in the glass, but she couldn't detect anything, since the cinnamon and mint were so strong. *Only a subtle smell very similar to... celery... maybe?*

Both boys watched her, sipping on their beers, and she felt like she was on display. She took another tiny sip of her cider, trying to vanquish some of the drink with a nonverbal spell. She pretended to swallow as she held the liquid in her mouth, and noted the strange taste on her tongue again. This time she recognized the sharp aftertaste of scurvy-grass and the peppery taste of sneezwort. *The ingredients of a Befuddlement Draught? Couldn't be...? How could..*

"Is anyone here?" a distinctly gruff Scottish brogue called out from the back of the house, startling Hermione.

"In the front room," Pierre called out as Philippe sat on the arm of one of the armchairs.

As soon as the owner of the voice entered the room, Hermione almost dropped her glass of cider, staring at the guy who had to be Ciarán. He had spiky, dark hair, deep-set, hooded eyes, heavily built frame with large, hairy forearms and hair poking out from where his shirt opened in a V indicating a hairy chest, just like...he looked just like Gareth Montague, Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team and one of Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad... They even had similar gruff voices. "Montague...?"

"She knows you," Philippe said with a smirk. "Zis should make zings eazier, no?"

Hermione backed away from Montague, and Philippe stood up, setting down his beer on one of the tables.

"Ah, don't be shy, girl. After all I went through to get you here?" Ciarán said, moving toward her.

"What...?" she asked, her gaze flicking between Pierre and Ciarán and back as she started realize just how much trouble she was in.

"Getting your mum to plan this trip," Ciarán said with a one-sided smirk. "My uncle paid your parents a visit, implanted the suggestion, told them how dangerous it is for you in England..."

She couldn't believe what he was saying; it seemed impossible. "The Ministry official who came by our house to apply magical protections? That was *your* uncle?"

"Catches on quick, doesn't she?" Philippe said, drawing a wand.

"You're a wizard?" she gasped at the French boy as Ciarán drew his as well. She turned to look at Pierre and was stunned to see him holding one as well. "You too?"

"Brightest witch of her age, or so I'm told," Pierre said. "Only she's far to trusting."

"Nah, I told you she'd go for your looks," Ciarán said, holding his wand casually in his fingers. "Gareth said she don't have boyfriends at school...only books." He turned to look at Hermione, and she felt trapped. "All we had to do was make sure your parents got the *Prophet*, especially the ones mentioning you and your friends' names, and a copy of the *The Quibbler* with Potter's interview."

"My parents don't get the wizarding papers," Hermione started to protest, and then realized that he'd said he'd sent them. "They would have told me."

"Zought you said she es bright?" Philippe said mockingly. "Or don't zey teach a liddle spell, Refreno infantis?"

"So now, ma petite chérie, will you come quietly, or do we have to subdue you?" Pierre asked, rising from his stool.

Hermione was frightened. She looked around and swallowed nervously. She didn't have her wand and there were three of them. Philippe was between Hermione and the door, Ciarán was blocking the entry to the back of the house, and Pierre had his back to the kitchen. "Why are you doing this?" she asked Pierre, watching the other two with her peripheral vision, acutely and fearfully aware of her situation.

"It's not for the money, I assure you," he said, raising his wand up higher. "C'mon, you're outnumbered, and we're armed."

He was right. Hermione was so frightened she felt her magic surge within her and forced herself to think.

"Argh, enough of this, just subdue the girl," Ciarán snarled, taking aim.

She lunged the second he fired, thankfully an Impediment Jinx, but Pierre fired a Stunner at her. Only because of the times that Hermione had spent dodging Severus' spells did she manage avoiding being hit.

"Slippery liddle minx," Philippe said, taking aim as Hermione managed to Summon a pillow, and the spell collided with it, rather than hit her.

"So, she can do wandless magic," Pierre said, although for some reason he actually sounded pleased.

Yes, she thought. *I can.* At least one of the projects she'd tried on her own had worked. She'd been reading about wandless magic ever since she'd learned it was possible. In fact, quite a bit of her extracurricular reading was on the subject, and she'd practiced doing it for years, but only managed simple spells.

Ciarán fired again, and Hermione lunged for the space between the coffee table and the sofa. Another spell rebounded off the glass, and she cried out as she scrambled for the wall as another spell struck the sofa and a third whizzed by her head. One spell hit the glass bowl and rebounded, catching Philippe's hand. She heard him cry out in pain. "Merde," he snarled.

They are toying with me, she thought angrily. Drawing on her innate energy, she made one of the chairs move to shield her. Pierre levitated the chair, and she dodged behind the sofa. Philippe chose at that moment to try and grab her. A charge, like that of electricity, ran through her body, startling Philippe, and she managed to bend and turn as Pierre fired a Stunner. It hit Philippe instead, disarming him. *One down.*

"What did you give her, Liquid Luck?" Ciarán snarled as he fired a Stunner at her, hitting the nude torso sculpture as Pierre moved to her left, releasing Philippe from his Stunner.

She'd been reading about magical bursts of magic, like the Defensive charge, and even practiced it at school, only with random results *I need to panic, to let it happen naturally*, she thought. She could feel the slight rise in her temperature, an increase in her breathing...common symptoms of the Befuddlement Draught.

"Confusing Concoction," Philippe said as Pierre moved to his right, hoping for a better aim. "She drank half the glass."

"Apparently, she didn't *drink* much of it," Ciarán snarled. He was edging closer to her.

Hermione felt her pulse quicken, another symptom of the Draught, but it only increased her anxiety. She used it to her advantage, allowing her raw magic to surge through her as her adrenaline levels increased as she felt like she had as a child when cornered. *Thank God for the fight or flight reflex*. She attempted a nonverbal Confundus Charm at Philippe, but wasn't sure if it worked since he was still moving toward her.

Pierre levitated the sofa, and Hermione rose with it, keeping her body as protected as possible. *Focus! Listen to my steps; hear me,*' she remembered Severus saying. *Use your other senses..'* She knew that accidental wandless magic could be particularly volatile, and the raw magical energy surging through her was not abating. She concentrated on it, using her rising anxiety to make it increase and directed it at Ciarán and Pierre. Both guys stumbled back as if body slammed, their spells firing off at odd angles, hitting the walls.

Ciarán recovered first, fired a shot, apparently aiming for under the sofa, but it rebounded off the floor and hit the glass behind her. Unfortunately, the glass didn't break, but it did crack, like a rock on a windshield, and the sofa fell back onto the floor.

Damn. As Philippe reached for her again, Hermione threw out her hands as she stood up, shouting, "NO!" allowing all her pent up magic to release, sending Philippe LeFèvres crashing into the glass window, spreading the cracks throughout the glass, and Ciarán Montague flying into the wall behind him with the pulse of her Defensive Charge.

Pierre stumbled back. "Putain, I heard you were capable," he said and then took a fighting stance, firing at her again.

However, she turned, and his stunner hit the fractured glass in the window, shattering it; so she ran for the outside, jumping through the broken glass onto the porch. She could feel a Stunner hit her shoulder, but she ignored her arm as it fell limply at her side.

"Call Lucien Laurent," Pierre snarled as he jumped over the sofa to chase after her.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

The information and historical sites of St Jean de Luz mentioned in this chapter were either found on Wikipedia or on: <http://www.touradour.com/towns/stjeandeluz/stjgen.asp>

My Latin comes from the English to Latin translator/dictionary from the University of Norte Dame. And mistakes in my choice of words are mine; I simply pick the one that is closest to what I want to use. The link is: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

refreno: which means: to rein back, hold in, restrain, curb

infantis: which means: speechless, unable to speak

Chapter 32

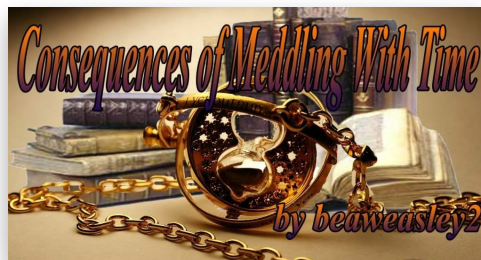
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Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of the fingers can make the user jump irregularly, and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self who becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, those events that are not mentioned that happen in the books are as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione ran straight out onto the beach. Suddenly, two more wizards appeared, wearing blue uniforms similar to the French Foreign Legion's light blue greatcoat with the red sashes, white-fringed epaulettes and white fourragères. More spells fired in the air around her, but the new wizards were aiming for the house. One wizard shouted, "*Periculum*," sending red sparks into the sky as people around them ran in every direction, screaming.

Another witch in the same blue coat but with a double fourragères appeared right in front of Hermione, grabbing her arm. "No too fast. You come to me," she demanded, grasping the medallion on her fourragères. The next instant, Hermione felt the sensation of a Portkey trans-relocation.

They arrived inside what looked like an old Parisian bank, in an enclosure off the main lobby that reminded Hermione of thick bulletproof glass. The witch shoved Hermione forward as a thick glass door opened, allowing them to pass into another enclosed space behind what once may have been the teller's counters; and two more wizards in the same blue uniform moved to intercept them with their wands drawn. On the other side of the opaque thick glass, several witches and wizards, also wearing a buttoned up blue coat, sat at the long counter helping people who were lined up in the main lobby on the other side of the thick glass in front of them.

"Mademoiselle Granger."

Hermione turned to see a wizard in the same blue coat with white and gold-fringed epaulettes and double red and white fourragères standing in front of her. "I am Auror René Marche, Directeur du Département des Aurors en France. Zis es my bras droit, my Chef de Cabinet, Lt. Amanda Penverne." The woman nodded in greeting. "You are in Département de la Sécurité Magique of ze le Ministère Français de la Magie, and I am 'ere to assist you, but you must come wiz me," he said, drawing her over to one of several desks. "You do not have your wand, no?"

"No," she replied, shaking her head. "It's back at the house..."

The two wizards who had appeared next to her on the beach suddenly Apparated into the thick glass enclosure she'd arrived in, one holding Pierre by the collar, the other by the arm. Hermione noticed that his hands were bound. "My associates, Albert Batteux and Marius Trésor, bringing one of ze young men zat attacked you. You recognize mes Aurors, no? Zey were zere to assist you, yes?"

"Yes, I think so," she said, avoiding looking Pierre in the eye. "I recognize the uniforms." She turned to look at him.

Hermione was led to a room with several chairs and a table. Her parents stood the moment she entered, and Hermione ran over to hug them both. "You're all right," her mum said, holding her tightly.

Her father stood and placed his hand on her back. "We were so worried, pumpkin," he said, his speech slightly slurred as if he were inebriated.

A brunette witch, wearing an unadorned version of the blue coat and whose hair was styled in a 1940's bob, placed parchment, inkwells, and quills on the table. "Madame, Monsieur Granger, would you like an'udder cup, per'aps?" she asked softly, and her father drained the contents of his cup.

Her father handed the woman his cup, but her mum shook her head, mouthing, 'No thank you.'

"No, Marie, de té sólo claro," Auror Marche told the woman, Marie.

"Je comprends, Directeur," she replied, nodding once with a smile. She collected the cups and left.

Auror René Marche and Lt. Amanda Penverne sat down on the other side of the table. Lt. Penverne organized her parchment and inkwell on the table in front of her as another witch in the buttoned up blue coat similar ones worn by the people at the counter came in carrying a pad of parchment, a quill and ink. She sat gracefully at the end of the table, set her things down and then held the quill posed ready to write. "Mademoiselle Granger, if you please, tell me what 'appened zes afternoon?" Auror Marche asked, "Please be specific and detailed."

Hermione told then what happened, pausing when either Auror Marche or Lt. Penverne asked for clarification on something or had a question. Both Auror Marche and Lt. Penverne jotted down notations, but the witch at the end of the table seemed to be taking down everything said. After Hermione gave the Aurors her statements, she was asked to identify five magical images.

"Ow do you know zis boy?" Lt. Penverne asked as Marie returned with a fresh cup of tea for Hermione's dad and left quietly.

"He said his name is Pierre Baudelaire," she replied, sadly. "He befriended me on the beach." Hermione explained how she met Pierre and that he walked her home. "He seemed like such a nice guy at the time. He was charming and liked me, or so I thought."

"Zea all do," Lt. Penverne stated as the brunette witch wearing the unadorned blue coat entered quietly and handed the Auror a few files, then left. "And do you 'ave any ozzer contact whiz des boy before today?"

"Mostly I'd see him on the street or on the beach, and he'd wave at me and smile," Hermione said.

"So, you only spoke to 'im once, zen agreed to 'ave lunch wiz 'im today?" Auror Marche asked, tapping his quill on his parchment. He moved his quill up to something near the top of the page. "Yet, you see zis boy several times in ze street, by ze shops, in ze square, and on ze terrace of a café, no?"

"Yes," Hermione said, with a definitive nod. "That was all. Well, until today..."

"When 'e asked you to 'ave lunch," Auror Marche said as if finishing what she was going to say. "Did you not just 'ave lunch wiz your muzzer zis afternoon?"

"Yes, but we argued and I didn't finish it," Hermione said, then quickly added, "Just a misunderstanding between mother and daughter." She glanced up at her mum, but both her mum and dad were simply sitting quietly, calmly listening intently, which was rather odd.

"Over zes boy?" Auror Marche asked.

Hermione shook her head. "No, over my choice of school, my friends, and some of the things that has happened to me in the past."

Auror Marche looked up at her and held his quill with both hands. "But zis is related, no? You were attacked because of your association wiz your friends, 'Arry Potter and de Weasleys. Your 'Eadmaster, Dumbledore asked zat we keep an eye out for you."

"If he did this is the first I've heard it," Hermione said in shock. All three Aurors made notations on their parchments.

"So you do not know who zis boy is, yet you followed 'im to 'is 'ouse?" Lt. Penverne said, pointing the feather end of her quill at Hermione.

Hermione shrugged, "I had no idea it was a set up until Ciarán Montague walked into the house. His brother, Gareth Montague, was in school with me. He was in Slytherin House, Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch team and was one of Umbridge's Inquisitorial Squad this last year."

"Who es zis Umbridge, and what is zis Inquisitorial Squad?" Auror Marche asked.

Hermione explained it to him as best as she could.

Lt. Penverne opened one of the files and picked up some pictures, turning them so they faced Hermione. "Pierre Baudelaire, es de grandson of Charles and Margarette Baudelaire," she said, tapping the edge of the picture. "'E attended Beauxbatons. 'Is father 'as been wanted in connection of a few International Secrecy violations and International Class A Non-Tradeable Goods and Class C Non-Tradeable Substance transactions. We believe 'im to be in league wiz your Dark Lord Voldemor'. But, zis is

ze first time Pierre 'as been in trouble."

"Figures," Hermione sighed and looked at the other pictures. "This one is Philippe, but I can't remember his surname," she said, and appointed to the next image. "This one is Ciarán Montague. I don't recognize the two men."

"Zee oizzer two wizards are zought to favor zis Dark Lord Voldemor', Lucien Laurent and Jean-Vincent Jonquet. Eet was Lucien Laurent's 'ouse, zat you escaped."

They asked her many other questions, and Hermione tried to answer them all but she had little more to offer them.

Surprisingly, Jean and George Granger were awfully quiet throughout the questioning, almost as if they'd had a Calming Draught or were under a spell. When Auror René Marche and Lt. Penverne were satisfied, Hermione and her parents were escorted over to the French International Magical Transportation office, where transportation was arranged to the Ministry of Magic in England by international Portkey. Hermione, her parents and a French Ministry employee arrived in a special alcove, just past the corridor of Ministry Floos. Jean clasped her husband's hand, her other wrapped around his arm as if leaning on him for support, although her father wobbled a bit before steadying himself.

A wizard with a thick mustache and wearing a monocle waved them to come forward, so they stepped out into the atrium, facing the new statue in the reflection pool. Hermione was shocked to see all their luggage, including Crookshanks in his carrier, stacked up neatly beside them. Jean clung to her husband; however, George Granger looked anything but supportive, looking around the immense room with a sense of wonder.

An imposing wizard with shoulder-length tawny hair, bushy eyebrows over yellow eyes and wire-rimmed spectacles approached, followed by a scowling Dolores Umbridge, Percy Weasley, (who carried a clipboard and quill), and thin, stubborn-looking witch with dark hair in a tight bun. "Miss Granger, I am Minister Rufus Scrimgeour. I want you to come with me," the bespectacled wizard stated, and two of his companions stepped aside to let her pass.

"That will not be necessary," Dumbledore stated, his voice firm and politely authoritative, making both Mr. and Mrs. Granger flinch. Hermione turned, quite surprised, yet relieved to see him, Professor McGonagall, a lovely, stately-looking witch, and a tall wizard in the French Auror uniform. "As I happen to have a copy of the report filed by the French Aurors regarding the incident that took place in St Jean de Luz earlier this afternoon."

"Dumbledore, really," Dolores said in her sickeningly sweet little girl voice, "we must determine the validity and thus the severity of the incident."

"I assure you the French Aurors were quite thorough," Dumbledore insisted with a tolerant smile.

"That be as it may, we have questions," Dolores persisted, "and I for one do not read French."

"How fortunate then that Monsieur Edouard Courbet of the French Aurory here is quite fluent in English and can translate the document for you," Dumbledore said with a kindly smile, his eyes twinkling. "He also has the files on the wizards involved in the attack on Miss Granger."

The Minister demanded an explanation, which Headmaster Dumbledore insisted firmly could wait. "I'm sure Miss Granger will be happy to comply if you have any further questions *after* you've read the French Ministry report," Dumbledore stated, adding, "but I'm quite certain you'll find that the French Aurory has been most thorough in their investigation," rather firmly. Monsieur Le Rousè nodded curtly, his grey eyes hardened, as if Minister Scrimgeour had insulted him personally.

Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived. "I came as soon as I could," he said, nodding politely to Dumbledore.

"Wonderful! I'm sure that Mr. and Mrs. Granger are exhausted by their daughter's ordeal, so if you'll escort them to the Madam Vance's residence until their home can be properly secured," Dumbledore said kindly but with a definite edge of insistence. The stately-looking witch turned to Hermione's parents, offering her condolences and her support as Professor McGonagall moved over to Hermione's other side. Hermione was a bit surprised how quiet her parents were, considering everything, and now was quite certain that the French Aurors had numbed them with a few doses of Calming Draught.

"And since it appears that Miss Granger is already packed," Dumbledore continued, "I think it best that Professor McGonagall escort her to her friend's house, the Weasleys'."

Professor McGonagall placed a caring arm across Hermione's shoulders and nodded with a kind smile. "Are you all set?" she asked.

"Now you wait one minute, Dumbledore," Minister Scrimgeour sputtered angrily. "You cannot..."

"Yes, I can, and I must insist; however, as you request, I shall spare you a minute," Dumbledore said with a smile. "More if you should require it, but I really must see to the protection of the Grangers' home as soon as possible, as I'm sure you can understand." He nodded to Professor McGonagall while looking at her intently and then did the same to Kingsley and Madam Vance.

Professor McGonagall whisked Hermione away to the Ministry Floos, followed by Kingsley, Emmeline Vance, and her parents. "The Burrow is being given the highest security measures that Albus, Severus and Mad-Eye can conceive," Professor McGonagall explained as they walked up to the outgoing Floos. "Even I have lent my wand; but then Molly is quite the formidable witch, you know. You'll be going there tomorrow once Albus thinks the Burrow is safe."

"The...safe? I thought...it's always been safe, hasn't it?" Hermione stammered, coming to a stop.

Behind her, Ms. Vance was talking to her parents, trying to reassure them that staying with her for a few weeks was a necessary precaution. "Your belongings will have been delivered, if I know Albus. I live nearby, a few streets away from number Ten Downing Street, London," Hermione heard her say. "My home is quite safe, and as soon as your house is secured, you can return home."

Hermione sighed in relief, knowing that her parents would be taken care of, and followed Professor McGonagall into the Floo as Kingsley and Emmeline Vance led her parents into another.

"Ole Pitlochry Tavern, Scotland," Professor McGonagall called out as she threw in the Floo powder. They arrived in an inn and exited quickly.

Professor McGonagall took Hermione's hand and Disapparated, arriving on the garden path of a grey stone farmhouse surrounded by fields of barley and clover and lush, rolling hills. "Let's get you inside," she said as she ushered Hermione toward the house.

"What is going on? I mean, I know I was targeted, but the director of the French Aurory said I was attacked because of Harry and Ron...that Dumbledore asked him to keep an eye on me! Has anything happened to Harry? Is Ron all right? Was the Burrow attacked as well?" Hermione rambled as she quickly followed her professor inside the Scottish farmhouse.

"Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley are fine, and no, the Burrow wasn't attacked per se," Professor McGonagall said, holding up her hand to stem off any more questions when Hermione opened her mouth.

"Please, Professor, tell me what's going on," Hermione begged.

"Well, I assume you'll hear all sort of rumors, so I might as well tell you what I can," she said, indicating that they enter the parlor and closing the door behind them. "Yes, Miss Granger, you were targeted this summer, as were the Weasleys. In fact, each of you who followed Mr. Potter to the Department of Mysteries were targeted. Or didn't you know that Amelia Bones was found murdered in her home? Susan barely escaped to Hannah's great Aunt's."

"Susan's home attacked?" Hermione asked, stunned. "But-but by who? Death Eaters?"

"Amelia is believed to have been brutally murdered by Voldemort himself; if not him, then we suspect Greunn Goyle."

Hermione sank onto the closest chair. "I remember that Goyle said that his father thought Susan's aunt was a troublemaker and that someone would teach her a lesson! If Susan...what about Hannah? Did they try to follow Susan?"

"Yes," Professor McGonagall said sadly. She sat on one of the wingback chairs, facing Hermione. "If the Abbotts hadn't been in Brookshire instead of Cornwall, they'd all be dead. Their house was destroyed. We, well Albus actually, foresaw that Voldemort would target the twenty-four of you." Professor McGonagall folded her hands on her lap and sat up rigidly in her chair, a pose Hermione knew well; it meant she had more unpleasant things to say. "The Order has been frantically trying to secure the families."

"Who else was attacked?" Hermione asked, dreading the answer.

Her professor's lips twitched as if suppressing a smile. "Miss Chang, both Patil girls and Miss Edgecombe used the Edgecombe's Floo to escape to the Patils' home, but they'd left the house immediately after. Evidence suggests that two Death Eaters were at the Patils' house when the girls arrived. We only found the girls an hour ago and all four are all right, but quite frightened, as you can imagine," Professor McGonagall said somberly. "Harriet Edgecombe, who as you know works for the Floo Network authority in the Ministry, was beside herself. I'm sure it will be mentioned in the *Prophet* tomorrow."

Hermione was still trying to piece all the information together. "Who else? Is everyone else all right?" she asked, a slight pleading to her voice.

"No, not all of them." Professor McGonagall smoothed her skirts with both hands, then clasped her hands together above her knees. "Augusta says Mr. Longbottom is fine, and Kerianna assured us that Mr. Finnigan is well protected. However, the Creeveys are not at home, but they like to camp and hike over the summer holidays. The School Registry simply said the blue and green dome tent, Pembrokeshire Coastal Path, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park, southwest of Moylgrove...we sent Hagrid and Charlie Weasley to find them. According to the Floo registration, Miss Katie Bell and her little brother used her Floo to escape an attack, but the Floo Network's trace led to a dead end. We've yet to find them. And Miss Lovegood and her father are missing. I was on my way to check the school registry for them when Albus sent word that you needed my assistance."

Hermione rubbed her left hand over her right hand knuckles as she stared out of the window. "She mentioned going to Africa this summer to search for the crumple snortdak horned-something or other." Despite the turmoil of her thoughts, she did think that the view of the Scottish moors was remarkably beautiful.

"I'll inform Albus," Professor McGonagall stated as Hermione continued to stare out of the window. "Miss Granger." Hermione turned her head to look at her professor. "I must insist...please do not try sending letters directly to your friends. If you feel you must, send them through one of the Order members for the time being. Also, don't speak a word of this to anyone until things are settled down. We don't want Rita Skeeter or some eavesdropper finding out something they shouldn't. And you must be extra careful until school starts. No wondering off or any wild adventures."

"Oh, no, I promise!" Hermione said, holding her hands up in supplication, then dropping them to her lap. She fervently hoped that the rest of her friends were all okay.

"And I must insist, when Mr. Potter finds out, you'll help us by keeping him from doing anything rash as well," her professor said pointedly, and Hermione fully understood her meaning.

"Of course," she answered with a nod, "but he'll want to know. He hates not being informed about things."

"All in due time. I'm sure he'll find out soon enough, but I'm trusting you to help him keep a level head about all of this."

Hermione nodded again and Professor McGonagall relaxed somewhat.

"Good. You'll be going to the Burrow tomorrow morning. Mr. Potter's transfer to the Burrow is being arranged, but not until Albus feels safe in doing so, you understand. I suspect it will be in a day or two. You can bring him up to speed about what happened then, but please use discretion in deciding how much you tell him."

"All right," she agreed, although Hermione knew Harry would want to know everything. But her professor was right; Harry already felt like he'd put everyone in danger just going to the Ministry...this information would really upset him.

"Let me show you to the guest room," Professor McGonagall suggested, rising, and Hermione followed her. "If you want a bath, it's in there," her professor said, pointing to a door and opened another. Crookshanks was curled up asleep on the bed, and her trunk was on the floor at the foot of the bed. "Your cat has settled, I see. Well, I'm off. If you need anything, ask my granddaughter-in-law."

Hermione thanked her and decided to take advantage of the offer for a bath, but didn't soak too long, in case the house only had one bathroom. When she returned to her room, she heard a very young voice say, "You're Muggle-born."

Hermione whirled around, seeing a small curly-haired boy in plaid, footed pajamas, holding a stuffed brown moose, standing behind her. "Yes, I am," she said, smiling at the adorable boy.

"I'm Kieran. Can you show me how tae use the fellyphone and a inks pen?" he asked, walking over to look at Crookshanks. "He's pretty," he said, reaching out and gently petting her cat.

"Thank you," Hermione said as Crookshanks began to purr loudly.

"Gran Nan says you know Harry Potter. She writes about you and him all the time," Kieran said and turned, holding his moose with both hands. "Can I meet him? I can ride a broom."

Hermione refrained from laughing. "Yes, I know Harry Potter, and if your Gran Nan says yes, I can show you how to use an ink pen."

The boy smiled at her, showing a pair of dimples in his cheeks.

"Geoffrey Kieran Hamish McGonagall, do nae be botherin' our guest!" a woman said in a thick Scottish brogue.

"Mum, she's only here one nigh!" Kieran whined. "And she's *Muggle!*"

Hermione couldn't contain her chuckle as a pretty, red-haired witch entered the doorway. "I'm sorry if he be botherin' you, Miss Granger."

"No, it's all right," Hermione said. "He's adorable."

"And will talk yer ear off if n' you let him. I'm Maggie, short for Margaret," she said. "Minerva's daugh'er-in-law, so tae speak. I'm married tae her grandson."

"Nice to meet you, Maggie," Hermione replied. "Please call me Hermione."

"Will you read tae me?" Kieran asked, to which his mum immediately admonished him, "Kieran, let the girl rest."

Maggie looked up at Hermione. "You must be exhausted? Geoffrey is ou' helping Minerva secure the kids. He said ye've been bounced from France tae England tae here. Are ye hungry? I can only assume ye would be."

Hermione's stomach grumbled loudly, answering for her. "Yes, I am a bit."

"I'll whip up some Shepherd's pie; it should be ready in a half hour," Maggie offered. "Now, Kieran, behave yourself."

"Aw, Mum!" the tyke whined.

"I'll read to you from my book for a bit," Hermione suggested, smiling at Kieran's answering smile and bobbing head, and Maggie smiled too, then left the room. Hermione pulled out her book with short stories of great wizards in history from her trunk, slipped off her shoes, and sat on her bed. Kieran climbed up, patted Crookshanks again, and settled in next to her. Hermione turned to the chapter on Rowena Ravenclaw and selected one of the stories of her early adventures. Kieran snuggled in closer as Crookshanks rose, circled, and settled down at her feet.

"There aren't any pictures," Kieran said, pouting.

"If you listen carefully, you'll see them in your mind," she suggested. "It takes place in a meadow...well, much like the fields out back behind your house."

"Okay, I can do that. Is there heather?" Kieran asked.

Hermione made a mental note to mention heather in all the appropriate places. "Yes."

Severus entered the Entrance Hall of Malfoy Manor with all his Occlumency shields in place and his emotions carefully in place. So far this summer, the Dark Lord had allowed him to live in his home at Spinner's End instead of taking up residence in one of the opulent bedrooms or one of the bedroom suites the manor offered.

Quite a few of the financially lesser fortunate members of the inner circle, and a few of the currently favored Death Eaters, had been provided room and board at Narcissa's expense. Unfortunately, that also included the Mordaunts, Greyback, and the Carrows. And with Lucius still currently in jail, the Malfoys were in disgrace because Lucius had been unsuccessful in retrieving the prophecy and had been arrested. The lord of the manor, therefore, was none other than the Dark Lord himself, when he was in residence. The Dark Lord had situated himself the master suite, taken his 'rightful' place at head of the table and commandeered the use of the Malfoy's vaults. However as far as Severus knew, Narcissa was holding up very well, ever the gracious hostess to those invited or summoned to her home.

Although, possibly due to his pampered upbringing, Draco Malfoy wasn't faring as well living under the Dark Lord's rule as his mother. Ever since the night Narcissa and Bellatrix had paid Severus that fateful visit, he had been watching the boy, and whenever Severus saw Draco as of late, the boy's complexion was frequently ashen or sweaty and he frequently had blood-shot or puffy eyes. He also noticed that Draco frequently tried to hide his squeamish reactions to the punishments the Dark Lord dealt out.

Severus had tried on a few occasions to talk to the boy, but Draco wouldn't exchange more than coldly stated polite greetings before excusing himself. It was highly irritating. Nonetheless, once school started, he'd have more opportunities to try and get Draco to confide in him regarding this task. But whatever the task was, almost no one knew anything, not even Wormtail.

He'd been sly. Thanks to the complicated layout of the manor, Severus was occasionally able to get certain individuals aside, under carefully thought up pretexts, to speak to the weaker minded residents. Then, using carefully constructed sentences with multiple hidden or alternative meanings to confuse the unwary, he'd probe their minds for answers, then Obliviated the conversations, replacing the missing minutes with false memories. It was tricky, and yielded some interesting information, but not what he needed to know. However, the bits of information he did acquire turned out to be quite helpful to the Order on several occasions, pleasing Dumbledore immensely.

Still, he was getting nowhere in solving his own dilemma: Draco's task.

As Severus walked confidently across the great hallway, he nodded politely to Drachenblut, Merkle and Macrae as they passed them on their way out.

Pucey and Amycus Carrow acknowledged him with juts of their chins from across the large room before Severus turned and walked toward the withdrawing chamber on his left, to wait for his arrival to be announced to the Dark Lord.

He could hear the voices even before he entered the withdrawing chamber from the main hall. "The boy was bragging about his Dark Mark. Our positions are not so secure that we can be so reckless," Rabastan was saying, his tone harsh and low. "It's bad enough that Nott and Urguhart broke into the hall of records."

Bellatrix's eyes narrowed as Severus strode purposefully in through the open door. He raised an eyebrow as Bella hissed, "Rab, you talk too much."

"Severus knows about the infiltration of the Ministry," Runcorn said, nodding once sharply at him, and Severus returned the gesture. "That Umbridge witch is going to play right into our hands, and she'll be right helpful when the time comes. She's going to help my niece get that Vance witch's job at the ministry."

"I hardly think being a clerk to a Muggle is going to be all that helpful," sneered Bella.

Severus wanted to smile but refrained. Cryptanthus Lestrage was not as steadfast a supporter as her uncle believed she was and, given encouragement, could prove helpful to the Order. *And if Kingsley supports her placement... I'll speak to Dumbledore about the appointment.*

At that moment, Narcissa entered the chamber from across the room and walked directly up to Severus, her appearance as graceful and elegant as ever. "Good, you're here. He wanted to see you as soon as you'd arrived," she said and turned, indicating for him to follow her. "He is using the grand salon today."

Ignoring the looks from Bellatrix, Severus followed Narcissa into the lavishly decorated grand salon, which, much like their gallery, usually contained a fine display of the Malfoys' finest works of art.

However, the great salon was set up as a throne room with a low dais supporting a large wingback chair, magically enhanced and enlarged to imperiously frame the imposing wizard who sat on it. Nagini, ever present, coiled on a large beech branch stand by the nearest window, no doubt enjoying the sun's rays on her scales. On the floor before the dais, Mountbatten was scrambling up off the ground, his body still trembling violently.

"Ah, Severus, come," the Dark Lord called out as soon as he looked up.

"My Lord," Severus said, bowing to show his supposed reverence and submission. "You have asked for me."

"I wanted you an hour ago," the Dark Lord snapped.

"I was unable to comply as I was with Dumbledore at the time," Severus said, bracing himself for the ensuing anger.

Instead, and much to his surprise, the Dark Lord waved his hand dismissively. "And what did the old fool want with you?"

"Dumbledore gave me the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor," Severus said.

"WHAT!" The Dark Lord rose, his robes billowing as he literally glided off his dais. "What did you say?"

Severus knelt in case the Dark Lord struck at him with the Cruciatus. "He summoned me to his office to inform me that I shall be given the post of Defense Against the..."

"I heard you!" the Dark Lord snarled, his hands tightening into fists. "But why?"

Severus looked up at the gleaming red eyes that flashed with suppressed discontent. "He did not tell me, Master."

"HE did this to push my hand!" the Dark Lord said, staring down at him. "Get up."

"I don't know if he thinks the boy is ready or not," Severus said as he rose to his feet. "It might be possible that it's because of his hand."

"Yes, his hand is crippled...or so you've said...from his failure to break a curse," the Dark Lord said, his voice soft, almost thoughtful but still quite angry. "One you don't know, which I wonder about. Yet his magic is as strong as ever..."

Severus carefully suppressed any thoughts about the cursed ring, but the Dark Lord, thankfully, started pacing in agitation. "He knows the position is cursed and that you'd only have one year in the position if not the school. It will force me to escalate my plans to take over. I'm not ready...there aren't as many wizards and witches flocking to me as I'd like, not like the last time. Too many people don't remember...they've forgotten my power, my strength, my purpose." He stopped and stared at Severus. "The books have it all wrong. They've lied." He took a step toward him. "Severus, return to your home for now."

"Of course, master," Severus said calmly, pleased to separate himself from the goings on at the manor and the many eyes watching his comings and goings. Not that having Pettigrew under his roof afforded him any greater privacy.

"And take that vermin Pettigrew with you. I want him where I know he can't scuttle around as a rat, eavesdropping on me," the Dark Lord insisted, making Severus inhale as he forced his expression to remain indifferent, although he felt anything but.

The Dark Lord turned. "Where is Master Draco? Send him to me." There was a brief sound of scuffling at by the doorway to Severus' left.

"Severus, you may go."

"My Lord." Severus eased back a ways without turning his back on the Dark Lord, then walked out of the side exit to find Pettigrew *Bugger. Where is that thrice damned Rat? Too bad I can't use him as a potions ingredient and make that maniac drink him.*

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

For those who didn't figure out the French, although I tried to be as clear as possible in the chapter

Directeur du Département des Aurors en France = Head of the Auror department in France

bras droit is the same as Chef de Cabinet, meaning: Chief of Cabinet or second in command.

Departement de la Sécurité Magique of ze le Ministère Français de la Magie = the Department of Magical Law Enforcement of the French Ministry of Magic

de té sólo claro = just plain tea

Vous comprenez, Directeur = I understand, Director

According to Snitchette, who kindly helped me with my translations, the head of the police was called chef de la sureté (head of the safety/security) in the 19th century. So I called the Department of Magical Law Enforcement - Departement de la Sécurité Magique.

Thank you, Snitchette and Proulxes, for the help correcting my dismal attempt at French. I really appreciate it very much!

Crypthanthus is a genus of the botanical family of Bromeliads. The name comes from the Greek 'cryptos', meaning hidden, and 'anthos', meaning flower. I thought that apropos.

Chapter 33

Chapter 33 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione woke up feeling a pair of feet pressing into her ribs and her back pressed against the wall. She tried to pull the cover down but couldn't. Leaning up, she saw Kieran curled up next to her in footed pajamas with his arm around Crookshanks, his tiny hand stroking Crookshanks' fur even in his sleep. Her large ginger cat, although purring loudly, was looking at her as if to ask, "Why?"

"Kieran," Maggie called out softly from the next room. "Where ye be, boy? It's time for yer breakfast."

"He's in here," Hermione called out as she tried to untangle herself from her covers, waking the small boy. Crookshanks took the first opportunity to run as soon as Kieran moved his arm, darting for the floor and landing with a heavy thump.

"Geoffrey Kieran Hamish McGonagall, why in blazin' horntails are ye botherin' our guest!" Maggie McGonagall scolded the little tyke now sitting next to Hermione on the bed, then turned her gaze to apologize to her. "I'm so sorry, Miss Granger. I'd no idea he'd sneak in here like this."

"It's all right," Hermione said as Kieran stretched and then rubbed his eyes. "I'm not at all sure he'd left last night."

"Aye, he did. I put him tae bed when ye fell asleep. Come now, Kieran, time tae eat," Maggie said, ushering the boy off the bed. "Breakfast will be ready in ten minutes."

"I'll be right down," Hermione said with a smile. She was actually famished. She opened her trunk and smiled at the pouch of seashells she'd bought for the house-elves that sat on the warm jumper she'd had on the night before. She pulled out a white blouse she hadn't worn for a while to wear over her lightweight peach tank top. However, she noticed that her blouse was a tad tight in the chest, so she had to leave a few buttons open.

When she entered the kitchen, Kieran was sitting in his booster seat, holding a magically moving Hebridean Black dragon toy in one hand and his spoon in the other as he ate. She sat down at the table across from Maggie. "Help yourself. Geoffrey will be home in a bit, so you'll get tae meet him."

Hermione smiled as she helped herself to the poached eggs, black pudding, fried mushrooms, and homemade whole grain Scottish toast. "How long have you been married?" she asked and sipped on her black tea.

"Goin' on six years now," Maggie said, putting a bit of black pudding on Kieran's plate.

The women talked as they ate, mostly about family, and afterwards, Hermione helped her with the dishes.

Hermione was showing Kieran how to draw with a pen when Professor McGonagall arrived, followed by a strapping man with red curly hair.

"Da, look! I know how tae write with a inks pen!" Kieran said, grabbing the piece of parchment and holding it up, proudly. "See? I drew a Short-Snout! Scales an' all!"

"Very, good, Kieran," he said as he ruffled the boy's hair.

"Miss Granger, this is my grandson, Geoffrey McGonagall," Professor McGonagall said proudly as her grandson turned to smile at Hermione. "He'll be taking you to the Weasley's this morning."

"It's good tae meet ye," he said warmly. "Heard about yeh, o' course."

Hermione laughed. "Thank you, it's nice to meet you."

"Yer welcome," he said with a fond smile at Professor McGonagall. "I'm glad that ye're all righ'."

"Yes, well, unfortunately, Miss Granger, you should be on your way. Molly is expecting you," Professor McGonagall said, and Hermione scrambled to her feet. "I hope you're all packed?"

"Yes, ma'am," she replied as Kieran began to cry.

"No, Gran Nan, no, let her stay! We were going tae play dragon keepers," he said, holding up two of his dragon toys for her to see. The Swedish Short-Snout let out a harmless puff of magical flame and smoke. "She said I could use a fellyphone! And I want tae meet Harry Potter! Please, Grand Nan! She knows him...she said so!"

"No, Kieran," Geoffrey said as Hermione went to get her trunk and Crookshanks. "I have tae see that Miss Granger gets tae her friend's house in one piece."

When she came back, Kieran rushed up to Hermione and hugged her legs. "I don't wan' yeh tae go," he cried.

Hermione looked up helplessly at her professor. Maggie pulled him toward her and hugged him. "Miss Granger has tae go, Kieran," Maggie said softly. She stood up and smiled at Hermione. "He'll be fine."

It broke Hermione's heart to see Kieran holding onto his mother's leg with his little face streaked with tears as he waved at her from the doorway.

"Looks like ye've made a friend," Geoffrey said as he grasped onto the handle of her trunk. Outside, the air was crisp and cool from the rain and the skies were cloudy. He held up a horseshoe. "Grab on and keep a tigh' hold on that cat carrier."

As soon as she did, the horseshoe began to glow, and she felt the pull in her navel as if jerked backwards by a hook. This time Hermione knew to keep her feet down and brace for the impact, thankfully landing squarely on her feet. She turned around, smiling at the magically stacked house and the large tool shed that she knew so well.

"Let's go, it's nae good to linger out in the open," Geoffrey stated. He drew his wand, making her trunk follow them as he walked with her to the front door of the Burrow.

As they approached the door, Geoffrey held out an arm so Hermione would not be bowled over by the near collision of an elderly witch's sudden Apparition at the exact moment a rugged, red-haired guy in a dragon hide coat and boots was exiting the house.

"Oh my!" the elderly witch exclaimed, startled as she jumped back a step, while the wizard simply stared down at her. "I'm dreadfully sorry. I must've misjudged my destination." She stopped to stare at Hermione. "Oh, my! You!"

"Not a problem, Mrs. Blenheim," the man said with a definite Romanian accent as he closed the door.

Mrs. Blenheim quickly handed an envelope to the redhead. "See your mum gets this," the witch said, still gaping at Hermione and then disappeared with a loud pop. The

wizard stared at the envelope as if affronted.

"Geoffrey," the guy said with a nod, finally noticing Hermione's escort, then shifted his gaze to Hermione, eyeing her speculatively.

"Ioan, ye're back," Geoffrey said jovially. "Did Sandru and Charlie return?"

"Charles, no. Alexandru is inside," Ioan said, his gaze still on Hermione. He turned his head and handed the envelope to Geoffrey. "Give this to Pani Weasley. I must go."

"Will do. Give my best tae Tatyana," he said. Ioan nodded stiffly, looked at Hermione again and walked away.

"Is that one of Charlie's friends?" she asked, curious about the wizard.

"No, Ioan Madgearu works for the International Association of Quidditch Foundation. Our mutual friend, Sandu Pavlenco, works with Charlie in Romania," Geoffrey said, opening the door for her. "In ye go, young lady."

But Hermione's way was suddenly blocked by Professor Lupin and a wiry looking bloke in an old brown coat, both men looking a little worse for wear. "I'm sorry, Hermione," Lupin said, moving out of her way quickly as the other wizard backed up to let her in.

Hermione was taken aback by the scratches and scars on the wizard's youthful face.

"Professor," she said politely, entering the house.

The wiry wizard nodded to her respectfully, albeit shyly, and exited quickly without a word. Professor Lupin quickly followed after the young man and they Disappeared. Hermione wondered if the other wizard was a werewolf, too, considering the state of his clothes and his scars.

It seemed as if the Burrow was the hub of all possible activity, but it was quickly emptying of people as Mrs. Weasley hurried over to Hermione. "Hermione, my dear, are you all right?"

Across the house, an excitable wizard in a wobbly, violet top hat and a full figured witch with long, back braids were situating themselves in the Floo. "The Copper Cauldron," the wizard said as he dropped a handful of Floo powder, and the pair vanished in a puff of green flames.

"Yes, Mrs. Weasley," she replied as another wizard stepped into the Floo.

"I heard what happened, of course," Mrs. Weasley said kindly, ushering her inside to the kitchen area. "Are you hungry?"

Hermione saw Auror Moody, the real Mad-Eye Moody, and Bill Weasley standing at the table, both facing a grey-haired witch holding a magnifying glass as they all leaned over, examining two intricate silver spinning devices. "No, I had a big breakfast, thank you," she replied as a silvery skunk shot through the window and stopped right next to Mad-Eye.

"Let's get you settled in Ginny's room, then," Mrs. Weasley said, and then turned to Geoffrey. "Just leave her trunk, Geoffrey. One of the boys will take it up for her."

Hermione thanked Geoffrey again and carried Crookshanks up to Ginny's room.

"Oh, my god, are you all right?" Ginny asked as soon as she opened the door. She took Crookshanks' carrier from Hermione and ushered her over to the bed.

"I'm fine," Hermione said, plopping down on the bed and resting her head against the wall. "Who are all these people?"

"Order of the Phoenix, mostly," Ginny replied. "Charlie is here, and his friend Sandu Pavlenco...they're on leave from the dragon sanctuary in Romania. Sandu recruited his friend, Ioan Madgearu."

"I met Ioan Madgearu downstairs," Hermione said. "Professor McGonagall's grandson said he works for the International Association of Quidditch Foundation."

"He does...Ron was thrilled to meet him. Ioan tried to recruit Charlie when he'd left school, but Charlie hurt his eye that summer and had to stay off a broom," Ginny explained as she let Crookshanks out of his carrier. "But Charlie's always liked dragons, so he chose that career instead." She sat down on the bed and turned to face Hermione. "So give, tell me everything. All we heard is that you were attacked in France and had to be sent to a safe house."

"Gosh, where to start," Hermione said as Crookshanks jumped up into her lap. Hermione began with meeting Pierre Baudelaire on the beach, which Ginny thought was so romantic until Hermione told her about being set up by Ciarán Montague.

"No!" Ginny gasped. "Gareth Montague was really rough on the pitch, but a Death Eater? He's signed up to play with the Falmouth Falcons!"

"Well, we can safely assume he and his family are either Death Eaters or Voldemort's supporters," Hermione said with a shrug. Crookshanks nudged her hand for attention so she idly started petting him. "Have you ever heard about someone named Lucien Laurent?"

"Sure, pure-blood, rich, much like the Malfoys," Ginny stated. "Why?"

"He apparently paid Pierre Baudelaire and Philippe LeFèvres to help Montague get me," Hermione said. "Although Pierre said he didn't agree to do it for the money."

"Initiation perhaps?" Ginny said, more like a question than stating a fact.

"Could be," Hermione admitted, smiling as Crookshanks nudged her hand again. "So, what's going on here?"

"Well, until we hear otherwise, this is the Order's headquarters, although I think that either Dedalus Diggle's or Hestia Jones' house is being used as well." Ginny started telling her what had been going on and what she, Fred and George had overheard. It matched pretty much what Professor McGonagall had told her. "Oh, and dad got a promotion at work, the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Counterfeit Defensive Spells and Protective Objects."

"Gin, that's wonderful!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Thanks. Oh, and one more thing," she said, her smile fading, "we have the delight of hosting that Veela witch from the Triwizard Tournament as well. Ron's delighted, but I call her Phlegm."

Hermione shook her head as she exhaled. "I remember her. Is Ron still affected by her charms?"

Ginny nodded as she rolled her eyes. "But he's at least behaving around her...she's engaged to Bill."

"Bill?" Hermione gasped. "When did this start?"

"Over the spring. She took a job at Gringotts to *emprove 'er Englesh*," Ginny said, mocking Fleur's accent. "She's *sooo* annoying and trying to be *soo* helpful, reminding everyone who'll listen that she was a Triwizard Champion, as if it matters. I keep my distance as much as possible."

Great, Hermione thought. She hadn't really gotten to know Fleur all that well, however, she'd hated the way all the boys acted when the French Veela had been around. But, Hermione had other things to worry about. "Ginny, do you by chance have the latest copies of the *Daily Prophet*?" she asked.

"I have today's," Ginny said with a shrug, walking over to her writing desk. "Why?"

"I was...oh, bugger." Hermione turned to look out of the window. It would be almost nine weeks before she went to Hogwarts and could look everything up in the library's copies.

"Why? What's wrong?" Ginny asked.

"My parents! Montague has been sending my parents the wizarding paper ever since the incident at the Ministry. I know pretty much what was printed before that, and I received a few issues when I was in the hospital, but I want to know what my parents may have read," Hermione said while Ginny looked around her desk. "Mum and Dad want to pull me out of Hogwarts."

Ginny turned to gape at her with mouth open before she gasped, "No!" She handed Hermione three older issues of the *Prophet* and a few issues of the *The Quibbler*. "I found these. Would they really pull you out?"

"Thank you. I have a feeling that they wanted to talk me into agreeing, rather than trying to take me out of school by force," Hermione said, now certain that her parents couldn't actually pull her out. Well, they could stop paying for her schooling, but Hogwarts had scholarships. Certainly she could talk to Professor McGonagall about one if her parents did stop payment, but she didn't know if there was a deadline for the application for financial aid. "But yes, Mum and Dad want me to finish at a Muggle school and go to a Muggle university."

"You won't do that, will you?!" Ginny asked, her eyes wide with disbelief. "I mean, I know that most wizards finish after Hogwarts. Some fields have further studies, training programs, and there are apprenticeships, but we don't have formal universities like you've described. There is Cambridge, but only if you are going into law or something academic...not for the magical fields. Remember, you and I talked about this your fifth year, before your career counseling."

"I'm a witch now; I'm finishing at Hogwarts," Hermione said with determination, but it wasn't Ginny who she was affirming to, it was her parents, even though they were at Madam Vance's home in London.

"Hermione, you *are* a witch...you've always *been* a witch...whether you finish at Hogwarts or not," Ginny said reassuringly with a small smile and checked under her schoolbooks. "No matter what, you belong in the wizarding world, and at Hogwarts, no matter what those pure-blood extremists say. Here. I found today's."

Hermione leaned forward as Ginny handed her that morning's issue of the *Prophet*. "I know," Hermione admitted, knowing in her heart Ginny was right. "But I think I'll look into what courses are offered at Cambridge. My parents would like it if I went there."

She looked at the *Daily Prophet*. The paper carried a picture of Amelia Bones on the front page with a short article that stated that her services were scheduled for Friday. The other headlines read: 'Friarton Bridge, Perth damaged. Muggles blame a chemical truck explosion' and 'Dementors thought to be breeding.' Below that was a picture of the stately woman, Madam Emmeline Vance, who had escorted her parents to her home. Hermione stared at her picture in shock. The lovely witch smiled politely at her from under a headline that said she had been 'brutally murdered by Death Eaters near Number 10 Downing Street, London.' "*Oh, my gods!*" Hermione shrieked and scrambled from the bed.

"What?" Ginny asked, alarmed.

"NO, no, no..." Hermione stammered as she ran from the room. "This cannot be happening!"

"Hermione?" Ginny called out after Hermione as she ran from the room. "Wait, what?"

Hermione didn't listen as she barreled down the stairs. "Mrs. Weasley, I have to call my..." she cried out, coming to a stop at the bottom of the stairs *can't call, can I? The Weasleys don't have a telephone, and I can't Floo because my parents are not hooked up to the Floo network...except for special circumstances.* "Go. I have to go! My parents...I have to go!"

Tonks looked up as Mrs. Weasley rose to her feet. "Go? Go where, dear?"

"Home," Hermione said, although the logical part of her brain kept telling her that her parents would not be there. "My parents. Are they...are they...?" She covered her mouth to fight back the panic that threatened to erupt. *The Knight Bus, I can summon the Knight Bus, can't I?*

Mrs. Weasley was holding her, one arm across her shoulders and her other hand on Hermione's arm, as she guided her to a chair. "Tell me what's wrong?"

"Dead...are they dead?" Hermione asked, showing Mrs. Weasley the paper.

"No, no, your parents are fine, dear," Mrs. Weasley tried to assure her as she took the paper from her hand and gently pushed Hermione onto a chair. "They're fine. Really, they're fine."

"How do you know?" Hermione asked, shaking, looking up at the motherly witch, wanting to believe her, as tears streamed down her cheeks.

Tonks sat down next her and touched her arm. "I took them to my parent's house," she was saying. Hermione turned to look at her. Tonks looked ill, less colorful than normal, a bit drawn, and she had puffy eyes as if she'd been crying. "My parents live much closer to their office..."

"Emmeline Vance...the witch from the Ministry...I-I thought they were staying with her?" Hermione blurted, although coming out as a question, and Tonks shook her head. "The paper said he killed her...Voldemort killed her!"

"Madam Vance worked for the Cabinet Secretary at Number 10 as a civil servant and liked to walk to work. Not that she needed to work, she was fairly well off, but the Minister thought it important to have people assigned to the Prime Minister and key members of the Cabinet of the United Kingdom," Tonks explained. "She was killed on her way to her house last night."

Hermione didn't understand, shaking her head, so Tonks continued, "We had a warning, Hermione...Professor Snape warned us about the attack. I called my friend, Iris Lindhardt, and we went and got your parents. I took them to my parents' home. We'd already arranged for Iris to work in your parents' office for the rest of the summer...longer if necessary," Tonks explained patiently as Mrs. Weasley stroked Hermione's back tenderly. "She is going to start Monday. So, your parents are staying with mine for two days while Dumbledore strengthens the protection charms on their house."

"Doing what?" Hermione asked, still puzzled. "I mean, what is Iris going to do at my parents' dental practice?" After their talk in St. Jean de Luz, Hermione couldn't believe that her parents would hire a witch or that any witch would be able to do anything helpful around the office. Her parents' office was really quite modern by Muggle standards.

Tonks smiled, although it didn't exactly reach her eyes. "Answering telephones, filing or something... scheduling appointments. She has to learn how to work the *commuter*," she said, smirking, making Hermione's mouth twitch into a slight smile for a brief moment, and Mrs. Weasley give them both a confused glance, "but her real purpose is to watch over them and make sure they're all right, you know, to Apparate them out if anything happens like an attack."

Hermione nodded, finally understanding, feeling grateful to Tonks and Professor Snape. "So, they're all right?"

"Yes, Hermione," Mrs. Weasley said, her fingers of her hands tightening reassuringly on her shoulder and on her arm. "Your parents are both fine. They are being

protected. If you want to, I can see about arranging a Floo call for you tomorrow?"

"I'd like that," Hermione said weakly, feeling relieved and yet sad at the news. She'd have to wait until tomorrow to talk to her parents, but she trusted Tonks and Mrs. Weasley that her parents were alive and safe. Hermione was so grateful to Severus; he had warned Tonks about the attack on her parents in time so that she could take them to safety. It was sad that they hadn't been able to save that lovely Vance woman, too. Hermione could only imagine what her parents thought about all of this, especially since they wanted her to abandon the wizarding world.

"Now go upstairs and wash your face. I'll have lunch ready in a bit," Mrs. Weasley said, getting up.

Hermione rose to go, thanking Tonks before turning for the stairs.

Ginny walked with Hermione up to the bathroom. "Take your time. I'll be in my room, okay?" she asked.

Hermione nodded and turned the tap, her emotions still in a turmoil.

By morning, Hermione felt better. She'd hoped to be able to make her Floo call that morning before her parents went to their office.

"They're really shaken up about the conflict with You-Know-Who and the wizarding war, so we thought it best they had a Muggle-born to talk to, and Molly's Floo is already connected to my parents' house, so you can talk to them after the meeting," Tonks had said, sitting crossed-legged on the floor between the girls beds. She'd come up to talk to Hermione after catching the two girls and the twins, Fred and George, on the stairs, trying to eavesdrop on the early morning Order meeting, and had shooed them all back to their respective rooms. The usually vibrant witch had still looked, well, dull; her hair had been a mousy brown, and she had bags under her eyes as if she hadn't slept well.

However, Hermione's Floo call that morning hadn't exactly gone well. According to her father, Mr. Tonks had explained to George and Jean Granger that even if Hermione turned her back on the wizarding world, she still not only fell under Wizarding law and the magical statutes, but she'd always be a witch, with all the rights and obligations that implied. And she would always have her magic...it didn't just turn off...it would actually get stronger, and she'd need training and guidance on how to use it properly and responsibly, which is why she should return to Hogwarts. Hermione's mum had been rather upset by the information, still arguing for her only child to find a 'safer lifestyle', and her father had been adamant, insisting that she 'remain neutral' and stay out of the conflict as much as possible.

She'd ended the Floo call feeling relieved that her parents were alive and cooperating with the Tonks and the Order members trying to protect them, but not at all pleased that they wanted her to separate from her friends and take a coward's way out by keeping neutral in a conflict she felt so strongly about. It wasn't that she really wanted to be fighting in a war at her age, but her very survival...her right to be what she was...was in jeopardy should Voldemort win.

Hermione thanked Mrs. Weasley and went outside for some fresh air and to think, refusing Fleur's request to accompany her. Ginny had understood, as had Professor Lupin and Mrs. Weasley. Hermione promised Mrs. Weasley to stay on their property and not to go any further than the pond, which she knew could be viewed from the kitchen window. But she needed time to think.

She picked up a stone and tossed it into the pond, watching the ripples spread outward.

She knew that should Voldemort win, she, like all Muggle-borns, would be hunted down, persecuted, and systematically eliminated just like what had happened to the Goblins after the Goblin wars of the thirteenth century, (which resulted in Eargit the Ugly's appointment as the Goblin representative on the Wizard's Council) and again after Urg the Unclean led the Goblins into rebellion during the early eighteenth century. Both periods of wizarding history, Goblins had been slaughtered mercilessly, greatly depleting their numbers, and for a race that typically only bore one or sometimes two offspring in their lives, this really had devastating results on the Goblin population. It was not too dissimilar to the genocide of the Armenians by the Turks or the Holocaust of WWII in her opinion.

She threw another stone, her gaze locked on the ripple effect as she sorted things out in her mind.

She felt a presence behind her and slyly slipped her wand into her hand.

"If I'd meant to do you harm, you'd already be dead." The cool tone of Severus' voice sent a chill down her spine, even though she'd felt an immediate sense of relief by his presence.

"I assumed that you were not an enemy, considering we are this close to the house and under the protective wards surrounding the place," she said softly, watching a dragonfly as it moved among the cattails.

"Never assume you are safe or that wards can protect you. Your naïveté is your weakness as it only proves your overconfidence in another's magic," he said, coming up to stand beside her. "Consider the times; you should *never* let yourself be so unguarded."

"Constant Vigilance. And here I thought the Burrow was protected by spells devised by *you* and Professor Dumbledore," she replied as she turned her head to look at him. "Nice to see you, by the way."

He turned to face her. "And yet, you are quite lucky that you can," he said coolly, his anger tightly controlled. "What were you thinking going off with a strange boy unchaperoned?"

She turned to face him fully. "I was in France! I didn't think I was in any danger at the time, and he seemed nice," she said defensively, realizing that ~~that~~ was the real reason he sought her out.

"/ can seem nice...the Dark Lord *can* seem nice when it suits his purpose," he said sharply.

"You are nice," she said, then cringed at his smirk, adding, "When you want to be. You were nice enough to me all last year...when you weren't trying to put me in the hospital."

"Hermione," he growled in warning.

"In fact, I'd assume that Vol...er, sorry, the Dark Lord can be deceptively nice when it suits his purpose. Otherwise, why would people...intelligent people such as yourself and the Malfoys...follow him?"

She blushed under his glare and turned to stare out at the pond. "I assume the Malfoys are intelligent; Mr. Malfoy certainly doesn't strike me as an imbecile, neither is Draco," she added, and he shook his head. "I don't have that much experience with boys... well, not like *that*, anyway... So, I was deceived. I admit it...I used poor judgment, and I should've been more aware of my surroundings. Thank Merlin I remembered what you taught me last year and that we'd worked on my reflexes during my training sessions."

Something, a fish perhaps, broke the surface, making new ripples on the surface of the pond.

"I read in the report that you used wandless magic," he said after a long pause as if he'd been watching the ripples too.

"Simple spells. I can Summon and Repel objects, even heavy ones, with nonverbal wandless charms, but I can't do a Blasting Hex or deflect spells yet. Oh, and I think I did the Defensive Charge," she admitted, turning to look at him again. "I was so frightened; I could feel my magic, make it grow stronger, as if my adrenaline levels were elevated, so I used it, focused on it..." He looked surprised by her statements. "It was so much easier than trying it at school."

He crossed his arms and his posture became rigid as he stared at her. "You could have been killed...you were almost captured. Have you any idea what would have become of you if you had been?"

"I got away," she said, looking him directly in the eyes. For the first time she realized she was nearly tall enough that she almost could look him in the eye. Her five foot five height made her about level to his mouth. Of course he wore his dragon hide boots, and she was wearing her favorite Vans.

"You were lucky," he said, his eyes narrowing.

She smiled weakly. "I used what you taught me in our lessons," she said, hoping to assuage his anger. "I was able to dodge and deflect everything..."

His brow quirked, but he didn't relax his posture. "You and I will have more lessons on your fighting skills and work to enhance wandless magic."

Hermione couldn't believe his offer and exclaimed, "Promise?!" grinning at the prospect.

His eyes narrowed again. "This is not a game, Hermione, this is serious!"

She refrained from rolling her eyes. "I know it's serious," she quipped. "Why does everyone think I'm not taking this seriously?! I'm in this for my right to live, my right to belong! It's not a game to me!"

He relaxed. "Yet, you allowed yourself to be caught unaware."

"I was in France! On holiday! How was I to know his reach was that far?" she said a bit too defensively.

"Well, now you know," he said with a sharp nod. "His reach extends from here to France and across Europe to Poland and down to Bulgaria, although he's concentrating his efforts on the United Kingdom first."

Hermione looked at him in shock.

"Or did you think that Karkaroff simply waited in Durmstrang to be caught after failing to report to the Dark Lord in the graveyard a year ago...he fled. He tried to hide...in the Vozgian Republic of the Russian Federation. He was found and killed within a month of his desertion," Severus explained. "That's why Charlie Weasley remains in Romania; he and his friend, Sandu Pavlenco, are recruiting for the Order and reminding people what it was like under the Dark Lord's mantle the first time."

She gasped, stunned. "Headmaster Karkaroff...dead?"

"It has yet to be confirmed, but yes, my sources tell me he is dead," Severus said with an odd look in his eyes.

She exhaled as she stared at the cattails swaying gently in the soft breeze, taking in what he said. "I understand. I'll be more cautious in the future."

"Please be sure you are," he said softly. "You're important."

"I know, to help Harry keep a level head and from doing anything too impulsive," she said, nodding sadly. *The voice of reason.*

He turned to leave. "I wasn't talking about Potter," he said, taking a step and Disapparating.

She stared at the spot he'd disappeared from, his final words echoing in her mind as the warm summer air made a strand of her hair brush across her face. "You're important too."

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

I know, in canon Mr. Weasley said Igor Karkaroff died 'some where up north,' but I thought, 'That's odd? Why hide in Scotland and not in his homeland or someplace he knew...' so, I put him in Vozgia. Then realized that Severus heard about the ex-Durmstrang Headmaster a month before it was reported in the *Daily Prophet!* So yes, that is what I mean. Severus knew about it a month before Karkaroff's body was found and his death confirmed in the papers. I know, he'd be a bit decomposed, wouldn't he? (Sorry for the ickish mental visual)

The Vozgian Republic is one of the twenty-nine constituent republics of the Russian Federation. Vozgian history in a nutshell:
http://steen.free.fr/vozgian/vozgian_republic.html

Chapter 34

Chapter 34 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia and EverMystique for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Harry's arrival was fairly uneventful, except that Ron threw open the curtains and swatted him on the head to wake him up, which Hermione thought was juvenile. Fred and George had returned to their flat above their shop the day before, so Harry had been given their room for the rest of summer. Unfortunately, Fred and George left boxes of their products around, and Hermione, who should have known better, tried snooping in the twins' stuff, and ended up sporting a purple-black eye from a dangerous punching telescope.

And, of course, there was Fleur, constantly hovering about, doting on Bill and Harry, talking nonstop about her wedding plans and driving Mrs. Weasley and Ginny batty. Not that she didn't effect Hermione's disposition any...Hermione found herself groaning inwardly whenever Fleur droned on. She also hated seeing Ron mooning over Fleur and being pathetic whenever she was around, and even though Harry was able to control himself better, even he got all mushy about her in her presence as well. It was disgusting.

Harry told them what he'd been doing over the summer, that he'd be having private lessons with Dumbledore once school started and about the prophecy. Then Ron told him what he'd been doing. Hermione had been in shock that Harry knew near to nothing about what had happened to their friends, or the trouble that she'd been in, but then her incident in France was only briefly mentioned once in one article on several such attacks, disappearances and odd occurrences in the *Daily Prophet*, after the nice long article and the obituary for Madam Vance.

She'd watched Harry closely as they'd talked, scrutinizing Harry's tone of voice, watching his expressions and his body language for any signs of guilt or depression over the attacks, Sirius' death... anything... However, more than once, he'd scowled at her so she'd quickly recovered whenever she saw him staring at her, hoping she'd masked her concerns. But he seemed to be handling it well enough. He said he wasn't having the dreams anymore, but she wondered if he was telling her the truth about them being over. When Ron was called to help his mum, she thought it time to tell Harry about her parents, the attacks and Severus' warning.

"If you're going to ask me about Sirius, don't," he said before she said anything.

"No, well, but since you mentioned him...how are you doing, Harry?" she admitted. When he said "Fine," albeit a little curtly, she nodded and let the matter drop. "Harry, there have been... things...other stuff going on."

"What things?" he asked, still standing with his arms crossed.

"Well, not all of it has been in the paper," she said, and he turned his head slightly with his eyes narrowed as if not getting what she was driving at. "All right *Where to begin?*

He sat down, and she looked up at him and inhaled deeply.

"Tell me what happened."

"Harry, first, it's not because of you," she said, and his forehead creased and his eyes narrowed. "There is a reason you were brought here early. I'm not sure how much to tell you, but hear me out, okay?" He nodded, and she began with the incident in France. To his credit, he listened, although she had to deal with quite a few of his outbursts and his pacing. She then tried to tell him about the others.

"So you're telling me that everyone was attacked?" he said, whirling on her. "Why doesn't anyone tell me anything?"

"What exactly do you think I'm doing now?" she pleaded.

"But they were attacked because they went with me to the Ministry!" he declared. "I fell for Voldemort's..."

"*No!* Listen to me, Harry," she interrupted him. "Madam Bones would've been a target anyway; she sides with Muggle-borns' rights in many of her judgments, and she's head of the MLE. She's considered a blood traitor. I heard Goyle calling her that at Hogwarts last year."

"And the rest...the DA...they wouldn't have been attacked if they hadn't followed me to the Ministry," he snapped back at her, his emotions starting to get riled up.

"You don't know that!" she shot back and then took a calming breath as she held up her hand. "Okay, it's possible, but think about it. Dumbledore's Army was about standing up against You-Know-Who...not just defying Umbridge...and learning how to defend ourselves. Neville even said it was about doing something real! None of our friends plan on staying neutral and hoping we come out unscathed. For most of us, this is our last year at Hogwarts and then we'll be out there," she pointed at the window, "...fighting." She dropped her arm and looked up at him, hoping he understood her.

He plopped down on the bed and stared at his hands. "But they were attacked because of me."

"*No*, Harry, they were attacked for standing up for what *they believed in*. They knew that Voldemort was going to attack the Ministry...I told them." His head turned sharply to glare at her, so she pressed on. "I told them about the dreams...that they were a connection. Everyone already knew about the one you had when Mr. Weasley was attacked. They thought it was because you have the Sight...you know...you're taking Divination. Anyway, they *wanted* to go. It was *their* choice. I sent the message through *all* the coins and they came. So it's my fault."

He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. "But I'm..."

"I know, you're the one identified in the prophecy: parents who thrice defied him, born at the end of July and marked as an equal. That means you have the power to defeat him, *if* you believe in the prophecy," she said, still hoping he'd listen and let her words sink in. "It's a huge burden, I know. But it's not the only reason people are standing up to Him. Neville's in it for his parents; Seamus for his real dad and his uncle; Cho fights for her mum, who's Muggle-born, and revenge for Cedric. Susan and Katie have personal reasons too...we all do. *I do!* I'm fighting for my right to exist!"

Harry stared at her, his expression hard to read. It seemed like he was taking it all in.

"If we don't win, I'm as good as dead. I am everything *He* hates; I'm a Mudblood, and Draco reminds me of that fact every opportunity he gets. I know I'm smart; I'm in the top percent of our year, and Draco hates that, too...that I best him marks," she said, trying not to blush. "I heard him grumbling about it enough to know his father... Well, he's under a lot of pressure at home."

Harry hung his head.

"I know you've had a raw deal, but Harry, I'm in this *with you*...all the way. I won't let you down, just like you wouldn't let me down. In fact, you have friends, Harry...real friends." She touched his arm to make him look at her. "Well, obviously you're the one with some power Voldemort knows not, right? But still, you need us as much as we need you. Together we're strong...you, me, Ron...we balance each other. Together, we've done some remarkable things. In the first war, Voldemort played on people's fears, wanted them to be distrustful of each other, afraid of their shadows. Divided and afraid, we are weaker. We can't be that way again...we have to stick together."

He nodded and looked at his hands again. "You're right."

She waited.

He continued to look at his hands and then looked up at her. "So now what?"

"We keep learning everything we can, like we did last year...only this time it's about life or death," she said, reaching over to squeeze his arm again. "We, Harry, all of us. Constant vigilance. If I could be attacked *in France...on holiday*...one set up by a Death Eater, then *nowhere* is safe. So until the time comes, when you have to face him again, we prepare, and we will be ready."

"Right," he said, the flash of determination back in his eyes.

Hermione woke up with the sun and smiled at the sleeping redhead on the bed across the room. For the most part, the last few weeks had been spent playing two-a-side Quidditch, much to Hermione's dismay, and helping Mrs. Weasley whenever she'd asked. It would have been a pleasant time for Hermione except for the articles each morning about people disappearing, odd accidents, and the daily reported deaths from suspicious circumstances or the Killing Curse and Dementor attacks. Sometimes, Bill or Mr. Weasley had bad news to impart when they arrived home each evening, and occasionally Remus Lupin made reports of werewolf attacks and maulings, some that didn't even make the *Daily Prophet*.

Even Harry's birthday had a sad shadow of bad news that cast a gloom most tried to ignore for Harry's sake. Both Ollivander and Floean Fortescue had disappeared, and Headmaster Karkaroff had been found dead in the Vozgian Province of Vologda in the Russian Federation, a month after she'd heard about it from Severus. Pricilla Colton, who was in Gryffindor the year above them, and her family had been found dead in their home.

Still, Mrs. Weasley had tried her best to make Harry's birthday as pleasant as possible. It saddened Hermione that even with all the bad news, Harry had told everyone it was his best birthday ever.

Hermione slipped from her bedcovers, leaned over Ginny's small desk, and pushed open the window, surprised to see a long-eared owl swoop in on her. The pretty, medium-sized owl held out a heavily-feathered leg for her to untie the scroll he was carrying, watching her with his yellow eyes. "Now who do you belong to?" she asked as she untied the ribbon, being extra careful not to pull on any of his feathers in the process. The owl clicked his black beak and fluffed his feathers.

"Yes, you're quite handsome," she said softly, offering him some of Ginny's owl treats. The owl hooted happily and accepted his owl treats eagerly.

She sat in the chair as she unrolled the scroll and smiled at the hand painted decoration of a phoenix sitting on a long thin branch of pomegranates and yellow flowers.

"Who is the letter from?" Ginny asked, apparently having been woken by the owl.

"It's from Luna asking if I would like to come over for lunch today or tomorrow," Hermione replied. "Odd, it's addressed to my house, not here, yet her owl found me."

"The Fidelius Charm...some owls are clever enough to get around it." Ginny scrambled from the bed. "I'll get a slip of parchment from Mum so she can come here."

Hermione jotted down a reply, while Ginny went to let her mother know that Luna might come over, then picked up one of Ginny's books *Handmade Magical Crafts: Charms and Transfiguration Spells For The Crafty Witch*, and sat on her cot to read.

"Mum says it's fine for Luna to come," Ginny announced as she walked back into the room. She walked over to the owl and carefully attached the notes to his leg. The owl hooted and flew out of the window.

"Lovely bird." Ginny turned to face Hermione. "Now, what shall we do all morning?"

Hermione held up the book.

"Oh, no, you don't," Ginny said, laughing as someone knocked on the door. "It's gorgeous outside. And before you suggest reading outside, I'm going to suggest Quidditch!"

Hermione was going to groan, 'again', but the door opened and Ron and Harry strode in. "I'm up for another game," Ron blurted, tossing a Quaffle at Ginny. She caught it easily as Harry plonked himself down next to Hermione.

The owl returned and landed on Harry's knee. Hermione removed the note as Ginny handed over an owl treat. "Luna must live really close," Hermione replied.

"She lives on the hill," Ginny said as Hermione showed Harry Luna's reply.

"Okay," Harry said with a grin. "So we can get a few rounds of two-a-side Quidditch until Luna shows up." He pulled the book out of Hermione's hands. "You can learn how to transfigure socks into puppets later."

Once again Hermione found herself on a broom, trying not to fall off, protecting the basket Ginny had placed in a tree, while Harry and Ginny battled for the Quaffle. Across the 'pitch', Ron protected another basket magically suspended in the branches of another tree. Harry snatched the Quaffle from Ginny and both of them shot forward. Harry feigned right, then swerved left which gave him room to chucking the Quaffle at Ron's basket. Ron fell for the ploy and barely managed to tip the Quaffle away from his basket, but flew into some branches of the tree, getting tangled up for a bit.

Hermione laughed as he pulled twigs and leaves from his shirt and hair. Then Ginny got the ball, and she was heading for Hermione with Harry flying right behind her. Hermione momentarily panicked as her broom shimmied, and she turned too sharply to compensate. When Harry lunged, trying to grab the Quaffle from Ginny just as she was about to throw it, Hermione tried to move to intercept and lost her balance, grasping her broom tightly as she slid off the handle. Hermione hung from one hand, screaming for help as her fingers, slick with nervous sweat, began to lose their grip. Neither Harry nor Ginny got to her in time... her broom seemingly to pull upward and away as her fingers slipped further...

"*Arresto Momentum*," Luna cried out loudly, pointing her wand at Hermione, and her fall slowed down enough for her to reach up and grasp her broom.

Somehow Hermione managed to scramble back onto her broom. Hermione angled her broom down and landed with a thud, slightly winded. "Thank you, Luna."

"My pleasure," she said, clasping her wand with both hands. "Now, what lives in mistletoe?"

Hermione gaped at Luna in disbelief. "Pardon me? Oh, right," she said, smiling at Luna's bright yellow pinafore dress and lace bobby socks. Harry and Ron landed and walked up to them, with Ginny touching down a moment after. "Erm...? Oh, gosh Luna, I know fairies sometimes lay their eggs in mistletoe, and Bowtruckles eat fairy eggs...that's not right, is it?"

Luna smiled and cocked her head. "Nargles live in mistletoe, but I know you don't believe me. I do like the leaves in your hair, Ron. Did you put them there on purpose? I

prefer flowers, but then I suppose leaves are more masculine."

Harry started laughing at Ron's expense. "That's Luna all right. Hi."

"Hi, Harry," she replied back. "Well, what would you ask me, Ron?" Luna asked, turning to face him.

"Well, what *are* Nargles, and why do they live in mistletoe?" Ron asked. Everyone started laughing, Luna loudest of all.

The rest of the afternoon was more to Hermione's liking. After lunch, they talked about current events as they played a few rounds games of Muggle Snap, Gin Rummy and Patience, and Luna brought them up to speed on some of the things printed in *The Quibbler*.

The day after the book lists arrived, Mr. and Mrs. Weasley took everyone to Diagon Alley. Bill had brought Hermione and Harry gold from their Gringotts vaults so they would not have to wait in the long lines or have their orifices probed by the Goblins. Hermione had been quite relieved to receive the small pouch of coins, particularly because that meant that her parents had relented on allowing her to return to Hogwarts, and, more importantly, they were not cutting her off financially. However, they were not as generous as they'd been in the past, so she knew that she'd have to budget herself carefully to make the money last. At least she'd had plenty to buy schoolbooks, school robes and three new blouses as well as sufficiently restock her Potions kit. She was certain that her Aunts Alberta Granger and Cornelia DeRynk would send her new jumpers, scarves and mittens for her birthday and for Christmas, so she'd have everything she needed for the new year ahead.

Hermione had been shocked at the changes in Diagon Alley. So many shops were closed, and there were all sorts of vendors in the street. And the incident with Malfoy... that still rankled with Hermione, but not nearly as much as it did with Harry, who was absolutely certain that Draco was now a Death Eater. Hermione had replayed her disastrous encounter with Borgin over in her mind, and her utter failure at subterfuge, wishing she'd thought about what she was going to say to him *before* entering his shop. She was a horrible liar, she knew it, and apparently no good at all at subterfuge, considering Borgin had read into her the moment she'd stepped foot in his shop.

But even going over the items she could remember in the shop, the only things that stood out in her mind were the lovely opal necklace on display, the hand of glory, the black obsidian glass orb labeled a Readers Eye, a few skulls of various animals and the wall clock that looked surprisingly like Mrs. Weasley's. Mr. Weasley thought that the only item Malfoy could be interested in was the old Vanishing cabinet. Hermione wasn't so sure. Since the Malfoys were in league with Voldemort, they'd have nothing to fear from the evil wizard, so why would Draco have need of a Vanishing Cabinet?

One morning, feeling restless, Hermione asked Mrs. Weasley for a task to keep her busy, and was asked to help Ginny and Ron degnome the garden. Unlike Ginny or Ron, Hermione was grateful to have an outdoor task: it took her mind off the problem with her parents, the questions over the items in Borgin's shop, the Malfoys' odd behavior, and got her away from the overly solicitous Fleur Delacour. Not that she had anything against the girl, but she was really trying too hard to make the Weasleys, especially Mrs. Weasley, like her. So much so, it was bloody annoying.

She decided to check under the tomatoes Mrs. Weasley grew along one wall of Mr. Weasley's shed, when Hermione caught a bit of conversation happening between Harry and Mr. Weasley.

Mr. Weasley's voice carried out from the open window, "It's just that growing up with those relatives of yours, I imagine that they wouldn't have told you about, erm... certain *changes* that happen as you come of age."

She knelt down and lifted aside a bit of growth laden with ripe tomatoes to peer underneath.

"Mr. Weasley, you really don't need to worry about telling me any of this, Uncle Vernon covered all the basics for Dudley..." Harry started to reply. "And I sort of overheard him..."

She spotted a gnome and practiced her nonverbal, wandless Summoning Charm to bring it to her outstretched hand.

"Yes, I'm sure he had, but there are certain *things* a young man should know," Mr. Weasley interrupted him, clearing his throat. His voice sounded somewhat strained with nerves to Hermione. "What you and your friends did in the Ministry this last June was remarkable," Mr. Weasley stated, his pride evident in his tone. "I suspect you'll have a few members of the fairer sex interested. But that can also be a problem..."

She stifled a laugh as she caught the gnome easily enough and stood up. Taking hold of its legs, she began twirling it.

"Young ladies, a young witch, well, they sort of... Well, they *Bloom*, Harry, in a manner of speaking, when they turn seventeen, and you'll take notice," Mr. Weasley was saying. "It's just that, young men have these... urges, Harry, and not all of us are capable of controlling them. However, if you are aware in advance of the, erm, greater attraction, the Allure, then, er, you can... resist certain," he made a sound as if clearing his throat, again, "rule breaking and prevent the outcomes of those actions."

"Er, okay?" Harry said in a slightly strangled voice, clearly uncomfortable with the 'talk' he was being subjected to. Hermione could almost feel his blush coming through the wall. "Right, condoms," he said.

She heaved the gnome as far as she could, adding a nonverbal wandless Repelling Charm for good measure. *Oh, this is priceless*, she thought, feeling a bit embarrassed to be eavesdropping, but unable to just walk away as she bent down to snatch another gnome who'd come out to see what was happening.

"No, no, I don't mean to condone it, but you young wizards," the Weasley patriarch stammered apparently uncomfortable giving Harry the 'talk.' "You're famous now, well again, Harry, and a prime target. I've seen it before...they will be attracted to you because of your fame which can heighten the, er, allurements, you see. You'll have to, er, be cautious with the young witches...be on extra alert..." He paused briefly before continuing, "so you don't get caught or you can end up in a sticky wicket."

Hermione stifled a laugh as she twirled the gnome to make it dizzy. *Odd, him being so uncomfortable considering he has six sons. Surely he's had practice enough* But then he was talking to Harry, who technically wasn't his son.

"Right, so I shouldn't...I'll be careful," Harry promised. "Control my urges and wear protection to avoid any sticky wickets."

Hermione smiled as the gnome went flying in a high arch, way out into the field.

"No, no. If you keep your wits about you that should protect you well enough," Mr. Weasley said, apparently not understanding Harry's comment about protection.

She stifled another laugh as she grabbed the next gnome. It struggled in her hand, pounding on her fingers with its tiny fists.

"Right, okay, sure," Harry said, obviously heading off having to explain what he'd meant by protection.

Hermione could just see trying to explain condoms to Mr. Weasley; he'd want to try some, and Mrs. Weasley would have a fit, most likely.

As she twirled the gnome by its feet above her head, Hermione could almost see Harry trying to hide his embarrassment. She'd look up contraceptive potions and charms once she got to school. Surely the wizarding world had something to protect guys, or would it all fall on the girls to make sure happy little accidents didn't happen.

"Good, excellent," Mr. Weasley said. "The important thing is to keep your wits about you."

"I will," Harry said solemnly, but Hermione could detect the inflection of a suppressed smile in his voice. "I won't get snagged into anything, and I won't get caught."

She used the momentum to fling the gnome out into the field, adding her Repelling Charm again. It sailed out of sight. *Three down.*

"Good, excellent," Mr. Weasley said, clearly pleased by his response. "Well, then." There was a sound of hands being clapped together once, and she could visualize him bouncing once on his heels as he looked at Harry with a cheerful grin. There was a slight pause as Hermione squatted down to see if any more gnomes were hiding in the tomatoes.

"Another thing, don't be surprised if Ron starts showing certain... signs. It's going to be his year, this year, I'm glad to say," Mr. Weasley said.

Signs... what signs, for what? Hermione mulled over what he'd said, confused by the choice of words. She spotted another gnome watching her intently *Stupid things.* She grabbed it, and it bit her finger, making her swear softly as she stood up.

Harry didn't respond right away, either, possibly as confused as she'd been. Hermione twirled the gnome as quickly as she could to make it dizzy.

Finally Harry asked, "His year...? What signs?" slowly in confusion.

"He comes of age this year! Every young man looks forward to his coming of age," Mr. Weasley said as if that explained everything.

Hermione smiled and chucked the gnome as far as she could with another Repelling Charm to send it flying. She couldn't even see where it had landed.

"Right, he'll turn seventeen in March," Harry replied.

"Yes, he'll achieve his full potential as he comes of age," Mr. Weasley said. "He'll have the flairs the start of next year most likely, but the teachers...they'll know how to harness any mishaps until he gets a hold of his magic in March. But don't worry, Harry, it will happen to you, too, next year. I just wanted you to be aware and prepared."

"I don't think I understand," Harry said.

"Oh, yes, you wouldn't have... You see," Mr. Weasley faltered, once again sounding a bit strained. He cleared his throat. "As young wizards, when we approach the age of seventeen, our bodies react to the changes in our magic. We experience surges in our magic. Don't worry, they go away once you reach seventeen. It's why the age seventeen is considered to be an adult in our world."

There was a long pause. "Okay, right then," Harry said in a slightly strangled voice, again, and Hermione felt sorry for him.

She'd read about the Surges and that wizards and witches came into their full powers, their full innate strength, when they approached seventeen. In fact, she had been looking forward to it, and it explained why her magic had felt rather strong lately. Except *she* hadn't had any surges as described in the books. No random uncontrolled bursts of magic, possibly like the ones she'd had as a child. At least none lately that she'd been aware of.

Hermione heard the door open to the shed and ducked out of view, so neither Harry nor Mr. Weasley would see her and think she'd been spying on them.

"Rise, Severus."

Severus felt a vibration in his pocket as he rose. He kept his head slightly inclined as if to show the pale-faced wizard with the inhuman red eyes his complete reverence, to hide his grimace. The activation of the Protean Charm couldn't have come at a more inconvenient time. He hoped that the message would hold until he could leave the Dark Lord's presence.

"What have you to say for yourself?"

"My Lord." He looked up into the red eyes, forcing himself to maintain a calmness he didn't really feel at the question. "Considering the recent events, and the previous request you made of me, I am at a loss as to what exactly you are implying." He cocked his head ever so slightly.

"Where are they?!" the Dark Lord snarled.

"The children from Potter's little club were all relocated by the Order, and as I've said, I'm not privy to their new locations. Well, except for Potter and the Mudblood, but as Dumbledore set the Fidelius Charm himself, he was quite thorough. I am unable to even hint at the location." The Dark Lord bared his teeth as he flexed his head side to side, but didn't say anything, so Severus pressed on. "As for the new location of the headquarters, all I can say is that the previous one is not trusted at the moment, and the new location is likewise protected by Dumbledore himself, and I..."

"Cannot say, I KNOW!" the Dark Lord shouted in frustration as he slammed his fist on the armrest of his chair. "I want to know where they are hiding! Can no one hazard a guess?"

"My Lord," Bellatrix purred, leaning forward on her knees and gazing up at the Dark Lord with a deeply longing adoration in her crazed eyes. "I have tried to follow the one Weasley boy, but he returns to his flat every night. And the twins, they live above their shop... neither go to their parents as far as I can tell."

"The twins play cat and mouse with you, Bellatrix. They wear Sneakoscopes around their necks and have turned wristwatches into Foe Glasses. They simply Apparate twice before going to their parents," Severus explained. "Their oldest brother, William, wears the same."

"I know they wear those tricky devices," she snarled at Severus. "But even idiots slip up."

Severus smirked at her. "They know they're being followed, and they are being cautious."

"ENOUGH!" the Dark Lord snapped. "Severus, you told me the old man was cursed and that it was eating away at his flesh. When will it consume him?"

Severus resisted the urge to smirk. "He is still battling to contain the curse in his hand. However, it should reach his heart by Christmas." Severus had finally developed a potion to slow the progression of the curse, but it would not cure the old man's hand.

The Dark Lord's eyes flashed and his lips pursed. "Christmas. No sooner? And the source of this curse?"

Severus fixed the image of a snuffbox, one that belonged to the Black family, firmly in his mind as he slowly shook his head. "I'm not sure of the actual source, but he did say he tried to open it and was hit unexpectedly. He summoned me immediately, and I did try to contain the effects, but as I've said, it will not last long. The curse is strong and will eventually kill him."

"Very well," the Dark Lord said, but it was clear by the absentminded tone of his answer that his thoughts were elsewhere. "Go." He turned Severus. "See that he dies this year. I grow tired of his constant interference."

As Severus bowed to leave, the pendant in his pocket vibrated again. *Bloody hell.* He walked casually through the manor, his stride long and purposeful to hide the urgency he felt. Once he passed the main gates, he Disapparated for a bend on the dirt road partly hidden by a thick growth of tall grass and sages near the small beach house and pulled off his Death Eater robes and mask. Thankfully, the pendant still showed the message. *Holden.* Sighing heavily, he shoved his mask into the hood of his robes and rolled the black wool into a tight bundle and walked confidently to the front of the house.

Serena Wilkes opened the door before Severus even closed the gate to the small front garden. "He's Marked," she cried out.

"Will you hush, woman," he snapped, walking across the flagstones quickly and brushing past her. "Never announce anything like that out in the open," he hissed, and she recoiled in shock. "You'll draw too much attention."

She hung her head and moved aside. "Darias is with Raithe and Tammoreh in the lounge."

Severus turned and opened the door to the adjoining room. Darias Kennecott moved aside as he came through the door, greeting Severus politely but solemnly. Raithe Macrae was sitting on the sofa, letting Tammoreh Merkle hold a cold compress to his left forearm. "Don't do that, you silly girl, he'll feel it," Severus sneered and walked over to the young man. "Show me."

Miss Merkle removed the compress as Severus put his Death Eater garb on the side table, and he withdrew a small jar of ointment from his pocket. "Here. Use this. But keep in mind that each time you touch it, *He* can feel you do so. And don't push your finger into it, it's like calling him."

Mr. Macrae nodded as Miss Merkle opened the jar for him. "My dad caught me entirely off guard. We were supposedly going to the Malfoy's for dinner. Tammoreh and I were hoping to have her father talk to mine, since she said her family was invited, too. Only it wasn't dinner, it was my Marking ceremony! I haven't even had my *initiation*. Draco Malfoy, that snot, stood up for me and just like that...I'm in."

"He's not the only one," Mr. Kennecott spoke up. Severus turned around to face the young man leaning against the doorframe with his arms crossed. "Grantham is to be marked, too. I've been trying to work with him on his Occlumency, but I don't know if he's strong enough. Duane, he has managed to avoid it so far, but his dad told him if he doesn't take the Mark his mum will be killed for 'turning him against their master.' He wants to run before he's cornered like Raithe was. Aldebaran is supposed to be marked this summer, and he's scared. He turns seventeen in two months, but his father told the Dark Lord he doesn't want to wait until Christmas for his son to 'join the ranks!' And Raymond knows he'll have to take the Mark next summer after leaving school. That only gives him a year."

"And you?" Severus asked, although he already knew the answer.

Mr. Kennecott turned his head to look at Miss Wilkes. "My dad thinks Serena and I are traveling in Europe. Duane's initiation is to hunt me down and bring me back for my Marking ceremony. I Confounded a Muggle who looks like me to go to France and then travel by motorbike through Europe, ending up somewhere in Italy. Cost me a bundle too."

Severus scowled. "That's a huge risk, considering that Mr. Macrae here knows you are here in Wales."

"I intend to have you Oblivate me," Raithe stated gloomily. "Then Tammoreh and I are going on a 'search' to find Darias. At least I'll be away from here and I won't have to..."

"Idiot!" Severus snapped, cutting off the young man. "The Dark Lord's reach is as far as France if not to Spain already, and since you've been Marked, he can sense you wherever you go." Mr. Macrae hung his head, staring at his arm as he sighed heavily, and Severus forced himself to calm down a bit. "But I will Oblivate you. However, your ability at Occlumency should've been strong enough if you'd practiced harder. You will need to learn to segregate your thoughts, formulate half-truths and carefully arrange your words so that you can mask your true thoughts."

"But that means I will have to bring in Darias?" the young Death Eater said, well asked, as if pleading that it wasn't so.

"You can always say that you couldn't find him," Severus suggested. "But that means that any communication or contact between you will put you and Mr. Kennecott in danger...you, of the Dark Lord's wrath; Mr. Kennecott, of being marked for death." Severus turned to look at the girl on the sofa. "Which reminds me, Miss Merkle, I believe you're father is looking for you as well," he told the girl, and she merely nodded, her eyes downcast as she watched Mr. Macrae apply the ointment.

"Her father wants her to marry Tiberius Flint!" Miss Wilkes stated, standing next to Darias.

"I know Claudius and Lividia Flint are staunch supporters, but I also know Drusilla Flint wants her grandson, Tiberius, to marry her dear friend's granddaughter, Catherine Chittenden," Miss Merkle said sadly. "But my parents want to elevate our status by forcing me to marry Tiberius instead of Raithe."

Severus had heard about it, of course. "Claudius may think that such an alliance will promote his interests, but if Drusilla wants Tiberius to marry her friend's granddaughter then the matter is already settled. Drusilla controls the wealth of the family, not Claudius, although he likes to make every one think he does." *In fact, the old shrew is also friends with Augusta Longbottom and Niharika Patil, he thought smugly. And if she's favoring Tiberius to marry the Chittenden girl... Interesting.*

Miss Wilkes squeezed Mr. Kennecott's hand. He smiled at her, and Miss Merkle looked more hopeful. "So what do we do now?" the young man asked.

Severus thought about the situation for a moment. *Damn, didn't my Head of House duties end with their leaving school?* Mr. Kennecott, you'll stay here with Miss Wilkes. Miss Merkle will return home and be the dutiful daughter. I'll see what I can find out about Drusilla's arrangement for the union between her grandson and the Chittenden girl and imply that Miss Merkle would prefer an agreement with Mr. Macrae. *Maybe I could sway Narcissa to support the union as well? A gently applied Inception Charm would do the trick. And Lucius' mother, Winifred Malfoy, is on good terms with Drusilla Flint.* He hated being involved with the pure-blood intrigue; it was bad enough dealing with the Dark Lord's and Dumbledore's demands.

"Mr. Macrae, after I Oblivate you, you are to go to France and pretend to follow this tourist to Italy. You'll be summoned in a week or so, and you'll report that you were unable to locate Mr. Kennecott. You may or may not be subjected to the Dark Lord's displeasure, but I assure you, you will survive it if you are. Once you return home, you will request further tutorial with me in the Dark Arts. I will have planted the idea that you would be a good prospect for such instruction. During the time we have for your instruction, we will work on your Occlumency skills. Are we agreed?"

"Yes, I agree," Mr. Macrae said with a small smile. "Maybe Duane and Raymond can join us?"

"Mr. Hartshorne, yes, he needs further lessons in Occlumency, especially if he is to be Marked," Severus replied, wondering how he was going to propose the arrangement to the Dark Lord. "But I'll have time during the school year to continue Mr. Urguhart's and Mr. Aubry's instruction." Mr. Urguhart was already fairly proficient, but Mr. Aubry was not. "However, I will need to spend time with Mr. Thortenson as well, since both you and he are going to have to face the Dark Lord from here on out." At least he could work with the young men in his basement potions lab. The Rat, Wormtail, was not allowed down there, and it was impossible for him to eavesdrop through the thick door at the top of the stairs that led down to his lab.

Severus grabbed his Death Eater robes and mask, then led Mr. Macrae and Miss Merkle outside and Apparated with them to a street in Manchester, one that closely resembled his own neighborhood. He searched Miss Merkle's memories using Legilimency and carefully removed all recent memories of Mr. Kennecott's house.

He turned to Mr. Macrae and said, "Play along," as the girl recovered. When Miss Merkle was once again herself he added, "Why do you wish to study the Dark Arts under me?"

"Because I want to be as proficient as you are," Mr. Macrae stated.

"Very well," Severus said. "If the Dark Lord approves, I'll tutor you."

The young man nodded, and Severus turned to the girl. "Miss Merkle, I do believe that you should go home. I have things to discuss with Mr. Macrae," he said with curt politeness. She nodded and Disapparated. Severus nodded to Mr. Macrae, and he nodded back, affirming his readiness. "*Legilimens.*" Severus entered the young man's mind, Obliviating all recent memories of Mr. Kennecott's beach house and reinforced the order to follow Mr. Kennecott to France. When he was done, he broke the connection and carefully outlined requirements and obligations the young man would have to accept to be his apprentice in the Dark Arts.

They parted ways, Severus going to the the Order headquarters to make a report to Dumbledore. Alastor Moody and Dumbledore were none too pleased with Severus' report, and, as he had expected, Dumbledore all but dismissed the young men as a loss. Kingsley, however, remained quiet, listening to his information with neutrality. Kingsley did, however, mention that he thought that Andromeda Tonks knew Catherine Chittenden's daughter-in-law, Elise, well, which pleased Severus. If the witch did, Augusta could talk to Drusilla, and Andromeda could talk to Elise, and thus he'd have two witches unknowingly supporting his little situation.

Severus was not ready to give up on his Slytherins, knowing that when it came down to it, they would still fight on their side. But convincing the old man and the crazed ex-Auror would be futile: Dumbledore distrusted Slytherins...Severus being the only exception; and Alastor distrusted anyone who'd accept the Mark...whether they'd been forced to or not.

Severus Apparated to the Burrow. He wanted to find Nymphadora, and Arthur had said the girl was with Molly. He approached the house, and Molly ushered him inside. Nymphadora was sitting at the table, her nose red and her eyes puffy from crying. *Oh Circe, more female hysterics.* "Molly, please forgive me for the presumption, but I haven't much time," he said as he placed his Death Eater robes and mask on the table and drew his wand, "but I need to speak to Nymphadora, privately...Order business."

Molly nodded in understanding and walked toward her kitchen. He made a sweep of his wand with a wide flick, saying, *Muffliato*, to assure their privacy, ignoring Nymphadora's glare. He wasted no politeness and got to the point. "I need your intervention. You know I have a small group of Slytherins on our side," he said, and she nodded.

"Go on," she said suspiciously.

"Drusilla Flint wants her grandson, Tiberius, to marry Elise Chittenden's daughter, Catherine, but Claudius Flint is pushing to have his son marry Merkle's daughter, Tammorah, to promote his interests. I also know that Tiberius has not accepted the Dark Mark, and so far the Chittenden's are remaining neutral, doing as little as possible but trying to avoid the Dark Lord's attentions," Severus explained quickly.

"And my mum says that Drusilla Flint is not as much a supporter as many people think," Nymphadora said, her eyes narrowing at him in suspicion. "Could it be that her grandson isn't either? If Drusilla is trying to help her grandson stay out of the Dark Lord's clutches, she wouldn't want him married to the daughter of a Death Eater, would she? What's your interest in this?"

"Tammorah Merkle is in my group of Slytherins, and she's involved with Raithe Macrae, another of my group. He's been Marked, and I need them together," he stated, and the woman inhaled in surprise, but he pressed on. "I know your mother is on friendly terms with Drusilla Flint's daughter-in-law, Elise. If your mother would assist in making sure that..."

"Your two underground Slytherins are engaged?" she finished for him and he nodded, to which the girl's eyes widened in surprise. "So that will give us another... Can you trust him?" Nymphadora asked. "Macrae... Macrae. Macrae is on our watch list. Ashton has him, I believe."

Severus nodded. "Yes, I trust them." Well, he trusted him more than her, but with them engaged, if he was seen speaking to the girl, none would question his intentions, especially if the Dark Lord approved the summer apprenticeship. "Macrae brought his son, Raithe, to the Dark Lord, and he was forced to take the Mark...and two more in my group will be as well. I trained them in Occlumency myself, and they are proficient enough to be useful. They know the risks involved and what is at stake." The fact that most Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs thought all Slytherins were evil grated on Severus's nerves. He was more determined than ever to prove everyone wrong. "I know that Drusilla Flint is also friends with Augusta Longbottom and Niharika Patil, and they are both supporting our side in this conflict."

Nymphadora nodded. "Yes, Augusta Longbottom supports Dumbledore wholeheartedly, and the Patils are traveling to India to elicit help..." She paused and looked out of the window, then turned to look at him. "I'll see what I can do."

"I also ask that either you or Kingsley take watch over Raithe Macrae, Grantham Thortenson and Duane Hartshorne if their names should come up. I don't want them given to an Auror who will not understand the role these young men will be doing," Severus said, rising from his chair.

"I'll see what I can do," Nymphadora said.

Severus ended his Soundproofing Charm.

"Severus, will you stay for lunch?" Molly asked.

He shook his head as he picked up his Death Eater garb. "I regret that I cannot. Molly, thank you. Nymphadora, contact me if there are complications."

As he turned to leave, Hermione Granger opened the door. He stared at her, his eyes sweeping from the tiny freckles that dotted her nose to her warm amber eyes and down her body, lingering a bit too long on her bosom, before flicking back up to meet her gaze again. She was nearly as tall as he was, about five foot five was his best guess. The majority of her hair was caught in a band just behind her left ear, which left several softly curling tendrils to frame her face, and she wore simple gold hoops... He mentally berated himself for ogling her. "Miss Granger."

"Professor Snape," she said warmly. "How nice to see you. Is everything all right?"

Remembering that he was being observed, he drew himself up to his full height. "Of course it is. Please move aside so I may pass."

Hermione backed down the short steps and watched him as he followed her. "Are you having a nice summer?" she asked when his boot touched the bare earth path, and then she winced at her own question. "I mean," she added softly, "are you doing all right?"

He kept his posture straight and rigid, but his lips quirked slightly. "It has been a very busy summer. I really must go." He paused and looked over her shoulder, scanning the area... They were alone. "You are on *His* list," he said, allowing his concern to reflect in his voice. "He hasn't declared you a target, yet, but he asks about you. Please be careful when venturing out, or better yet, stay close to the house and within the wards."

"I will, I promise," she said, and he believed her. "You be careful."

His mouth twitched again at her concern. "I always am," he said as he walked away. He saw Ginevra approaching so he Disapparated before the girl would think anything had occurred between him and Hermione.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

On to sixth year! As a note to everyone reading this, if I don't mention something that occurs in the books...it happened as it did in the books. If I do mention it, I've changed it, added to it or am mentioning it as reference to where we are in the year. I'll be doing more behind the Harry-scenes in the next few chapters again, and there will be more Severus and Hermione moments in the following chapters. Thank you to everyone still reading this and sticking with me.

Chapter 35

Chapter 35 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the Brit picking, and DuchessOfArcadia and nagandsev for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



It was brilliant. Hermione was thoroughly enjoying her first day of lessons. Professor McGonagall approved all of her choices for her classes, which thrilled her. Her first lesson, Ancient Runes, was going to be really exciting with all the new challenges that Professor Bathsheba Babbling mentioned. She'd learned the Elder Futhark, Anglo-Saxon Futhorc and the Younger Futhark her third and fourth year, and the northern European Germanic Runes, the Scandinavian Rök and Futhork runes last year. This year, however, they'd be delving into the ancient Aramaic, Grecian, Phoenician and Egyptian, and those civilizations in the ancient cultures of the Mediterranean. She had a fifteen inch essay due, two long translations and three chapters to read by Wednesday.

She hurried to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom and met up with the boys in the corridor with the rest of their classmates. When Professor Snape opened the door, she was filled with anticipation.

In contrast to her previous DADA professors, Professor Snape's classroom had the same feel of his office in the dungeons: he'd closed the shutters, hung all sorts of gruesome pictures and portraits around the room, and there were devices and implements in glass fronted cabinets and skulls and strange things on the shelves.

Hermione had been enthralled by his introductory speech about the complexity of the Dark Arts...and he should know. Of course he'd been right; they'd have five teachers so far for DADA, each with their own unique perspective on the Dark Arts, and their own methods of teaching and priorities. However, a few in the class, especially Harry, didn't take him seriously. Hermione blamed the ineptitude of previous teachers like Lockhart and Umbridge for people thinking that the class wasn't important enough to give Professor Snape their undivided attention. There was a war going on outside the school, and in only two years, if it wasn't resolved by then, they would all be thrust into the battle or defending themselves from Death Eaters.

After his lecture, Professor Snape had everyone pair up to try doing the Shield Charm nonverbally. Hermione paired up with Neville and tried the Shield Charm against Neville's attack, thinking, *Protego*, firmly, with every ounce of determination that she could muster and yet not speak the incantation, as Neville cast a Leg-locking Jinx at her. However, her shield barely manifested, and she fell back on her bum with a loud, "umpf."

"Try again," Professor Snape said, releasing her as he walked by.

Across the room, Ron, who was supposed to be jinxing Harry, was purple in the face with his lips pursed tightly together to keep from uttering anything, and Harry had his lips so tightly squeezed together they were curled inward as if he was biting on them. On Hermione's right, Seamus and Dean squared off, both mumbling the incantations, and Lavender forgot and blurted out, "*Protego*," as Pavarti hissed, "*Mordere*," as she shot a Stinging Hex at her.

"Miss Brown, I said *nonverbally*, as in *no speaking*. Miss Patil, you are not a snake...stop hissing," Professor Snape admonished them, and then he turned on Harry and Ron. "Mr. Potter, do it without moving your lips."

Hermione readied herself again to cast the Shield Charm against Neville's next 'attack,' thinking, *Protego*, firmly and determinedly. She felt her magic build, just as it had in France, and she concentrated on it, letting it surge as Neville cast a Jelly-Legs Jinx. Her shield was nearly a solid wall of light as Neville's jinx rebounded against it, pushing him back into Pavarti, causing both of them to fall onto the floor.

"Very good, Miss Granger, five points...however, since you disabled Miss Patil, five points *from* Gryffindor." He turned, ignoring her frown. "Mr. Thomas, nonverbal means *no mumbling*."

Harry glared at Professor Snape as Hermione nodded and squared off with Neville again, this time with him defending against her. Neville was concentrating so hard his eyes seemed to bulge. Hermione cast the Jelly-Legs Jinx at him, and Neville blocked it, but not without his lips moving. He managed it better the second time, with barely a twitch of his lip, but his shield wasn't as strong as his first. "You're trying too hard," Hermione suggested in a whisper. "If you just trust your magic to do what you want, let your magic surge, you can focus on your incantation and your determination. It will work."

Neville nodded as he took aim.

"Nonverbal means I shouldn't hear any talking, whispering or mumbling," Professor Snape admonished the class.

Neville readied himself again as Hermione concentrated on the Jelly-Legs Jinx and let her magic flow. She could feel her magic surge again and focused her intent on the action as she mentally shouted, *Infirmare crura*.

Neville's shield gave, making him fall back into Lavender, knocking them both over into Dean, although Neville's legs did appear to have lost all function.

Professor Snape quickly moved to where the students were clambering up off the floor. "What happened?" he demanded as Neville clasped Lavender's hand and helped her to her feet.

"I didn't stop the jinx," Neville explained as Lavender said, "Hermione blasted Neville."

Professor Snape turned on her. "Let me see your hands," he demanded. Hermione stepped forward and held out her hands. He ran his fingers gently on her palms, making her breath hitch, then stared into her eyes. After a second, he said sternly, "Control your magic or you'll put Longbottom in the hospital," and turned around, snapping at the others to continue practicing.

She looked on as Professor Snape turned to watch Harry and Ron, before squaring off with Neville again. "Pathetic, Weasley," Professor Snape said behind her, walking over to stand next to Ron.

Hermione nodded to Neville and fired another Jelly-Legs Jinx at him, releasing the magic at the same time she thought the incantation with a more controlled determination. This time, Neville managed to block it, although his lips had moved.

Suddenly, Harry shouted, "*Protego*," casting a Shield Charm so powerful that Professor Snape was knocked off balance and fell against a desk.

The whole class stopped to stare at them as Professor Snape got back onto his feet. Professor Snape was furious, but instead of admonishing Harry for blasting him, he demanded to know if Harry remembered his directions of using a nonverbal spell.

"Yes," Harry responded stiffly, which angered their Professor.

"Yes, *sir*," Professor Snape snapped at him.*

And Hermione cringed at Harry's impertinence when he quickly replied, "There is no need to call me 'sir,' Professor,"** making several of the others gasp in shock.

"Detention, Saturday night, my office," snarled Professor Snape in a controlled rage, his hands clenched so tightly that his wand shook. "I do not take cheek from anyone, Potter...not even the Chosen One."** He turned heel and said, "Now back to work; class is not dismissed yet," in a low commanding tone that had everyone immediately squaring off with their partners and resuming the class exercise.

Hermione focused her attention on Neville and cast her Jelly-Legs Jinx nonverbally while Neville tried to protect himself nonverbally with the Shielding Charm. However, she was distracted, and her spellwork wasn't as strong as it had been for the first part of class.

Harry should have known better and been more respectful. Imagine, hitting a teacher and knocking him into his desk! Of course he got a detention, and now Professor Snape was limping slightly as he moved about the students, correcting each student with curt directions and admonishments, although he avoided Harry and Ron throughout the rest of the lesson.

Naturally, after lessons Ron told Harry, "That was brilliant," which angered Hermione. Although she told Harry he shouldn't have done it, he only became angry at her, comparing Professor Snape's 'attack' to his Occlumency lessons. That made Hermione wonder again just what *had* happened between them in that last lesson.

"You know, Harry, in a way Professor Snape's lecture had sounded a bit like, well, like you did when you were leading the DA," she started to say, but Harry immediately took offence. "You remember, when you were telling us what it was like to face Voldemort. You said many of the same things Professor Snape just said...that it's not just memorizing a bunch of spells. You have to think and act quickly. You said it was just you and your brains and your guts. That it really comes down to being brave and keeping focused, ready for anything and thinking creatively."

"But did you hear him, Hermione? He loves them!" Ron said in Harry's defense, getting a nod and grateful smile from Harry. "Doesn't he, Harry? All that *unfixed* and *indestructible* stuff...the git."**

"Yes, Ron, I heard him. I was paying attention in class, and what he said makes perfect sense if you think about it," she argued, wishing they wouldn't just hate Professor Snape. He did have a peevish attitude towards Harry and could be unyielding at times, but he was their teacher. "But even you have to admit, he was right. Besides, we know Professor Snape likes the Dark Arts...fighting against them is a challenge and takes a great deal of intelligence and courage."

Neither Harry nor Ron had anything to say to that, well, in part because Jack Sloper, one of Gryffindor's Beaters from the Quidditch team last year, had run up to give Harry a message from Dumbledore about his first private lesson.

Still the lesson had been brilliant. She had been worried about Professor Snape when Dumbledore announced he'd be teaching DADA, whether he'd be all right this year, what tragedy would befall him or if he'd have some mishap that would remove him permanently from the school. She hoped not, yet couldn't shake the feeling of dread each time she saw him. Nevertheless, she surmised that Dumbledore must know what he was doing giving Professor Snape the post. At least they were going to really learn a lot under him, and Hermione was truly looking forward to his lessons.

After lunch, she, Harry and Ron had Potions. Hermione entered the Potions classroom and looked around the room, her bag already bulging with her books. Even though she'd added a nondetectable enlargement charm on the inside of the bag and the charm Severus...well, teenaged Severus...had used on her bag to make it lighter on the outside, it was cumbersome. With both charms she could easily carry all of her schoolbooks for the day as well as any additional books she borrowed from the library and all of her writing supplies...and for today, her scales and potions supplies as well.

She felt odd, a strange sense of wrongness, upon seeing that the room had been reorganized and rearranged; the oddities that Professor Snape kept on the shelves were gone, the worktables were pushed together so that four students worked together rather than in threes, and there were mats on the floors as well as bright glow orbs floating above. Apparently, Professor Slughorn liked a sparser working environment and brighter light.

Harry, Ron, Ernie and Hermione took the worktable in the middle of the room; the four Slytherins: Malfoy, Nott, Zabini and Davis, took the worktable in front of them. At another table, Terry Boot and Michael Corner had taken places across from Stephen Cornfoot and Sue Li, and both waved at Hermione before they pulled out their scales and books.

Several cauldrons sat on the other tables each holding a different potion: a standard pewter cauldron of Veritas serum sat on the table beside the Slytherin worktable; the slow-bubbling, sludge-like Polyjuice Potion sat near the Ravenclaws, and nearest her was a gold-colored cauldron containing Amortentia, distinctive by its mother-of-pearl sheen and its steam rising up in characteristic spirals. She inhaled its seductive scent, recognizing the smells of freshly mowed grass, new parchment and... and... She inhaled deeper, developing a sense of headiness from the fumes. *A mix of herbs...slightly smoky, and oakmoss...vetiver... citrus and cedar.* A masculine scent that matched the cologne she'd bought for Ron for his birthday last year. Hermione glanced at him and blushed.

While Hermione set up her cauldron and Potions equipment, Slughorn gave Harry and Ron a set of old school scales and battered copies of *Advanced Potion Making* by Libatius Borage. When Slughorn asked for the identity of the potions in the room, Hermione had no problem identifying them; each had been brewed perfectly, which attested to Professor Slughorn's skills at potions. It was no wonder that Professor Snape was so good, if he learned under this wizard.

However, when she was asked to identify the Amortentia potion, she stammered, naming only the first two scents, and blushing furiously, unable, well, unwilling to name the third. Thankfully, Professor Slughorn let the matter pass unnoticed and had them all brew the Draught of Living Death to win a prize...one tiny vial of golden Felix Felicis, one day's worth of pure luck.

Midway through her potion, Hermione's Draught of Living Death was a perfectly smooth, blackcurrant color with bluish steam rising in gentle swirls. She remembered Severus telling her about the Soporiferous Beans, "Don't slice it crush it with the flat side of your dagger. It will release more juice, and it won't harm the bean so you can

use the pulp for the Congestion Elixir.'

She remembered (quite funny now looking back at the incident) how hard it had been to slice the beans in his lab, her bean shooting out from under her knife unless she angled the cutting edge perfectly perpendicular each time. Seeing all her fellow classmates struggling as she had to cut the hard bean now, watching as the tough little beans shot away from under their knives, made her smile. Well, until Nott's bean hit her in the head.

"May I borrow your dagger?" Harry asked.

Hermione nodded and handed him her dagger as she poured the Sopophorous Bean juice into her potion. It turned the exact shade of lilac as described in the book. She glanced at the directions. *Stir the potion seven times counter-clockwise. Repeat three times, pausing three seconds between each stirring...*

All right. Then she recalled what Severus, his teenage self, had said, 'Add a clockwise stir where Borage's directions say to pause, especially if there is more than two. He always missed that step, and it will make the potion blend better.' She'd asked him why, and he'd shrugged. 'I just know. Otherwise your potion will whirlpool and the ingredients just swirl around...it works, trust me.'

Hermione had then and did now. She added the clockwise stir at each pause and watched her potion lighten each time until it turned palest pink. Across the table, she noticed that Harry had copied her in doing the added clockwise stirs. No matter, Harry's potion looked exactly like hers. Slughorn would have a hard time choosing a winner...if he was going to be fair about judging. Ron's however looked like liquid licorice, and Ernie's was a deep navy color.

At the end of class, Slughorn walked around to check on each student's progress. He shook his head as he passed over Malfoy's, Nott's and Davis', and smiled apologetically over Zabini's. He shook his head with a frown as he looked at Ron's and passed Ernie's navy concoction entirely. "Oh ho, look here! We have a winner! Excellent, excellent, Harry!" Slughorn called out, smiling broadly. "Merlin's beard, it's clear that you've inherited your mother's talent, my boy. She was a dab hand at Potions, Lily was...the best in her year!"*

"You haven't looked at Hermione's," Ernie said, scowling. "Hers is perfect."

Professor Slughorn's smile faded. Hermione tried to pat down her hair, knowing that it always became bushier after Potions class because of the fumes. "Give it up, Granger," Malfoy sneered. "You can't improve that rat's nest."

Professor Slughorn walked over and looked into Hermione's cauldron, his eyebrows rising in surprise. "Oh my, excellent. Yes, I do say..." He stood up and smiled at her. "I do say I'm impressed, Miss Granger. I'd never have thought...two students with extraordinary talent in one year. Oh, this is wonderful! Are you sure you aren't related to Hector in some relation...you clearly have his talent? No?" he asked, not giving Hermione the opportunity to answer as he turned and faced the majority of the class. "Yes, well, we have two winners." He handed Harry the tiny vial of Felix Felicis. "As promised, Harry my boy. Use it well. Miss Granger, I'll have yours to you by dinner."

Hermione watched as Harry slipped the tiny vial into his inner pocket with an odd expression that flitted between delight and guilt as he caught Ron's and Ernie's eye. Ron looked simply dumfounded; Ernie utterly disappointed.

As they left the classroom, Hermione had to ask, "Harry, how did you know what to do...the changes?"

He shrugged. "I don't know what you're...I got lucky, I suppose."

Hermione let it drop because Malfoy and Zabini were following behind them, paying attention to their conversation. However, once settled in the common room in their usual spots, she turned to Harry again. "Harry, how did you know about crushing the Sopophorous Beans with a dagger instead of slicing it with a knife?"

"Why? Do you think I cheated?" he asked, clearly affronted.

"No," she said slowly. "I mean, you could have seen me do it, which isn't really cheating. But doing the counter stir...where did you get the idea from?"

"I wasn't cheating off you! It was in my Potions book. It's got all this writing on it, and that was one of the suggestions," he stated.

Hermione gasped. "Writing? Harry, that's horribly risky! What if the suggestions were wrong?"

"It wasn't," he said grumpily. "You did the same as me, so why are you saying my book is wrong?"

Well, he had every reason to be defensive; she was calling him on cheating, and they had done the exact same steps. "But you have no idea whose book that was!"

"Give it a rest, Hermione," Ron said, standing up for Harry. "You won too, didn't you?"

"Well, yes," she admitted, "but that's not the point.

"So what's the big deal," Ron said flippantly. "He took a risk and tried someone's suggestions, and it worked out for him. Yeah, it could've been a catastrophe, experimenting like that, but it wasn't and it paid off!" He heaved a sigh as Hermione gaped at him because he was missing her point entirely. "Slughorn could've handed me that book, but *no*, I get the one no one's ever written in. *Puked on*, by the look of page fifty-two, but..."*

"Hang on," Ginny interjected. Harry suddenly perked up and turned to look at Ginny with a huge smile. "Did I hear you right?" she asked, looking alarmed and angry. His smile faded instantly. "You've been following something someone wrote in a book, Harry?"

"It's just an old copy of *Advanced Potion Making* that Professor Slughorn gave me in Potions this morning," Harry said, making room for her to sit down. "It's not like Riddle's diary...it's just an old schoolbook that someone had written in. It's no big deal."

"But you're doing what it says!" Ginny persisted.

"Blimey, Ginny! I tried a few of the suggestions written in the book, and they worked out," Harry explained, holding the book to his chest, looking sullen. "What is the big deal? Hermione was doing the same things, and her potion came out just like mine."

"After everything that happened to me my first year, and you are going to trust..." Ginny tried to snatch it, but Harry held on tight. "Let me see it!"

Harry handed her the book. Ginny placed it on the table in front of them and tapped the cover with her wand, saying, *Specialis Revelo!* But the book remained inert.

"Happy now?" Harry asked, grabbing for the book the same time Ginny did, and it fell to the floor.

Both Harry and Ginny bent down to retrieve it, bumping heads in the process, but Ginny picked it up first. She asked, "Who is the Half-Blood Prince?" as she closed the book and handed it back to Harry.

"I dunno. Apparently the guy who owned the book before me," Harry shot back, jamming the book into his bag.

Hermione was now more than a little concerned, and she wanted to see the book to look at the writing that Harry mentioned. Only Harry became obstinate and waspish every time she'd asked to see the book, almost as if she'd take it away from him if she did.

The steps that Hermione did in Potions were the ones Severus, well, teen-aged Severus had shown her, and Harry had been doing each step just a moment after she had, so she'd assumed at the time that he had been following her every move...only he'd admitted, adamantly, that he hadn't. It was possible that someone else had figured out

that crushing the Sopophorous Beans yielded more juice, but Harry had specifically asked for her dagger, not her cutting knife.

Harry barely spoke to her at dinner, and afterwards, he and Ron played several games of chess in the common room. So Hermione absorbed herself in her school work.

When the lower years started filing into the common room for their curfew, Hermione glanced up. Being an N.E.W.T. level student, she still had easily over an hour before her curfew, which meant that if she wanted to, she could do laps in the Prefect pool.

The incident over the summer had really bothered Hermione, and if she had been a better swimmer, it was possible that Pierre Baudelaire wouldn't have found her such an easy target. Well, if she discounted that he was really quite handsome: straight white teeth behind his adorable crooked smile, his wavy brown hair and incredible turquoise blue eyes, not to mention his chiseled torso. She shook her head. *No. But still being a better swimmer wasn't a bad idea.*

She looked at her essay, already fully outlined and with half of her resources quoted... She had the time, and it wouldn't put her behind. She flipped through her revision guide. With the free period she had each day from dropping Muggle Studies, History of Magic and Care of Magical Creatures, she would have plenty of time to do her assignments. Decision made, she leaned over to ask Harry if she could look at the map.

"I'm not..."

"I'm not asking about the book, Harry. I'd like to look at the map," she said with a small smile.

He looked at her suspiciously for a few heartbeats. "All right, since you're not harping at me about my Potions book," he agreed, pulling the map out of his bag and giving it to her.

Hermione tapped the map with her wand, muttering, "I solemnly swear I'm up to no good," and looked for the Prefect's bathroom. The map showed that the bath was unoccupied, so Hermione tapped the map, saying, "Mischief managed," and handed it back to him, then ran up to her room. She changed quickly into one of her new swimsuits and hurried down to the pool to do some laps before turning in for the night.

The rest of the week went by so quickly.

Professor Sprout had the N.E.W.T. level Herbology students in the large greenhouse four, but there was a weird mist on the grounds in the mornings that week, so it had been hard to find the correct greenhouse. Professor Sprout, however, had been in a jovial mood, and the blood sucking thistles they'd replanted had been quite a challenge.

In Arithmancy last year, Professor Septima Vector had taught them Transcendence theory, in both qualitative and quantitative ways: non-constant polynomial equations with rational coefficients in application with large numeric variables using qualitative and quantitative equations from the fundamental theory that, where a non-zero polynomial exists with intercoefficients, the polynomial will have its root in the complex numbers. And this year they would be doing them in multi-linear equations and determining complex intra-social time and life lines! She had already read the first six chapters of *Transcendence Magical Theory, Advances and Applications*.

For Transfiguration and Charms, both Professors McGonagall and Flitwick both gave a quick review of some of the complicated theories of the art they'd used last year, and then had the students try to do a spell nonverbally. Professor McGonagall had them try the Vanishing spell on vertebrates nonverbally, and Hermione managed to vanish her hamster by the end of the lesson, but no one else in the class had. In Charms they practiced Summoning and Repelling Charms nonverbally, but when Hermione focused her intent on the vase, she was a bit too determined, sending the vase flying into the wall and breaking it. Both teachers set plenty of homework and reading assignments, which Hermione noted down carefully in her revision guide.

In Alchemy, Professor Theophrastus von Hohenheim was having his N.E.W.T. students write a comparative extrapolation between his ancestor, Paracelsus Philippus von Hohenheim's work in his *Archidoxes of Magic*, and compare it to the magic theories of Agrippa and Nicholas Flamel, whom he openly rejected, and Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, with whom Paracelsus held a natural affinity, and compare them to the views of the modern magical practitioners. All in only fourteen feet of parchment! Hermione already knew which noted Alchemists she wanted to quote.

And Professor Christina Rosencruz in Language Arts and Mythology decided to start the class on eighteenth century wizarding poets and authors, which would include the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, and focused on such writers as George MacDonald, Druscilla Penningham, Mary Shelley, Robert Southey, Bram Stoker and Thaddeus Werten, much to Hermione's delight.

In their second Potions lesson, Hermione noticed that Harry cut his daisy roots on the oblique rather than transverse after carefully scrutinizing the tiny writing in his book. She frowned. Slicing roots on the oblique was another tip that Severus had taught her when she'd helped him brew her third year, as was the dropping of the Bogswallowwort leaves on the surface of the potion one by one, which Harry had done as well. But when she'd tried to glance at the writing herself, Harry moved the book closer to him and out of her line of sight, much to her annoyance.

On Friday, Harry and Ron met up with Hermione outside of the DADA classroom, neither looking at all eager when Professor Snape opened the door. Much like before, Professor Snape began with a brief lecture giving them a list of all the spells he thought they should have covered in their fifth year, and Hermione was amazed that his list included many of the spells that he'd taught her in their private lessons together. His assignment was to look up each spell, identify the incantation, wand movement, spell color or trajectory pattern, as well as the counter spell and the most effective means of defense. When he was finished speaking, he had the class pair off again to demonstrate their abilities at nonverbal Shielding charms. He called Harry and Ron to the front of the class first, allowing the rest of the class to practice at the back of the room until it was their turn to demonstrate.

Hermione paired up with Neville again, who was remarkably better this morning at casting the Shield Charm when Hermione cast the Stinging Hex and then a Stunner at him. "You got it, Neville!" she encouraged him, then watched as his face paled slightly when Professor Snape called out their names. "Just relax and focus on me, not him, and you'll do fine," she whispered as they approached their professor.

Neville nodded mutely, staring at the ground.

"Miss Granger, you shall hex Mr. Longbottom. The approved Hexes are on the board," Professor Snape stated.

Neville swallowed nervously and faced her, his eyes never leaving her face. Hermione nodded and took aim, feeling her magic build as she thought the incantation and released the spell, feeling the power rush out of her. It was exhilarating. However, Neville's shield wasn't as powerful, and he was thrown back into the shelves behind him.

"Again," Professor Snape said, as soon as Neville was on his feet again.

Hermione took aim again as Neville braced himself, likewise wand at the ready. Hermione's Stinging Hex surged out of her, hitting Neville's shield with a flash of bright light, but Neville's shield wasn't quite strong enough...the spell absorbed into his shield rather than rebounded, and he stumbled back a step.

"Pitiful, Mr. Longbottom," Professor Snape said. "Switch. Miss Granger, defend yourself from Mr. Longbottom's hex."

Hermione nodded encouragingly to Neville, focusing on her own magical energy with the incantation firmly in mind. Neville still wavered a bit when he hexed her, moving his lips while casting the Stinging Hex. Hermione's shield on the other hand was a solid wall, the projection like a wall of water that rebounded Neville's hex easily, making his hex shoot over his head and hit a window, breaking it.

Professor Snape's eyes narrowed; then he turned and, with a casual flick of his wand, repaired the window nonverbally. "Again," he said, turning back to face them both.

Once again, Hermione focused on her magic, allowing the build to surge again, and focused her intent. Neville's hand twitched a second before he mumbled, *Mordere*,

with a quick slash of his wand, but Hermione was ready; her shield erupting from her wand into another strong barrier. Neville's Stinging Hex had significant power behind it, hitting Hermione's shield with a powerful force, rebounding again and crashing into the wall behind Neville and chipping the stone.

"Miss Granger, control yourself. Do not destroy my classroom," Professor Snape snapped at her. "Again, Longbottom, choose another hex."

Neville nodded, this time mouthing, *Infirmare crura*, through gritted teeth as Hermione cast her shield to protect herself. Although her shield wasn't as strong, the impact of his Jelly-Legs Jinx flared brightly on the barrier, making the shield visibly waver and flex.

Professor Snape stared at Hermione, his dark eyes searching hers intently. "Show me your hands," he said. Hermione pocketed her wand and held out her hands with her fingers fully extended. Her right hand shook ever so slightly, and she tried to relax it a bit. After a second he said sternly, "I want you in my office tonight at seven." "Mr. Longbottom, five points from Gryffindor for mumbling. I expect you to do better next week." He turned around, snapping at the others to continue practicing, and called Lavender and Parvati forward.

Hermione wondered what she'd done wrong, and even received an apologetic shrug from Neville and Ron.

That night after dinner, Hermione hurried down to the dungeons for her detention with Professor Snape. Just as she was about to knock on his office door, the one behind her opened. "Inside, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said and moved aside to let her enter. The room looked much the same as it did the previous year. "Pull out your wand."

Hermione dropped her bag and drew her wand, facing him with uncertainty.

"Cast a Stinging Hex at the dummy," he instructed. "Nonverbally."

"Okay, Professor," she replied. Hermione concentrated for a moment, focusing her will, thinking the incantation clearly, and fired. It hit the target dummy in the chest with a velocity of one hundred and fifty-five with her strength in the dark purple shades.

"Again," he said, standing behind her with his arms crossed. Hermione shrugged and tried again, feeling her power build as she focused her intent, then fired. Her velocity went up ten points, and her strength registered a dark purple.

"What is taking you so bloody long to do the spell?" he asked, scowling at her.

She blinked.

"Do it again," he snapped.

She did. Her velocity number remained the same, and the chest glowed deep purple.

"Again."

She did. Her velocity number remained one hundred sixty-five, and the chest glowed a dark purplish-black.

"Show me your hands."

Hermione held her hands up for him to see. They were trembling slightly. He grasped her hands, his thumbs pressing into her palms, making small circles that made her breath catch, and after staring at them for a few heartbeats, he nodded. "What?" she asked, worried.

"You are experiencing the Surge," he said, letting go of her hands.

She looked up at him in shock. "I'm what?"

"The Surge," he repeated. "I read a copy of the report from France. And judging by what I witnessed in your lessons...you are Surging."

Hermione took in what he said and tried to recall what she'd read about the Surge. "My full magical strength..." She looked up at him. "But I don't feel any different."

"You don't feel your magic building within you before you cast your spells?" he asked, his arms crossed and his feet set firmly apart.

She nodded slowly as she thought back to the lesson. "Yes, I...but I was focusing on doing the spells nonverbally, so I thought..."

"Hermione, your magic is finding its balance. When you mature, so does your magic. As you near magical puberty...you're coming of age...your magic surges, wavers, and eventually levels off. However, until it does, you must be very careful until your seventeenth birthday. You can inadvertently cause great harm to another student," he warned her, and she inhaled in shock. "Do not allow your magic to surge out of control. Focus it, draw it, but *control it*...don't let it control you. If you continue to let it surge each time you use it, you'll never get out of the habit, and you can drain your magical core."

She stood there in silence, taking in what he said. "But I don't feel any different in Charms or Transfiguration?" she said, sounding more like an uncertain question.

"You are," he stated firmly. "You have been drawing on the Surge since June, I believe, especially in tense situations. You will meet with me each week..." he paused, "three times a week until your birthday."

Hermione nodded. "Yes, sir," she replied, wondering how she'd get all her homework done if she was adding extra lessons with him.

Hermione arrived precisely at seven as instructed two days later. Severus smirked at her expression when he opened the door to his training room before she'd even knocked on his office door. "Inside, Miss Granger," he intoned, moving aside to let her enter. She immediately set her things down out of the way and faced him expectantly.

"Pull out your wand," he said, watching her intently. "Cast the Stunning Hex three times in quick succession."

Hermione turned and complied. Her aim was perfect and her velocity remarkable, easily topping two hundred. But her strength was in the highest ranges.

Impressive. "Do it again...six times...nonverbally."

He noticed that she paused before each strike, but her strength still registered in the dark purples to near purplish-black, when even a simple Stinging Hex could kill. "You're allowing yourself to Surge," he stated. She turned to face him. "Stop thinking about your magic and just fire," he said, indicating the target dummy with an impatient flick of his hand. "Six times in quick succession."

He watched her carefully. She was concentrating too much. "Stop," he said, reaching out to clasp her wrist and actually felt her magic vibrate in her arm. "Don't worry about pulling on your magic or letting your magic build up...trust it to be there, strong enough to do spell. Focus instead on your intent, your target and your determination."

She tried again, and again, but her results were the same. Her strength remained in the dark purplish shades.

He stared at her, trying to determine the best way to explain it to her. When he'd first heard about the attack in France, he'd been livid with her. She'd naïvely allowed

herself to be trapped by two Death Eater recruits, Pierre Baudelaire and Philippe LeFèvres, both of whom Lucien Laurent and Ciarán Montague had tried to bring into the fold. Such naïveté, after everything he'd taught her the previous year, really rankled with him. She, of course, had no idea of her importance, but he did. If things were to come out right, she had to live, to guide Potter and protect him from himself. She needed to survive this war. He would do everything he could to make sure she did.

However, after her last performance in his class, he'd asked permission to review the French Aurory report again and had been startled by a realization that the girl was Surging. There was no other explanation of how Hermione had stood up against three armed, fully mature wizards wandlessly and escaped unharmed. Dumbledore had been so proud.

Now the girl was Surging in her lessons and no one had noticed.

For most Muggle-borns the Surge lasted a month or two, their magic slowly increasing, reaching a plateau, and then easing off as their innate magic found a balance with their magical core. Hermione's birthday was the nineteenth, and all indications suggested that she'd be an early Bloomer, starting her Bloom sometime early next week. In fact, he'd seen some early evidence in the boys already, not that Hermione noticed. He may have felt some of the draw himself, but, after years of teaching, he'd learned to control himself around Blooming young women and chose not to react to them.

However, that also meant that Hermione's magic should have reached the plateau stage already, and it should be starting to ease off... but so far he wasn't sure if it was or not. "Explain to me what you felt when you cast your spells just then?" he asked.

"I can feel my magic build, and if I concentrate on it, I can feel it move, like a current surging through me," she replied.

"And before...last year," he prompted her. "How is it different?"

"It feels alive, stronger, like an electric wave...a deep pressure that builds into... a Surge," she said and blushed. "Like it was described in the book."

He inhaled deeply. *And it is not easing off yet... Merlin, help us.* "The Surge is a gradual increase in one's power, their magical strength. Up until now your magical energy matched your magical core. Now as you reach magical adulthood, it's like going through a magical puberty, only quicker; your body and magic are changing. But between now and your birthday, you must not concentrate on the build of power, but trust that it will be there for you."

She nodded, and he indicated the target dummy again. "Intent, aim and determination, but keep your strength in the green-blues," he instructed.

She tried a few, but each time the strength indicator turned a dark bluish-purple or deep dark blue.

"Too strong," he said again. "Focus. In the green-blues, not blue-purple." He was quite impressed. She was doing the spell nonverbally, and her attacks were direct hits, even though she was unable to control her strength.

"Rein yourself in," he said as the indicator turned deep blue, then dark indigo blue, and a bright blue with each new hit. "Greens, Hermione, not blues."

Hermione left the dungeons Monday evening, feeling deflated. Even after three sessions with Professor Snape, she still had almost no control over her magic at all. The best she'd managed was a deep sea blue, not even a deep sea green, and that was only because she lost her determination altogether. She'd disappointed Professor Snape again; she could see it in his eyes. He'd expected her to do better, to control her magic. Still, her lessons with her professor were far more productive than Harry's had been with Professor Dumbledore, in her opinion.

Hermione had been rather disappointed when Harry told her and Ron what Dumbledore had shown him in his private lessons. Hermione could hardly call them lessons at all. Still, she did understand the importance of knowing more about Voldemort, and she had written down everything Harry had said about the Gaunts, the ring and the Headmaster's hand.

What she needed was a good long swim to clear her head.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

A few lines were quoted from the US version of *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* and denoted with an asterisk.

I made some slight changes to Hermione's, Harry's and Ron's class schedule from what it might be in canon:

Potions: is on **Monday** and Thursday.

DADA: is the same as in canon: **Monday** and Friday

Herbology: Tuesday, as in canon, and **Thursday**

Transfiguration: is on **Tuesday** and Thursday, which differs slightly from canon

Charms: **Wednesday**, as in canon, and on Friday.

Ancient Runes: Monday, as in canon, and Wednesday

Arithmancy: Monday, as in canon, and Wednesday

*Alchemy: which I added to Hermione's schedule is on **Wednesday** and Friday*

Language Arts and Mythology: which was mentioned in her third year is on Tuesday and Friday this year.

Bold: indicates a double lesson. This way, Hermione has a break (period off) each day for revision and angst/adventures or whatever Harry comes up with.

Italics: indicates a lesson Hermione is taking the boys are not.

Mordere means: to bite; to cut into; to nip, **sting**; to vex, **to hurt**, pain. Taken from the Latin translation site: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

Infirmary means: to weaken, disable, to make infirm, and Crura is Latin for legs

Taken from the site: <http://translate.google.com/>

Chapter 36

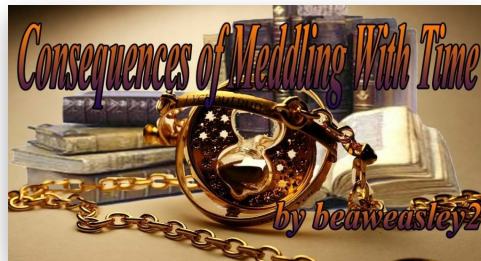
Chapter 36 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Severus entered through the staff entrance of the Great Hall, slipped smoothly into his chair, placed his napkin on his lap and filled his goblet. He watched the students as they entered and settled into their seats. His Slytherins were right on time, as usual, many already seated. Mr. Malfoy and his two cronies, Messrs Crabbe and Goyle, entered and headed to the Slytherin table with Miss Parkinson hanging on Malfoy's arm possessively, although the boy was not paying her any attention at all. The little group took up the space next to Mr. Rayne Boughton and Miss Brambila Rushbridge, the only two sixth-years to join Severus' Slytherin SA group, not that he approved of the name.

Mr. Aldebran Urguhart and Miss Penelope Reilly, his seventh-year prefects, were sitting down next to Mr. Raymond Aubry, Mr. Terrance Higgs, Miss Winnifred Maguire, Miss Mary Langley and Miss Catherin MacTirdelvach. Severus was pleased that Miss MacTirdelvach was with his seventh-year group of Slytherins. Maybe this year she'd decide to start to think for herself and stand up to her father...or quietly rebel. Miss Candice Longacre and Miss Tracy Davis, who used to spend their time with Miss Greengrass and Miss Parkinson before the Dark Lord's return, were keeping to themselves more, and Severus wondered if maybe they were distancing themselves from the students siding with the Dark Lord.

Of his fifth-years, Mr. Gasper Vaisey was actively recruiting. He had admitted to Severus after the prefect meeting that Mr. Seumond Sharma was scared to join Severus' group, but knew about it, and he felt strongly that it was only a matter of time before Mr. Eugene Caldwell joined. Severus wasn't sure; Eggart Caldwell had avoided arrest at the end of the first war, but he and his wife openly affirmed their loyalty to the Dark Lord since his return.

Eddart Terrance and William McGariety were sitting with Jessica Arenas, his other fifth-year prefect, and Pauline Gweyneowud and Aurora Shidhom. Damayea Vogelli kept to herself, but then she was a small and timid girl. That left four of his fifth-years out, most of them too set in their pure-blood and anti-Muggle-born beliefs.

He would have to have a meeting soon, but for now Mr. Urguhart and Miss Reilly were holding them. Severus' attention turned to the Gryffindor table.

His gaze immediately fell on Hermione and her two friends. He'd been concerned about her ever since he noticed that the girl was Surging. She needed to learn to control her bursts of magic in his classroom and in his private lessons, but she still couldn't reign in her magical strength. He smiled slightly at the memory of her lithe body moving in perfect balance with her intricate wand movements for each of the magical defense spells she cast...her fighting ability had greatly improved from when he'd started training her. She would be a formidable foe to any of his brethren Death Eaters. Regardless of how they mocked the girl in their circle, she was an exceptional witch.

She still craved his approval, always trying exceptionally hard in his lessons to gain it, but never faltering when he denied it to her. He should have turned to Minerva to teach her, but he wanted to. He had no idea why it was so important to him, but he would not back down now.

Severus glanced quickly at the Ravenclaw table when Hermione looked up at him, but he watched her in his peripheral vision. Weasley said something, nudging her arm to gain her attention, and she turned to look at him, then turned her attention to Potter. Potter scowled at Hermione, but she only turned to Weasley, as if trying to get him to agree with her, but Weasley merely shrugged. Typical, the dunderhead appeared to be caught in the middle but remained noncommittal as he stuffed his face. Whatever it was, it was no concern to Severus.

His concern was Malfoy and that bloody task of his; that damned Vow trapped him into involving himself, and he had yet to get the boy to confide in him.

Their next Herbology lesson was spent collecting seeds from *Euphorbia Peplis Draconis*, or more commonly called the Purple Dragon Spurge. The aggressive, succulent, magical species of thorny spurge didn't like being disturbed, much less having its seeds plucked, and the poisonous milky sap would squirt out from even the slightest wound. Any contact of the sap with the skin had to be cleaned off immediately and thoroughly, but if it came in contact with cuts or scrapes caused by the thorns, the student was sent straight to the hospital wing. Every student was wearing coveralls, their dragon hide gloves, protective eye goggles and grindylow skin masks.

The plant tried protecting itself from the students' efforts to collect the seeds by viciously attacking the students' gloved hands with its long thorns, and Hermione, as well as over half the class, had to use liberal amounts of the Akoko Emulsion on the puncture wounds and scratches and take a dose of Tabaiabaserum to prevent any extremely painful inflammation. Luckily, only a few students were sent to the hospital wing for poisoning.

Professor Sprout announced at the end of the lesson that they would be repotting the plants on Thursday, eliciting a moan from the students, and that they would be milking the plants the week after to give the temperamental plants time to adjust to their new pots.

"Blimey, a whole month with these bloody plants," Ron groaned as he stripped off his gloves.

"Purple Dragon Spurge's sap is the main ingredient for Purgative and Laxative Potions, Ron," Hermione told him as she carefully pulled off her coverall.

"But I thought Professor Slughorn didn't have those potions on his syllabus until October," Neville said, holding up Hermione's robe solicitously so she could slip into it easily. "Or that's what Professor Sprout told me."

"Thanks, Neville," she replied, slipping her arms into the sleeves. Her smile faded somewhat when he blushed a deep pink. He was doing that a lot around her lately: blushing, as well as opening doors, pulling out her seat... and other strange behaviors.

"Still, it's nice being in a lesson where we can talk freely," Ron said, dumping his coverall in the hamper. "Unlike *some* professors."

Hermione knew who he was inferring too, and her lips quirked in annoyance.

"And not lose house points if we swear when that bloody plant pokes us," Harry added, rubbing more of the Akoko Emulsion on his scratches.

As they left the greenhouse, Neville opened the door for Hermione and blushed again when she thanked him. All the way up to the castle, Ron and Harry continued to grumble about the loss of house points for speaking while Hermione and Neville talked about the properties of the Purple Dragon Spurge. She had Language Arts and Mythology and Arithmancy after Herbology, while Harry and Ron had a nice long break to catch up on their revision before double Transfiguration that afternoon. She was quite disappointed when Ron suggested, "I just remembered...Ginny has a break too. Let's find her and see if she'd like to toss the Quaffle. I could certainly use the practice."

Harry's face lit up with delight, but Hermione frowned at them. "Yeah, and I think Katie may be free as well," he said enthusiastically.

"You have four essays to write," she started to admonish them, but Harry cut her off, saying, "Hermione, we have *hours* before Transfiguration. And it's not due until Thursday."

"So are the essays for Herbology and Potions," she reminded them.

"Right, which we'll write up, and then you can fix them for us tomorrow night," Ron said as he started to leave for the stairs, calling over his shoulder, "C'mon, Harry, let's find Ginny."

"Don't worry, Hermione, we'll meet you in the library after your Arithmancy lesson," Harry said apologetically and then ran after Ron.

She shook her head and headed for class. She saw Anthony Goldstein and Justin Finch-Fletchley in the corridor as she turned the corner, talking to Megan Jones as they walked to class. Anthony spotted her, stopped, smiled and waved her forward, so Hermione joined them.

"Hiya, Hermione," Anthony said. For some reason, Anthony was quite a bit friendlier toward her this year, but she assumed it had something to do with their riding a Thestral together to fight in the Ministry of Magic last year.

She replied, "Hello," back and joined in the discussion about Druscilla Penningham's version of the Count Dracula story.

"I bet Professor Rosencruz has us comparing Bram Stoker's Dracula to Penningham's," Anthony said as Justin opened the door for everyone. "What do you think, Hermione?" Anthony asked, following her through the door.

Megan gave Hermione a curious glance and huffed as they walked to their desks.

"I suppose, since they are both about vampires," Hermione said as she sat down. She'd finished reading Jean-Berléand François *Vampires de Bohémien et de Hongrie*, and the story of *Vlad Ţepeuş I, Voivode of Wallachia, Son of Dracu!* last night after her swim, and planned on reading Sheridan le Fanu's classic of the vampire genre, *Carmilla*, tonight as well.

Anthony plopped into the seat next to hers, making Sue Li, who normally sat next to Hermione, frown in annoyance. "I asked my mum about the Anne Rice books. Have you read them?"

"Er, no," Hermione said, knowing that Anne Rice's books were not in the school library. She had read Polidori's *The Vampyre*, which was inspired by the life and legend of Lord Byron, and the short German poem, *The Vampire* by Heinrich August Ossenfelder, both of which she was going to use in her comparative essay. "Have you?"

"Yeah, I like the vampire Lestat. He's cool."

"All right, settle down," Professor Rosencruz said, getting up from her chair to begin the lesson.

Hermione, mindful of Professor Snape's instructions to focus only on her intent and determination when doing spellwork, finally managed to Vanish most of her hedgehog on the third try in Transfiguration, but she'd left bits of quill tips still visible. She forgot to Vanish the tail on her fourth attempt, and by the fifth try, she managed to completely vanish the patient little creature. But Harry was having no such luck with his guinea pig, grumbling that he couldn't vanish it because it was bigger than Ron's rat or Hermione's hedgehog; so Hermione swapped animals. However, since she managed to Vanish the guinea pig the first try, Harry became even more put out. But her spell must have been too strong because the poor creature had squealed loudly.

She also had little trouble using the Summoning and Repelling Charms nonverbally in Charms the next morning on the large sacks of potatoes and rice that Professor Flitwick had brought to class. Hermione's sack of rice had shot toward her so fast when she'd demonstrated her Summoning Charm, it knocked her into Ron who was standing behind her, and when she'd Repelled it, it shot across the room and hit the far wall with an audible thud. Professor Flitwick gave her a questioning stare, but she'd just shrugged her shoulders and smiled at him.

However, Hermione found that the magical theories the professors lectured about were getting more difficult and much more complex, and she was struggling to keep up with her notes in class. Also, Professors McGonagall and Flitwick expected all the spells the students used in the practical aspect of their lessons to be nonverbal, which, apparently, not everyone could do.

Even though Hermione could do the spells nonverbally after several tries, she spent most of her effort trying to control her magic as Professor Snape wanted her to do and not rely on her magical surges. But it was hard.

Her classmates, on the other hand, were all red- or purple-faced, bug-eyed or biting their cheeks to keep from saying incantations aloud and losing points.

That night on her way to the dungeons for her lesson with Professor Snape, Hermione spotted Luna at the top of the stairs that led to the second floor. "Hi, Luna," she called out.

Luna turned and smiled, then cocked her head slightly as Hermione approached her. "You're positively glowing. Is it that time for you?"

Hermione had no idea what she was talking about; there was no way her 'glow' was because she was pregnant, and she wasn't in love with anyone in particular, at least not enough to be 'glowing' about it, and being aglow in love didn't exactly fit Luna's mention of it being 'that time'. Confused, she stammered, "Er, no," with a shrug.

"Oh, I thought that it was almost your...no...okay," Luna said, starting off at a casual pace down the stairs.

Still confused, but letting it go since Luna frequently said things that made little or no sense, Hermione fell into step with her friend. "Where are you off to?" she asked.

Luna smiled. "A room on the second floor," she replied, drawing small swirls on the stone handrail with her fingertips as they walked down the stairs together. "It has lots of large windows and a fireplace, and it's convenient for all the Hufflepuffs who wish to do Yoga with me."

"You're still teaching Yoga?" Hermione asked, actually pleased in a way that the DA members were still meeting up with each other.

"No, it's more like leading. Amber Colbert...do you know her? She's in my year." Hermione shook her head, so Luna continued on, "She and I just follow the pictures in the books, and everyone copies us the best they can. Cho is still leading Yoga; she's does her sessions in the west wing on the fifth floor near the stairs that lead to the Ravenclaw Tower common room. Lavender and Parvati go there to be with the Ravenclaws who wish to keep limber."

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Luna turned to face her. "Are you joining us tonight? I'm going to show the King Dancer, the Billywig, the Locust and the Flying Griffin poses today," Luna said serenely.

Hermione had no idea what the poses were, but she was certain her mum had never heard of the Billywig or Flying Griffin poses. "No, I can't, I have to be in Professor Snape's office in five minutes."

"Oh, that's all right, there is always Friday," Luna said with a wistful smile, but Hermione knew she'd have another lesson with Professor Snape then, too. "I'm going to try the Sleeping Unicorn, the Reverse Moon, the Clabbert and the Mooncalf on Friday, just to keep things interesting."

"Sounds like fun, but I'll have to see," she said and wished Luna good luck with her yoga, then hurried down to the dungeons.

Hermione knocked on the door to Professor Snape's office and turned to face the one across the corridor, just as he yanked it open. "You're early," he stated.

She knew that she was only one or two minutes early at best. "I promise to walk slower next time," she said and crossed the corridor quickly. As she eased by him through the doorway, she thought she heard him inhale deeply, however when she glanced up at him, his face was set in its usual authoritative expression.

"How have you been managing in your lessons?" he asked as she put her bag on a chair and removed her school robes. She was still in her white blouse and skirt, but hopefully they wouldn't duel too much today.

"I'm having a little difficulty with the determination and execution of my nonverbal spells in Charms and Transfiguration," she said casually as she rolled up her sleeves.

His dark eyes seemed to follow her every movement before he turned to look at the magical window in the wall. Today the scene was the eerie green of the lake behind the thick glass.

"Mostly because my focus is divided between remembering not to speak, focusing my intent and determination without letting my magic surge. It's really hard."

He nodded, his whole attention solely on her again. In an odd way it was reassuring and unnerving at the same time. "Yes, it's hard because you've been relying on your surges to do your wandless and nonverbal spells, but it is essential that you learn to control your magic. You're doing Vanishing, Summoning and Repelling Charms, are you not?" he asked, and she smiled because he knew. "I'll take that as a yes," he stated before she could answer.

He pulled out a small box from his pocket, slightly larger than the one that he'd used to hold her Time-Turner.

Hermione's curiosity increased as he opened the lid and withdrew an odd-looking, spindly object with a glass orb.

"Hold out your right hand," he instructed, checking something on the device.

She complied, and he balanced the small device on her palm, asking her to straighten her arm out fully. The object seemed to balance on one point, barely touching her skin as if it weighted less than a piece of feather down. He watched it, staring at the device as if reading something. Hermione tried to do the same, but he barked at her not to move and had her fully extend her arm again. After a while, her arm began to get heavy, but he told her to hold still.

What seemed like a long time later, she began to feel the muscles strain in her arm, and the center of the small device began to rotate, going slowly at first, speeding up, the bands twirling fast, and it began to whistle shrilly. Severus plucked it from her palm and held it up to the light, looking at the center of the device, so she let her arm drop, thankful for the reprieve.

Hermione tried to peer into the device as well, moving to stand close to him like she'd done when they brewed together as teens, but she had no idea what he was looking at, unless he was looking at the alignment or some tiny markings she couldn't see. He inhaled sharply and turned to look at her, his expression hardening into a questioning glare so she backed up a step. He turned his attention back to the orb, but he'd not relaxed his shoulders. She looked at him, trying to gauge his mood by his profile. She saw his Adam's apple bob and the familiar tick in his jaw from clenching his teeth and smiled.

"Her...Miss Granger, I do not like being studied," he said just like he'd done as a teen.

She pursed her lips to hide her smile and turned away.

"Or being laughed at."

Her head snapped in his direction. "I wasn't...I'm just curious about the device."

"Obviously," he said smoothly. "Among other things." He put the device back into his box and stared at the window as he thrust it into his pocket. He inhaled deeply as he turned to face her again. "Tonight you'll be working simply on control. Try the Human-unveiling Charm."

She frowned at the directions...they'd only reviewed the theory and had yet to practice the spell. She tried the unfamiliar charm nonverbally. But the intensity of his undivided attention and the rigidity of his body were somewhat unnerving. She made several unsuccessful tries and huffed in disappointment, flustered that she couldn't do it. She pursed her lips and tried again determinedly, finally making a glowing holographic image of him appear in front of her... although his image was so bright he illuminated the entire room.

"Put it out," he snapped, and she quickly uttered, *Nox*."

"Do it again, but control your magical strength. The image should only be a faint, ghost-like reflection of me."

She tried, repeatedly, although each time he glowed so brightly, his image illuminated the entire room.

"Enough. Try another. I believe you are able to cast a Hex-Deflection Charm?"

She nodded. "Yes, Barty Crouch Jr. taught us when he was impersonating Mr. Moody."

His mouth twitched into a smile, and she could hear a faint chuckle escape from deep inside his chest. "Do it," he said, regaining his teacher's pose.

Hermione pulled out her wand and aimed it away from him. *Hexa Declinare*." Her shield burst forth in a blazing glory, glaringly bright, illuminating the entire room.

"Put it out and do it again," he said, almost a demand, and she extinguished her deflection shield. "Do it nonverbally and control. Your. Strength."

By now the intensity of his undivided attention, his stern demeanor and his disapproval of her inability to do as he wanted was decidedly distracting. She made several tries, making herself flustered at her ineptitude at controlling her magic. She could do the bloody spell verbally, but each time she did it nonverbally, her magic surged, the shield glowing brightly, bathing the room in blazing silvery-white light...and she didn't know how to hold her strength back.

She jumped when he snapped firmly, "Put it out," because he was standing so close behind her it was practically said in her ear. "You're letting your magic surge. Try again," he said angrily, his voice deep and low, his body so close she could almost feel it against hers.

She closed her eyes, to force back the retort she wanted to say to him, his proximity and irritation setting her on edge. She knew she was surging...she could feel it surge. She was trying...but didn't know how to do as he asked. She could practically feel his irritation prickle on her skin, but she wasn't... it wasn't... damn. Her hands clenched, and she inhaled deeply to try and calm down. She would just have to try harder.

"What is the problem?" he asked in a deep growl, confusing her, his breath moving her hair slightly.

She turned around. "What have I done to make you angry?"

He jerked back slightly. "Pardon me?"

"You seem angry...not just irritated...angry. So I'm asking, what have I done to anger you?" she boldly asked him, hoping the direct approach would work. "Because whatever it is, I'm sorry."

He stood back, his posture rigid. "I am not angry with you; I expect you to make more of an effort."

Hermione refrained from stamping her foot in frustration. "I am trying. I've been trying. But this isn't...each time I can't help it...it surges." His eyes hardened somewhat. "Do you do this with everyone who Surges?"

"No," he replied.

She was shocked by his admission. "No? Why me, then?"

He took a step closer, leaned forward slightly and glared down his nose at her, but that brought their faces within inches of each other. "You are exceptionally gifted and...because I didn't invest all my time to have you burn yourself out because you can't control your magic," he said angrily.

She inhaled deeply to calm down, thinking briefly that he smelled nice, and then looked up at him in shock. "You're afraid I'll burn out? But my magic should plateau in a few days."

He didn't reply, he simply stood there, their eyes locked on each other's faces.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Your magical strength has increased," he said finally. "It should have levelled..." He turned his head and looked at the wall. "Try casting your shield as if on an impulse. Don't think about doing it...just do it. You may do it verbally."

"*Hexa Declinare*," she said confidently, casting the spell without focusing, seeing the dome-shaped shield erupt from her wand. It was still bright, much brighter than normal, but not as blinding. He nodded, and she let her shield fade out.

"Better," he said, his lips quirking back slightly. "Now why was that time different than the others?"

"I didn't worry about the steps. I just determined what I wanted to do and focused on my memory," she said, her mind analyzing it thoroughly.

"You're over-analyzing the action," he said with a smirk. "You over think it too much. You did that when you were young, too. You'd bog yourself down in how it's done rather than trusting in yourself and doing it. I know you can do whatever you set your mind to, you catch on quickly and are very capable, but you focus on every step as if following the theories from the books. Trust your actions."

She smiled at his compliments.

He moved into the center of the room. "Now defend yourself...nonverbally."

Hermione left the dungeons, analyzing everything she'd done in Professor Snape's private lesson. She did over think her steps. Although her magic was still abnormally strong, when she didn't focus on her magic, it flowed better. The problem was when she was actively defending herself against him in a duel, her magic had surged, and she'd knocked Professor Snape clear across the room. At least she hadn't hurt him; he'd expected it and had cushioned the wall behind him. Still, she felt guilty that she was utterly at the mercy of her magical surges.

Cormac McLaggen and Bernard Dunstan, both seventh-years, approached the Fat Lady the same time Hermione did. "After you," McLaggen said with an odd glint in his eye.

"Thank you," she replied. She did notice that he was watching her as she scrambled through the portrait hole. Hermione wished that someone would widen the hole. It had been far easier getting into the common room when she'd been a first- or second-year than it was this year, and having two guys stare at her bum as she stooped to enter was disconcerting.

"Anytime, Granger," McLaggen said with a smirk, nudging his friend.

She shrugged it off and went to her room to change. What she needed was a good long swim to clear her head. She looked up at where the sixth years were revising and mentally groaned that the boys were watching her as she crossed the room. Neville blushed and ducked his head down, and Dean turned to say something to Seamus. She just didn't understand their sudden interest. Five years of being totally invisible to her male housemates and suddenly now they found her interesting. It made her feel self-conscious.

It was the same wherever she went; Hermione had the strange sensation that many of the students, especially the boys, seemed to be watching her as she entered a room, especially when she entered the Great Hall for meals. Ron was acting strangely, weird, more often staring at Hermione's chest when he spoke to her, and even Harry was watching her more than normal. Neville blushed whenever she said anything to him, even just a simple hello. Seamus found excuses to speak to her. The boys in other houses, ones she'd known now for five years, were starting to behave rather oddly, too. She figured it was hormonal or something.

Harry and Ron were with Ginny by the fire, revising, thankfully.

Ron looked up, smiled and waved her over. "Hermione, will you look over my essay?" he asked as she approached, his gaze flicking from her chest to her face.

"I want to take a bath first, if that's all right," she said, and he nodded.

"We'll be right here," he said, getting back to the one he was working on. She hurried up to change.

Severus had borrowed two of Dumbledore's spindly objects again. The one that supposedly measured the amount of static magic in the air was whirling on its little pedestal table while the second, which would indicate if Hermione was actively surging, was emitting a humming sound. Not that he needed either device to show him what he could obviously see in the sparring dummy indicators, but Miss Granger responded with the appropriate annoyance from the added noise.

"If you were controlling your magic, the devices would be inert," he told her again.

She gave him a scowling look, which he reprimanded with a stern look of his own and a raised eyebrow. She immediately appeared contrite. "Yes, sir."

Her need to gain his approval still amused him, but she was also becoming too comfortable with him, and that had to be curbed. "Try again. I expect to see the indicator to measure your strength in the green tones." He smirked slightly at the flash of indignant fire in her warm brown eyes.

Hermione apologized and looked at the floor as her face flushed a bright pink. She tried again, but the indicator was still showing her range in the blue-greens...not the greens.

This was going nowhere. *On all basic forms of the magical arts she can moderate her strength satisfactorily...but with the defensive spells, she's too strong...aggressive, trying too hard. Speed, accuracy and strength...what I drilled into her in fifth year... The girl simply has to learn how to control her magic.* Even a first year could moderate their magical strength. *Her first... Yes.* He tried another tactic. "Do you remember telling me how you learned to control your magic as a little child?" he asked, remembering the conversation as if it were only a year ago and not a life time. "Your parents thought what you did were telekinesis and pyrokinesis, if I remember correctly."

"Yes," she said, her head tilted as she gazed up at him questioningly, yet so trustingly.

He was struck by a remembrance of the act; she would do the same when they had worked together when he'd been a teen, her head would tilt as she gazed up at him with unconditional trust and when she pondered something he'd said, her eyes questioning, the thoughts swimming so quickly in her brain he could almost see it... Best not dwell on it, he was her teacher now.

"Why isn't this the same for you? Control your emotions and your abilities," he said, gazing down at her. He was once again surprised that she was almost his height. Not the unpretentious, yet precocious, lanky, over-achieving, large-toothed teen anymore... The know-it-all bookworm had blossomed, would Bloom soon, and be the witch he'd seen in her as a teen. In fact, she was now the same age he'd been when they'd first met. It was an odd thought.

"It can't be that simple," she said, breaking him from his contemplation.

He made a slight scowl at her and then shook his head. "It's not..."

"No, the theory behind it...but it would be, wouldn't it?" she mumbled, interrupting him. However, he could see the thought process spinning in her mind, her warm brown eyes glazing as she rationalized out what he meant. Suddenly, she looked up at him with those expressive doe-like eyes...

"Yes," he said with a nod, knowing she'd reached the proper conclusion. She was such a corker. "Try again."

At breakfast, Hermione kept her head down as she tried to ignore all the stares she was getting and was thankful when Harry suggested they all go visit Hagrid.

However, Ron slammed down his cup, saying "Oi, we've got Quidditch tryouts this morning, Harry," which meant that all attention shifted to Harry, at least at the Gryffindor table, as her housemates began speculating who'd make the team and encouraging their friends who were going to try out for the team.

"Right, afterwards, then," Harry said to Hermione as the owls swooped down into the Great Hall.

Hermione was glad each morning when the post came. Even though she wasn't getting post from her family like before, it still meant that everyone's attention was diverted to their deliveries. Harry received his new *Advanced Potion Making* book, but although Hermione suggested giving Professor Slughorn back the old book, Harry refused. He quickly switched covers, much to her disappointment in him.

Another owl swooped down and delivered Harry a roll of parchment with the list of all the people who wanted to play for the House team.

Hermione glanced at the list and nearly choked on her pumpkin juice. It looked like it had more names on it than were eligible to play in their House. "That list is too long, Harry," she gasped, wiping a bit of juice off her chin with her napkin.

Harry's brow creased in confusion. "Can't be. Professor McGonagall wrote it," he said. "Blimey, the team is going to be really popular this year."

"It's not the team, Harry, it's you." Hermione told Harry why he was more popular, but he simply blushed. She hadn't meant to give him a speech about it, and his face had reddened the longer she explained it, so she finally let the matter drop.

"Well, I suppose if you say so," he said, refusing to look her in the eye as he spoke, and pocketed the scroll.

When they got to the pitch, Harry handed Hermione the scroll so she could cross off the names that didn't make the team since he hadn't brought a quill and ink. She stood behind and slightly to Harry's left as he surveyed all the people who'd shown up for trials.

McLaggen, whom Lavender had quite the crush on all last year, approached Harry with a bit of a swagger, his shoulders back and chest puffed out. "We met on the train in old Sluggy's compartment," McLaggen said, watching Hermione as he shook Harry's hand firmly. "Cormac McLaggen. I'm trying out for Keeper," he finished loud enough so those around them could hear.

Hermione sighed, knowing Ron wanted to play Keeper, as Harry asked him, "I don't remember you trying out before. You didn't try out last year, did you?"

"I was in the hospital wing when they held the trials last year," McLaggen boasted, glancing at his friends as if preening. "I ate a pound of Doxy eggs for a bet."*

Hermione wanted to vomit at the thought.

"Right. Go ahead and wait to the side... over there for now," Harry said, obviously not at all impressed, and Hermione wondered what McLaggen's excuses were for his previous years.

First, Harry dismissed anyone who hadn't even brought brooms with them, an obvious judgment, since it was best to have your own broom to be on the team. He dismissed a group of giggling girls, who were there simply to see him, and several people who were not even in Gryffindor.

Then Harry divided everyone into groups, some of the combinations not making too much sense to Hermione at first glance.

"Okay, now each group will race around the pitch, weaving between the posts for the goal hoops," Harry instructed, indicating the goal posts at the end of the pitch. "Then you'll fly as fast as you can toward the other end, weaving through the posts again," he said, indicating the goal posts at the far side of the pitch, "and fly back as fast as you can, then hover above me. Everyone got that?"

Most of the applicants nodded, but some looked utterly baffled.

Harry dismissed a bunch of first-years that tried the exercise on old beat up school brooms, because most were too inexperienced at flying and the old brooms were not fast or maneuverable enough. Likewise, Harry dismissed the second group because they couldn't do the maneuvering he'd asked for, ending up in a heap at the base of

the goal posts, and the next group kept fighting and shoving at each other rather than show off their flying capabilities.

Hermione drew a line through each name Harry dismissed, watching the names of those she crossed off magically drop to the bottom of the parchment.

Finally after several different flying tests, which resulted in many complaints, more than a few tantrums, several broken teeth and one boy losing half of his teeth, another boy smacking the ground with his broom, breaking his tail twigs, and one collision that damaged a Comet Two-Sixty and two Cleansweeps and possibly given two of them concussions, Harry finally selected three Chasers: Katie Bell was back on the team, Ginny and another fifth year, Demelza Robins.

Things were not any better choosing Beaters, but even Hermione could see that Harry's best choices were Jimmy Peaks, who nearly killed Harry when he'd knocked him in the head with a ferociously hit Bludger, and Ritchie Coote, who looked quite weedy, but could really whack the Bludger hard and was a very quick flyer, even good enough to play Seeker if necessary.

Hermione excused herself to go up to the stands as Harry suggested that those already selected for the team take their positions and practice working together against those trying out for Keeper. Hermione chose a spot on the midline so she could have the clearest view of the entire pitch and still hear Harry. Each Keeper was given ten shots to block, and Harry instructed his Chasers not to hold anything back. Hermione was amazed at how good the Chasers were this year, as they cut down the competition for Keeper one after another.

Colin and Dennis Creevey sat behind Hermione with Marcus Belby in the stands, so they'd not be in her way, but seventh-years, Alex Hughes, Bernard Dunstan and Geoffrey Hooper sat to her right, and all the girls seemed to fill up the front of the stands in order to ogle Harry. Seamus, Dean and Neville sat on Hermione's left, calling out each time the person trying out for Keeper blocked the shot so Hermione could mark it down. Good thing, too, as McLaggen kept flying by, showing off in front of her until it was his turn for his trials.

Finally, Ron was up, looking anxious on his new broom on one side of the pitch, with McLaggen facing off on the other, and the three Chasers taking their places. So far the best score made was only six saves, and Hermione mentally crossed her fingers for Ron to get all ten. Ron made two solid blocks but missed the third one, then saved three in a row, catching one of Ginny's throws with his fingertips and almost falling off his broom, then stopping a shot by the new Chaser, Demelza, with his head, and kicking the last one. Ron missed his seventh, then made two very nice saves, but missed the last shot as it was just out of his reach, and the Quaffle rebounded off the inside of the goal hoop, apparently still counting as a goal.

Hermione smiled as she wrote seven by his name and circled it.

McLaggen missed Ginny's first shot, claiming that she only got by him out of pure luck. He barely stopped Katie's shot with his foot, then saved three, caught Ginny's curve throw and his caught his seventh, but Katie's rolled off his fingertips and bounced on the inside of the goal hoop and fell through the hoop. Harry called it a goal, but McLaggen was obviously offended by the call; he swore loudly enough for Hermione to hear him, and she was surprised by his lack of sportsmanship.

Demelza threw a curve at the left goal, which McLaggen lunged for, barely making contact with the Quaffle, but Harry said that *that* one didn't count as a save, because her aim was off and missed the hoop, so Hermione erased the hash mark she'd made beside his name for that one. However, McLaggen got angry, accusing Harry of being unfair and a liar, which stunned Hermione, considering Harry said it wouldn't count as one of his ten shots.

He was still arguing with Harry as Katie hurled the Quaffle into the left hoop. Harry reluctantly told Katie that this was trials and not an actual game, so it didn't count, although Hermione knew by his expression that he hated saying it. Katie scowled, but nodded and said something to Ginny and Demelza, who both nodded, Ginny casting a quick grin at McLaggen.

McLaggen squared off, his eyes hard and determined. Katie, Ginny and Demelza flew down the pitch. Ginny smiled at Hermione as the three girls flew by her, then turned about to face down McLaggen. The girls flew well together, weaving and ducking, passing the Quaffle between them as they charged the goal posts. Ginny dived for the right goal hoop as Katie shot forward toward the center hoop, then rolled and swerved at the last second as she caught the Quaffle from Demelza and threw a hard curveball that flew into the left hoop, just beyond McLaggen's fingertips. Hermione marked a miss on her parchment and looked up, to see Ginny wink at her.

Hermione watched McLaggen, wondering if he'd really be the best player for the team. Ron and McLaggen each had three misses but if McLaggen made this one, he'd be the team's Keeper. Hermione cast a nonverbal Confundus on him, making him feint to the right and miss the Quaffle as it sailed through the center of the hoop.

Lavender was bouncing in her seat, squealing, "He did it, he did it!" as Harry flew up to check Hermione's parchment.

Harry turned, smiling as he announced, "Okay, Ron's made the most saves today, so he's Keeper."

McLaggen, still hovering on his broom, chucked the Quaffle in anger, hitting Demelza in the head, swearing about Ron's ineptitude ruining the team, saying, "There's no chance to win a game now with those inbred gingers on the team," glaring at Ginny. Ginny, who'd been congratulating her brother, turn and glared at him, but said nothing.

Hermione, however, didn't care; she jumped up and ran out of the stands to go congratulate Ron.

Hermione did remember to remove the Confundus Charm from McLaggen when she saw him barrel into a pole, getting a scowl from Harry. She merely shrugged and turned to listen to Ron extol on his victory.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

I didn't change these things from the book, but I didn't mention them either: Hermione, Ron and Harry did visit Hagrid and learn that Aragog is dying. Hermione and Ginny did attend Slughorn's first Slug Club dinner party, and Harry did serve detention with Professor Snape.

In Hermione's Language Arts and Mythology lesson: Druscilla Penningham and Thaddeus Werten are names I made up and are not real authors, but the other's mentioned are.

Euphorbia is a genus of plants belonging to the family Euphorbiaceae; obviously the one I used is made up, but if you're an author, feel free to use the plant in your own stories.

The antidotes for the plant's poison are a play on two words: On the Hawaiian Islands, spurges are collectively known as "akoko", and on the Canary Islands as "tabaibas", hence the name of the potions. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euphorbia>

Declinare means: to bend aside, turn away, deflect. From: <http://www.archives.nd.edu/cgi-bin/lookdown.pl>

Two of Vlad Tepes' (Vlad III, Prince of Wallachia or aka Vlad the Impaler) sons, Vlad Țepeș and Mihnea I "the Bad", have been claimed to be ancestors of Mary of Teck, grand-mother of Elizabeth II, Queen of Great Britain. In October 2011, Prince Charles publicly claimed that genealogy shows that he is a distant relative of Vlad the Impaler. The claim accompanied his announcement of a pledge to help conserve the forested areas of Transylvania. The book, *Vlad Țepeș I, Voivode of Wallachia, Son of Dracul* mentioned in the chapter is fictional.

Chapter 37

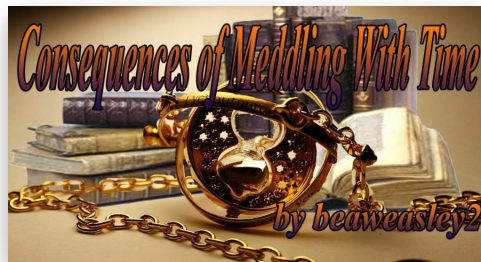
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Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Severus watched the boys fumble about Hermione, trying to gain her attention, but she was concentrating on maintaining her control while casting the Leg-Locker Hex at Mr. Thomas. So far their bumbling had cost their house thirty-five points, and if they continued, their inattention would cost them a lot more.

He turned to watch Hermione as she faced off with Mr. Thomas. After all the time Hermione spent sparring with Severus in her fifth and sixth years, Hermione hardly transmitted her intent anymore when she cast her spells; her movements were quick, fluid and without hesitation. Something Severus was quite proud of, actually, but that was also potentially dangerous to the student she was paired up with in class. Mr. Thomas, unfortunately, was not paying attention to what Hermione was about to do as he should have been because the boy jerked his wand suddenly and shouted, "*Protego*," barely able to block her curse in time. Hermione flushed, quickly apologizing.

"Ten points for shouting, Mr. Thomas," Severus said, scowling at the boy's expression, "and five more for ineptitude." He wanted to admonish the boy for staring at Hermione's chest and not paying attention as he should, but refrained since he didn't want to embarrass her. He would have preferred pairing Hermione up with one of the girls, but none of them were strong enough or skilled enough to defend themselves against her. The only boy not staring at Hermione as if besotted with excessive sexual desire seemed to be Potter. "Everyone, those of you casting will now shield yourselves and vice versa."

Severus had paired Hermione up with Mr. Thomas because Longbottom was even more of a maladroit than normal around the girl and kept flushing each time the girl spoke to him. The idiot had pulled out her chair and tripped over his own feet to pick up the piece of parchment she'd dropped at the start of class. This, for some irrational reason, had irritated Severus profoundly, more so when the boy knocked over his chair to get up to help Hermione rise for the dueling part of the lesson. Not that Severus desired the girl, and he knew she was experiencing the Bloom, but he did not like the way the boys were staring at her or all their inane fawning over her.

As he moved about the room, Severus stopped next to Mr. Potter, since the boy wonder and his side kick, Mr. Weasley, were both watching Hermione instead of practicing their spellwork. "Is there a problem, Mr. Weasley?" he asked, his voice dangerously low.

"Er, no, sir," Mr. Weasley stammered, finally turning around to face Potter and himself. "I was..."

"Watching Miss Granger. Perhaps, you'd like to spar with me?" Severus said with a sneer.

Weasley shook his head.

"No? Well, then maybe you should be practicing with Mr. Potter," Severus said coolly, adding, "instead of ogling your *friend*," in a low sneer so only the two boys heard him. "Now, get to work," he admonished them louder, deducting five more house points each from them.

He turned his back to the annoying pair and saw Mr. Thomas make a half-hearted attempt at hexing Hermione, which she defended against easily, although her shield was much too strong. Severus crossed his arms, watching with growing irritation as Mr. Thomas made one weak attempt at hexing her after another. "Mr. Thomas, I expect you to actually try and *hex* Miss Granger so she can attempt to block it," he snapped to cover his ire. "Ten points from Gryffindor for lack of effort."

He turned, glaring at Mr. Finnigan and Mr. Longbottom. Both boys were watching Hermione intently. "Get to work," he admonished them. "Five points each from Gryffindor." At this rate Gryffindor would suffer a severe loss, making them the lowest in house points.

He moved to stand behind Miss Granger to watch her as she defended herself, and now him, from Mr. Thomas' Leg-Locker Jinx. Her stance was perfect for fighting: arm relaxed, feet set firmly with her body weight even on both feet. Her arm moved fluidly, her wand making a perfect arc as her foot moved slightly, her body perfectly positioned, ready to brace herself against the impact of the hex Mr. Thomas cast. As usual, Miss Granger's shield was an impressive barrier that would not only protect her but everyone behind her as well. He inhaled deeply as the spell rebounded off her Shield Charm, catching the scent of lemon verbena and lavender. Mr. Thomas' next hex was barely strong enough to make her shield vibrate.

"Mr. Thomas, either cast a proper hex or get out of my classroom. If you're not going to put any effort behind your spells you're wasting Miss Granger's time as well as my own," he said curtly. "Ten points from Gryffindor."

Hermione stiffened, turning to look him in the eye, questioningly. Their gazes locked, her doe-like eyes looking at him, searching his eyes for...What? A hidden ulterior intention behind his words? Trying to read some cryptic meaning in his actions? Her unguarded, unspoken inquiry triggered memories of the friendship that had developed between them in his youth, during those few stolen weeks when he had hidden and protected her at school.

Ruthlessly, he disciplined his emotions. It didn't matter. He would not cave. He was her teacher, and she was his student and that was all there was. That was all there could be. That friendship was in his past.

"Miss Granger, my office seven o'clock. Do not be late."

"Of course, Professor," she replied, her expression softening as if his admonishment was a privilege not a reprimand.

He turned and scolded himself for his idiocy. He shouldn't be alone with her. She was Blooming. He snapped at Miss Brown and Miss Patil, "Nonverbally means, no mumbling, no lips moving and no whispering five points deduction each," and turned to watch his least favorite students, Weasley and Potter, grinding his teeth.

During the break in lessons, Minerva finally got around to her list of students under her care who would reach the age of maturity during the school year. She had written out the lists for the Heads of Houses prior to the start of term, but with everything going on the previous summer, Albus' frequent absences, she'd been remiss in handing them out. Even Pomona had inquired about her list of Hufflepuffs at dinner last night, and this morning, Filius had been much too relieved when she'd handed them out at breakfast. Even Severus had commented. And she couldn't put off scheduling her meetings with her charges any longer.

She personally preferred to have these little meetings in private, and always at least two months prior to the student's seventeenth birthday. Well, except for the students who had their birthdays in September or October...those she did right away. For one, it was easier, less embarrassing for the young witch or wizard if they were one-on-one, and secondly, she could help them if they were struggling with the Surge. She unfolded the parchment. *Okay. The Boys.* This year there were three sixth-years turning of age during the school year:

Mr. Thomas 21 November

Mr. Weasley 1 March

Mr. Finnigan 19 May

Mr. Longbottom and Mr. Potter would come of age next July. *Augusta Longbottom is more than capable of assisting Mr. Longbottom when his Surges start next summer. Arrangements will have to be made to assist Mr. Potter, but then, he lives in a Muggle home...*

She paused. That didn't seem to make much difference as of late, something invariably happened to the boy *He is wanted by every Death Eater and personally targeted by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, and has so far had the worst experiences. That Dementor alone last year.* Minerva frowned. It was lucky the boy didn't have any incidents this summer, considering what happened in the Ministry. *It might be possible to keep the boy from doing too much magic next summer...and the Surge manifests most often under stressful situations...* She would have to talk to Albus and the Order members about this. Maybe they could move Potter to the Burrow in June. Molly was more than capable of handling the boy's Coming of Age issues.

Now, the girls. There were four sixth-years turning of age:

Miss Granger 19 September...*Oh good holy Mother of Merlin!*

She checked her calendar. Two weeks had passed. *Two!* Minerva gasped. *And the girl, if she is an early Bloomer, may have been radiating for three perhaps five days now!* The Bloom generally manifested slowly, lasting about seven days on average for most girls, but those with exceptional talent like Miss Granger, it could last for up to ten days...or much longer if she was a long Bloomer.

Minerva wondered if Molly had spoken to Miss Granger over the summer. *Last summer! How could I have forgotten? I should have paid Miss Granger a visit personally!*

The Surges were a normal part of coming of age that every magical child went through, only it was normal for wizarding families to have *the talk* well before a young witch or wizard came of age. While it did start one or two months before the child turned seventeen, the onset was gradual, slowly building up, and most magical children usually didn't have any need to draw on their magical surge. Unless the child was in a situation of stress or perceived danger...such as Hermione had faced in France.

Minerva sighed. Miss Granger was friends with Mr. Potter, and subsequently, knew that she'd be fighting in a war come the end of her school years. In fact, try as the professors all did, Mr. Potter and his friends had a horrible habit of being drawn into situations that they shouldn't, putting themselves in danger time and time again.

Muggle-borns, since how the magical world worked was so new to them, became the concern of their Heads of House to guide them through this period, something Minerva took quite seriously. But with all the concerns regarding the children in Dumbledore's Army and their families over the summer (which had fallen on her and Arthur to organize) Miss Granger's Coming of Age had slipped her notice. Then there was Albus' ailment and his frequent absences from school, which meant Minerva had been fielding quite a bit of the Order's business and the extra security measures of both the Order and in the school, as well as the frequent inquiries from the school governors and Ministry of Magic, plus all the letters from concerned parents...including the threats to withdraw their children and the course curriculum approvals and supply requests...she'd been so busy, she'd overlooked one of her star pupils.

I should have spoken to Molly last June or examined the girl the first day of school myself. She'd have to have the meeting with Miss Granger first thing. *Professor Snape had mentioned something about Miss Granger surging in his class,* she recalled, and Minerva berated herself for not recognizing the signs. *But then, Severus' lessons are much more aggressive in nature than mine or Filius'.* Still, she should have noticed if the girl was drawing on her surges. She was a Head of House after all, and she'd been teaching for well over fifty years!

Minerva looked at her list again.

Zoe Thornton-Reid 26 Sept

She wasn't too late for her, thankfully, and although her mother was a Muggle-born, her father came from a magical family so it was likely she'd had the talk *Hopefully.*

The other girls' dates were well in the future:

Miss Brown 7 November

Miss Patil 24 May

And the last entry was for Patricia Burtrand, whose birthday was noted as: 14 August. She was from a pure-blood family, and her grandmother was from a very old magical lineage.

Professor McGonagall penned a note to ask Hermione to come to her office after dinner and summoned a house-elf.

"Please see that this is delivered to Miss Hermione Granger immediately."

The house-elf looked none too pleased with the request, not at all surprising considering the disastrous problem during Miss Granger's fourth year when she was discovered to be the one leaving knitted objects stashed around her common room for the house-elves. They still hadn't forgiven her. "If you would, simply have it appear by her plate at lunch."

There, that appeased the elf, somewhat. *Might as well have Zoe Thornton-Reid as well. She is due to start Blooming early next week and is most likely feeling the Surge as well.* Although, there was little indication in her lessons to suggest that Miss Thornton-Reid wasn't controlling her magical surges. She glanced at her calendar, pursing her lips at the lack of available time on her schedule. *Might as well see both girls tonight.* "And one more, Miss Zoe Thornton-Reid," she said, quickly penning another note.

Hermione wasn't sure, but the guys seemed to be checking out her bum as she bent over to get potion ingredients off the lower shelves of the school cabinet. She even caught Draco checking her out, but he of course covered it over by making one of his usual demeaning, yet old, remarks. Back at her work station, she set out the ingredients for her and Ernie, and he stammered his thanks while staring at her oddly and almost knocked over the Yucca extract.

She mentally shrugged it off as hormones. The boys in her year were sixteen now, and her mother had said last summer that the older the boys got, the more they'd ogle and flirt to try to get the girls to have sex with them. Hermione had seen plenty of incidents of that already, usually toward the pretty girls. Just that morning, on their way to Ancient Runes lesson, Zabini, Crabbe and Goyle were harassing two Ravenclaw girls, Sophie Waithright and Marian Merrek, on the stairs with sexual innuendos and rude comments, but then Sophie and Marian were very pretty girls, in Hermione's opinion, and the boys always had noticed them.

She looked up at the directions on the board; they matched the book, with only one difference, Slughorn had written *add two to three grams of shredded witch hazel leaf, stirring twelve times clockwise, and let simmer for about five minutes...* Hermione checked her book and read her annotations: the ones she'd filled in from all the notes she'd copied from teen Severus' book and the changes he had told her about when they'd brewed together. *Yes, here it is... add one counter stir...all right...* Below that read, *add the buckhorn before the lavender oil.* She tapped the page smiling. *I'm going to win this one.*

Halfway through the lesson, after stirring in the vermilion powder twenty-nine times, adding one counter clockwise stir to stop the whirlpool effect, she checked her directions. *Add one-half diced white onion before the sliced witch hazel...* She smiled, remembering Severus telling her, *use the skin; it will thicken the potion, but enhance the witch hazel.* Hermione cut her onion in half and set the other half aside for Ernie. She wet her onion with ice cold water to hinder the release of the propanethiol S-oxide from the amino acid sulfoxides in the onion, so it wouldn't make her cry, and cut her onion, rolling the blade of her knife as teenage Severus had shown her.

She glanced up and saw Harry do the counter clockwise stir with a start *How did he?*, she stammered to herself. However, she was certain that he hadn't added his onion skin. Her potion was a thick tangerine color, not a clear yellow as shown in the book. But by the time she added the lavender oil after the buckhorn, the potion would be just the right shade; a little thicker, but not as bitter to swallow and more effective because the lavender oil would soften the buckhorn and change its property.

She made furtive glances at Harry, waiting to see if he added the lavender oil before or after... and scowled as he added the buckhorn first...directly opposite from the directions in the book. *That's impossible! First the onion before the witch hazel and now the buckhorn before the lavender...?*

Of course, as Professor Slughorn moved about the room, checking on each student's progress, he stopped right beside Harry, extolling loudly what a superb job Harry was doing. It made Hermione grind her teeth in annoyance that their professor merely glanced at hers, muttering quietly, "Well done, Miss Granger. But what else would I expect from my other top student, eh?" "Bottle up your potions and put it on my desk," he announced to the class. Unlike Professor Snape, Slughorn wanted all of their potion, especially if it came out right.

"Don't worry, Hermione," Ernie said with a sappy, apologetic smile. "You'll still get full marks."

"But how did he know about the buckhorn?" she asked so softly that Ernie asked her, "Uh?"

"Nothing," she replied, wondering how Harry knew to switch the ingredients. She bottled her potion, cleaned up her work area and waited for Harry to finish cleaning up.

Once out in the corridor, she pulled Harry aside. "I'm not accusing you, but I have to ask...the onion before the witch hazel...how did you know? Was it in your book?"

He started to bristle. "Look, Hermione, lay off..."

"No, wait, it's just that...Harry, if you didn't use the skin, it can make the potion unstable," she said, and his eyes narrowed at her. "And using the buckhorn before the lavender oil is really tricky if you don't know to use the right spoon...which you did."

"How did you know that?"

"Really, Harry?" Ron interjected. "She read it, of course."

"It's just that you keep doing the variations I am, and I'm just curious who had the book before you. I think..." She paused. She couldn't tell him she'd learned it from Severus...he'd ask how... or why he'd told her... or when... not to mention Harry hated Severus... "It may be one of the Potioneers that I read about in the Potion journals." There, that seemed innocent enough.

Harry regarded her skeptically, his eyes narrowing. "I don't think so," he said, suspiciously.

"How can you be sure?" she asked, knowing Harry rarely read the periodicals and journals.

"Because the only name in the book is the Half-Blood Prince."

The Half-Blood Prince? Hermione was stunned. She could not think of one wizarding family named Prince or a Potioneer named Prince...*Prince?*

"So that solves it," Ron said, clapping his hands together once. "Let's go toss the Quaffle, Harry. I could use some practice..."

"Before you start on your Herbology and Transfiguration essays due tomorrow," she pointedly reminded them, still trying to recall a Potion brewer named Prince *Or a Healer, that is a possibility...they study Potions.*

"Right," Ron grumbled, and even Harry looked displeased. "So, I suppose that if we go play Quidditch instead of starting our essay..."

"Starting?" Hermione gasped in stunned disbelief.

"...you won't help us," he finished.

Hermione exhaled slowly as she regarded him sternly.

"Right," Ron said dejectedly. "The library it is then."

Severus hated these meetings; however, the Department of Education and the school governors insisted that they occur, but it was one of his least liked duties as Head of House. It rated just below dealing with puberty related crises: wet dreams, female menses, bedwetting, homesickness and, heaven forbid, pregnancy. Homesickness: his prefects handled that one, just as the male prefects handled wet dreams and bedwetting (and summoned house-elves to clean up the mess). Female menses: the female prefects had a supply of the 'necessities' for the girls to use, and then the girls simply went to see Madam Pomfrey or wrote a discrete letter to mum, or whatever female family member they confided in.

At least the boys' talk about the Surges, the Bloom, and the Coming of Age changes wasn't as bad, well, only slightly less painful than the one he had to have with the girls

of his House.

His way of handling the problem was simple. Usually, Minerva provided Severus with a list before the start of term with the birthdates of each boy and girl in his house who would be turning seventeen that year, one of her duties as the Deputy Headmistress and thus Keeper of the School Registry. However, she was quite late in providing him the list this year, possibly due to Dumbledore's incapacitation with his cursed hand and his frequent disappearances as of late, making her have to shoulder more of the responsibilities in school operations and the letters from concerned parents wanting reassurance for their child's safety. Regardless, it'd made him put off *the talk* for two whole weeks, something he'd preferred to get over with as soon as possible.

Normally, he arranged two meetings in his classroom the first Saturday of the year: first with the boys turning seventeen that year and the male sixth- and seventh-year prefects as well; the second one was with all the females coming of age and the female sixth- and seventh-year prefects. That way he only had to cover the subject of the Coming of Age changes twice, rather than dragging it out like Minerva or Pomona liked to do. They invited each individual student Coming of Age into their offices for tea. And then there was Flitwick with his charmed charts... Utter idiocy in Severus' book, and it allowed the student to feel free to ask questions. No, Severus hated dealing with any questions related to puberty, the Surges, the Bloom or the Coming of Age. Severus' way was straightforward and to the point.

However, here it was two weeks into the term, and he'd only received his list that morning. Severus had sent notices to the students on his list at lunch, the boys to meet with him immediately after dinner, the girls to arrive fifteen minutes later. The young men on his list and his male prefects were presently filing in and taking a seat.

"Just take any seat, Mr. Malfoy. Mr. Boughton, up front by Mr. Urguhart." He picked up the St. Mungo's pamphlet on the male magical Coming of Age *Becoming A Young Adult Wizard and the Responsibilities and Wondrous Joys It Can Bring*. Mr. Nott chose to sit next to Mr. Boughton and Mr. Urguhart, instead of Mr. Malfoy and Mr. Goyle. "Mr. Urguhart hand these out," Severus said, handing his seventh-year prefect the pile of pamphlets.

All right. Time for the talk. "With the exception of Mr. Boughton and Mr. Urguhart, you are here because you will be turning seventeen this year, which means in the magical world, as I assume you know, that you will become an adult and will finally come into your magical maturity. As you reach your age of maturity, there are several changes that occur. I assume that your father or some male representative of your family already told you about the Coming of Age transformation."

Every one of them nodded or mumbled their assent.

Good. "You've been told about the Surges?"

Again there was a general indication, mumblings, nodding and such that indicated that they already knew.

"If any of you have difficulty controlling your magic, see me or another professor. I do have a practice room set up here in the dungeons if you need guidance *As if any of them would admit to being incapable of controlling their magic at this age*, he scoffed to himself.

There was a chuckle, several grunts, and Mr. Boughton swallowed as he looked at the wall behind Severus' head.

Severus nodded. Still, he'd have to be on the lookout for the typical signs as they neared their birthdays. "And you have been told about the Bloom and controlling your urges?"

Mr. Goyle blushed slightly, and Mr. Boughton turned his head, but they all indicated in some manner that they had been told about the Bloom.

"Good. If I ever find out that any one of you gets a girl pregnant while you are still at school, you will wish that you had been sorted into Hufflepuff," Severus said with a hard edge to his voice so none of them would mistake him. "Not to mention what your parents will do *when* I write to them that you got a witch pregnant out of wedlock." He smirked, watching Mr. Zabini become astonished while Mr. Goyle and Mr. Malfoy actually cringed and paled slightly at the thought; Mr. Nott swallowed and examined his hands clenched on his lap, and Mr. Crabbe lost all his bravado, suddenly looking dumbstruck. Mr. Boughton appeared horrorstruck at the thought. *Good, enough said.*

Next was the question he hated. "And you are aware that you will experience wet dreams during your change, for a week prior to or about the week after your seventeenth birthday."

Each boy nodded or mumbled his assent.

"Good," Severus said, not the least surprised. "When you have such incidents, summon a house-elf to change the bedding. Any questions?"

The boys only shook their heads or smirked at their neighbors.

"Settle down. Write your name on the last sheet of your pamphlets where it says your name. If you've just lied to me, your name will vanish, and you'll have to stay behind." *Fat chance of that, they are all purebloods or from well established wizarding families.* But the magic of the quill worked every time if the boy's family failed to explain things competently and the boy lied to hide his embarrassment. If that were the case, he'd have to have the boy back for a private meeting. It rarely happened, but there had been a few occasions in the past when it did.

His sixth-years each flipped to the last sheet, picked up the Blood Oath Quill and signed his name. "When you're done, and *if* your name appears on the page, you may go," Severus instructed, adding, "Leave the quills on the tables," just in case some tried to abscond with them.

As the boys all headed for the door, Severus swished his wand, making all the documents sail over neatly to his desk and the discarded pamphlets drop themselves in the waste bin. *Done. Four minutes and thirty-five seconds. Girls next.* Circe, he hated doing the female version of *the talk*. It took longer.

Minerva took another sip of her tea and set down her cup. Miss Granger and Miss Thornton-Reid had arrived that evening right after dinner and were sipping on a cup of Minerva's best green tips, a local blend that her friend had sent her as a gift, and each of them had two chocolate éclairs the house-elves had sent up. Minerva told them why she'd requested them, and immediately Miss Thornton-Reid had looked relieved. Miss Granger had simply flushed and nodded her head.

"This happens when a young witch reaches her maturity, which you both know is seventeen. The Bloom is a release of pheromones, creating what is commonly called a *radiant glow*, or to Radiate, that every male around her will instinctively notice, be attuned to...unconsciously...and is a period sometimes crudely called *being in heat*, although I find that vernacular rude," Minerva said, her typical speech for young ladies. Both girls nodded slightly, apparently understanding things so far.

Minerva knew that in these modern times, Muggles were aware of pheromones, which made these talks easier. "This reaction to the release of your pheromones is also referred to as the Allure, the Drawing, or the Attraction, for obvious reasons, as those of the male sex will be drawn to you. They become attracted, attentive and quite solicitous towards you during this period, and some continue to be for weeks after your Bloom. Don't mistake this reaction for love, although those men who are still drawn to you even well after your Bloom can make very good marriage partners."

Miss Thornton-Reid smiled wistfully, and Miss Granger bit her lip, listening intently.

"In antiquity, and still observed by some magical cultures, the Bloom was the time when magical betrothals were made and marriage contracts agreed to, hence why many magical marriages and or unions occur when the young lady turns seventeen."

Miss Thornton-Reid straightened slightly, holding her cup delicately, and Miss Granger gave a small nod that she understood.

"Do keep in mind that during this time, one must be careful about advances and young men getting carried away. We don't want you girls getting into a sticky wicket."

Miss Thornton-Reid snickered softly, and Miss Granger narrowed her eyes slightly as she contemplated the warning.

Minerva pressed on. "Early Bloomers...those who Bloom prior to the week leading up to their seventeenth birthday...have traditionally been considered to be magically strong witches and were considered the more desirable matches in ancient times and in cultures that still practice arranged unions. There are Late Bloomers...those who go into bloom after their seventeenth birthday. Late Bloomers were considered to be weaker magically, although this is not always the case. I seldom see such a difference in the young women I teach. However, traditionally, special attention was made to determine the period *and* duration of the young witch's Bloom. Longer durations being thought the more promising." Minerva hated this part; many of the young ladies she had to talk to were late Bloomers, and thus took offence if she wasn't careful.

Miss Granger set down her tea cup, and her gaze wandered downward slightly, a sure sign that she was considering each statement carefully, probably categorizing it or memorizing it and possibly realizing that she was already Blooming. Minerva had been paying attention to the boys' interactions with Miss Granger and watched their expressions all day, and if Minerva read the boys reactions toward the girl correctly, she was definitely in her Bloom period.

Miss Thornton-Reid, on the other hand, looked slightly put out as if Minerva was insinuating that she would be a late Bloomer. Minerva smiled warmly at the girls, and she took a sip of her tea before continuing.

"However, occasionally, there have been Long Bloomers. Long Bloomers, generally begin their Bloom slowly, the onset happening a week or more prior to their seventeenth birthday and lasting for an additional week or so after their birth date. Rare, in that most believe that only those witches of exceptional magical strength and those of strong natural magical abilities exhibit this phenomenon. However, this is purely speculation, but it is generally more common with Muggle-borns. There is a theory that this is most likely to ensure that the young Muggle-born witch is able to gain the attention, and therefore the attraction, of an appropriate wizard for magical marriage. But again, I don't think there is enough proof that the theory is correct. Most females are unaware of the Bloom, as it's only physical manifestation is little more than a *radiant glow*, which could also be attributed to the happiness of coming of age. But the fact is that you *will* Radiate." She handed the girls each the Ministry approved pamphlet, saying the title casually, "*Blooming Into Womanhood*. Please read this thoroughly."

"Yes, but I already went through puberty," Hermione said, looking up from the pamphlet in her hand.

"This is not pubescence," Minerva stated kindly, "it's when your body and your magic blooms into your maturity. When you become a young adult witch."

"What's pubescence?" Miss Thornton-Reid asked.

"It starts when extra amounts of chemicals called hormones start to be produced in the body, which make your breasts develop, your hips swell, your pubic hairs grow," Miss Granger tried to explain, a flush growing on her cheeks.

"Oh, the changes that happen before the menses," Miss Thornton-Reid stated dismissively. "That's different; this is special!"

"Now, I suspect that you have both been having the Surges?" Minerva asked, trying not to look directly at Miss Granger.

Miss Thornton-Reid set down her cup and straightened. "Oh, yes, I have. But Mum told me about them, and I've been careful not to focus on my magic too much and rely on my intent and determination instead. Dad and I did exercises over the summer to help me prepare."

Minerva nodded. That was a typical, St. Mungo's approved, approach to avoid being addicted to the increase in power of the Surges. But it wasn't that easy for all students; Miss Granger was an example of that. Miss Thornton-Reid was not demonstrating the same magical strength that Miss Granger was. Not by far. For some, like Miss Granger, the Surges were quite strong, making their magical strength double...in her case, according to Severus, even triple. "Very well. Miss Granger?" She hated putting Miss Granger on the spot, but she needed to know.

"I've been working on controlling my magic so as not to harm anyone," the girl replied, blushing.

Minerva asked, quite well aware that Severus was working with her, "And how are the lessons coming along? Are you able to utilize your efforts all right?"

Miss Granger looked up, startled. "Yes, I think so. Sometimes in Defense I feel them more acutely than in Charms or your class, but I'm trying."

Minerva smiled again, reassuringly. "The good news is that you should be leveling by now, and your magic should find its equilibrium. By Wednesday, your magic should stabilize, and you shouldn't feel them anymore. By Thursday, you'll feel your usual self again."

The girl looked relieved. Minerva sincerely hoped she was right. *Severus' lessons will most assuredly help the girl. Now for the more enjoyable part of the tea, asking the girls about boys.*

The spell on the door told him the instant Hermione's hand touched his office door. He yanked open the door to his practice room to admit her and tried not to inhale as she passed by him. He might as well have told himself not to breathe. She still smelled like lemon verbena and lavender with an overshadowing of peppermint scent that lingered in the air about her, the flower scents subtle but discernible to someone who could tell a potion ingredient's potency by both sight and smell.

"I'm so sorry about the hour," she began to say as he closed the door.

She walked over to the shelves that lined one wall and set down her bag and drew her wand, anticipating to put in at least an hour's worth of hard work, although technically she was doing so much better at controlling her magic than he did at her age. He tried not to stare at her derriere when she bent over or her chest as she turned to face him.

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she apologized again. "Professor McGonagall wanted to talk with me about... well, about something, and it took a while longer than I thought it would."

"I am already aware," he said smoothly, having been informed by Minerva at dinner that she was having *the talk* with Hermione over pudding.

Even though Horace Slughorn, Severus' Head of House at the time, had given them *the talk*, Slughorn had naturally assumed that the sixth-year students of his house had already been told all the basics by their parents or legal guardians. Severus' mum had not. The summer previous to his sixth year, his father had been unemployed, so his mother had avoided speaking about anything related to magic. Her whispered comments to Severus in his room that summer had ill prepared him for anything except dealing with the Bloom, the wet dreams and night sweats. She'd been ill that Christmas, and Severus had remained at Hogwarts that year.

Thus Severus had drawn on his surges during his bouts against the Marauders in the months leading up to his seventeenth birthday, and subsequently after his 'magical puberty change into adulthood', he had become used to drawing on his core in stressful situations. It had landed him in the hospital, and he'd received a very stern talk from Madam Pomfrey. Not to mention a few hours with the Defense teacher, learning to control his magic in a duel. That was really what he'd been doing with Hermione these last few meetings and subsequently the previous year as well.

He took Hermione through the paces, having her practice the Freezing Charm, Impediment Jinx, Reductor Curse, Stunning Charm and Stinging Hex nonverbally on the target dummies, modulating her strength so that the indicator on the sparring dummy registered the level he'd asked her to do. He was pleased that she was finally able to control the level of strength of most of her spells, making the indicator register either in the greens or purples as he requested most of the time, although she had a hard time making it register blue. However, each failure to produce the requested color had her pursing her lips and clenching her jaw or stammering incoherently and blushing deeply in frustration, reactions he'd found amusing as a teen.

"Let me see your hand," he said when he had her stop. She held out her hand, looking up at him with those expressive brown eyes full of trust. It made his heart ache, but

he shoved the emotion down, so he could focus on her magic.

He rubbed his thumb over the soft, pliable flesh of her palm, trying to feel for any latent vibration. Her skin was smooth under his thumb, warm... He inhaled, still holding onto her hand as he checked her eyes for signs of strain. Her gaze met and held his unwaveringly. He could feel his cheeks redden as she stared so frankly at him, and he suppressed the traitorous blush as he forced himself to concentrate on his task, trying to focus on the constriction and dilation of her pupils not the tiny flecks of color in the amber brown irises, reminding himself that this was to protect her from her Surging magic. Not gazing into her eyes like a love starved Crup.

She shifted her feet, and he dropped her hand. "Very well," he said stiffly. "Let's see how you do against a few curses, shall we?"

She moved into position, and he smiled slightly at the prowess she exhibited. He cast both verbal and nonverbal spells at her, projecting his intention slightly with his nonverbal ones. Hermione moved with agility and grace, her wand movements fluid and quick with each of his assaults. Her nonverbal shields were strong and sure, not that he expected otherwise. Several times her magic flared, and she chastised herself silently each time. On a few occasions her shield was too strong, making a bright glow, but it was evident that her magic was finally starting to level off. He knew that her magic would be in the plateau phase by tomorrow, and by Wednesday her magic should find its equilibrium. She'd be an exceptionally strong witch.

He knew Hermione was in her Bloom, and being alone with her was a mistake he shouldn't be making. He maintained strict control over his own drawing attraction to the girl, forcibly reminding himself she was radiating so he wouldn't react. A constant inner struggle he was determined to overcome, to prevail.

Minerva, or any of the female staff, should have taken over his tutorial of the girl at least for the next few days, but he found he didn't want to relinquish the job over to just anyone. The girl needed to learn not only how control her magic, but to be able to defend herself. That was his job.

Thankfully, Minerva knew of their lessons and approved. That alone made him relieved and a bit satisfied. It showed that Minerva trusted him, even with her prized pupil.

He stopped to appraise Hermione for signs of strain, pleased that there was none. He let her hand drop and took two paces back from her, breathing deeply to clear his head, trying to ignore the warm scent of lemon verbena and lavender.

"Good, this time we'll duel. Use any defensive spell I've taught you and your shields. Begin."

Even though she was tired, Hermione forced herself to go up the stairs at her normal pace on her way back to her common room, only stopping on the fifth floor to catch her breath. Her body ached. Her limbs felt like she'd exercised for hours. She was sweaty, her hair felt damp, and she still felt hot, even in the cool stone corridors.

She looked down the empty corridor and thought, *Why not?* She could always transfigure her knickers into a swimsuit, even just by making the fabric thicker. Moreover, she knew drying and refreshing charms that she could use on her clothes. Plus, she'd only be saving herself a trip up the stairs and back for her nightly swim. It was hours before her curfew, but the O.W.L.-level students would all be in their dorms or revising in their common rooms. And if the pool was already occupied, she could still come back at her normal time...

Decision made, Hermione walked to the prefect bath. Besides, if she got too tired to finish the normal number of laps, she could reheat the water to a cozy bath temperature and have a long soak before bed...well, revision and then bed.

"Snickerdoodle," she said at the door and turned the latch. The room immediately illuminated as she opened the door wider and walked in. The mermaid turned, flicking her tail suggestively until she saw it was Hermione, then waved happily and went back to brushing her hair. Other than that, the room was unoccupied. Even Myrtle was blissfully absent. She kneeled down at the taps, choosing the herbal ones she liked and the ones that poured out only clear water.

Testing the temperature, she smiled and walked to the benches to undress. She used the Refreshing Charm on her clothes and laid them out neatly, then walked to the mirrors to look at herself in her bra and knickers. A few flicks of her wand and her knickers and bra were transformed into a reasonable swimsuit.

Hermione smiled as she turned, pleased to see the pool already filled. She flicked her wand to turn off the taps, placed her wand on her clothes and dove into the water. The cool water chilled her instantly until her body adjusted. She swam to the far end to begin her laps, already feeling reinvigorated.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Canon suggests that there are possibly two other girls in Hermione's dorm room, but they are not named nor do we know anything about them. JK Rowling promised that she would reveal their names in the Harry Potter Encyclopedia, but so far she hasn't identified them as far as I know.

The site http://harrypotter.wikia.com/wiki/Fay_Dunbar identifies one: *Fay Dunbar (born c. 1979-1980) was a pure or half-blood witch who aspired to become a member of...* The problem is this character is not canon: Fay Dunbar is a character in the Harry Potter video games; she doesn't appear in the books. She is only mentioned and described in wikia.com. HPLexicon doesn't mention her, and they are pretty thorough when it comes to their character list.

So, I made up two names: Zoe Thornton-Reid and Patricia Burtrand. They are not canon.

Chapter 38

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Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and

helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



For Hermione, things seemed to change from baffling to bizarre. Monday morning, Neville blushed and walked into a table and Seamus dropped his school bag on Dean's foot when Hermione said good morning to them in the common room. Mike Fletcher, a seventh-year Hufflepuff, tried to catch her attention when she'd tried to pass him, and Trenton Hargett in the library and even retrieved some books for her off the shelf, even though they hadn't been out of her reach. This morning, Seamus and Dean maneuvered Ron out of the way at breakfast so Seamus could sit next to her, which really aggravated Ron. She knew the boys would act differently because of her Bloom, but really, it was almost comical.

Ron cornered her in Herbology as she was putting on her protective coveralls. "So what is up with Seamus? Are you seeing him now?"

"Seeing...? Er, no, I'm not seeing him," she replied, putting on her eye goggles. "He just wanted to talk to me, that's all." She pulled the loops of her grindylow skin mask over her head and untucked her hair. She'd twisted it back and secured it with a clip so it wouldn't fall in her face, but she still didn't want it trapped against her neck by the stretchy loops of the mask.

"He said you're pretty," Harry replied, slipping his hand into one of his gloves.

"She *is* pretty," Neville said, smiling at her and then flushed when she smiled back.

"Of course she's pretty," Ron said, putting on his mask. "I just wondered why Seamus was all over her at breakfast."

"Thank you, Neville," she replied, making Neville's skin ripen a deeper pink. Personally, in her baggy coveralls, grindylow mask and goggles, she didn't feel very pretty at the moment, but it was nice to hear, even if they were only saying it because of her Bloom. "And Seamus wasn't all over me, Ron, he just wanted to talk, that's all."

When they walked over to the tables, Hermione took the place next to Harry and handed him a gardening knife. Neville and Ron both seemed to want to stand next to her, jostling her shoulder a bit, but Ron had gotten there first and snatched up a pair of shears and a knife. However, it didn't dissuade Neville from being unnecessarily helpful during the lesson, giving her not-exactly-needed tips on how to milk her purple dragon spurge without getting too badly hurt by the plant's defensive thorns. Hermione had read about it extensively in the library to prepare for the lesson, but thankfully Ron paid attention to him, and at the end of the lesson, neither Ron nor Hermione needed as much of the Akoko Emulsion or Tabaibaserum as Harry did.

On her way to her Language Arts and Mythology lesson, Anthony, for some reason, opened up the door to the girl's loo for her. "Don't be soppy, you prat," Michael Corner said just before he collided with another student coming in the opposite way.

However, she had been surprised to see Anthony and Justin both waiting for her when she came out, and they walked with her to their lesson.

"Ladies first," Justin said as he opened the door to let her in. She would have dismissed the gesture as simply his good upbringing, but then he followed her to her desk and sat down next to her, Anthony plopping down in the seat on her other side. Professor Rosencruz gave Hermione a knowingly sympathetic smile as she handed out the reading assignment for week.

On her way to Arithmancy, Ernie Macmillan and Stephen Cornfoot spotted her in the corridor and waved, unfortunately making Draco and Crabbe notice her as well, although Draco's usual Mudblood comment didn't have the same amount of disdain and sneer that it typically did.

Although she hadn't noticed it at first, Colin Creevey and Sebastian Kirchner went out of their way to say "Hiya, Hermione," in much the same way that Colin had greeted Harry during his entire first year. Even the seventh-years in her house were acknowledging her. They had largely ignored her all through her previous years at school, well apart from the seventh-year prefect, William Green, and Cormac McLaggen who'd been in the DA. Cormac definitely had a new interest in her; he would smile and wink at her when she walked by him, and both his friends, Bernard Dunstan and Geoffrey Hooper, were more sociable than ever before, although not as solicitous as Cormac. Alex Huges, a handsome boy Parvati had dated for an entire six months the year before, was now greeting Hermione in passing and watching her, actually watching her. William Green even offered to help carry her books from the library the night before.

But boys in their seventh year in the other houses, particularly Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff, were saying hello to her as well, boys who'd never spoken to or acknowledged her at all. Of course, the members of the DA still greeted her; she expected them to after everything they'd done together.

Perhaps the strangest reaction to her Bloom had come from Malfoy. She'd run into him frequently enough this year, especially on the stairs before curfew and between breaks, and in the past few days he'd actually greeted her on occasion without the rancor or snide comment she'd come to expect. Just a simple, "Granger," with a nod of his head as he hurried past her.

She had looked at herself in the mirror that night before swimming, and there had been no difference in her reflection at all. Well maybe her skin was blemish free, and styling her hair with simple twists and a clip brought out her eyes a bit more, but really, she looked the same as always.

Hermione was beginning to see just how annoying the Bloom could be. She'd read the pamphlet, of course, not that it gave her any sage advice, but it had clarified a few things for her that Professor McGonagall had mentioned. Like why she was getting all this unusual attention from the boys around her, and why she was suddenly starting to feel like Fleur. Although, she could not find such attention flattering as Fleur seemed to. For Hermione, the attention left her feeling flustered and unsure, so she tried desperately to ignore it all. Besides, she reasoned, it would go away and then things would return to normal.

On her way back to the common room, she saw Harry coming down the stairs toward her with the map in his hands. "Harry, where are you going? Curfew is only minutes from now."

Harry scowled. "I know, but I saw Malfoy on the map," he said, but she caught his arm before he passed her.

"He's not down that way. I didn't see him on my way up."

He looked at her and then searched the map. "There he is, on the fourth floor," he said, tapping it with his finger.

Hermione looked at where he was pointing. The footprints were now crossing the landing for the next staircase down. "He's returning to his common room, just like we should be."

"But what was he doing up here?" Harry asked, pulling his wand out of his pocket. He checked the map again, and Hermione saw the footprints with the little tag reading, *Draco Malfoy*, on the stairs heading to the third floor.

"See, he's going down to the dungeons," she said and then looked at him. "He was on the seventh floor?"

"Sixth," Harry stated emphatically. "He was standing outside the... Well, as if he was waiting for someone."

"There is a loo there, but he's alone now, it's only his prints," she pointed out. The tiny prints were now descending the stairs to the second floor. "He could have been meeting a girl, a Ravenclaw perhaps."

"I thought he was with Pansy Parkinson," he said, his eyes questioning.

She shook her head. "She's with Crabbe last I heard. The Malfoys may still be wealthy, but they are in disgrace with most of the wizarding populace."

He moved as if he were still going to follow Draco to the dungeons. "Harry, it's curfew. We have to go in. Whatever Draco was doing, it wasn't anything untoward, I assure you."

"You don't know that," he snapped. "Why won't you and Ron believe me? Ginny does."

If she'd said that, then Ginny was humoring him. "We have no proof that he is doing anything wrong. Just because he was on the sixth floor doesn't mean anything. He could have been to see the Headmaster... or Professor Sinistra...her office is up here as is Madam Hooch's and Professor Vector's."

His shoulders stiffened. "He is a Death Eater...I heard him bragging about it."

"Okay, I'll accept that you overheard him brag about taking the Mark, although why You-Know-Who would Mark a sixth-year, I have no idea. It's not like Draco can do anything but recruit. He can't go on raids, he can't terrorize Muggles, he can't leave the school without permission."

"I did," he reminded her.

"Harry, that was different. You went to *Hogsmeade* on a *Hogsmeade weekend*. That's not exactly the same as going to London and causing part of the underground to collapse." That Death Eater raid had been reported in the *Evening Prophet* a few nights ago, but the Ministry personnel who'd gone to fix the damage had it sorted out in only an hour. The moving picture scanning the damage had shown not only that the end of the tunnel and a good part of the wall had collapsed, but one of the train cars looked like it had been severely damaged as well. And the few Muggles who had been hurt were apparently recovering in St. Mungo's, most likely doused with memory altering potions as well as healing ones.

"I know we read about some of the things the Death Eaters are doing, like the disappearances and the attack in Llanrhystud and the one in Devon," she said as she started up the stairs, turning when she realized he hadn't followed her. "Harry?"

He still looked unconvinced.

"If we start seeing suspicious behavior, you know Ron and I will back you up, but really, what could Draco really be doing that's all that bad?"

He sighed heavily and started walking up the stairs next to her, looking dejected.

"Besides, the portraits warn the staff of anything wrong or suspicious things going on at night. It's why they are here, Harry, the magical portraits, to watch the corridors," she said as she indicated the portraits hanging on the wall. She knew that Althea Crockford and Rosalba Higgins still watched the seventh floor corridor for Severus, he had told her that, but she decided not to tell Harry they did.

Severus had watched the boys fumble about Hermione all day at every meal, just liked they were doing now, and he was once again irritated by their solicitous behavior, yet he found himself smirking when Hermione seemed oblivious to their attentions. Hermione was focused on her scholastic studies; he knew that she carried a full load, ten N.E.W.Ts in all, and that she wanted top marks in all her subjects.

Except... *Except...* she was *smiling* at all the attention she was getting from Messrs Weasley, McLaggen, Finnigan and Longbottom. He didn't understand it: Weasley with his atrocious table manners and apathetic attitude toward his lessons, McLaggen, the blowhard exhibitionist, vainly puffing his chest out like a peacock each time *any* female was near him, and Longbottom, the completely inept, bumbling idiot, who was almost always a shade of pink whenever she even glanced at him... pitiful. Each of them, utterly pitiful.

He did have to admit it to himself: that little girl that bit her lower lip with her large front teeth, the little precocious girl who'd look up at him from under her fringe with pleading, doe-like eyes that he'd protected years ago, had gone. In her stead was a young woman still desirous to please, determined to succeed at everything she tried, with a gentle soul and kind heart. It was odd, watching her now, seeing her in her *Coming of Age*, knowing that when he'd been a teen, the age she was now, they'd been friends. It brought to his mind the memories of his younger self once again, her lively wit and engaging thoughts when he had been the recipient of her attention as an equal. She'd been as true a friend as he'd ever truly had.

He tore his gaze away from her and scanned the Hall. Even the boys in the other houses were noticing her. He could see Mr. Summerby at the Hufflepuff table point in Hermione's direction, getting nods from Messrs Macmillan, Stebbins and Summers. At the other end of the table, seventh-year Jerome Dorny watched her while pretending to listen to Messrs Fletcher and Harkness. At the Ravenclaw table, Messrs Corner, Cornfoot and Goldstein glanced several times in Hermione's direction as they talked and ate. Severus had seen the seventh-year Ravenclaws, Messrs Belby, Carmichael and Page watch her as she'd passed them in the corridor, and even overheard Mr. Page's crude remarks about banging the bookworm in dark corners, and Carmichael's comment about boning her against the library ladder. He scowled at the memory of their loutish behavior. The three of them had two weeks of detentions with him starting tonight.

Miraculously, through it all, Hermione appeared oblivious to their interests.

He sneered at that observation, unaccountably pleased, as he inconspicuously turned his attention fully on the Gryffindor's, his hair shielding the direction of his gaze. Potter was scowling at Hermione, and Weasley appeared to be caught in the middle of the disagreement. But that would change; they were thick as thieves those three. Severus wondered what the argument had been about, what mischief they would be plotting now, and dismissed the thought. He snorted quietly under his breath. If Potter was arguing with Hermione, he wouldn't be fawning over her.

Ginny bounded into Hermione's room early with a huge grin and a small wrapped box in her hand. "Are you awake?" she asked, standing by one of the posts at the foot of her bed.

"Yes, sort of," Hermione said, sitting up. "What's up?"

Ginny literally skipped as she hurried forward and handed the small present to her. "I know it's early, your birthday isn't until tomorrow, but it's just arrived by owl and I-I wanted to give this to you straight away. It's from mum and me."

Hermione peeled off the paper, admiring the elaborate 'D' on the box before opening it. A silver charm bracelet with a delicate little silver weasel and a phoenix dangling from it lay inside. "Oh, Ginny, it's lovely," she said, admiring the intricate detail on the charms. They were utterly amazing.

"Corny, I know, but it's to put all your charms on."

Hermione looked at her confused, which made her friend chuckle. "I always forget, don't I?" Ginny plopped herself down on the bed. "A wizarding tradition; it's common for guys to give you a charm for your seventeenth birthday. Sometimes your friends will too...it's tradition. If you order them through Smeltings Fine Silver Wrought, they track which ones you already have so you don't get duplicates. Dragonsilver Designs and Seriously Silver do, too."

"I didn't know..." Hermione said, wondering why these traditions were not written down in a book somewhere. It was so unfair, all these things she should know about and because she was Muggle-born had never heard of. She always heard about them after the fact and felt so left out. "I'd have sent Angelina... and Katie one... They must think that I don't consider them friends!" She wasn't that close to Cho. *But if it is tradition... and she's always been nice to me...just not friends. But Katie and Angelina have been friendlier toward me ever since the DA and the fiasco at the Ministry. Had I known, I'd have sent them one for sure.*

"Are you that close to them? I know you know them, but I didn't know you were friends or I'd have told you...well, I could have told you if I knew you were close," Ginny said, and Hermione felt her face flush. "You can always send one this year and explain. Tiffany did when she found out about the tradition. She is friends with Katie."

Hermione nodded. "So what is the tradition? Tell me about it."

Ginny helped Hermione put the chain on her wrist as she began to explain, "It's just that...your friends, especially boys who want you to notice them, will send you a charm for your bracelet. I know that Dumbledore sends every girl one, and you'll get one from Professor McGonagall. They're not expensive really, but it's fun, and one more thing that makes turning seventeen fun. The weasel is from mum, you know, 'Weasley'," she rolled her eyes and Hermione smiled at the intended pun, "and I chose the phoenix. I was going to get you a horse, but the phoenix was so pretty."

As Hermione and Ginny headed down to breakfast, Neville blushed and stubbed his toe on a chair in the common room when Hermione said good morning to him. "Er, you got it...I mean, you're already collecting?" he asked, indicating her wrist.

Confused, Hermione lifted her arm then smiled, getting a knowing grin from Ginny. "Yes, Ginny gave it to me this morning."

Neville nodded and suddenly looked uncomfortable. "I was going to er, wait, but..." He dug around in his bag, down deep, and then pulled something out, a small pouch. "I know it's a day early, but happy birthday."

She accepted the pouch and smiled as she extracted a pretty flower charm.

"It's a puffapod...I thought it was pretty."

"It's lovely, Neville, thank you," she said, and he smiled at her, his face flushed all the more, but pleased.

In the Great Hall, Hermione and Ginny sat across from Ron and Harry so Ginny could show Hermione the charm to make the charms attach properly to her chain. Seamus and Dean sat next to her again, and she shrugged when Ron glared at her.

"I see you're startin'," Seamus said with a sly smile.

Hermione nodded and showed him her bracelet. "Apparently. Ginny gave it to me this morning."

"Well, it's a day early, but why not," he said, digging into his bag. He pulled out a tiny silver box with a gothic 'S' on it, tied with a silver string, and placed it next to her plate.

She opened the box, smiling at the silver Celtic knot charm in the shape of a clover. "It's lovely, thank you," she said, making him beam with happiness.

Dean leaned around Seamus and handed her another, exclaiming, "Happy birthday." His was an intricate silver dragon with iridescent wings.

After that, throughout the day, she'd been pulled aside by a few of her friends. Ernie gave her an adorable owl charm, Michael a pretty hippogriff, Justin a fwooper, and Anthony had given her a Pegasus charm because as he'd said, "You can't see a thestral, so I thought this one was better. To remind you of our ride, eh?" And in Potions, someone had placed a tiny pouch with a little silver cauldron in it next to her book on her workstation with a slip of parchment that simply read, Happy Birthday, B.

At dinner, she found a small box next to her plate with a large marquise emerald entwined in a silver vine. The card simply had an embossed green 'M' on it. The charm had obviously cost a lot, and she'd have sent it back, but Ginny told her not to and had her place it near the clasp of her bracelet. It did stand out among the rest.

The following morning, there were a dozen boxes and small pouches on her bed. Ginny had come bounding into her room again, eager to see her charms, and even Lavender and Parvati were curious. Ron had given Hermione a pad of her favorite parchment and a quill, the one she liked best, and a cute quill charm. Harry sent her several Flourish and Blotts tokens and a stag charm, which made her smile. Padma had sent her a ladybug, Stephen Cornfoot sent her a niffler, Alicia an enameled streeler, Fred and Gorge sent her a gnome and a pixie, Terry a diricawl and Hannah a Billywig. Cho had sent her a lovely swan, and Hermione made Ginny promise to lend her the flyer so she could get a charm for the girl in return. Parvati gave her a fairy charm, and Lavender a sweet caricature of a graphorn, its coat a silver-lavender in color with shiny horns.

At breakfast, several owls dropped small pouches on her plate. Professor McGonagall sent her a cat and Professor Dumbledore a winged boar, Hogwarts' mascot symbol. Lee sent her a pretty rose charm, Susan Bones a hippocampus, the Creeveys a griffin, Luna sent her a pearl and Zach Smith sent her a salamander. Not surprising, Cormac sent her a Gothic letter 'C' to remind her of him, but seventh-years, Geoffrey Hooper sent her a wyvern, Alex Huges a mermaid and Bernard Dunstan a little Crup with a forked tail.

However, the nicest one was delivered by a school barn owl. Hermione opened up the envelope and pulled out a lovely silver unicorn charm.

She immediately knew who the charm was from, at least she hoped it was from him.

The delicate charm caught the light; the body was polished to a gleaming shine and the mane and tail sparkled as if it had diamonds in it, making it glimmer and refract the light. It was just like the real unicorns that she'd seen with Severus her third year on their hike when she'd stayed with him. Holding the charm, she could remember that day like it was yesterday. It had been perfect, the sun warm and the smell of the forest rich and earthy. She stared at the unicorn on her palm with a sense of profound sadness at what she'd lost. Their friendship had been precious to her and now it had all changed.

There was no card accompanying the gift, but that did not matter, she was pretty sure it was from Severus. She was amazed that he'd been so thoughtful. She glanced up at the staff table, wanting to express her gratitude, but she couldn't catch his eye.

"My gods, that's gorgeous," Ginny breathed, picking up the charm. "Who sent it?"

Hermione turned back. "I don't know; there isn't a card." She was not going to break Severus' trust by divulging their relationship...what little relationship they did have. As tenuous and restricted as it was, constrained by the strict codes of student-teacher interactions as defined by the school charter, it was still all he'd allowed her.

Hermione removed her necklace as Ginny examined the unicorn, but she stopped her friend before she put it on the bracelet. "No, Gin, don't."

Ginny looked at her confused, but handed it back. Hermione hung the charm on her neck chain instead and put the necklace back on, putting her silver wishbone that her mum had given her for luck the morning before her first year at Hogwarts on the bracelet instead.

Severus waited until his prefects left his classroom. Only Malfoy had been missing from the group, but then he'd received a note from him that morning saying that he no longer wished to continue his prefect duties. The arrogant git. Other than Miss Parkinson, each of his prefects had chosen to side with him and his group. Severus ground his teeth. The SA, the Slytherin's Army, as they were now insistent on being called.

His attention was diverted from the list of new recruits that Mr. Urguhart had given him as his sixth year students began to amble into the classroom, making enough noise to wake the portraits on his walls. "Pair up and practice the spells on the board," he said. "You'll find your partner listed on the sheet of parchment attached to the door."

He turned his attention back to the list as the students milled around, finding their respective partners. Catherine MacTirdelvach had joined his group, but he was well aware that the girl was not a fighter. In his career interview with her, she'd indicated that she wanted to be a Healer, unless her father married her off after leaving school. Egraine Whyte was now seeing Terrance Higgs and had attended the last meeting, however Severus was dubious about her at best. The girl was pretty, but a mediocre student and had been raised her entire life to be the proper wife and mother to her future pure-blood family.

But the fourth years showed the most promise: Eddart Terrance, Louis Beresford and Charles Lenox, students Mr. Vaisey had inducted, were taking a stance. That meant that four out of five of the boys would be standing up for the right side when the war came. They would have to be careful around the other fourth-years; Phillip Crane's parents were both loyal extremists, and Arush Ganatra and Edward Yang's loyalties were unknown. Beatrix Spencer and Eleanor Beaufort had joined, which left Georgiana Curzon, Charlotte Defoe and Frances Kitschier following their loyal parents into the Dark Lord's order, to be dutiful Death Eater wives and mothers. *Pity.*

He looked up as the noise level decreased, watching the students pair off. He rose from his desk and began moving between them, watching for errors in technique, sloppy aim, and moving lips. "Mr. Finnigan, clamp your mouth shut and do the spell *nonverbally*; five points from Gryffindor," he admonished the boy, turning to watch Longbottom as he walked by.

Mr. Longbottom saw him, their gazes locking for a moment, and the boy stumbled, his shield faltering as Miss Granger's hex shot over Longbottom's head and nearly hit Severus in the chest...and would have if he hadn't been aware that Mr. Longbottom's concentration would falter, and Severus had quick reflexes. Severus had his wand drawn and the hex dissipated with one fell swish and flick of his wrist.

Hermione smiled at him a little cheekily at his proficiency.

"This is not duelling, Miss Granger, it is practicing nonverbal spellwork," Severus snapped at her, trying to sound annoyed at her. "Be in my office at seven." Mr. Longbottom opened his mouth to say something, most likely a protest about his unfairness in defense of Miss Granger, but he cut the boy off. "One word, Mr. Longbottom, and you'll be spending two evenings in detention with me...alone."

The boy paled and clamped his mouth shut with a snap. Severus did love the reaction, it was so satisfying.

Harry glared at him, and Ron turned, mouthing something under his breath. Severus narrowed his eyes. "Weasley, you'll be spending the evening with Filch. Now, everyone, nonverbal means *no* speaking, *no* mumbling, and, Mr. Finnigan, stop what you're doing and get to work. Ten points from Gryffindor."

He sighed. So far the only one to master the ability of nonverbal spellwork was Miss Granger, but that did not surprise him in the least.

By now Hermione's bracelet was teeming with little silver charms. Not all of them were from boys in her year either, quite a few seventh-years had sent them, even those from different houses. The most surprising ones were from Aldebaran Urguhart, the seventh-year Slytherin prefect, he had sent her a rose on an S, and from Rayne Boughton, who was filling in as Slytherin prefect since Malfoy abandoned the post. He'd given her a tiny vial with a bit of liquid silver in it. Gasper Vaisey, another Slytherin boy who she'd merely made brief comments to like, 'pardon me,' or 'excuse me,' and the occasionally mumbled 'thank you,' in the library, had sent her the Rune symbol for happiness.

On her way to the dungeons to see Professor Snape, Hermione spotted Professor Slughorn and Madam Pomfrey up ahead at the top of the stairs. "Yes, yes. Mr. Potter is really quite an exceptional Potioneer," she overheard Professor Slughorn saying when she drew closer, and Hermione pursed her lips in annoyance. "He turns out perfect potions every time."

"No, I meant Miss Granger's," Madam Pomfrey said with a shake of her head, making Hermione stop short in surprise for a moment at hearing her name. "The name on the bottle was hers, not Mr. Potter's, although his was of fine quality as well. Edith Wadely and Julius Thwaithe both told me her potion was not as bitter as yesterday's and asked me what I'd done to it. That, and it seems more effective than the one I've been using, almost as if Professor Snape... Well, that's silly of course, he hasn't the time like before, and with you here, he hardly has to help me fulfill the hospital potion requirements, does he? But if you have anymore, I could certainly use it." She looked up as Hermione got closer. "Oh, hello, dear."

"Madam Pomfrey, Professor," she greeted politely, nodding to each.

"Miss Granger," Professor Slughorn said, making Hermione stop again. "A moment."

Hermione paused, feeling a little nervous anticipation in her gut, before turning around. "Yes, professor," she asked slowly, knowing what he wanted. Her directions...Severus' variations.

As expected, he asked her about her potion and even offered to compensate her in House points if she'd agree to brew him another batch.

Madam Pomfrey made a copy of Hermione's frown, only hers was deeper. "Horace, really," she scolded and then turned to Hermione. "Miss Granger, come see me tonight if you've the time. I'll happily offer proper compensation for your brewing time."

Hermione considered her request. *It was a great opportunity... Severus had said he...* "All right. I have..." She couldn't say lesson...that was a secret. "A meeting with Professor Snape. But I can come by after." Madam Pomfrey was delighted, but Professor Slughorn looked rather put out. She thanked the Healer and excused herself properly, leaving with a sense of smug satisfaction. Her potion was better than Harry's.

Harry's best subject was now Potions, but Hermione knew it had everything to do with his Potions book and not because he'd learned anything, but then she was doing steps that she learned from Severus as well. Teenage Severus had frequently left his Potions book in his lab, and Hermione had read it, eager to know what she'd learn in advanced Potions. She'd copied down many of his notes in her revision guide, and when she got her copy of *Advanced Potion Making*, she had transferred all his notations into her copy. But that was different. She and Severus had brewed those potions together, many of them anyway, and she'd learned the steps and deviations from the directions from him. And he was her teacher, so it wasn't like she was cheating.

Severus paced the old classroom restlessly. She was not late, but he didn't like waiting nonetheless. A timid knock on the door startled him. He yanked it open and moved aside to let the girl in.

"I wanted to thank you," she said, dropping her bag on the floor against the wall without taking her eyes of him.

"For what?" he asked suspiciously. The charm bracelet on her wrist caught his attention as she removed her robe and folded it casually to set on top of the bag. The charms were a token of friendship, or even a subtle indication of interest, given to a girl by her friends and admirers when they turned seventeen. The fact that Hermione was an early Bloomer almost assured that some of the charms were from admirers. *Or is she really that popular?* He'd never considered that she could be; she was always with Potter, Weasley or the Weasley girl. Occasionally, he'd seen her with Miss Lovegood or in the library with other classmates, revising...

"For my gift," she said, looking up at him with a warm smile.

Ah. That. He felt a faint flush of heat spread slowly across his skin. He didn't know what had possessed him to send it to her. Regardless of any rationale he could contrive, Severus was well aware of the tradition, and he'd sent her the charm simply because he didn't want any other bloke giving her the unicorn. That was their symbol, their memory, and it...that day...was one of his fondest memories from his youth.

So, cursing himself for his sentimentality, he'd bought her charm from Dragonsilver Designs in January.

The three top jewelers, Smeltings Fine Silver Wrought, Dragonsilver Designs and Seriously Silver, kept meticulous records; the Silver Charm Ledgers had the names of each Hogwarts girl and their birthday and would automatically update the other two matching ledgers when the shopkeeper wrote down each purchase for each girl so that there would be no duplicates. Severus had been surprised that his had not been Hermione's first charm purchase. The phoenix and a cat had already been bought, most likely from Minerva and someone in the Order. The winged hog was also listed, the symbol of the school, the one Dumbledore sent to every girl, and a weasel.

"You're welcome." But considering all the charms on her bracelet, his was merely one of many, surely.

A tiny flash of silver caught his eye as she drew her wand and turned to face him. There, on a thin silver chain around her neck was the charm...his charm...lying against her creamy skin. The light of the illumination orbs in the chandelier gave the unicorn a soft glow and made the tiny cuts in the tail and mane sparkle, not unlike the creatures themselves. His lips twitched at the memory of her expression when she'd first seen them on their hike.

He looked up at her, her soft, doe-like eyes watching him and a small smile graced her lips.

He inhaled deeply, unfortunately catching a whiff of lemon verbena and lavender, and he swallowed back the reaction to the scent he'd always, and forevermore, associate with her. He mentally shook himself to break the Allure. *She is Blooming*, he reminded himself. *Get a grip on yourself, man!* That is all it was and he was not going to react. He was not a hormonal teen, he was her professor...she was his student. Fifteen years of teaching and he'd never allowed a girl to weaken him. Miss Granger would not be the first.

She was still looking at him, expectantly. He knew he should coolly acknowledge her thanks and move on, but he found it difficult to do so. Instead, he emitted an incoherent grunt and a sharp nod, conscious that he was hunching his shoulders in a defensive gesture. He saw her smile widen before him at his acknowledgment of her thanks, and it suddenly became very important that he return to the matter at hand.

"Well?" he asked, as if she should know the routine by now. "Do I need to give you a list of spells or can you chose for yourself?" He raised his hand up, indicating the target dummies. "In the greens, please. Six in quick succession."

Hermione's smile widened, and she turned, firing a combination of Stunners, Impediments and Disarming spells and three hexes at the sparring dummy in quick succession as requested. The indicator glowed a brilliant shade of emerald green with each impact.

Severus walked down the corridor, illuminating the recessed doorways with his wand and securing the locks on the classroom doors. He had no idea where Draco was or what the boy was up to. So far his search had proved futile. The boy eluded him. He had only a few more places to check before turning in. On an afterthought, he walked down the fifth floor corridor for the prefect bath. As nice as the bath was, oddly only a handful of the prefects utilized the room, mostly for trysts. A quick indication spell revealed an occupant. Severus mumbled the staff access password, opened the door and entered.

He nearly gasped aloud.

The girl at the far end of the pool, for there was no mistaking the form, swam away from him, her body stretched out on the surface of the water. In a relaxing and gliding swim stroke, her head rising as she kicked with her arms reaching out and then fanning outward, she pulled herself through the water with ease. Her entire back was bare, or appeared bare. In a quick smooth move, she ducked under the water as she neared the end of the pool, turning and twisting under the water surface, kicked off the wall, reemerged, and was now swimming toward him. He moved to stand next to the bench where the towels were, unable to take his eyes off her. The girl's arm lifted, a perfect arch, her body twisting as she took a breath... His breath caught. It was Hermione.

There were no bubbles to hide the fact that the girl was practically naked in the water. The flesh tone of her skin stood out in the clean, translucent turquoise of the water. Her body glided, slipping through the water with a natural ease. Her freestyle stroke was long and strong, the water rippling along her torso and thighs to enhance her form... the splash from her kicks not enough to distort the shape of her legs... He remembered that curvaceous little body in denim shorts and a T-shirt standing by the Weasley's pond, the wind making her curls flutter against her skin. "Miss Granger," he bit out in annoyance, his voice echoing in the room.

She stopped and turned, treading water as she looked up at him. "What? Did you want something, sir?"

Did I want something...isn't that a loaded question? "I want you out of the bath now, Miss Granger, it's nearly curfew."

She swam easily to the edge and heaved herself out of the water, rising before him like a water nymph. He stared at her dumbstruck as she stood and walked casually toward him.

She'd definitely grown up over the summer into a lovely young witch, and not only in height; she'd filled out, her curves, breasts, that were normally concealed under the school robes were now on full display for him, and his body immediately reacted. He scolded himself for ogling her, but the two triangles of fabric straining to contain her perfect breasts, and the tiny ties on the side of her hips holding the small triangle of pale flesh-colored fabric hiding her possibly shaved mons... Present, yes, but still, a tiny triangle of peach fabric was hardly enough to dissuade a boy from taking advantage of the privacy of the room. Severus fought to control his thoughts. He was a man after all, and for all his normal self-control, this was indecent exposure!

He grabbed a towel and thrust it at her.

"Thank you," she replied, wiping her face with the thick terry cloth.

"I expect you to cover up that...that...whatever you call it," he stammered at a loss. He growled inwardly and drew himself up to his full height.

"Swimsuit," she finished for him, placing one foot on the bench and drying her leg.

"You're indecently clad...if that flesh tone *swimsuit* can be called clad at all," he admonished her. His penis was now straining against his trousers zip, and he was thankful for the length of his frockcoat and his robes.

"It's apricot," she said, looking down as she dried herself off.

"Will you cover up!" he snapped. She finally wrapped the towel around her body, tucking the end in to secure it in place. It hardly helped. As she bent over and wrapped her hair into another towel, Severus held the edges of his robe in his hands as he crossed his arms, effectively wrapping himself up in the voluminous fabric so she'd not see his physical discomfort. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

"I've been swimming every night," she replied casually, turning to look at him.

"Every night?" he asked, glad that his voice didn't crack.

"Yes, sir," she replied, smiling at him as if utterly unaware of how enticing she appeared.

"Merlin," he growled out after she told him why she'd started swimming every night *Every night! If the boys, any boy found her in this state of undress...dressed in her*

'swimsuit'... No. He'd put a stop to that. "Well, from now on you'll have your own password, and it will be active an hour before curfew."

"Erm, thank you, sir," she said with a warm smile.

"Very well. Now go to your common room. You should be in bed." However, the mere thought of her in bed made him react, his already engorged penis twitching uncomfortably. He was too close to her, in a secluded room, and she was still only wearing three tiny triangles of apricot fabric tied on with strings under a towel that could easily fall off with the slightest tug...

He turned on his heel. "I'll wait to escort you to your common room outside. Do hurry," he said and strode purposefully, not hurriedly he assured himself, from the room, his body still betraying him with the treacherous sense of attraction he was suffering. Her birthday was two days ago, and he could still feel her Allure...she was still radiating! Damn blast, the girl was going to be a long Bloomer.

~ T. B. .C. ~

I have art! The wonderful Proulxes drew me a picture for this chapter! You can see it in my gallery on deviantart.com. Thank you, Proulxes, for the lovely drawing. I absolutely love it!!

<http://beaweasley2.deviantart.com/art/from-Proulxes-What-325957235>

Chapter 39

Chapter 39 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione trudged down to the dungeons, trying not to think about her detention with Professor Snape. *A detention. Not a planned lesson carefully worded to sound like a detention...a detention!* She forced herself to think of anything else. Harry was still angry with her over her comments about Draco. There was no proof that Draco was doing anything wrong. Yes, she'd passed him a few times on the stairs either when going to the prefect bath or coming back to her common room, but that didn't mean anything. Draco was taking Alchemy and Arithmancy; Professor Newton's office was on the seventh floor on the south wing because he liked the view, and Professor Vector had her office on the sixth floor, and rumor was he was struggling in both subjects.

Thoughts of Draco led to Harry, which, in turn, led to her annoyance that Harry had arranged a Quidditch practice on the night Slughorn had his dinner party just so he could avoid going.

She had dreaded going to Slughorn's pretentious dinner party, wishing she could use the Quidditch practice as an excuse like Harry and Ginny had, but at least it had given her the opportunity to give Cho the silver rune charm for good fortune she'd bought for her. Cho had been so touched and very understanding about Hermione not knowing about the tradition until this year. The girls had compared bracelets, telling each other which charms came from whom.

But as people started to take their seats, Blaise and Cormac had sat on either side of Hermione, each vying to gain her attention, and Cho was stuck sitting between Blaise and Professor Slughorn. Damayea Vogelli, a very shy Slytherin fifth-year, had sat between Albert Wertheim, a fifth-year Ravenclaw boy, and seventh-year Slytherin, Raymond Aubry, who'd brought Penelope Reilly as his date. Seventh-years, Duncan Inglebee and Jerome Dorny had talked about Quidditch with Kenneth Rearick, Blaise and Cho through most of the uncomfortable, formal dinner, but all five boys kept staring at Hermione throughout dinner. In fact, Professor Slughorn had even commented on how pretty Hermione looked, and she'd managed to thank him without rolling her eyes. Except for a touch of mascara and magical, smudge-free lip gloss, she hadn't done much to her appearance, simply put on her cashmere red jumper over her blouse and wore her best black jeans. She hadn't even done much to her hair, except pin it back a bit.

She knew it was because of the Bloom; apparently, she was a long Bloomer, unfortunately. Professor McGonagall had confirmed it over tea the Sunday after Hermione's birthday. Hermione hadn't noticed any change in the boys' reactions at all; they still acted like wet prats or stared at her whenever she was around them.

Hermione entered the dungeons still a little upset with Professor Snape. *A detention. He'd actually given her a detention.* Seamus, who had been on Hermione's left, had

been ogling her in DADA. Instead of blocking Neville's curse as he was supposed to, he'd been watching her and deflected the curse...in her direction! So not only did she have to block Dean's hex that he'd fired at the same time Neville had fired his curse, but she had to block Neville's curse too. Hermione had intentionally increased the strength of her shield to handle both spells and to protect Lavender, who had happened to be standing behind Hermione and Seamus where she'd sparred with Parvati, as well. She honestly hadn't mean to knock over Patricia Burtrand, who had been sparring with Zoe Thornton-Reid next to her. She'd only stopped to apologize and offered the girl a hand up when Professor Snape had barked at her.

Yes, her shield had been strong, and yes, it had been too bright and too large, but she had been protecting two other people! He had promised her back in her fifth year that he would word his intentions carefully to seem like detentions or disciplinary actions to her fellow classmates and so they wouldn't show up in her school records. *So much for that promise*, she fumed as she knocked on his office door.

The door to the room across the corridor opened, and she inhaled in surprise, feeling a sense of relief as he motioned her inside *Maybe I'm wrong*. She hurried into the room, and he closed the door.

"Why was the strength and force of your shield strong enough to blind the entire class?" he snapped as she set down her bag.

She turned to face him. "I had to defend myself from two spells, and Lavender was right behind me...she wouldn't have seen it...she could've been hit," she tried to explain but his jaw was clenched tightly, and his dark eyes were hard with anger.

"No one can fire two spells at once, and I know perfectly well you can defend yourself against consecutive spells," he growled out angrily. "And Longbottom isn't proficient enough to cast effective consecutive spells in quick succession."

"Neville and Dean fired their spells at the same time, and Seamus' attention was...he was distracted...he accidentally deflected Neville's curse in my direction," she countered, trying to control her temper. "Lavender was behind me...her back was to us, and Neville's curse could have hit her." He was not being fair. She wasn't surging anymore. Didn't he know that she did it on purpose?

"So you purposely strengthened your shield far beyond that which was necessary?" he asked, "and therefore endangered another student."

Apparently not. "Yes, I did it on purpose. I purposefully increased my intent and determination to create a shield that would protect Lavender, Seamus and me from Neville's and Dean's curses."

"Mr. Thomas used a hex," he snapped.

So he had been paying attention. "Yes, it was, sir," she said, forcing herself to sound respectful. Getting angry would not help; she needed to be calm and rational. "I reacted in a way I thought best for the situation."

He stood there, watching her. She held her ground, yet tried to keep her expression neutral, to keep her breathing slow and even. She could feel her anger ebb, even under his scrutiny. She did what she thought to be necessary at the time and, if faced in the same situation again, she wouldn't do anything differently. Hermione had apologized to Patricia again at lunch, and she had understood that Hermione hadn't intentionally knocked her down.

"Very well," he finally said. "Today we will be working on your accuracy and magical force."

So much for rewarding back any House points he'd deducted. She turned to look at the dummy standing next to the far wall. He had switched the sparring dummy for a target dummy. The sparring dummy stood in the far corner with a sheet over it, looking like a stiff version of a Muggle ghost costume.

"May I remind you, the target dummy is used to work on accuracy and the force of your hits. White is contact...but no strength, yellow...sufficient impact but low effect, orange...sufficient impact with moderate effect, orange-red is a good, solid strike with optimum effect, and red...damage done or a deathblow. As you know, the strength of the spell will be shown in the indicator on the forehead."

She nodded, remembering the first time he'd shown her the dummies in her fifth year.

"I want you to fire the same spell, five times, each time modifying your strength so as to make the chest glow all five colors. I do want your accuracy rating to be above ninety. You may begin."

Hermione sighed as she nodded and drew her wand.

Their practice time had been delayed tonight; some engagement that had come up, Professor Snape had said in his note, which he needed to attend. She'd spent the time in the library until eight, and then hurried down to see him. As exhausting as these lessons were, they were fun and exhilarating, and she really looked forward to their time together.

He didn't open the door across the hall at her arrival, and his office was empty. Not sure what to do, she opted to wait for him in his office, using her time to work on her Arithmancy essay on Ferris' theory on tri-linear numerical equivalents, which was to be compared to Wentworth's theorem of using equations of equal congruent probabilities to determine logical outcomes.

There was the obvious hole in Ferris' theory which centered on using triad equations for each identifier, in her opinion... but Wentworth's equation of equal congruent probabilities substantiated Ferris' theory. Lai-Sang Young's idea of using equal and congruent lines that can intersect and or pass in tangent to the prime equation and her actual practical application of the calculations disproved Ferris, though.

Hermione frowned. It was a tricky problem, but it was clear that Ferris and Wentworth were not as congruent as most Arithmancers believed, and she thought she saw the discrepancy. She just needed to explain her reasoning and make the calculations work to prove her theory.

She was reading Johann von Reichenburg's method, which used trilateral equations to demonstrate synchronized cuneate probabilities when Severus entered his office.

"What are you working on?" he asked as he approached her, stopping to peer over her shoulder at her book.

"My Arithmancy essay," she replied, looking up at him.

He picked up her rough draft and skimmed through it, shaking his head, nodding, then smirking at her work.

"What?" she asked.

He handed it back. "Ferris was a dunderhead. There is an obvious hole in his theory about using triad equations, if you can find it."

"Wentworth's equation substantiates his ideas, but I think there is a discrepancy that is being overlooked," she said, and he smirked. She felt elated *Is it possible he agrees?*

"Did you read Kincaid's principle on parallel versus congruent probabilities with multiple vectors?" he asked, flicking his wand to adjust the chair next to hers, and sitting down. "He clearly disputes both of their theories."

"I haven't, no," she admitted, jotting down the name. She'd have to look him up. "I am considering Johann von Reichenburg's method as his seems to agree with Lai-Sang

Young's."

"Scott Macintyre's paper in the Arithmancy journal, *Questions for Inquisitive Quanderers*, is not as convincing as his book on the practical application of equal congruent probabilities in the determination of life equations, but he's an interesting read."

They sat and talked about the theories at some length, much like they used to when they had both been younger. For Hermione it was marvelous to be able to sit in his office, discussing theory and arguing points of difference with him.

"You should also read Edward Troughton. He presents some valid points and has some interesting arguments on the practical application of the principles, but he's not as accomplished a mathematician as Lai-Sang Young or Johann von Reichenburg." He stood up, all at once resuming his authoritative bearing. "So are you ready to practice?"

"Oh, sorry, right," she stammered as she quickly packed everything into her bag and stood up. "I am now."

Severus held nothing back tonight, as per usual. After a full half hour of target practice, carefully controlling her magic so the chest glowed with the proper color, they squared off against each other for another half hour, and he cast one curse, hex or jinx after another at her, expecting her to deflect or block each one. Then he wanted her to cast them at him, to break through his shields. Not that she could, though to her immense satisfaction, she did make him stumble back from the impact of a few of her hexes.

He was training her to be a fighter, to be able to survive the war. And she was grateful, but by the time he called it a night, she was sweaty and her body hurt. Every muscle cried out as she climbed the stairs, and her back ached.

She stopped at the bottom of the stairs that led up to the sixth floor and turned her head to peer down the corridor. Two of the Ravenclaw prefects were walking toward her for the stairs, most likely heading back to their common room, which meant the bath might be unoccupied since they both had wet hair. She checked her watch and decided to save the time and effort, and simply transfigure her underwear again.

She said her private password, "Snow angels," to the door and smiled when she heard the latch unlock. Hermione was still smiling at Severus' choice of password as she walked to the prefect bath, remembering the day she'd played in the snow with him.

Severus found himself taking the stairs to the Astronomy Tower two at a time. He'd just check if there were any hormonal teens shagging on the tower. He reached the top and found himself alone. He walked to the wide-set crenellations that kept those idiots who came up here from falling to their deaths, placing his hands on the rough stone as he gazed out at the forest. Normally, he avoided spending any amount of time up here, gazing at the outline of the mountains and the dark, forbidding forest, or out across the lake toward Hogsmeade. He shivered. Winter was coming early this year; he could feel the tendrils of cold wrap around him, a frigid wind ruffled his hair and chilled him. *Ah, bitter chill it was! The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold...*

Lily had loved the views from up here. She would stand close to the edge, lean over and laugh as the wind blew through her hair. He'd always marveled at her courage and recklessness.

No matter how much he'd loved her, she had maintained a distance, withdrawing from him, and the more he'd pursued her, the further and further away she'd seemed. He never understood her attraction to Potter, someone she'd adamantly called a toe rag for five years, but in the end, he'd won her, a boy with bombastic behavior, a malicious bully and an overall arrogant prat.

Of course, Lily had hated the Death Eaters and everything the Dark Lord stood for, and she had never understood Severus' fascination with the Dark Arts. He could never persuade her that he not only understood the Dark Arts, but knew a great many Dark Arts spells...and their counter spells. *That's* what had fascinated him; the complexity of the Dark Arts and that he could figure out how to reverse the darkest of magic, thus defeating their intent...and therefore defeat the mind that created it.

Her refusal to understand his academic interests was exacerbated by her contempt for his housemates and their repeated taunting and harassment. She hated Severus' association with his housemates; Lily had never forgiven him for becoming friends with his peers in Slytherin, whose association offered him protection and companionship, and for his use of the word 'Mudblood,' a common parlance among Salazar's House...and in fact had become quite commonly used among the discontented pure-bloods.

Those were things Lily just wouldn't forgive.

He berated himself for his inability to release what was lost, and move on with his life. He was stuck, forever accountable for his past errors of judgment, fused to his promise to protect Lily's child and secure Potter's destiny. *Bloody Gryffindors and manipulative twinkling-eyed old farts!*

His thoughts turned unbidden to Hermione.

They were so alike, Hermione and Lily. Both Lily and Hermione were the brightest students of their year, both kindhearted girls, caring and compassionate toward others. Lily had a natural and intuitive ability at Potions that matched his own and was very adept at Charms; Hermione was very gifted in both Charms and Transfiguration equally, but she also enjoyed the academic challenge of Ancient Runes and Arithmancy.

Lily had been vivacious, charming and very funny; Hermione was more thoughtful, compassionate, measured and witty. Both were very brave.

Lily had been a popular girl for whom many boys had romantic feelings; Hermione's popularity had been earned slowly as her friends got to know and understand her. Lily hadn't been very forgiving, whereas Hermione tended to be, and Lily couldn't see past her own definitions of what was right or wrong, while Hermione could see the complexity of a person's life and why they sometimes acted as they did.

Lily might even have returned his feelings if he had not become so seriously involved in the Dark Arts. Lily expected everyone to be good, not to fight or harm each other, and to stand up for those who were weaker, which is one reason she was so unforgiving and intolerant of his infatuation of the Dark Arts.

Lily couldn't understand that people could do wrong things for the right reasons; Hermione understood his role as a spy and didn't reject him for it.

Truth was Lily was more intuitive, more introspective than he'd ever seen Hermione be. Both felt compelled to prove themselves as worthy to be in the wizarding world, striving to be the best at everything they did, reading voraciously and wanting to know all there was to know. Hermione just developed her ability to think for herself later than Lily had done.

Severus allowed a small smirk of satisfaction play across his face. He was probably the reason; he'd always forced Lily to think for herself rather than quote the books back at him. But after Hermione had returned from her third time with his teenage self, her work had greatly improved.

He remembered telling Hermione, when she was a little girl trapped in his lab all those years ago, to extrapolate, summarize and hypothesize, to fully explore her own thoughts and opinions, and not just regurgitate the ideas that she had read in books, but give well thought-out opinions and theories on them as well. He chuckled. She tried so hard to please him, to gain his approval...even his teenage self...that she'd taken everything he said to heart and gave it her best.

He stared at the ridgeline of the mountains and frowned. He was not going to brood over that which had been, or the situation which was now held within very strict expiations and guidelines. *That was then, this is now, accept it.*

He forced himself to think on his other problem...Draco. The boy was avoiding him, and he was nowhere near discovering what this task was that the Dark Lord had given the boy.

He had erected a few pillars in the room, six in all and in no discernible pattern, simply obstacles. They had been sparring for a while now, no-holds barred. "So this is what it's like to be in a wand fight," she said, dropping her shield, quickly deflecting a hex and casting a Stunner at him.

Of course he deflected it. "Hardly," he said smoothly as he fired two quick hexes of his own.

She managed to deflect both, earning a smirk from him. "It's not?"

"No," he said, his arm moving in a graceful, yet fast arch. His Stinging Hex almost made contact, but she deflected it and cast another curse, then created a shield against his jinx.

"But I do well enough against you," she said, firing a hex and immediately deflecting his jinx, then firing again at him.

He chuckled. That arrogant 'you think so' chuckle. "Well, I could," she snapped, deflecting his curse.

"Hardly," he said with a crooked smile, sending two hexes in quick succession.

She cast a shield and lunged to her right, firing at him. "I bet I could."

"Not," he said in that cocky attitude she remembered from when he was sixteen. He was smiling as they fought, actually smiling at her.

"I could, too."

Hermione now understood what Mr. Malfoy had meant when he'd taunted Harry by saying, 'Did you really think that children stood a chance against us.' Not that she'd heard the taunt; she'd never made it as far as the Death Chamber in the Department of Mysteries. But Neville and Colin had told her what he'd said when they'd talked about the events, and subsequent fight, and what happened in the Veil of Death's amphitheater. Harry still hated talking about that day...and with very good reason.

Hermione squared off against Severus in the vast chamber where she and the Slytherin prefects had led the students when Fred and George had set off their now infamous fireworks, and neither she nor her professor were holding anything back, especially him. He had asked her in the beginning when he'd led her to this room if she'd wanted to do this, to really fight, all out, and she'd acknowledged that *that* was what she wanted. He'd even asked again once they had entered the cavernous room, giving her the option to back out, but she'd wanted to give it a try.

Hermione had quickly found out just how inept at fighting she could be.

Severus was quick and crafty when he fought, and she was dodging and deflecting his spells as best she could, but each time she leaned around a pillar to fire at him, he was not where she thought he would be or he fired at her first. He was wickedly fast and could fire multiple consecutive spells with amazing strength, speed and accuracy, but after the first round when he'd hit her with a Stinging Hex, a Full Body-Bind and then dangled her upside-down by her ankle, he'd only used doubles on her.

As if *that* made any difference.

She had gained complete control of her magic now, thankfully. Thanks to his help, she now found it easy to moderate her spells, both speed and strength, so that the indicators on the target dummies were indicating the levels of intensity she wanted, but this...this was an entirely different situation. She could feel the rush of her adrenaline, her senses were fully heightened, and she could feel her magic course through her. It was exhilarating while in practice...necessary in a fight to the death.

Not that Severus was trying to kill her.

She dodged a particularly vicious Cutting Hex and corrected herself.

She *hoped* he was not trying to kill her.

Perhaps she shouldn't have challenged him.

There was a small ding sound before he called out, "Time," his voice echoing slightly.

She placed her hand on the pillar and leaned heavily on her arm. *Thank Merlin!*

She was sweaty, breathing hard, and her heart thumped rapidly in her chest. Her side hurt from where his Stinging Hex and Stunner had hit her, her leg was sore from the Jelly-Legs Jinx from their second round, and she was still smarting from the first *and* second Full Body-Bind Curses from the next two rounds. *Four out of five. I'm pathetic.*

Severus walked toward her, his robes billowing, his lips pulled back in an amused smile. Although he was somewhat shiny in the face and his hair was slightly mussed, he showed no outward appearance of having been in a wand fight... none at all. Even his breathing was normal as far as she could see. And he had that cocky 'I told you so' look on his face. *Damn him.*

"Do you concede?" he asked, crossing his arms. "Or do you want another round?"

"Yes, fighting you is much different than sparring in the classroom," she replied as she tried to catch her breath.

"Yes, it is, but that was not your challenge, was it?" he asked, watching her.

She hated to admit it, but he was right. "No," she said softly. "You win, you're better than me."

He simply nodded. "Now, once you've caught your breath, I'll show you some wand techniques."

She stood and faced him, eager to find out what he meant.

He laughed, the rich sound echoing in the dark. He conjured a cup and pointed his wand at it, saying, *Aguamenti.* Another demonstration of his control, the gentle stream of water emerged from his wand and filled the cup halfway with water without splashing or sloshing all over his hand like hers tended to do. He handed her the cup. "Drink."

"Thank you, sir," she replied before drinking. The water was refreshingly cold.

"When most wizards and witches," he said with a nod in her direction, "begin to learn wand waving, they wave it, flourishing it about in wide ridiculous swirls, swishes and flicks. Few learn how to moderate or tighten up their movements. A flick does not have to be thus." He made a wide flick, exactly as Professor Flitwick had taught them.

Hermione was reminded of his comment about foolish wand waving from her first day of Potions with him and tried not to grin.

"Or a swish," he said, making the familiar move. "One can limit the motion if the intent and determination are strong enough. You have to know you can and do it without having to fully concentrate on the motion. It's like learning how to fence. To really fight, you have to learn how to parry."

Parry? She was surprised to hear the fencing term. *Lunge, parry, en garde, feint...*

"*Prime*, wand down and to the inside, wrist pronated. *Seconde*, wand down and to the outside, wrist pronated. *Tierce*, wand up and to the outside, wrist pronated. *Quarte*, wand up and to the inside, wrist supinated. This works best with circular or oval movements. *Quinte*, wand up and to the inside, wrist pronated. Works best with lateral and circular movements. *Sixte*, wand up and to the outside, wrist supinated, good for lateral or circular movements. You drop the point and bring it up on the inside, then bring your point back towards the center. If you become proficient with this move you can fire three spells at once."

He repeated the move, this time in slightly slower motion, saying, "flick, swish, or as Professor Flitwick says, 'reverse flick'." He did it again, and she could see the movements now, even though they were really quick.

"*Septime*, wand down and to the inside, wrist supinated. A semi-circular swish, then point is dropped...a flick, the wrist to the inside...swish as you pronate your wrist with the tip up...flick. *Octave*, wand down and to the outside, wrist supinated. Point is dropped, bringing the wrist up on the inside, your point back towards your center. And finally *Neuvieme*, the tip of the wand is on the inside and dropped while the hand is raised. It's used to make two quick consecutive spells and then sweep to create a shield charm."

Hermione wished she had her bag so she could write them all down.

"You don't have to write them down, they are listed in *Theory, Techniques and Exercises in Magical Dueling* by Imelda Vass and *Magical Dueling: Ancient Art and Modern Sport* by Clive de Beaumont," he said with a grin. "You can indulge your curiosity about them later. For now, copy me."

She held up her wand and tried to copy him as best as she could. He would stop occasionally, placing his hand on hers to correct her position or movement. Each time, she tried hard to concentrate on what he was saying and showing her, not on the warmth of his touch and the coolness on her skin when he let go.

"Now, I expect you to find the books I mentioned, memorize the motions of the parry, and be ready to duel with me our next meeting in two nights' time. If you can demonstrate them proficiently, I'll give you back ten of the points I deducted from your House today," he said with a quirk of his mouth.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, sir."

"All right," he said with a nod, "go and collect your things."

"Thank you, sir." She turned and walked, a bit hurriedly, from the room. She wanted to take Harry, Neville and Ron to the Room of Requirement to have them practice like she and Severus did, to help them prepare for their part in the war, but the room wouldn't open last night for some reason. At this moment, she was utterly convinced that the guys needed this kind of training.

She checked her watch in the corridor. If she ran, she could go to the library to get the books on fencing, then spend a half hour or so with Harry, Neville and Ron and still have time for her swim. Smiling, she ran all the way up the stairs to the library.

Hermione sucked on the end of her Deluxe Sugar Quill, deep in thought. Slughorn's party had been bearable this time; of course he'd droned on about all the famous people he knew, and he simply fawned over McLaggen, but this time he'd invited Gwenog Jones, Captain of the Holyhead Harpies. Of course, that meant that the conversation over dessert focused on Quidditch again. But that wasn't what was occupying her thoughts as she climbed the stairs.

She still couldn't believe that Harry had accused Malfoy of giving Katie the cursed necklace... or having used either Crabbe or Goyle, Imperiused, to do it for him. Even Ron had said that it wasn't a very slick, well thought-out plan of attack.

Leanne, Katie's best friend, had left the Great Hall at breakfast today, looking rather upset, and she'd looked like she'd been crying at lunch. Angelina had said it was because she'd had word from Katie's parents; Katie was still unconscious and unresponsive from the curse on the necklace. Severus had sent a note to Hermione after Potions to cancel their meeting, and he'd been absent from the Great Hall at dinner.

Ron was still quite moody over the fact that Professor Slughorn always treated him as if he was nonexistent. Even in Potions today, Professor Slughorn didn't even bother to check Ron's potion, and it had turned out quite well in Hermione's opinion. It had been more of a brownish-purple than either Harry's or hers, which had come out a rich purple, but Ron's was so much better than some of the others which had turned out like sludge.

Hermione was still miffed at Harry; he was following the scribbling in his book and copying every move she made. He'd added the beetles eyes while stirring, just like she had, and sliced his astragalus roots at an angle, although he'd rinsed them off *before* adding them, Hermione had rinsed off the roots, cleaning the root thoroughly before slicing them paper thin. *Still, how did he know to slice them at an angle?*

Neither of them had added the juniper berries. She had stirred the required twenty times and lowered the flame to let it simmer until the end of the lesson. When Professor Slughorn had made his rounds, he'd told Hermione to leave her cauldron on the flame, then told Harry the same and had asked both of them to remain after class. Hermione and Harry were then asked to return tonight at eight to finish their potions...for House points. Hermione thought he was hoping Harry would have then stayed for his party, but Harry, of course, had his lesson with Professor Dumbledore. Much to the professor's dismay over losing Harry as a dinner guest.

How Harry knew about the astragalus root was beyond her. But he'd done the step, and their potions were exactly the same. When they'd gone down to the Potions classroom at eight, Slughorn had been delighted to see them, awarding twenty points each for merely showing up. She'd cut the juniper berries in half, then in slices according to teenage Severus' notes, frowning as Harry did the same. Hermione had asked the professor if she needed to return in nine hours to remove the potion from the flames, and although Professor Slughorn had blanched as he looked at the clock, he'd said not to worry and that he would do it. They had walked up the stairs together, talking about the famous Potioneers Professor Slughorn knew, especially those who had been his students. However, Harry had departed once they reached the fourth floor, albeit too cheerfully, and had run up the stairs to go see the Headmaster.

Hermione was also still angry at Harry for ignorantly trying an unidentified, handwritten spell that someone had made up on Ron, accidentally levitating Ron and hanging him upside down by his ankle. Yeah, Ron thought it was funny *now*, but it could have been disastrous. Harry had admitted that he'd found the spell, Levicorpus, in his Potions book Saturday at breakfast, and during their break, instead of concentrating on his Transfiguration essay, Ron had explained how the spell was cast, which meant that they had *both* learned it...to use on other people. Hermione didn't like that spell at all.

She knew that Severus had used it to impede James on their hike so he could immobilize Sirius, but James and Sirius had also used that spell on him when they had attacked him three against one in the forest...the day he was sent to the hospital...when she'd been trapped alone, with no word of what had happened to him, and she'd almost been found by his house mates... And the Death Eaters had used the spell on those Muggles at the Quidditch World Cup. No, she hated that spell.

Not only that, but he'd already used other spells from that bloody book. Harry had used a hex on Crabbe that made his toenails grow extremely fast, and Crabbe had to go to the hospital to have them clipped. Harry had also used a mean little jinx on Filch, who had no defense against magic, that made his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth so he couldn't admonish Harry and Ron for whatever they had been doing at the time. And that silencing spell, Muffliato, that made anyone nearby hear an irritating, unidentifiable buzzing in their ears just so you could have a private conversation... No, Hermione didn't much care for this Half-Blood Prince. He was mean, cruel and dodgy if anyone bothered to listen to her. Which, when it came to that book, neither Harry nor Ron did.

Now, on her way back to the common room to change into her swimsuit, here was a third-year using the Toenail-Elongating Curse on another little boy, making him rip off his shoes and socks because his toenails were growing out too fast. Luckily, Altheda Crockford was passing through the Apothecary's portrait and went to get Professor Snape, because Hermione had no idea how to reverse this curse, and she knew that Madam Pomfrey had gone to St. Mungo's this evening and wasn't sure if the Matron Healer had returned.

And poor Filch, only last night Hermione had found him hanging upside-down by his ankle outside a loo. Thankfully, Harry had mentioned that Liberacorpus was the

counter-curse, and she'd righted Filch in no time and set him on his feet carefully, receiving an embarrassedly grunted "Thank you," from the old caretaker.

"Burke, Caractacus Burke, of Borgin and Burke's..." Hermione said, speaking her thoughts aloud. Once again, there was a connection to that dodgy shop. After her swim, she'd gone up to Harry's room to hear about his lesson with Dumbledore, but once again was a little disappointed. Of course, the memories were informative in understanding Voldemort, but they hadn't done anything really practical at all.

Hermione had pulled out parchment and quill and made Harry repeat everything he could remember, every detail, even if he didn't think it was important. "It might be, Harry, or the Headmaster wouldn't be spending his evenings showing you these memories." She wrote down the description of Merope's appearance, that she was pregnant and sold Slytherin's locket for only ten Galleons. "Was that all, Harry?"

"Dumbledore said that Voldemort's mum couldn't do magic anymore," he said, staring at the wall.

"She what?" Hermione asked, looking up.

"I dunno," Harry ran his hand through his hair awkwardly, "she... she just sort of dried up, I suppose. Like... she didn't want to use it any more... or couldn't. Dumbledore said that she lost her powers. That her despair caused them to atrophy or something."

Could that happen? She'd have to look that up later. "What happened next?"

Ron opened up a Chocolate Frog, and the frog made one good leap, landing on Hermione's parchment. She picked it up, scowling at the chocolate smear, and handed it back to him.

"What? It got away from me," he said, accepting back his frog.

"Never mind, it's all right," she said. She was going to rewrite it anyway, once they were done. "Go on, Harry, tell me everything you remember, every detail."

Harry repeated what he'd told them the Pensieve figure of Burke said, and about what he'd seen in Dumbledore's memory, and she wrote furiously to get it all down. "He didn't like having the same name as a barkeeper, and he was a loner, went to Diagon Alley by himself...he didn't want Dumbledore's help at all."

"What else?" she urged as she finished writing out the last bit he'd said.

"He liked being special...different, Dumbledore said notorious, I think. That was important to him," Harry said, staring at nothing in particular, and by his distant gaze and his tone, she knew that he was trying to recall everything of import. "Dumbledore said his magic was surprisingly well-developed...he had control over his magic...he used it to hurt and manipulate people, to make them do things, and he collected objects."

Hermione looked up, confused.

"He stole things and kept them as trophies."

"Okay, I got you," she mumbled as she quickly added that to what she'd written. Ron sat munching on his Chocolate Frog, listening intently.

"He was secretive, friendless and preferred to do things alone. Dumbledore said that even though the Death Eaters claim to have his confidence, that they are close to him or are his favorites, he doesn't think that's the case. He said that he thinks they are deluded."

Hermione finished the last bit and looked up, surprised. "He could be right, Harry."

"Oh, and I also noticed that the ring was gone, the one that hurt his hand," Harry said, and she bit her lip, confused. It had been in Professor Snape's office, she was sure it was, but she didn't say anything.

"Here are the books I want you to review," Professor Snape said, opening his drawer. He moved something aside and pulled out a sheet of parchment. Hermione was curious about the ring she saw, the one with a black stone that rolled off the parchment as he withdrew the parchment from the drawer, but she didn't ask him about it. However, it matched the one Harry described exactly: a gold men's ring inset with a large, cracked, black stone with lines on it. Only she saw that it had what looked like a triangle around a circle with a line through it... The lines were not a crest at all, but deep scratches carved into the stone...

"Miss Granger," Professor Snape said, closing his drawer with unnecessary force...

But she did write down the ring she saw in great detail on her parchment now.

"Hermione?" Ron asked.

"What?" she replied, busily finishing writing down her observation.

"What are you writing?" Ron asked.

"What Harry said about the ring." *There. Done.* She looked up, wondering why Severus had it if the curse had been broken...*Unless the curse hadn't been broken on the ring...?*

"Why?" Harry asked.

"What if the curse on the necklace was similar to the one on the ring? The one you said damaged the Headmaster's hand.*Would he have wanted to compare the items? It was possible...* She added her theory in case it was important.

Harry bristled, inhaling before he said, "But Draco gave the necklace to Katie..."

"Draco was not in Hogsmeade," she said and looked up.

"... or had an accomplice do it for him, then."

"We have no idea...no evidence at all that Draco was involved with the necklace. Consider the facts, Harry. ~~law~~ saw it in Borgin and Burkes' *after* Draco had left the shop, and with the extra security measures this year, Filch's checking everything and everyone that enters the castle with his probes, and the owl post is being checked. It is highly unlikely Draco ever *had* the necklace.

Harry looked away, crossing his arms angrily.

She had to think this out rationally...logically. "I'm not discounting you, Harry, but really, it's a question of there being a means, a motive and an opportunity...the three aspects of a crime needed to convict someone. Yes, Draco has the means, sort of. I mean, he could have afforded to buy the necklace...but he would have had to have bought it before school. He might have left the school grounds for London, but he'd have been in serious trouble if he had. Now, yes, it's possible someone bought it for him... even his mother... His mum could have somehow... or some other Death Eater..." *Bloody hell! Bugger. His mother or father could have.* "But then how did *she* get it

to Katie in the girls' bathroom of the Three Broomsticks? Neither Draco nor his mum were *in* the Tree Broomsticks, and neither of them would've just left it lying around now, would they?"

Harry scowled, and Ron frowned in contemplation, biting off the leg of his second frog. "Don't recall anyone dodgy in there, mate, except for Dung, and he was leaving, wasn't he? It was mostly students in there, and the Malfoys...they kind of stick out."

"But what motive did they have?" she continued, thinking it out aloud rationally. "Why harm Katie? Unless it was as you said, to have Katie give it to Dumbledore, making him a target. So yes, I will agree that there is motive; however, the means still don't necessarily point to Draco. And then there is the question of opportunity...Draco didn't have an opportunity to give Katie the necklace...he was here, with Professor McGonagall, in detention, remember? He wasn't in Hogsmeade."

"That wouldn't matter if mummy or daddy did it for him, would it?" Ron pointed out, getting a satisfied grin and a nod from Harry.

Hermione set down her quill. "All right," she admitted. "It is possible he could have had help. His mother could have bought it for him, but she wasn't in the Three Broomsticks... that we know of..." Now there was a scary thought. *Mrs. Malfoy could have easily done this: she had means, motive, and it isn't too farfetched to come up with an opportunity. To do this for Draco...*

Harry now looked positively smug, obviously feeling vindicated that his theory had merit. The fact that he could be right after all was something that Hermione was feeling rather apprehensive about now.

"But now we're accusing Mrs. Malfoy of this," she pointed out, "not Draco."

Harry's shoulders sagged, and Ron bit off the last leg of his chocolate frog.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Severus' quote, '*Ah, bitter chill it was! The owl, for all his feathers, was a-cold,*' is from John Keats' poem, *The Eve of St. Agnes*, *The Poetical Works of John Keats*. 1884. <http://www.bartleby.com/126/39.html>

Information on the wand movements comes from: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parry_\(fencing\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parry_(fencing))

In case you recognized the books Severus mentions, they are borrowed:

C. L. de Beaumont is President of the AFA, and wrote, *Fencing: Ancient Art and Modern Sport*, published in 1960. *Theory, Methods and Exercises in Fencing* was written by Ziemowit Wojciechowski in 1980.

Chapter 40

Chapter 40 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellebloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione had been really surprised by Ron's reactions in Herbology that morning. He'd been acting so petulant and moody over the Slug Club and how Professor Slughorn ignored him, that when she'd mentioned the Christmas party, his initial reaction had been, well, expected.

She'd been hurt that instead of letting her ask him to go with her, he'd been sarcastic and mean, sneering that she should go with McLaggen...McLaggen of all people...mockingly saying that they'd be the queen and king of the party if they did. However, the look on his face when she'd told him she wanted to take him as her guest, wide eyed with surprise, mouth gaping open slightly...

But she'd been hurt by the disparaging way he'd told her *toget off with McLaggen*, so instead she'd thrown his sneer back in his face. Such a childish thing on her part, but his very quiet response of, "No, I wouldn't," his ears turning bright red, had shocked her. It occurred to her that he was jealous...Ron was jealous of McLaggen! Could it be that he honestly liked her?

No one had *liked her* liked her since... well, Viktor. Not really. And Ron had been jealous of Viktor then, too. The more she thought about his reaction, the more she was convinced that he did...that Ron might, in his own sweet, boyish way, like her.

Of course, McLaggen still showed her attention, even now, well past her Bloom. Most of the other boys had begun to act normally towards her after the twenty-ninth of September, a few more had taken a week to start treating her like they usually did, but McLaggen hadn't.

Anthony still seemed to be interested, especially when they sat together in their Literature lesson, and when they saw each other in the corridors, he'd walk with her, but it was starting to seem more like a friendship than an infatuation. Neville still blushed easily around her as well, but then when he'd apologized for his behavior during her Bloom two days ago, he'd admitted to always having had liking her. She liked Neville, too, but not in that special way, just fondly, and that wasn't the same as *liking him* like him, like she would a boyfriend.

Colin Creevey and Sebastian Kirchner were still acting the same as when she'd been Blooming, going out of their way to say "Hiya, Hermione," to her, but sometimes it seemed more of a game for them than a flirtation. Ron was utterly indifferent to them, occasionally saying "Hi" back offhandedly. And William Green, Gryffindor's seventh-year prefect, was still paying her a bit more attention. Not as much as during her Bloom, but more than he'd done in the past.

Aldebaran Ugruhart and Rayne Boughton were still polite to her, but then they were both Slytherin's prefects, and the only time she dealt with them was in the prefect meetings. However, Ron and Green always sat next to her in the meetings, although Green was treating her the same as he'd done before her Bloom, Ron was clearly annoyed when Green paid too much attention to her. But Green was seeing Katie this year, so his attention wasn't flirtatious, it was just politeness, wasn't it? Besides, she didn't like Green that way. At least, she didn't think so.

Malfoy was the only surprise. Whenever she passed him in the corridors, and they were alone, their interaction was the same before. In place of his usual derision and sneer, he merely grunted at her with a nod of his head as he hurried past her or told her curtly to move. Of course, when he had one of his friends with him or there was another student, he said, "Granger," in the normal sneering fashion, but he didn't make any of the cutting snide comments like he used to. He was obviously distracted and not his usual self this year. He looked worried, somewhat anxious... and she'd heard that he wasn't doing as well in his lessons this year, which was really shocking.

Alchemy and Arithmancy were hard subjects, but Malfoy had always done well in them before. Moreover, he seemed to be slacking in Potions, Transfiguration, Charms, and Herbology as well. It was like he was fed up with school, or didn't put forth the effort anymore to beat her scores in those subjects like he used to, and that wasn't at all like him. But then, having your father in Azkaban could have devastating repercussions on anyone, especially someone as proud as Draco Malfoy. It certainly explained his lack of vitriol toward her, even though she'd been one of the people who'd been questioned about the events in the Ministry that had led to his father's arrest.

But Ron, Ron hadn't changed much when she'd been on her Bloom; he hadn't treated her any differently then, and he wasn't all that different now. He'd been, well, Ron.

Hermione had watched Ron slyly all afternoon and this evening, analyzing his recent actions. She'd remembered that he'd been jealous of Seamus' attentions toward her... Of course that was when she was Blooming, so she'd discounted it at the time, but he'd done it again yesterday, too. And Ron had maneuvered Neville out of the way in Herbology a few times so he could stand next to her during her Bloom... but when they'd been told to get into small groups in class that morning and harvest the puffapods from the Snargaluff stumps, Ron had grabbed her elbow and guided her to join him and Harry, not that she wouldn't have in the first place. She'd smiled at him, glad that he wanted her with him on the project, as she'd put on her gloves, and his ears had turned slightly pink.

In retrospect, he'd been jealous of any guy who showed her any interest this year, something she hadn't noticed him doing last year.

Now she wondered if maybe there was more to his behavior than she'd realized before. She liked Ron, and lately she was finding it very hard to understand him. Naturally, he still asked her for her help on his homework, but he sat next to her whenever he could, sometimes with their knees touching. He touched her more frequently, little touches, which he'd never done before. He smiled at her more often, and when she'd look up at him while reading or revising together, he'd be looking back at her as if he'd been *watching her*. But then, of course, he *also* liked the attention the other Gryffindors were giving him, especially the girls, and he smiled quite a bit at Lavender, too.

She bit her lip, watching him slyly from under her fringe as she regarded Ron. He was rewriting his essay, making all her corrections and suggestions like he always did. He looked up, their eyes met, and he smiled, really smiled, and it made her cheeks feel warm.

Yes, it could be possible. Ron Weasley likes me!

Hermione turned her attention back to her essay on conjuring spells, the fundamentals of magical manifestation and their applications, focusing her attention on instantaneous versus indefinite duration designations instead of pondering the mysteries of one Ronald Weasley.

Severus watched Hermione as she demonstrated the various parrying movements, correcting her as needed. Although she was flawless in telling him what the position of her hand and the movement should be, they were awkward for her. He was hardly surprised. His twice weekly lessons with Hermione were paying off though, even though he was finding it harder to find reasons to give her the supposed detentions.

Minerva had asked him why he was continuing working with Hermione, and was deeply concerned that it was due to damage from her Surges, but he'd assured the old man that her cub was fine, that he simply wanted her to become well adjusted to her increased strength. She nodded thoughtfully, as if she didn't believe him, and said she'd inform the Headmaster of his continued lessons...not that the Headmaster wasn't already aware of the fact.

In fact, in their bi-weekly meetings, Hermione's progress was one of the things that he and the old man discussed while Severus administered Dumbledore his dose of potion and Severus tried the series of counter-curses to retard the effects of the curse in Dumbledore's hand. The old man also inquired after Severus' progress, or lack thereof, in regards to Draco's task, something with which he'd made no progress at all.

Not that it was helping all that well. On more than one occasion, Severus had had to Apparate across the country to meet up with the old man, each time in a different place. Why Severus had been called away from the castle (instead of the *Headmaster* of the school returning himself and actually *residing* in the school he was running), or what Dumbledore was up to, the old man wouldn't say, but at least Minerva and the Heads of House all had the school well in hand and things were presently running smoothly.

Bloody, meddlesome old fool. Dumbledore had accepted his reasoning for training Hermione to fight with a sly smile and that damnable twinkle in his eyes. *As if* he'd be inappropriate with the girl! She was his student, he was her teacher, and that was the end of it. If he trained her, she'd most likely train Potter, like she had in her fifth year. There was nothing to be *getting on with*, as the Headmaster had put it, and Severus had been extra waspish in DADA to waylay any rumors to the contrary, deducting his usual sixty total points from Gryffindor.

He placed his hand on Hermione's, ignoring the softness of her skin or the warmth of her flesh, and guided her hand in the appropriate motion for the Septime. He similarly corrected her Octave, although technically she had done it right, just not perfectly, and then adjusted her movement for the Neuvieme.

"Again," he said, circling her, as he studied her movements for flaws. She did the Prime, Seconde and Tierce just fine. He was so glad that she was well past her Bloom and he was able to think clearly...*more clearly*...he corrected himself. He was now able to concentrate on her dueling form and not her physical form, and it was easier to suppress unbidden reminiscences of her drying off in that skimpy swimsuit. He corrected the angle of her wrist for the Quarte and placed a hand on her shoulder to make her relax it. "Continue."

She did the Quinte well enough, he corrected her Sixte, but she did the Septime well this time. He adjusted her Octave movement, although it wasn't technically incorrect, and nodded as she made a fluid Neuvieme. "Once again. This time relax your shoulder and watch the angle of your wand."

She huffed in disappointment, sighing heavily, even though she nodded in acquiescence to his demand. She assumed the pose and started again.

"Relax your wrist, and don't grip your wand so tightly."

Pursing her lips in determination, she immediately complied.

"Not so loose," he admonished her softly. A strand of hair escaped her plait, the curl falling along her temple near her eye. He was so tempted to reach out... He inhaled sharply, berating himself for his distraction from the task at hand, getting a confused glance from the girl. *No, woman*, he told himself. *She is no longer a girl; she is a fully developed and magically mature young woman.* He forced himself to keep his thoughts from straying. "You don't want to keep your grip too loose or you'll be too easily disarmed," he explained. "Do all nine again, in reverse order."

She nodded silently, as she often did when she was concentrating so much on what he was saying, her expression one of focused determination, and began again.

He placed his hand on hers to correct the angle of her wand. She looked up at him, her warm brown eyes, so open and trusting, met his unwaveringly. He removed his hand immediately. "In Octave the point is down, not pointed at the floor. Continue."

That cute determined look in her eyes flashed again. "All right, sir."

She repeated the motion, this time more successfully, and he acknowledged her quick glance, the unspoken need to know if she was right, with a definitive nod, eliciting a small smile in response.

He crossed his arms, standing to the side. "Again. This time cast spells with your movements at the target dummy. In duplicates."

Her fingers tightened on her wand, expectantly, making the movements less fluid than they had been before. However, the three spells she chose to use hit the dummy with both sufficient accuracy and force.

"Again, but loosen your grip," he admonished her softly.

He strained to hold back the smirk at her cheeky, softly mumbled self-admonishment. Her determination to prove to herself she could do it right, to do as he wanted well and earn a nod of approval from him, made him chuckle to himself. His approval meant more to her than a thousand house points.

"Try the same spells on the sparring dummy."

She did as he requested and even though the velocity level was inconsistent, her accuracy and strength were acceptable.

"What did I tell you about your grip?"

Hermione turned to look at him, the tilt of her head and crease between her brows relaying her confusion.

"Pay attention to your body: relax your shoulders and arms, keep your wrist flexible and loosen your grip, but maintain enough firmness so your opponent can't disarm you," he explained.

He mentally laughed at how flustered she became.

"I just can't get them right," she stammered, almost incoherently and blushing deeply.

He had to admit it, if only to himself, that he liked it when she blushed.

"You haven't perfected the movements yet, but you are getting them right. With practice you should become quite proficient." Severus quickly shucked off his teaching robes and hung them on a hook he'd conjured on the wall and turned to face the girl. As he did, he noticed that her eyes had widened as she stared at him. "Shall we try a formal duel?" he asked as he roughly rolled up his shirt sleeve to his elbows.

Her answering smile faded slightly as she squared off to face him, that determined little glint back in her eyes. "Of course, if you like," she said as he rolled up his left sleeve, unconcerned that she could now see his Dark Mark.

He smirked when her eyes flickered from his blackened Mark to his face. He cocked his head and raised an eyebrow, inciting another flush to her skin. The Mark was quiet presently, but he carefully watched her reaction.

"Waverly rules or the International Wizarding Regulations?" she asked, gaining her composure, thankfully not repulsed by the cursed, raised scars and indelible pigmentation that forever marked him as a Death Eater.

He smiled at the question. He wasn't surprised she was familiar with both. "I suppose the Death Eater version would be inappropriate," he said with a smirk.

"If we do Death Eater rules...or lack thereof...shouldn't we be in the larger room?" she asked, grinning at him.

He was surprised by her challenge. "You feel ready to take me on again?"

She shook her head. "Not yet, although someday. For now, I'd like to follow Waverly; they are less restrictive, and I'm still learning the forms properly, if that's all right?"

He nodded. "Waverly it is then."

Hermione walked up to the seventh floor and stopped right next to the wall where the Room of Requirement opened. It was worth checking to see if the room would work for her again, even though the last few times she'd tried, it had remained stubbornly closed. *I need a place to practice*, she thought, pacing the necessary three times. To her surprise the door appeared, and she hurried inside.

She thought about going to the common room to look for Harry and Ron, but they might be in the library, although that was not too likely. If she left the room to search for them, the room might become obstinate again and refuse to open when they returned. She rummaged in her bag for her DA Galleon, finding it in a side pocket, and used it to try to get Harry and Ron to come meet and her.

Her coin vibrated as the message, *H R RoR now*, was relayed to the other coins.

She looked about the room, smiling at the target and sparring dummies that stood along the wall and the thick, magically cushioned mats that lay on the floor. It was just like in her fifth year when they'd had the DA meetings to learn defensive spells. Turning, she saw that the bookshelf on the back wall was stocked up with loads of books, probably all the same Defense books as before.

Neville and Colin burst through the door, followed by Dennis. "Where are Harry and Ron?" she asked confused.

"I'll get them. Don't start without me," Dennis said, running out again.

"What's happened, Hermione?" Neville asked, his expression a mixture of excitement and worry, as the door opened again.

"What's the matter?" Seamus asked, entering the room followed by Dean. They all looked at her expectantly, then around the room.

"Where are Harry and Ron?" Dean asked, looking around as if she were hiding them.

"I summoned them," she replied, unsure. Hermione wasn't expecting them; she'd wanted Harry and Ron. *But they are in the DA, and if we go to war...no, when we leave Hogwarts they will be in the fight, won't they? They're not in the Order... but they will fight if there is a battle...*The memory of her friends lying in the hospital from their injuries her fifth year came unbidden to her, and she made up her mind. "Well, I was reviewing some dueling techniques, and since the Room of Requirement has been, well, nonresponsive lately," both guys nodded, so she continued, "and it occurred to me that some of the dueling techniques allow you to cast two or three spells in quick succession. Seeing as how, well, we are on the side that will fight against Voldemort and the Death Eaters," Neville, Dean and Seamus cringed when she said Voldemort's name, but Colin didn't, "it might be good to know how to do the dueling moves."

Luna entered.

Great! Hermione sighed, wondering if Ron or Harry were going to come at all.

"Are we going to learn some new defensive spells, or are we going to practice what we learned before?" Luna asked, turning to the others. "In case You-Know-Who decides to try and kill Harry this year. Hello."

"Well, I'm ready for some more practice! Hiya, Luna," Colin said as the door opened again. This time it was Harry followed by Denis and finally Ron.

"What do you want?" Ron asked. Hermione repeated herself for their benefit as Cho entered with Ernie, Anthony and Michael.

"Okay, so you're going to teach us how to duel?" Dean asked before she had to repeat it for their benefit as well.

"My uncle Hamish taught me how to duel after me second year," Seamus said, grinning. "But Hermione is right; it would be good to brush up."

"Right," Neville said. "I took lessons." He flushed as everyone turned to look at him. "Gran hired a dueling instructor to teach me how these last two summer holidays; said it was high time, considering what happened in the Ministry my fifth year." The reaction to his statement was varied, but they all remembered how disastrous that adventure had been.

Hermione was impressed that Seamus and Neville had both been taught how to duel. *Okay, that's three of us that know how.* "Anyone else?"

"I've only ever sparred with Fred and George, but that doesn't count. There were only two rules...don't cause permanent damage, and don't get caught by mum. Oh, and there was that so-called *Dueling Club* Lockhart tried in second year, remember?" Ron asked. "O' course, Snape knocked him on his arse, didn't he?"

The others snickered; well, except Dennis, who looked at his brother in confusion, and Luna, who was laughing as if he'd told a particularly funny joke.

"And Harry talked to that huge snake," Colin pointed out, which Dennis had been told about, because he nodded enthusiastically.

"So are you up to learning how to duel?" Hermione asked, looking around, receiving several nods and exclamations of "Yes" or "Yeah." Harry at least looked like he was game to try dueling, as was Cho, and Ron and Dean looked eager to learn as did the others. Luna was examining something in the air near Ernie. "Right then. What I need are some posters of each of the nine parrying moves..."

Immediately, nine magical posters appeared on the wall, each depicting one of the moves Professor Snape had been teaching her in animated motion with an insert in the corner that focused on the hand and wand movement.

"Perfect." Hermione turned to face the group. "So if Seamus and Neville would demonstrate them with me," she said, hoping that they did know the moves well, "then we can show you how they are done. It takes practice, but if we get good, we may stand a chance against the Death Eaters if we have to face them again."

Ron was being a prat that morning because Harry had decided to call off Quidditch practice. Hermione knew that Harry was holding on to the hope that Katie would recover and return in time to play against Slytherin, but when Hermione had asked Leanne how Katie was doing, the girl had shaken her head, her smile replaced with a deep sorrowful expression.

Hermione leaned over Ron a bit so only he and Harry could hear her as the other students took their seats and Harry did the same. "Leanne said that the Headmaster has gone to see Katie, and apparently Professor Snape went with him, but so far she's unchanged," she said softly.

"Hi, Ron," Lavender said as she sat down behind him.

Ron turned around and smiled, making Hermione grit her teeth.

"So, has she woken up yet?" Harry asked as Ron greeted Lavender.

Hermione ignored Ron, whose ears were turning pink at whatever Lavender had said to him, and shook her head, leaning toward Harry a bit more. "Leanne told me that Madam Pomfrey said that sometimes the body will shut down like that, go into a magical coma so that it can heal itself, but, no, Katie hasn't woken up yet."

Harry straightened up in his seat, his expression both worried and annoyed. "So... all right... I'll have to find someone to fill in and have a practice soon..." He looked around, looking at Seamus and Dean in the next row.

Ron was still turned about, facing Lavender and Parvati. "I hope so...dunno why it was cancelled. It's the big game though...us against Slytherin...we need the practice."

"You'll be brilliant, Ron, I know it," Lavender gushed.

Hermione couldn't help feeling annoyed at Ron's goofy smile.

The rest of the lesson, Ron kept looking back over his shoulder. "Mr. Weasley, please face front," Professor McGonagall admonished him, taking ten points from Gryffindor for his inattention to the professor's lecture on conjuring animate objects.

"Blimey, she went on," Ron said to Harry at the end of the lesson. "Only got down half of what she said." He turned to Hermione, giving her what he must have thought was his most winning smile. "Of course, you'll let me borrow your notes, won't you, Hermione."

She wanted to say no, to tell him he should have paid attention and taken his own notes, but Ron slipped a hand on her back as he opened the door for her, saying, "Ladies, first," in the nicest way.

"Okay, you can copy what you missed tonight after I rewrite them," she said, grimacing when he chuckled.

"You could just give me the first draft, then, couldn't you?" he asked, turning when Lavender said goodbye to him as she left the classroom.

"No, you can copy down what you missed," Hermione persisted, but he wasn't looking at her. He was waving back at Lavender and Parvati, a dopey smile on his face, as the two girls waved at him while walking backwards down the corridor.

Hermione sighed. "Did you hear me, Ron?"

"Yeah," he said falling into step with Hermione and Harry. He smiled at her, his blue eyes full of warmth. "I heard you. Tonight in the common room."

She shook her head, wondering if maybe she was wrong about him. But in Herbology he acted as if nothing was amiss. Everyone sat on stools around the worktable, copying down the information on the new plant they would be working with. Ron was on the stool next to hers, and each time he looked up, he glanced at her briefly before looking at the blackboard Professor Sprout had erected in the greenhouse that day.

"*Gwyddienpedium* is a variety of Lady's slipper orchids," Professor Sprout said as her charmed chalk wrote the name on the blackboard, "also known as *Gwyddien's slipper orchids*," which the chalk added on the board, "are the orchids in the subfamily *Cypripedioidea*, or lady slippers, which includes the genera *Cypripedium*, *Mexipedium*, *Paphiopedilum*, *Phragmipedium* and *Selenipedium*." The charmed chalk wrote the six phylum names Professor Sprout had emphasized. "They are characterized by the slipper-shaped pouches, or *modified labellums*, of the flowers. Normally, in common *Cypripedioideas*, the pouch traps insects so they are forced to climb up past the *staminode*, behind which they collect or deposit *pollinia*, thus fertilizing the flower." The chalk finished writing the words she'd emphasized and landed gently on the bottom ledge of the blackboard. "However, for the *Gwyddienpedium*, the labellums are used for digestion."

"Did everyone copy this down?" Professor Sprout asked, waiting for a few stragglers to finish writing and look up. With a swish of her wand, the board disappeared. "Who can tell me how the *Gwyddienpedium* 'eats'?"

Hermione raised her hand a second before Neville did. "Miss Granger," Professor Sprout said, acknowledging her.

"Both the gynostemium are like jaws, armed with four to six tiny fang-like, strong, conical teeth and rows of serrated teeth. Within labellums there are three rows of small crushing teeth. The central row has four pairs of molars and the outer rows house blunted, conical teeth," she said, quoting the book. The magical chalk had written down the scientific name of the part of the plant she'd mentioned with the proper spelling.

Neville turned to smile at her, and Ron's eyes narrowed a fraction at him.

"Very good, Miss Granger, precisely. Ten points to Gryffindor," Professor Sprout said with a huge smile. "Mr. Longbottom, what can you tell us about the digestive secretions within the labellum?"

"Bet we have to feed them," Ron whispered to her as Neville answered the question.

Hermione chuckled softly, smiling even though she nudged his shoulder with hers, saying softly, "Hush, I want to hear Neville's reply."

"What for?" Ron asked, leaning so close to her she could feel his breath on her hair. He smelled like smoky oakmoss, citrus, cedar and mint toothpaste, something he liked using ever since her parents had given him a tube. "You already read the book. I bet you could answer for him."

"Now each of you are to take your *Gwyddienpedium* and observe the way the gynostemium clasps the insect, making the slightly masticated remains fall into the labellums."

"See? What did I tell you," Ron said and picked up a pot with a lovely plant. The three flower heads swayed softly as they all turned to face him expectantly. He placed the plant in front of Hermione and reached for another. "I just wish we had one lesson about a plant that didn't think my fingers were a snack."

Hermione and Harry both laughed softly, Hermione covering her mouth with her gloved hand, receiving an admonishment from their professor to begin.

Severus was finding it hard to come up with an excuse to put Hermione in 'detention'. Now that her Bloom was over, the boys were not paying her as much attention as before, and even Mr. Longbottom was able to concentrate on what he was supposed to be doing. Not that Mr. Longbottom didn't still blush easily when he hit Hermione's shield with a particularly strong curse or hex.

Even after seven weeks of lessons on doing the basic defensive spells nonverbally, only half of the class managed to be able to do them without mumbling, whispering, or moving their lips while casting their spells. It was utterly pathetic. Not that he expected better results; those of weaker magical ability would never learn the skill. It took concentration, determination and a strong desire as well as magical strength to achieve. He watched Hermione deflect Mr. Longbottom's curse easily, and then cast one of her own at him. The boy's shield manifested, but wavered dangerously against Hermione's strong hex. At least *she* was giving forth proper effort.

He turned his attention to Potter and Weasley, catching Potter's lips move as he cast his hex at Weasley. "Your lips should not be moving, Mr. Potter. Ten points from Gryffindor for lack of concentration."

The Headmaster's favorite student shot him an angry glare, but he clamped his mouth shut and tried again. This time with tolerable results.

He'd never be as capable as Hermione, but then Severus could not believe that Dumbledore considered Potter to be the Dark Lord's equal. So far, the boy had scraped by on sheer dumb luck and the aid of others.

Thinking of which, Severus' mind wandered to the plight of the Headmaster.

Severus had spent most of his weekend devising a variation of the potion he brewed for Dumbledore to stave off the effects of the curse because the original potion was not penetrating the infected muscles sufficiently. However, despite his and Madam Pomfrey's best efforts, the curse had nearly spread to the old man's elbow. Wherever the old man had been when he'd been away from the school, the travel was taking a toll on him both mentally and physically. At least now Dumbledore was being consistent in keeping his appointments with the school's Matron Healer and Severus.

The last examination showed that a considerable mass of body tissue in Dumbledore's hand had already died, resulting in the formation of black iron sulfide in the tissues. Nevertheless, there was limited putrefaction according to Madam Pomfrey, thankfully, and the curse was spreading slowly, but the Headmaster's hand and half of his forearm now resembled mummified flesh and tendrils of the curse's infection still persisted even with the spells Severus used to draw the curse back down to the affected hand.

Severus sighed, as he continued his rounds, watching the students. He snapped at Miss Patil for checking her nails after blocking Miss Brown's hex. He admonished Miss Thornton-Reid for the weak curse she'd cast at Miss Burtrand and deducted points from Mr. Thomas for saying "Bugger" softly when Mr. Finnigan's curse broke past his shield, taking an additional ten points from Gryffindor for the boy's swearing. So far, neither Longbottom nor Hermione had made any mistakes.

Oh, hell with it. "Miss Granger, my office at eight o'clock tonight. Do not be late," he said, smirking at her startled glare. "Ten points from Gryffindor as well."

"What did she do?" Mr. Potter asked Mr. Longbottom.

Mr. Longbottom lowered his arm as he shrugged.

"Ten more points from Gryffindor, Mr. Potter, *for speaking*. Now *silence*, all of you, and get back to work."

Mr. Longbottom turned his attention back toward Hermione and stood ready to defend himself from her next spell, although Mr. Potter and Mr. Weasley were both glaring at

Severus. It didn't matter, he would have another night with Hermione in his training room.

When the class was dismissed, Severus waited by the door, hoping to get a word with Draco. He watched the sixth-year Slytherins file past him with a growing sense of irritability. Unfortunately, the boy arrived late. "Five points for being late to class, Mr. Malfoy. Be in my office tonight at seven."

"No," the insolent boy said.

Severus clasped his arm quickly to stop him. "What did you say?"

"You heard me," Draco hissed softly, jerking his arm free of Severus' grasp. "I don't have to tell you *anything*. *He'll* hear about this, mark me."

Severus smirked at the boy. "By all means, inform *Him* that you were given a detention for rudeness and defiance. You *will* be in my office at seven or your parents will be informed."

"And you'll be reminded that I have a task *He* wants done that requires me to *beat* school," Draco said softly with a smug expression. "So expelling me for lateness or being rude will not sit well, will it?"

"I said nothing about expulsion, Draco. I merely wish to offer my assistance..."

"I don't need your *assistance*," the boy snapped in a low hiss.

Severus narrowed his eyes as the boy stormed by him and into the classroom. *Damn it. That went well.* At least he had this evening with Hermione to look forward to.

He strode to the front of the classroom to begin the lesson, admonishing Mr. Crabbe to cease his flirtations with Miss Bulstrode. He waved his wand at the blackboard, making the list of approved curses, jinxes and hexes appear. "Mr. Goyle, Mr. Crabbe, kindly turn and face the front. Mr. Zabini, Miss Parkinson will be partnering with Miss Bulstode today." *Damn.* He'd have to check his list from Minerva, but it was possible that the repugnant girl was Blooming.

Hermione had no problem conjuring up the twittering yellow birds when Professor McGonagall introduced them to the spell, but looking around the classroom, she noticed that no one else succeeded in creating so much as a feather. She received five points for each little bird, and received congratulatory comments from Neville, and a smile from Ron, which in turn made Lavender and Parvati glower at Hermione. At the end of the lesson, Hermione packed up her things. Ron got up quickly and headed for the door, so she followed him out of the classroom, wondering what had him so upset.

"Oi, let's wait on Harry," he suggested, drawing her aside. He leaned against the wall to wait.

"Are you all right?" she asked, hitching the strap of her bag up so it would be more comfortable on her shoulder.

He looked at the students exiting the classroom. "Yeah." He propped his shoe up on the wall behind him and looked down at the floor.

"What is it? Tell me," she implored.

He looked at the corridor filling up with students. "I shouldn't have taken Transfiguration."

She was shocked at his statement. "Why? You're really good at it," she said, stepping closer to him. "Was it today's lesson? You nearly had it." Truth was, he'd made a tiny bit of yellow puff appear, not exactly a bird, but the right color.

He shook his head, not able to look her in the eye. Hermione tried showing him how it was done, making another yellow bird appear and circle his head. Ron stood up and tried it a few times, only managing the same formless, yellow puff appear, then leaned back against the wall, watching Hermione's bird fly around them with a deep sigh.

Hermione placed a hand on his arm. "You'll get it, Ron, you always do," she said, smiling up at him.

"But I'm not good like you," he said, putting his foot on the wall behind him again.

They both turned their heads as the classroom door banged open, and Seamus stormed out, clearly agitated by something.

"Do you think McGonagall held him after for not getting it right?" Ron asked, watching Seamus.

"Oh, I got it, Weasley," Seamus snapped back. "But then you're thick as thieves, you and Potter, aren't you?" He eyed the yellow bird flying around Ron's head. "Having your *girlfriend* show you how, I suppose?"

Hermione wondered what had his wand in a knot.

Ron got really irritated. "You lay off. She's not my girlfriend," he snapped, then grumbled, "Not that *he* did any better," as Seamus stalked away. "He couldn't even make yellow fluff."

Across the corridor, Lavender looked positively elated, giggling excitedly to Parvati.

Hermione tried not to feel disappointed by his remark about not being his girlfriend. "No, most people couldn't, Ron, but then it's new, conjuring things, isn't it?"

"You got it straight away," Ron said, sighing.

"We'll work on it until you get it," she offered, looking at him assuredly.

"I can't," he said dejectedly. "I've got Quidditch practice tonight."

Harry walked out of the classroom with Dean. "There you are," Harry said. Both he and Dean smiling. "Dean is filling in for Katie. You ready to go?"

Ron's shoulders slumped. "Okay," he said, then straightened up. "Yeah, let's eat quickly so we can go practice."

The guys talked Quidditch maneuvers all the way up to the common room. At least Ron's mood had lightened by the time they scrambled inside. After dinner, Hermione watched the boys leave to get their brooms, wishing that she had time to go watch them practice. Instead, she went up to her room to change and headed for the dungeons.

Ron had been giving the cold-shoulder to both Hermione and Ginny ever since Quidditch practice, and even though Harry had tried to keep a truce between them, Hermione was hard pressed to understand what she'd done.

The night before, Hermione had sat in the common room, rewriting her Transfiguration notes into the journal she used for the subject. McLaggen had been bemoaning about the Quidditch practice at a nearby table, saying, "... *even sick on doxy eggs and hung-over, I'd still be a better Keeper than Weasley.*"

Apparently, Ron hadn't done so well at Keeping. "The new Beaters, Peakes and Coote, they're both doing well, and Dean flew well enough with Ginny and Demelza...so he's all right, but Ron...Merlin, what a wanker," McLaggen said, affirmed by both Hooper and Dunstan.

Hermione had bit her lip to keep from speaking up. She knew Ron was only suffering from nerves and lack of confidence, but she knew that Ron had overheard their conversation.

"You should've seen him, he was flailing all over the place," Dunstan sneered, which made Hooper laugh. "He even panicked over that one block and punched the new girl...what's her name, Robins?...in the mouth, knocking out a tooth and giving her a split lip."

'Oh no, Ron, you didn't!' Hermione cringed silently.

"Potter and Weasley had to take her to the hospital to be sorted out," Green stated.

There was no talking to Ron or Harry that night; Ron had sat sulking on the sofa, snapping at anyone who paid him attention, and Harry had spent his time diligently, albeit a bit too focused, on his Charms essay. By the time Hermione had gone to bed, Ron was swearing loudly, even snapping at some first-years for looking at him.

Hermione had tried to reassure him the next morning that he would be brilliant on Saturday, but he'd snapped at her, making her have to fight back tears. She convinced herself it was merely nerves and his low self-esteem, but it had still hurt.

Nevertheless, the following practice Ron was so horrible, so aggressive, and bellowing at everyone for his mistakes that Harry had to yell at him. However, that only made Ron depressed, and he tried to quit the team.

"Ron, you're not bad at Quidditch! I've seen you make some really good saves," she said as they sat alone in a small, empty classroom Professor Snape had shown her in her fifth year. She'd found him in there, alone, sulking. He'd yelled at her to leave, but she hadn't, plucking up the nerve to sit with him until he acknowledged her.

"I can't, I'm no good," he bemoaned again.

"You'd be fine if you just believed in yourself," she said, smiling reassuringly. "It's like everything we do, you have to know you can. It's like in class...you always get it after a while. You just have to trust in your magic and concentrate on your determination and intent. I don't fly much," she paused when he smirked at her. "Well, you know what I mean. But at the tryouts you got the most saves. And I've seen you at the Burrow against Harry and Ginny. You can block them all right." She had to prove it to him somehow. "Try making the bird again."

"That's different," he said, flicking his wand in the air. He only managed a bird-shaped piece of fluff with a few feathers.

Hermione showed him where he was flourishing his wand too much. She nudged him to copy her and showed him again. "There you got it! Try it now."

A large puff ball with wings appeared and fell with a plop.

"That's better! Try again, only breathe deep and concentrate on what you want, be determined," she suggested.

He flicked his wand, this time the large winged puff ball fluttered in the air for a while, and then fell to the desk, making a yellow mess.

"It flew, that's improvement, try again," she encouraged him.

After three more tries, he conjured an actual bird. Well, it was fluffy as if it had come out of a dryer, but it had wings, a beak and flew about her head. "Wonderful!"

"It's not as good as yours," he said dejectedly.

"Ron, it's better. Besides, with how low you've been feeling lately, it's right good," she said, giving his arm a squeeze with her hand.

When they returned to the common room, Ron's spirits were a little better, but he was still talking about quitting Quidditch if he failed next match. He stopped on the other side of the common room entrance, blocking her. "For pity's sake, Ron, move," she said, giving his lankly legs a gentle shove to get his attention.

Apparently, Lavender had caught his attention as he clambered through the portrait hole. He stood up to let Hermione in, but had only taken three steps. When Hermione finally stood up, she saw Lavender standing only two yards from Ron, beaming at him, flipping her hair and batting her eyes. Ron became flustered, and his ears turned a bright red as he said hello to her. Hermione tried to control the anger she felt toward her dorm mate; Hermione knew that Lavender was Blooming. Lavender knew that she was Blooming, and obviously Ron was clearly affected by Lavender's Allure. Had the girl no shame?

Ron remained still, watching her as if entranced, which in fact he was. "Ron... Ron," Hermione called out, trying to gain his attention, to no avail. "Oh move over," she sneered and shoved past, going up to her room. If he wanted help on his essay or spellwork, he could bloody well ask bloody Lavender Brown for it!

~ T. B. .C. ~

Chapter 41

Chapter 41 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Once again, the events that are not mentioned in this story that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione left the small classroom and turned down the corridor, first in the direction where the Fat Lady hung, then turning towards the stairs. No, she was not going to go back to the common room. At least not yet, but she'd have to get past all the celebrating Gryffindors still lingering the corridor, again. She hurried down the corridor, determinedly ignoring the red and gold clad revelers, and forced her way through the crowd, resolutely ignoring their comments.

She'd been angry about the comments and jeers from her fellow Gryffindors as she'd fled the common room, and she'd hid in the first classroom she'd found. She didn't know how long she'd sat there, frustrated and alone, but long enough to stop crying over the bloody git, Ronald Weasley, although her emotions were roiling around inside her and the faint noises from the party still echoing in her mind.

Ron was livid with me all morning because of that idiotic prank Harry pulled with the Felix Felicis at breakfast, pretending to put it in Ron's cup before the Quidditch game to boost Ron's confidence. Of course it worked, but when I tried to congratulate him, Ron twisted my words around and threw them at me accusingly as if I didn't have any faith in him at all...and that is so not true! After that humiliating scene on the Quidditch pitch, Hermione had gone up to Gryffindor tower, eased her way through the celebrating Gryffindors in the corridor, intent on at least trying to reconcile with Ron and to congratulate Harry on his victory. She'd congratulated Demelza in the corridor, then scrambled through the portrait hole and worked her way into the common room to look for Ron. The room was so crowded I had a hard time seeing him, but then there he was. I finally spotted Ron, or more precisely, the back of his head...with an arm wrapped around his neck...a girls arm... and when they turned, there he was locked mouth to mouth with Lavender Brown as if they were sucking out each other's life force.

The guy I like...the guy I thought liked me...obviously preferred vapid idiots and shallow fools like Lavender Brown instead. The realization had hurt deeply.

The sheer unfairness of the situation was really all too much. She fled down the corridor and stormed down the stairs, blindly trying to put as much space between her and the common room as possible. She flicked her wand and three more canaries materialized, soaring about behind her as she walked. She was so good at the spell now she could do them nonverbally and with the smallest flicks of her wand.

She thought about Harry, and how rudely she'd run away from him. She'd been practicing conjuring up the yellow canaries and vanishing them over and over when Harry had come searching for her. His concern was sweet considering I'd thought he was angry at me for accusing him of cheating at Quidditch. She thought, wiping away a tear as she walked down another flight of stairs, not really paying attention to where she was going. Then Ron and his Blooming bimbo barged in, damn him. Lavender hanging on his arm, laughing and giggling at me, while Ron said, 'Hi Harry, wondered where you got off too,' all cocky and self-assured as if... as if... Hermione swiped at her face again. Ron is probably somewhere in the castle with Lavender right now, groping each other, latched together like mating grindylows!

She had been so enraged, so hurt seeing Lavender grinning at her as if to say she'd won. Her cheeky little "Oops," had only indicated to Hermione that Lavender had intended for Hermione to see them...to know what Lavender planned to be doing. And Ron, acting as if nothing had happened, as if he hadn't just broken her heart. Hermione had cursed him and then stormed off. That bloody prat! That wanker! Well, she can bloody well have him...bloody Ronald Bilius Weasley.

She wiped away angry tears as she stormed down the corridor. It doesn't matter anymore. He's snogging bloody Lavender...Ronald bloody Weasley. Why? Why does Lavender want him? She could have anyone! He's the one guy who has shown any remote interest in me...she threw herself at him! Prissy, silly and sentimental, self-centered cow!

She turned blindly, wiped away more angry tears as she hurried away down the stairs...as far away from the common room as she could go.

She should've used a better hex.

She should've chosen one of Professor Snape's approved curses.

Hermione ran down the next staircase. If that's the kind of girl he wants...he can have the airheaded idiot, she fumed.

Except the image wouldn't leave her head: Lavender snogging Ron as if she were a Dementor and Ron was the last wizard on the bloody planet. That bloody hag! Hermione had merely gaped at him...astounded and then turned and ran, feeling devastatingly hurt. Although, if she had said anything aloud, it'd have been drowned out by all the catcalls, wolf whistles, and congratulatory nonsense being shouted by her house mates because Ron, all of a sudden, was getting his tonsils licked clean by Lavender's tongue.

She's on her Bloom! Her birthday is the seventh! Hermione knew it...Lavender knew it, she had to. The bloody witch is on her Bloom, and she is using it to ensnare Ron! she snarled mentally as she stormed along, furious, hurt and confused, paying little heed to where she was going, fighting the pounding sensation of adrenaline and anger that was setting her senses thrumming with barely contained power. Hermione had read about magical ensnarement in her pamphlet from the Ministry, and then looked it up in the library. In the old days witches could ensnare the wizard they wanted by engaging them in romantic interludes during their Bloom. But Ron is a pure-blood; his father would've given him the talk like he had Harry, wouldn't he? Hermione remembered Mr. Weasley's talk with Harry and rolled her eyes. If Ron is so thick as not to see what is happening, well, then, I'm through with one Ronald Bilius bloody wanking Weasley!

"Bugger. Bugger, bugger, bugger."

She didn't care where she was going as long as it was as far away from her common room as was physically possible to be. Walking, not running; running was against the rules, she was walking hurriedly down the corridor with tears streaming down her cheeks. She turned a corner and suddenly found her path blocked by an unyielding, solid wall of black wool. She looked up the row of black buttons slowly into the scowling face of Severus Snape and lowered her head quickly. She knew her face must appear splotchy and tear stained, and she really, really didn't want to run into anyone right now... "I'm so sorry, sir," she apologized.

"You should watch where you are going," Snape snapped coolly.

"I'm truly sorry, professor," she stammered, lacing her fingers together and staring at her thumbs.

"Where *are* you going?" he asked sternly. "It's nearly eleven o'clock, Miss Granger, and you're a long way away from your common room."

She couldn't look up at him, she was too ashamed, too emotionally distraught. "I-I was going to-to the loo," she lied, glad that her tears seemed to have stopped, for now.

He raised his arm and pointed over her shoulder. "It's right there."

"Thank you, sir," she said wretchedly, cursing herself for lying to him, but then going to the loo did give her a quick getaway. She turned on her heel and walked to the loo.

"Wait," he snapped.

Damn. No, I can't, please leave me be. He can't know I've been crying. She only paused, not wanting him to see her tears that she just couldn't hold back. Three fresh tears streaked down her cheeks unchecked.

"You are crying," he stated the obvious.

Hermione shook her head. "It's nothing, sir. I'm fine," she replied and hurried across the corridor for the door. She heard his footsteps, the familiar thud of his boots as he followed her. She slipped inside, thinking she'd escaped, but he opened the door.

"Miss Granger?" Severus braced the door open with one arm as he filled the doorway with his presence. "Why are you crying?"

She stood, hands gripping the sides of the sink as she stared into it. *Why am I crying? Because no one likes me! Because the one guy I thought liked me...me...is sucking face with Lavender bloody Brown, that's why.* "Nothing really, I'll be all right," she said, unable to tell him why *I'm crying because the guy I thought I fancied doesn't fancy me. Story of my life. The boys all choose pretty girls like Lavender or Parvati. I'm just the bookworm, the bossy friend of Harry Potter,* she thought as she felt a light, airy sensation waft through her and she chuckled coolly.

Professor Snape's eyes narrowed, and she blushed under his scrutiny. The ironic thing was that if he'd been his teenage self, she'd have been able to tell him what was bothering her...but this was the adult Severus Snape...her teacher. His teenage self would have told her that Ron wasn't worth it, that he was just a dunderheaded prat, and that she could do much better than Ron. He might have even held her and stroked her back like he'd done that one time.

Gods, she missed that Severus Snape.

She blinked as the lightness dissipated suddenly, and her crushed feelings seemed to envelope her more fully. *Get a grip. Don't start crying again. Not now!*

"It's Ron," she said softly, hands braced on the sink as if to hold herself up. She could see his back stiffen in his reflection in the mirror.

The door closed behind him as he stood there, watching her, and a few seconds passed, neither of them moving.

"I hardly see that he would be worth crying over," Professor Snape said eventually in a dismissive tone.

She looked up at him in the mirror. His dark eyes were still staring back at her unwaveringly. She realized with some surprise that he was trying to be sympathetic, and she gave him a small sad smile, grateful for his rather awkward concern.

"You're right, sir," she replied, actually feeling better in his presence. Even though he was different than his teenage self, he was still Severus Snape, and the similarities between the boy she'd known for a little while and the man he was now became evident to her. "I'm sorry to have bothered you," she said, taking a hand towel and drying her cheeks. She turned to face him. "I think I'll just wash my face and go back to my common room."

He nodded, his dark eyes searching her face for a moment before he spoke. When he did, it was in the same 'teacher tone' she knew so well, "Few teenage boys are worth your trouble, Miss Granger, Mr. Weasley least of all. Do not allow yourself to become so indisposed by them. Curfew is in five minutes. Take care to return promptly, once you have... collected yourself."

"Thank you, sir," she said, turning to face the sinks. He remained behind her as she turned on the taps and lathered her hands with the mild soap for sensitive skin instead of the standard mild soap she'd normally used to just wash her hands. She inhaled deeply to gain control of her emotions before wiping the soap on her face, carefully avoiding getting soap in her eyes, and then rinsed her skin. When she stood up to pat her skin dry with the hand towel, she felt a momentary pang of disappointment that he was gone.

She left the loo and walked quickly, not at all eager to be in the dormitory when Lavender returned to tell Parvati all about her conquest, but she knew that it couldn't be avoided. She saw Professor Snape striding confidently down the corridor as he casually checked the doors with his wand and smiled at the way his robes always billowed when he walked.

She hurried up the stairs; with any luck, she'd be in bed and asleep when Lavender returned. But she had three books on her bedside table she wanted to finish. *could always try the sound muffling spell from Harry's Potions book, Muffle-toe... Muffletato, Muffliato, that's it, Muffliato. If ever there was cause to use it, this qualifies, and I don't care if it makes her ears buzz. It would be worth it.*

Severus watched Hermione scurry up the stairs ahead of him. Not that he was following her, per se; he was actually searching for Draco. Running into her had irritated him; students rarely collided with him, they always went out of their way to avoid him, even diving out of his path into doorways and loos. His first thought when they'd collided was that she'd been heading toward the prefect bath, but she was wearing a thick jumper over her school blouse and brown Muggle jeans, although she could have easily had her string bikini on underneath. But now that he knew why she'd been running, he doubted it. He forced the memory of her barely there swimming attire from his mind.

But seeing her tearstained face had alarmed him. Some girls, several he could name in particular, had a propensity toward such hysterics, but Miss Granger was not one of them. Although, *he'd* certainly been the cause of her distress on more than one occasion, a regret he tried *not* to dwell upon either.

To avoid any uncomfortable discussion about what had provoked such an emotional outburst, he'd slipped into her mind to quickly scan her memories and had been annoyed that the reason for her distress was attributed to her lack of self-esteem. *If those idiotic boys in her year, especially the Weasley dunderhead, couldn't see what a kind and remarkable girl Miss Granger was, well then, that is their loss,* he sneered to himself as he watched the sway of her hips as she climbed the stairs before him.

How in Merlin's name do the dimwitted boys not see how desirable she is? He mused as he watched her reach the top of the staircase. She slowed her progress to a normal walk and crossed the corridor towards the next staircase.

He could see that her body was still tense, but she was now controlling her emotions admirably. Her back was straight and her head held high. *Nevertheless, her Muggle jeans do hug her hips all too provocatively,* he mused with a sly grin.

It wasn't that he was staring at her, she was simply in his line of sight.

He puzzled at her distress. She was perfectly attractive enough, he thought. Her beauty was wholesome, a natural beauty, unlike so many of her counterparts. Miss Patil and Miss Brown spent so much of their time applying layers of cosmetics that it was almost impossible to see the truth beneath the artifice.

Who was he kidding? She was lovely. He'd seen her all dressed up for the Yule Ball, and she had looked resplendent. She'd turned many heads that night, many of the boys gaped in astonishment, and Krum couldn't take his eyes off her. However, Miss Granger simply didn't paint her face on a regular basis or waste hours on her hair...she had other concerns, more serious pursuits and no time for such frivolities.

He paused to watch Miss Granger as she ascended to the seventh floor, absurdly pleased that what he had said in the bathroom appeared to have helped to restore her equilibrium.

He was about to follow her further up the staircase when she suddenly looked around and down towards him. He was too far below her to be seen easily but he felt a strange jolt and instinctively shrank away from her gaze. He was supposed to be searching for Draco, for Merlin's sake, not watching over an overwrought Gryffindor!

He turned looking down the corridor. *Draco won't be in any of these rooms, most of them are staff quarters or the staff lounge.* There was a supply room for stationary and various magical supplies, and the room that held the Heidelberg Windmill's manual printing press, mimeograph machine and Rapid Roller Copier that now all functioned on magic, but the portrait of Kasper Henry Stanhope, grandson of Charles Stanhope, third Earl Stanhope, guarded that room fastidiously.

He'd already checked the third, fourth and fifth floors and had no idea where the boy could be. Both Altheda Crockford and Rosalba Higgins promised to inform him if they saw Draco on their floors, and according to Rosalba, the boy hadn't been seen on the seventh floor all evening. Severus had asked the Bloody Baron to search the dungeons and first floor for Draco, and asked Eledora Bittlestrom, the ghost of a young girl who fell from the Astronomy Tower in the early 1700's to help him find Draco, as well as Alpheus Hyatt, who normally walked the castle battlements, but so far the ghosts hadn't been much help. *Where in the bloody horntails are you, you foolish boy?*

It was getting close to curfew, and the boy was somewhere in the castle, just not in any of the normal hiding places. Growling in fury, he ascended the stairs to the seventh floor, but he doubted that the boy would be up there, especially if the Gryffindors were loitering about.

As Severus walked down the corridor confidently, the Gryffindors who were still lingering about, quickly spread word of his impending approach and swiftly scrambled through the portrait hole into their common room. He barked out the names of the last stragglers, deducting House points as he strode by, more intent on finding Draco than harassing Gryffindors. Nevertheless, the boy wouldn't be this close to the Gryffindor common room; he'd be in one of the other wings. He paused at Rosalba's portrait, but the witch merely shook her head. He nodded to her and wished her a good night, then walked on.

Draco had not been at the game; he'd begged off playing Seeker, pleading illness, even though Slytherin had played Gryffindor. The first game of the season. The boy's absence would be remarked upon, not only among his housemates but among the teaching staff as well. Severus suspected that even the Dark Lord would hear of it.

Severus knew that the boy wasn't ill at all...most likely he was making another attempt at his 'task', a task that Severus was hard pressed to discover. In all appearances, the boy's scheme was to kill Dumbledore...but Severus seriously doubted that; Draco's attempts thus far were utterly incompetent and lacked the level of cunning and execution that Severus knew the boy possessed.

Here it was the first week of November, and he was nowhere in determining what the boy was up to. His feelings of impotence and fear increased; he'd made an Unbreakable Vow. If Severus couldn't gain the boy's trust, if somehow the boy failed and Severus was not there to help him, then he'd die...all for not knowing what he should and doing what he had vowed to do. He'd naïvely believed that his previous rapport with the boy would enable him to get the boy to confide in him, but Draco had hardened over the summer and become obstinate and belligerent, almost to the point of insubordination. In fact, if any other student caused him even half the grief or displayed half the rudeness Draco had, that student would find themselves facing expulsion.

Severus turned, scanning the corridor. *Damn and blast it!*

Severus compared his notes again on the potion he'd been brewing for Dumbledore. Here it was only the fourth of November, and the curse had spread so that now the wrist was blackened and there were black and purple tendrils creeping up the old man's forearm. At the rate it was progressing, it would encompass his elbow by December.

Unfortunately, the potion Severus had created to stay the effects of the curse was not as efficacious as he'd hoped. The curse, or possibly curses were much stronger than he'd originally thought. Although, his first thoughts in creating the potion followed along the lines of a variation of the treatment for Gangrene; however now, the closest he and Madam Pomfrey could equate it to was Scleroderma: a connective tissue disease that occurs when the immune system mistakenly attacks and destroys healthy body tissue...only magical...which posed all sorts of new problems. His countercurse was barely effective either; he was going to have to modify it as well. Severus spent all of his free time on Sunday as well as his Monday evening on the problem, even eliciting the aide of ex-Headmistress and renowned Healer, Professor Dilys Derwent for her input.

The second version of the potion was simmering gently on a low flame in his private lab and the timer for the potion sat on his desk while he waited to see if the thickness and color would remain the same. Dilys Derwent suggested Frankincense and perforate St John's-wort would work better than the goldenseal with the phoenix tears, considering that Fawkes was already using his tears on the Headmaster's hand to help with the pain and discomfort of the curse. However, the curse was strong, and the phoenix tears offered only limited relief. Severus tried to calculate the substitution, and at least, theoretically, the substitution was sound. The last two attempts were disastrous, the strength was not enough to stave off the curse for long. But this time, with the addition of the Frankincense, Blue Skullcap and perforate St John's-wort the potion steamed slightly, then seemed to simmer down, but it was too early to tell if it was improved or not.

He glanced up at Dilys, but she was reading the directions on the blackboard he'd erected, mulling over the problem at hand as well. One of the advantages of living at the castle was that he had this marvelous witch to confer with when he was in need of sound advice or second opinion. Altheda was more than happy to share the space in her frame with the renowned witch.

He checked his list, reading it aloud so the ex-Headmistress and Healer could hear him. "I've added the bilberry before the ground scarab beetles, which will hopefully increase the flexibility of the capillaries and blood flow. I increased the Echinacea, hoping that it would help stimulate the regeneration of cellular connective tissue and epidermis, especially if combined with milk thistle and salamander blood. Likewise, I increased the number of hawthorn berries and ephedra, which should help decelerate a rapid heart rate and fortify his heart. I'm considering ginkgo biloba for its preventive ability for neurological damage and to improve the capillary circulation, licorice for anti-inflammation..."

"And you added the armadillo bile next..." Dilys said, her right elbow rested on her left wrist as she stroked her thumb on her lip in deep thought. "Yes, if you add it after the bile, it may help. I always found that the bile enhanced the property of the ginkgo biloba, and it works well in conjunction with both hawthorn berries and ephedra."

"Yes, and at this juncture, the astragalus and garlic... Yes, this should increase the efficacy of the potion."

The bell in the clock tower struck, indicating the hour, and he frowned. He'd hoped to be further along at this point. If he couldn't figure out the problem of increasing the potions efficacy, he'd have to postpone sessions with Hermione for a few days.

"Excuse me, Severus," Altheda said, trying to enter her frame without nudging Dilys. Severus looked up at the pallid-faced witch that normally adorned the wall in his office. "You asked me to let you know when Hermione Granger passes my other frame."

"Has she?"

"No, I don't think she's going to swim tonight," Altheda said haughtily. "I saw her with Potter, heading for the library."

He smiled, Altheda Crockford liked him, they got along well, but she hated being in his office when students came to see him or when Dilys was helping him. She'd always felt like an intruder and would quietly slip away each time his door opened, returning only if Severus was alone. But for Severus, the location of her other frame was advantageous, especially knowing that from her advantage point on the fifth floor diagonally across the corridor to the prefect bathroom, she would know exactly when

Hermione swam each night, and had specifically asked her to keep him informed. "That's fine. Thank you. You could ask Rosalba Higgins to let me know when Miss Granger leaves the library, if you'd prefer."

"No, its fine, Severus, I don't mind visiting Master George Z. Rozenberg. His portrait has the best view of the library, and he's always enlightening to talk to." Altheda turned sideways in her frame and added, "Headmistress," nodding politely to Dilys and left.

"And what of your other problem?" Dilys asked, turning to look Severus squarely.

"My other problem?" Severus asked drolly. "You mean I have only one?"

"Young Master Malfoy," the portrait image replied nonplussed. "His latest attempt was poorly planned out and executed."

"The necklace was never conclusively traced back to Draco and the letter was burned by the phoenix before we could identify the contents," Severus stated. "It could have been sent by a disgruntled parent, for all we know."

"The Headmaster doesn't generally get contaminated or cursed post, Severus," Dilys replied. "Quite intuitive, Fawkes is, but it is also quite unfortunate that he reacted so alarmingly."

Severus inhaled, both from frustration and annoyance. He had asked Draco to remain behind after their last lesson to try to talk to him again, but the boy was absolutely obstinate and refused to wait. Once again he had angrily and insolently rebuffed Severus' attempt to help him. Severus was no closer to working out what the boy's task was. He had of course, dismissed the obvious...that the boy was supposed to kill the headmaster, as Dumbledore was assuming. However, if that was indeed his task, the boy had been utterly inept and was hardly trying to succeed, which in itself told Severus that the task was something else entirely and the attempts on Dumbledore's life were merely a diversion. A diversion for what, he was desperate to find out, and he needed to discover what it was before the boy succeeded. "From what Dumbledore told me, the sealing wax was green but there wasn't an insignia impression, and the black ink had a green iridescence, the type preferred by the Slytherin girls."

"So not Master Malfoy, then?" she asked.

"Inconclusive," he said. "But still, Dumbledore told me that the young eagle owl bore a remarkable resemblance to Lucius' owl, Metis, right down to her markings."

The timer went off. "Dilys, if you'd be so kind as to let me know the moment Dumbledore returns to the castle, I'd be obliged," he said as he rose to check on the simmering potion.

"And if he doesn't return tonight?" she asked, concerned.

"I have means by which to contact him," Severus said cordially, hoping his irritation didn't show in his voice. "Either way, I shall be up late," he added more amicably.

"Altheda won't mind my intrusion late at night?" the kindly witch asked.

He shook his head. "No, she both admires and respects you. Either way, let me know by nine, he should get his dose of the potion tonight," he said, turning toward the door to his lab.

"As you wish, Severus," she agreed. "I'll speak to you later."

The only good thing (as far as Hermione was concerned about Ron's new*attraction* to Lavender) was that Harry was now spending more time with her. She knew that Harry certainly felt like a gooseberry around the pair since they seemed to spend any second not eating, sleeping or breathing stuck together in a lip lock. Naturally, Lavender was still Blooming, a long Bloomer at that, and Ron's interest was most likely only because of his captivation to Lavender's Allure, but it didn't hurt any less when she reminded herself of the fact. Yesterday in Herbology, Hermione had chosen to partner with Neville and Seamus, leaving Harry with the two new lovebirds; Lavender had been constantly touching and petting Ron like a love-struck Selkie and subsequently lost Gryffindor twenty house points.

Hermione was still feeling utterly hurt and despondent. All she could think about was avoiding Lavender and her constant cooing over Ron or her preening about her relationship to Parvati, bragging in the dorm room that she won Ron "from all the other girls that were saying how hot and cute he is," for the next three or so days until her Bloom period wore off. She'd hoped that with Lavender's birthday that things could go back to normal, but so far, it hadn't.

So now, even being in the common room was uncomfortable for Hermione. Her main place of refuge had always been the library, but Lavender actually did occasionally do her essays in the library and now, unfortunately, she dragged Ron in there with her. Which was a good thing as it forced Ron to work on his homework as well. Another point of contention, Hermione had tried for years to get Ron to spend time in the library with her, unsuccessfully.

So until the girl finally concluded her Bloom, Hermione had to find somewhere to hide...some place quiet and with no Ron and his idiotic, immature, lazy, stupid...

"What did I see in him?" She swore under her breath as she let the Fat Lady slam back into place behind her.

"No need to... Are you all right, dearie...?" the Fat Lady called out to her as Hermione ran into the nearest empty room and slammed the door.

The door opened and Harry poked his head in. "Are you all right?" he asked as she slumped down on the floor next to the opposite wall.

Hermione buried her head in her hands and shook her head as she fought, unsuccessfully, to stop the impending tears from falling. Harry walked over and sat down next to her, his hand resting on her shoulder. The gently reassuring touch of someone actually caring made the tears fall even faster.

"Do you want to practice?" he asked.

She shook her head, not trusting her voice.

"Do you want to go to the library?" he asked, his voice sounding concerned in the quiet room.

"No, thanks," she replied. In fact, she'd been so focused on her schoolwork she was caught up on that, until tomorrow when her professors would hopefully give out new assignments, so she didn't even have that to keep her occupied. And reading... she was too distracted to concentrate on anything.

"I...I..." she stammered, trying to remember. "I have to go to Professor Snape's office in a few minutes." She hoped he wouldn't mind the intrusion. Maybe he could give her an assignment.

"Oh, right," Harry said, obviously confused. "Do you have another detention?"

Hermione shrugged. "It was my Surges, Harry, and now I have to relearn how to control the strength of my magic."

His eyes widened, and she chuffed out a short laugh, remembering Mr. Weasley's attempt at telling Harry about the Surges. "Harry, haven't you noticed that my magic seemed a bit strong in Defense?" He nodded, so she continued. "It wasn't because I was Surging. My magical strength increased dramatically when I came of age, as I came into my full potential, and Professor Snape," she'd promised not to divulge the truth about her lessons, but didn't really want to lie to Harry either, "has been furious at me for my lack of control."

"All those detentions with him are because your magic increased?" Harry asked. "The git..."

"No, really, it was because of my lack of control," she replied, defending Professor Snape. "Really, he's been making me do my spells on target and sparring dummies. It's really helped."

He calmed down and nodded. "Is that where you've learned it...from him?"

Her brow creased as she regarded him, wondering what he'd assumed, and he looked more pointedly at her.

"All the stuff you've been showing us in the Room of Requirement?" he clarified.

She nodded. "Some of what he's said makes sense, and we will be fighting in this war...it's good to be prepared." The clock in the bell tower chimed the hour. "Oh gods, I'm late!" She jumped to her feet. She hoped Professor Snape was still in his office.

"Okay, I'll see you later," Harry said, walking out of the room behind her. "I'll be in the common room when you get back. Maybe we can duel or something."

"Thank you, Harry," she said, hurrying down the corridor.

As she took the stairs as quickly as she dared all the way to the dungeons, Hermione tried to distract herself by naming the twelve uses of dragon blood and then list off the properties of each dragon species. She passed Malfoy and a second-year Slytherin boy on the stairs, barely acknowledging them. Even Malfoy's derisive, "Watch it, Granger," or the second-year's rude, "Watch where you're going, Mudblood," didn't faze her.

Hermione knocked on Professor Snape's door and turned around, fully expecting the door across the corridor to be yanked open in the usual manner.

It didn't.

She waited, wondering.

She turned around slowly and knocked on his office door again, then waited.

Nothing.

There was a pale line of light, so soft that it would go unnoticed unless someone looked for it, under his door. *He must be in*, she thought, knowing that Severus wasn't the type to irresponsibly leave a candle burning in his office. *Why then didn't he answer me?*

Sighing, she reached out and clasped the latch, smiling as she felt the latch give. She slowly opened the door and looked in. The lights were on, but he was not in his office. "Professor?" she asked cautiously as she stepped inside. It was odd, his door being unlocked if he wasn't there.

She entered boldly and closed the door. *Perhaps he stepped out to use the loo?* She looked around, peering at the objects on his shelves. There were the expected jars of specimens in formaldehyde, the occasional skull or carved device, and objects whose use were indiscernible to her even after five years of magical study, among the myriad of magical books. Curiously, she moved closer to the shelves, trying to pointedly ignore what looked like a manticores embryo and young lobalug as she read the titles of his books.

He had numerous books on many subjects, most related to the Dark Arts, curses, jinxes and hexes, plus several on Potions, even though he no longer taught the subject, and oddly, Arithmancy and Alchemy. Her finger stopped on a few books in tooled leather, and she examined the indented scripts, barely visible in the soft light, and was surprised by the four titles: *Comprehensive Organometallic Chemistry, Inorganic Elements and Lanthanides, Organic Synthesis and Methodology of Pharmaceutical Organic Chemistry*. She took one down, opening it, recognizing the text as one her father had on the properties and behaviors of inorganic elements and compounds. Only Severus' copy looked like any other magical text; although appearing the same as her father's with the same lettering, the same graphic design of a chemical compound on the cover, his was bound in hand tooled leather, not colorful, plastic protected paper-over-board like a normal Muggle book.

She remembered Sirius' sneer about Severus and his chemistry set when she'd been at Grimmauld Place the summers before last with a smirk. *So he did learn or at least read chemistry books. Interesting.* She put the book back and glanced up at the wall above the shelf.

A painting of a landscape hung on the wall beside the recessed bookshelves. In a way, it reminded her of the background to the Mona Lisa. It was the view through an open loggia of a gallery or corridor with dark pillar bases on either side of the frame. An unknown valley and merging rivers with winding paths and a distant bridge led the eye to some icy mountains and forest trees in the far background. One lone animal, a deer or elk perhaps, seemed to graze in the distance, but there was a serene loneliness about the scene. She briefly wondered if this was Altheda Crockford's frame. If it was, she must be elsewhere in the castle, either up in her frame on the fifth floor corridor or visiting another's portrait.

In another frame on his shelf near his desk sat a photo that had obviously been taken on a pier, overlooking the water toward the shoreline. It was a wizard photo since there was a seagull soaring on the air current, and there was what appeared to be an edge of a scarf wafting as well as a bit of an arm of a coat on the side of the frame.

Hermione startled as the door was suddenly thrust open, and Severus entered his office. He stopped, staring at her, his eyes flicking quickly to the shelves behind her and then back to her face. His face morphed into his usual mask of authority as he regained his composure. "What are you doing here?" he demanded warily, apparently angry that she'd been prying into his personal effects on his shelves or that she'd disturbed him.

"I thought we... I...forgot," she stammered.

"You forgot what?" he asked curtly. "We do not have an appointment tonight, or this week as I recall."

Hermione's eyes started to tear up. "I'm sorry, sir, I didn't mean to disturb..."

"Well, what did you want and be quick about it...I have an engagement elsewhere."

She looked up at him in surprise. *He had to be... He is leaving?* "I was wondering if or when can we start on wandless magic?" she asked, hoping he'd not be too angry at her impertinence. Having something new to work on would help her fill her time.

"Later, I'm busy," he snapped. He pulled open his door. "Now is not a good time for me, Miss Granger. I really must go and see the Headmaster."

Hermione nodded in understanding. She was keeping him from an appointment with Dumbledore. "I'm sorry, sir. I...I'll wait until I get word from you regarding our next meeting." She held her breath...she knew that she was pushing her luck. Really, he should have taken fifty points off her by now at the very least.

He watched her for a moment before, to her immense relief, nodding once. "Was there anything else, Miss Granger?"

"No, sir, I... Good night, sir," she stammered and then turned to leave. He walked her to the door, but she paused. "May I ask you one question before I go?"

He took a step closer and glared down his nose at her. "You just did."

She bit her lip, looking down abashedly, trying to hide the quirk at the corners of her mouth at what she hoped was a joke.

"Well, what is it, Miss Granger? The Headmaster is waiting..."

There it was again...she was sure there was a sardonic twist in his voice. She smiled properly this time, looking up at him again. "I noticed that you have a few Muggle chemistry books on your shelves."

Immediately, he seemed to tense, and he looked once again towards the contents of his bookshelves, then back to her. He nodded once, his eyes narrowing.

She was about to simply ask, 'Why,' but thought better about it. "Do the Muggle theories about chemical reactions... relate to how potion ingredients react in a cauldron?"

His lips drew back into a sneer, so she quickly pressed on before he could say anything hurtful. "I suppose it makes sense, though, doesn't it. I mean, chemistry explores the reactions of elemental chemicals and compounds under heat and cold...so in a way it's... a resource of information."

He crossed his arms. "Plants, minerals, even gasses have elemental properties, and yes, I sometimes find that certain chemistry reactions between various elements do in fact occur in Potions."

"Because, not all of the elements and ingredients used are magical; we use quite a few mundane minerals and non-magical plants as ingredients."

"Most of our ingredients are not magical," he stated. "However, when a witch or wizard brews the potions in a cauldron, there is a certain amount of their magic that is transmitted to the potion."

"When we stir it?" she asked, thinking aloud. "Chapter one, 'intent and determination of the will of the witch or wizard when stirring the potion', we radiate our magic, however minute, into the cauldron, therefore imbibing a small bit of magic with each step," she paraphrased her first year Potions book.

He nodded again, but there was a tick in his jaw.

"Sorry, I remember how much you hate me quoting the books," she apologized. "Thank you, Professor. I'm sorry if I've made you late for your appointment."

"Yes, you have made me late, Miss Granger," he stated gruffly, but then his features seemed to soften just a little and one side of his mouth quirked back slightly...not a smirk, but not a smile either. "Merlin forbid you should have a question go unanswered." His arms dropped to his sides, and he moved past her towards the door. "But now, I shall have to ask you to leave."

She hurried out, giving him a quick forced smile as she passed him, and walked back down the corridor for the stairs *Blasting Horntails. The library it is then... unless... unless Harry still wants to duel tonight.*

She set off to Gryffindor tower to find Harry, hoping that Ron and his Succubus were not in the common room. However, she ran into Ginny in the corridor where the Room of Requirement was located.

"I was looking for you," Ginny said.

"Oh?" Hermione asked, surprised. "I thought..." She turned her head to glance at the place where the door usually appeared, then looked at Ginny. "Are you alone?"

"Yes, I'm alone; and *no*, I was *not* in there," Ginny replied with a smirk. "I heard that you gave Lavender a rune charm for happiness for her birthday?"

Hermione looked away. "It's the rune for protection." She'd wanted to give Lavender the rune for misfortune in a cursed envelope, but then she was better than that, so opted for the rune for protection instead. She'd also bought Susan and Melody, the Ravenclaw prefect, the rune for good fortune at the same time. However, Hermione had used a school owl to deliver the charm to Lavender with the post in the morning, so that it could get lost among all the others she'd received, with a card that read, *Happy Birthday. HG.*

Ginny cocked her head slightly to one side. "I'm not so sure I'd have done it, given her one."

"She sent me one," Hermione offered in way of an explanation. "She gave me that sweet caricature of a graphorn, so I'd...I'd had felt like a heel if I hadn't."

Ginny's eyes widened. "That was before she stole Ron from you. You're being really unselfish considering..."

"Considering what? That she snagged Ron...*it's his choice.* And I'm hardly being unselfish; I'd already bought the charm and besides..." Hermione paused as Seamus hurried by. She lowered her voice, "She didn't *steal* him away from me...I never *had* him in the first place. For the most part, Lavender has been, well, considerate. She's not flaunting her relationship as much as before."

"Not flaunting..." Ginny smirked. "Right, it isn't as if they're *not* locked lip to lip and groping each other at every possible opportunity, snogging each other senseless all over the place! You can't possibly think that they are being considerate of *anything* but *themselves*?"

"*He chose her!*" Hermione screeched, exasperated and not a little hurt.

"It's not a *choice* if he's under the influence of her Bloom," Ginny pointed out. "Look, all I...what I really wanted to see was if you'd like to hang out for a bit; maybe slip in the Room of Requirement and... I dunno, duel or something?"

Hermione smiled at her friend. It was the sweetest offer, and she could take out her frustration on the target dummies. "Gin, I'd really like that."

"Good, then you can show me all the stuff you've been showing my git of a brother and Harry," Ginny said, pacing in the corridor a few times.

When the door appeared, Hermione pulled it open. "I'd be glad to. After you."

"Thank you," Ginny said, walking into what was once again, the DA sparring room.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Metis was the Greek goddess of crafty thought and wisdom and mother of Athena. In the one commonly cited version, Zeus lay with Metis, the goddess of crafty thought and wisdom, but it had been prophesied that Metis would bear children more powerful than the sire. In order to forestall these dire consequences, after lying with Metis, Zeus swallowed her down inside his own belly. He was too late: Metis had already conceived. Eventually, Zeus experienced an enormous headache; Athena leaped from Zeus's head, fully grown and armed, with a shout...and pealed to the broad sky her clarion cry of war. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athena>

Chapter 42

Chapter 42 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Once again, the events that are not mentioned in this story that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione gasped as she stared at the article in the *Daily Prophet*. After the announcement of a new Ministry appointment in the Oblivator's Office, there was an article which read that Incandesce Illuminations had been ransacked. A picture showed a small shop with broken windows and the Dark Mark looming above the shattered door and charred doorway.

Although, Miss Amelia Brighton, owner of Incandesce Illuminations, claimed to have any type of candle or illumination the discerning witch or wizard could need, it is unclear as to why she or her shop would have attracted the attention of You-Know-Who, but apparently, Miss Brighton was the victim of a Death Eater attack on Saturday evening. ... continued on page four

Hermione turned to page four, scanning through the article and saw that three other people had gone missing. Brow furrowed, she read the list.

Roger Hedenhal, a Muggle-born shop assistant, was last seen leaving his job at Barratts Boots in Little Chippering last Saturday night.

Adeline Haddon, a Muggle-born clerk for the Floo office, and Richard Hedresford, a Muggle-born Floo connection specialist, were last seen leaving work Saturday night. Witnesses say that they saw streaks of black smoke, then nothing. Death Eater abduction is suspected.

William Guifford, a Muggle-born who worked in the Weights and Measures Office as a Recalibrator, went missing after inspecting the scales at the Knockturn Apothecary...

"They are all Muggle-born!" she gasped aloud, making both Harry and Neville look up at her.

"Hermione?" Harry asked, looking worried.

She simply shook her head, absorbed in the horror reported so casually in the morning paper. The next article saddened her even more.

A Muggle, Mr. Hale, and Gloria Haversheim-Finch, pure-blood witch and mother of Ronnie and William Haversheim-Finch, first- and second-year students at Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, were found in the garden of the Haversheim-Finch family's home at five o'clock this morning. Mr. Hale was the victim of the Killing Curse, and Gloria Haversheim-Finch the victim of some unknown hex that boiled her blood.

Aurors on the scene say that concerned neighbors called the Muggle authorities as soon as they saw Mrs. Haversheim-Finch and Mr. Arnold Hale lying in her front garden, after hearing an unusual disturbance this morning. "She always comes out first thing in the morning to tend to her flowers. I remember her saying that it was time to pull up her bulbs for the winter," Mrs. Logan, the Haversheim-Finch's neighbor who had been the first to discover the bodies... "But this was unusually early, even for her. The commotion woke Ed and me, and I looked out the window to see what was going on. There was an odd bloke in a long, black house coat and another person in a hooded cloak...I didn't see their faces...but the one in the housecoat was demanding something rather loudly, then I heard Gloria's screams and ..." continued on page six

Hermione's eyes widened in recognition of the names. *Ronnie and William are first- and second-years in my house... Oh, my gods* She quickly turned to look down the table at where the second-years sat together. Both boys were sitting there, sheet white. Hermione jumped up and hurried down to where they sat. "Ronnie, William, c'mon. Come with me," she said softly, touching Ronnie on the shoulder.

Ronnie Haversheim-Finch looked up, his eyes brimming with tears. Beside him his younger brother, William, sat unmoving, grief stricken, his small shoulders shaking, his hands still clutching the morning paper. "C'mon, let's get you up to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione said calmly, trying to urge the boys to get up.

Ginny appeared at her side, laying a gentle hand on William's arm. "Up you go," she said in a tone so like her mum's. "Let's get you up to the hospital wing, shall we?"

Both boys stood, and Hermione and Ginny escorted them out of the Great Hall, Ginny carrying their bags as well as her own.

Colin walked up followed by Professor McGonagall. "I was just going to escort them to Madam Pomfrey," Hermione stated softly, keeping a reassuring hand on Ronnie's back.

Professor McGonagall nodded and turned to Colin. "I think we have things in hand, Mr. Creevey. You may go."

Colin nodded and walked away, and Professor McGonagall, Hermione and Ginny escorted the two boys up to the hospital wing. As Professor McGonagall and Madam Pomfrey tended to the grief stricken boys, Hermione and Ginny somberly walked to the library to wait until lessons started, neither wanting to talk, but not wanting to face

their housemates yet, either.

Severus was reading the article on Gloria Havershein-Finch when Hermione jumped up from her seat and rushed to the side of Messrs Havershein-Finch. Gloria Havershein-Finch was mostly likely attacked due to her rumored relationship with her Muggle neighbor, now identified as a Mr. Hale. Severus never believed the rumors; Mrs. Havershein-Finch was a friendly woman, but hardly the type to involve herself romantically with a Muggle. Still the attack was a brutal murder, carried out by two of the Death Eaters, one of them most likely either Selwyn or Rowle, whom he knew used the Blood-Boiling Curse on occasion. It was a painful way to die.

He looked up and watched Hermione as she talked to the boys, fulfilling her prefect duty, her concern and compassion evident on her face.

Amelia Brighton, a daughter of Muggle-born and half-blood parents, carried Secret Illumination Candles, handheld globes that acted much like a Hand of Glory by providing candlelight for the one who held it but that was nearly obscure to others, and black flame candles used in Potions or Dark Arts in her shop...both items generally used by his dark brethren. Severus had tried to warn the Order that the fact that she sold these openly in her shop had raised the ire of the Death Eaters... Apparently his warning went unheeded.

The three other Muggle-borns had been attacked for the only transgression of having the wrong set of parents.

And Raithe Macrae had told Severus that there were others, a long list of individuals whose names were being spoken of when any of the Death Eaters gathered, which both Duane Hartshorne and Grantham Thortenson confirmed when they wrote to him.

Severus had only been summoned a few times to make reports, either late at night or while the students ate their dinner, but not knowing why the Headmaster left the castle or where he was going only irritated the Dark Lord. So far, Severus had been lucky; reports on the progression of the curse eating away at Dumbledore's arm were enough to forestall his wrath. But the talk, the dissension of the others eager to begin taking action... the Dark Lord's followers were getting restless. There would be more attacks, more missing.

He was certain that as soon as Dumbledore died from this bloody curse...the Dark Lord would make his move.

His eyes followed Hermione as she and Miss Weasley escorted Messrs Havershein-Finch from the Great Hall. When the door closed behind them, he scanned the Hall, his gaze falling on Potter and Mr. Weasley, then on each of Hermione's friends, the students who had been involved in that illicit extracurricular group of friends...the DA. If Hermione had continued having meetings with her little club, Severus knew that their number would only increase. They were children, not at all prepared to defend themselves against what would come, when it came.

They didn't know what they truly faced out there. With all the incompetent defense teachers and inconsistent teaching methods, they were woefully ignorant to what was going on out in the real world, and it was possible some of them, especially Hermione and her friends in her DA group, could face another attack attempt over the Christmas holidays.

He knew the reports that came to Dumbledore from St. Mungo's and the Aurory...they had discussed the spells and curses being created by the Dark Lord's followers, and he'd even tried to create potions to relive the worst effects...

He had a lot to cover in only a few weeks.

Usually, Monday's double DADA lesson involved practical use of the defenses spells to the curses that Professor Snape discussed the previous Friday and assigned for them to read over the weekend; but instead he'd written a long list of curses on the blackboard, and the desks were in neat rows instead of having been moved aside.

"Put away your wands and close your books," Professor Snape said sharply as the students were all sitting down. "We will be having an oral examination, today."

Hermione looked up in surprise and slid her wand back into her bag, wondering what had irritated Professor Snape so early this morning*It's possible that he knows one of the people mentioned in the Daily Prophet this morning*, she presumed.

"Today is a review of all the curses an N.E.W.T. level class *should* know by now. I will call your name, and you will tell me the most effective defensive spell, the countercurse or means of reversing the curses effects, the wand movement and the trajectory pattern and color if known of the curse I give you. You will get one point for each correct answer, ten points deducted for each wrong answer," Professor Snape said, holding a long pointing staff in both hands.

Hermione smiled inwardly as all her friends, even Neville, sat up in their seats, boldly facing their teacher. Hermione knew that Seamus, Dean and Neville had been revising as hard in Defense this year as she had...so much was at stake once they left school, possibly even before that, if the articles in the *Daily Prophet* were true. Every day, someone disappeared, or was found severally cursed or dead. Even Harry was taking his Defense lessons more seriously; of course that could also be because he was spending so much of his time with her to avoid feeling like a gooseberry around Ron and Lavender.

"Mr. Longbottom," Professor Snape said, and even though Neville looked nervous, Hermione was glad to see him sit up straighter. "The Cruciatius Curse."

Neville paled slightly, but gave a near perfect answer, only stuttering slightly as he replied, "Th-the C-cruciatius, also known as the Torture Curse, is one of the three Unforgivable Curses. It causes severe pain to its victim, and prolonged t-torture can destroy the victim's mind. There is no kn-known countercurse. The wand movement is-is a direct pointing motion at the victim, the trajectory is a-a straight line, and there is no in-indication coloring. Glenhallen's Deflection is occasionally helpful if cast at the same time as the curse. Lysurus Elixir works on those who have suffered mild to severe duration but not on those who-who, have... been brain damaged."

"Five points, Mr. Longbottom, but then again that one should have been easy for you," Professor Snape said, tapping the blackboard and the curse faded in color. He called on Dean next. "Entrail-Expelling Curse."

"Otherwise known as Rackharrow's Curse, it slices the victim open so that his entrails spill out. Immediate stasis on the victim is needed until a Healer can put the guts back in and Blood-Replenishing Potion. The wand movement is a well-aimed slash in the direction that the caster wants to cut the victim open. Brenton's Deflection works, but not always successfully; if you catch it right, it only blocks most of the damage and the Lundergan Shield or Bowed Shield only works if the shield is especially strong. The trajectory is whip like, wicked fast, wisteria violet in color and cuts like a sword, even wrapping around the body if cast strongly enough. Immediate Healer attention is needed to survive."

"Five points to Gryffindor, Mr. Thomas," Professor Snape said, eliciting a few students to grumble about fairness as he made the curse fade on the blackboard. Professor Snape called out Parvati's name next.

Parvati was able to correctly describe the Tongue-Blisters Curse, or Lingua-Vomica Curse, correctly identifying the countercurse, Lingua mederi or the Tongue-Healing Charm, the wand movement and the trajectory pattern, but she incorrectly stated that the color of the spell as a flash of blue-green, not a dull blue-grey. She lost Gryffindor, ten points.

Professor Snape continued calling on students at random until they finished all the spells on the blackboard. He waved his wand and a new list appeared. "You should know the newer ones that have been used in the wizarding world in the last few years." He turned back to face them and scowled. "Well, why are you not ready? Take out your parchment and quills."

Immediately everyone scrambled to get their writing materials as quickly as possible.

"If you remember, I said at the start of term that the Dark Arts are many, varied, ever-changing and eternal? Fighting the Dark Arts is like fighting that which is unfixed, mutating and indestructible and are as diverse, innovational and imaginative as the demented minds that seek to create new and exciting ways to cause pain or harm to

others...and there are a few people who do enjoy such pursuits. I believe you call them Death Eaters...but they are not the *only* people who create curses...some are even created by accidental magical outbursts and then repeated for the torment of one's adversaries or the amusement of their friends," Professor Snape said, staring at Harry.

Hermione saw Harry's expression harden at the direct implication.

"These," Professor Snape said as he held out his hand in the direction of the blackboard, "are only the one's've heard about." He then proceeded to describe each curse: the trajectory pattern, the color and the wand motion, if he knew it, and explained the effect on the victim in gruesome detail, even showing a picture or diagram on several of them, and told them the countercurse, if it was known.

Most of the curses were ghastly or utterly grotesque, and many were horribly cruel in Hermione's opinion. Several of the others in the room, especially Lavender and Parvati, had gasped more than once as Professor Snape went down the list.

Hermione wrote each one down and taken as detailed notes as quickly as she could with a quill. More than once, she'd wished that wizards used ink pens, instead of quill and ink...it was faster, and she felt she had wasted valuable seconds having to stop and dip her quill so frequently. Still, she felt confident that she'd written most of the information down. Hopefully, Neville or Seamus, who had both been writing as furiously as she'd been to keep up with today's lecture, would have the ones she missed, if neither Harry nor Ron did.

"Most of these spells do not currently have a known countercurse. The counter curses are still being worked out by professionals with more experience than you to determine them. However, as your assignment, you will dissect what you know of each curse and estimate the best possible defensive spell," there was a general groan in the room, "based upon the trajectory pattern, the color and the wand motion if your opponent were to use one of these curses against you."

"How are we to know which counter spell to use if they are new?" Seamus asked to no one in particular.

"But how?" Lavender whined to Parvati. "If there isn't a countercurse, how are we supposed to figure it out?"

Professor Snape stared directly at her. "Were you or were you not part of Mr. Potter's group that went flying off to the Ministry last June on a fool's errand to rescue a man, a known murderer and escaped convict, who wasn't even *in* the Ministry at the time?"

Lavender blushed and lowered her head.

"You know she was, sir," Seamus responded under his breath.

"Mr. Finnigan, ten points from Gryffindor for *not raising your hand*," Professor Snape snarled. "You have learned various shielding charms and deflection spells over the last two months, have you not?" He stepped closer to Seamus' desk. "Use your brain and estimate what would be your best defense." He looked up as the bell tolled the hour. "Your list is due on Friday."

On Friday, Professor Snape had the list of the curses they'd been given the previous lesson written on the blackboard. He started calling on students at random to read their suggestions of which defensive spell to use, awarding two points for what he felt was a good defensive decision, one point for an acceptable defense and deducting five points for poorly chosen decisions, and then made them identify the trajectory pattern, the color and the wand motion, and name the countercurse if there was one known.

Hermione made numerous notes on her parchment, writing down which defense Professor Snape thought most effective, amazed that she had gotten many of them right.

However, Gryffindor lost an astounding sixty-eight points overall that morning.

On Monday, Professor Snape gave a lecture on determining the best defense blocking spell to use based upon the wand movements of the opponent. "Miss Granger, come up here," he said, actually demanded, indicating Hermione stand in front of the class and face him, much to her surprise.

"You can do it, Hermione," Harry encouraged her as she walked forward, wand in hand.

Neville nodded, mouthing, 'Good luck.'

As she squared off with him, Professor Snape said, "Do your best," so softly she almost missed it, then turned to the rest of the class. "Not all wizards shout their intention," he said as he glanced pointedly at Harry. "Many mumble or say the incantation through gritted teeth. Either way, in a wand fight, it's important to read your opponent's expression, and their eye, body and wand movements. For example..."

He turned and brought his wand up as he faced Hermione. His head tilted ever so slightly, and Hermione tensed, keeping her shoulders, arm and wrist relaxed and her body ready to spring. There was a teeny twitch of Professor Snape's lip, and then he moved. Hermione reacted instinctively, bringing her wand up in Quinte as professor Snape's arm rose, then angled, as she easily deflected his curse. He brought his arm down, so she brought her wand down, performing Septime as his wand tip flicked upward, and her deflection spell blocked his second curse.

He threw nine more curses at her in sets of three, all nonverbal, while everyone watched. With each set, he told her, and everyone else in the room, what she did wrong, but he was in teaching mode, so his barbed comments didn't hurt her feelings. Even though she felt self-conscious sparring against Professor Snape in front of everyone, she felt exhilarated as well, proud that she'd managed to stand on her own, and deflected all eleven curses with relative ease, although not as fluidly as she'd have liked.

When he called a halt to the demonstration, she was pleased to see a slight curve to his lips that immediately vanished before he turned to face the class. Of course, he only gave her six House points, but the almost smile was recognition enough.

"All right, pair up and try deflecting your opponent's spells. All spells, approved curses, hexes and deflection spells are to be done nonverbally," Professor Snape instructed. As everyone got up, Professor Snape made the desks slide into a side cupboard and levitated their bags to the back of the room.

After the lesson, Hermione tried once again to talk to him about wandless magic lessons, but he scowled at her. "What is it, Miss Granger?"

"Sir, about, er, my lessons, I was wondering if..."

"I don't have time, Miss Granger, nor the inclination," he said, making the desks return to their normal places with a few flicks of his wand. "Go to your next lesson."

She sighed and turned her head, hoping he didn't see how much his curtness bothered her. "I understand, sir," she said, turning to leave.

"You did well today," he said softly, making her turn back sharply, somewhat startled.

"Thank you, sir, she replied.

"Go," he said, indicating the door.

She left, feeling somewhat elated by his remark, and met up with Harry in the corridor to walk to Potions together.

On her way to Potions on Thursday, Hermione saw Professor Snape exiting his office. Faking the need to retie her shoelace so she might have a moment with Professor

Snape without Harry around, she urged Harry to go on ahead of her. But when she stood up, Professor Snape was gone. She walked down the corridor toward her lesson, regretting the lost opportunity to talk to him. Suddenly, a strong hand grabbed her arm, and she tried to yank her arm free as her assailant pulled her aside.

"Stop struggling, you silly girl, it's only me," Professor Snape said in a deep, hushed tone.

Relieved, Hermione nodded and followed him into a seldom used narrow stairway that sometimes led to the first floor. She frowned as he cast a softly spoken, *Muffliato*, on the entrance, then cast the Notice-Me-Not Charm with a Repelling Charm. *How does he know the Half-Blood Prince's spell?* she thought, then realized that he was holding out a rolled parchment for her to take.

"I don't have all day, Miss Granger, do you want this or not?"

"Want what?" she asked, taking the parchment and unrolling it. Hermione glanced at the tight, spiky writing, realizing that it was a list of various books and periodicals.

"A list of reading material...not that it will help all that much. Wandless magic *is not* something you can learn from a book, but if you study the theory and compare them to what you learned about conductive focus with a wand your first year and channeling your magical energy in normal magical applications, you may be able to learn how to do a few rudimentary spells," he was saying.

He was standing so close to her in the confined space that she could smell his scent, and even feel his magic thrum around her...intimating yet enticingly powerful...as he maintained his shield.

"Remember what I told you in my small lab, when you were a girl, analyze and hypothesize, rationalize out how. When I have time again, I'll arrange an hour or so to show you. But for now, it's impossible."

She breathed in and out deeply as she listened to his every word, trying not to be distracted by the combination of his presence and the purely masculine smell from his robes. *A mix of herbs...slightly smoky... like oakmoss... vetiver... citrus and cedar.*

"Miss Granger."

His tone brought her back to her situation abruptly, and she immediately looked up at him. "Oh, sorry, sir," she stammered. She had Potions in only a few minutes. "Analyze, hypothesize and rationalize...isn't it like channeling my magic through my fingers instead of through my wand, reaching into my core, finding my center and..."

"No." He sighed heavily. "Why everyone reads Murdock is beyond me, the man was an idiot." He tapped the parchment in her hand once with a finger. "Read these, especially the chapters explaining the *theory*; the practical aspect is really quite different, more... complex. As a singularly determined young woman, you should be able to focus your intent sufficiently. However, I must warn you, few witches or wizards ever master anything above a few rudimentary spells, levitation, igniting or extinguishing a candle or drawing small items to within their reach."

"Thank you, sir, I'll do my best," she replied. She could already do Levitation, Summoning and Repelling Charms on objects, but it thrilled her that she could possibly learn how to do more.

He chuffed a laugh. "I've no doubt you will," he said in his normally harsh professor tone as he exited the stairway for the corridor.

The next day, Ron and Lavender were once again in the library. Hermione was certain that it was due to Lavender's influence, because it was something *he'd* never been able to get Ron to do. But there they were, revising...actually revising...at the tables. And Ron still seemed as affected by Lavender's Allure as ever. "Damn it, she's a long Bloomer!" she hissed as she walked by. Life couldn't be any more unfair.

Hermione pulled out Professor Snape's list of books and periodicals on wandless magical theory and walked to the library card catalogue, making a notation of the location for each book on her list. From the corner of her eyes, she saw Ron watching her a few times, but she pointedly ignored him. When she turned, Lavender was snuggled up to his side, but Ron shushed her, fully intent on his own work.

Hermione sighed. *He'd never been this attentive on his studies when he'd been in the library with me! So why now?* She mentally shook her head. *It doesn't matter...good for him. Maybe he'll do better this year.* She walked over to the stacks with her head held high.

Severus had to find Dumbledore to give him the new potion. The old wizard had been gone a full week, and Severus' attempt at using the mirror the night before, which was supposed to allow him to contact the wizard, failed to link.

He was loath to use his Patronus; it was still a doe. Lily's doe. Even though Lily had been far from his mind each time he'd cast the charm to send it, it was still a doe. When he cast it now, he focused on the memory of Hermione's gifts: the spoon she'd made for him and the journal and quill he still kept in his desk, and the warm feeling he'd had realizing there was no ulterior motive behind them. That, or he used the memory of their hike, or their snow fight, or even their dueling lessons... seeing her large, amber eyes gazing up at him with pure, guileless, open enthusiasm whenever they were alone together as his happy memory. In only a short time span, she'd given him enough happy memories to produce a vivid, corporeal Patronus easily.

He waved his wand, incanting, "*Expecto Patronum*," seeing his doe emerge brightly. "Where are you...I have your potion," he said as it bounded around the room. His doe dove out the window, soaring through the air and blending in with the grey rainclouds. It was risky sending his Patronus, but thankfully only a handful of people knew its shape. Only one person knew its significance, and he used that information like a choke chain.

Dumbledore's silvery phoenix appeared a few minutes later. "Come to The Lake Road Inn in Keswick."

Scowling, Severus swished his wand as he spun about-face sharply and shot out of the window, hurling his body in a trail of smoke as he soared to the school gates, the way Death Eaters and Order members magically leaped distances to a visual destination. It was a risky way of leaving the castle, but the dark cloudy sky masked his plume. Within seconds he was standing in the rain at the gates and Apparating away to the Lake District. He walked quickly and found the inn easily, slipping inside and shook off his cloak, hanging it on a hook.

The old man was sitting in a corner table wearing a bright yellow suit with lime green ruffles showing at the cuffs and a lemon-patterned cravat, sipping on spiced wine *The wizard's sense of fashion rivals Elton John's! Or emulates it, for Merlin's sake...it's a bloody toss-up.* "You should not drink wine before taking your potion," Severus said in greeting as he slid into the other chair.

"I find the taste pleasing after a long Apparition," Dumbledore said calmly, adding quickly, "How is Draco coming along with his task?"

"Poorly; you're still alive," Severus stated, then ordered a pint of Sneakclifter. "I received a letter from Narcissa asking how Draco is 'getting on'. I've yet to respond."

Dumbledore nodded. "He is still resisting your aide, then? I'm sorry, my boy. You still don't believe that Draco's task is to kill me?"

"Hardly," Severus sneered, but without any true vitriol behind it. "All his attempts so far have been incompetent, poorly thought out and easily thwarted...hardly the level of cunning and execution that I know the boy possesses."

"I think you are overestimating Draco's abilities as much as you are underestimating Harry's," Dumbledore said as the waiter set another mug on the table and left.

"Regardless, Severus, should Draco fail, *you* must be the one to do it."

"Yes, so you've said," Severus replied, this time not hiding his bitterness. "Or we could both wait until the curse takes you, which should be sometime before summer, since you so frequently miss taking your bloody potion as you should. Or, if you like, I could kill you in May. Would that be acceptable? Or right after the school exams? It'll give you time to make your final arrangements and any funeral requests known to Minerva. I can fill her in when I return."

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, my dear boy, Minerva must not know of our plans. She is Gryffindor and far too open and trusting...Tom would be able to read her thoughts like a book should she be questioned."

"So she's to be in the dark as well. *Is anyone* to be aware of our plans?" Severus asked, the anger surging up inside of him again.

Dumbledore didn't respond; he simply sipped on his wine with a damned twinkle in his eyes.

"So I'm to be set up to be loathed by everyone, a pawn in your schemes?" Severus sneered, fighting the hopeless sense of being trapped in this shitty situation.

"You must appear to be beyond reproach, Severus, so that Tom trusts you explicitly," Dumbledore said calmly. "You will face many trials as Headmaster, and I don't want any excuse for him to enter the school. No, as much as it saddens me that you'll be on your own, it is truly necessary."

Severus flicked his wand discretely at the mug in the old man's hands, emptying the wine, and then refilled it with his potion. "Bottom's up, then," he said and lifted his own drink. "To your demise."

"Oh, Severus, don't be so bitter. Death comes for us all in the end," Dumbledore said and drank his potion.

Severus hoped he hadn't drunk enough wine to nullify the effects of the potion. "Let me see your arm."

Dumbledore shook his head as he set down his empty mug. "No time, my boy. I have a lovely, old woman to go see tonight."

"What are you up to?" Severus asked, resting both forearms on the table as he held his glass.

"That which must be done so everything will work out according to plan," Dumbledore said and rose from the table. "Good night, Severus, I shall see you in the morning."

Severus rose and followed the old man out, noticing that Dumbledore's posture was becoming stooped as if age had truly caught up to him. It grieved him to see the old wizard degrading so. Both men said good bye in a secluded spot between some shops and Apparated away, although to different destinations.

Ron and Lavender had been lip-locked in common room all weekend, much to Hermione's annoyance. She had hoped Ron would return to normal, as it was now over two weeks since Lavender's birthday, and she had to have stopped Blooming by now, but that was obviously not going to happen any time soon.

Hermione gave up revising an hour before the younger year's curfew and changed into her swimsuit and robes. On her way to the prefect pool, she literally ran into Professor Snape in the corridor junction on the fifth floor. "Oh, I'm sorry. Good evening, sir," she said, trying to suppress her smile at seeing him, even though he looked rather agitated or upset about something.

He paused, momentarily taken aback. "Miss Granger."

He had obviously just washed, his hair looked wet, and he was standing so close she could smell his cologne. "Um, I like your cologne," she said, ignoring the way he was gritting his teeth. "What is it?"

"My cologne?" he asked, startled. "Why?"

She cocked her head at him, unable to hide her smile. He looked nice, his hair damp, his robes fresh. "It smells nice, familiar...*Like rain dampened wood-esque sea breeze, earthy and rich oakmoss... that subtle hint of vetiver combined with orange oil and cedar...*

He smirked. "It's the same scent I've used for years... You commented on it once, as I recall, when I was a teen," he said, but she thought she could see a faint tinge of blush on his face.

She blushed as well, remembering the way he'd smelled as a teen. "I remember." It had been nice, especially the few times he'd been close to her. "You never told me what it was called though."

He shrugged, but his eyes narrowed momentarily. "A long time ago, I was given cologne as a gift. I was able to break down its components so I could recreate it...in my Alchemy lesson...we had to take a perfume or a cologne and determine its essential elements and then recreate it."

"Yes," now she remembered. He had told her. "I had the same assignment this year. I chose to do my Mum's Shalimar perfume."

He had an odd look in his eyes, one she couldn't decipher. "By Guerlain?"

"Yes," she said, surprised that he knew. "I used to wear it when I was little. She gave me a bottle so I could...it made me feel a little less homesick when I started Hogwarts. I wore it up through my third year. You know the fragrance?"

His body tensed as he inhaled but then he relaxed slightly. "I am familiar with it, yes. The one I used was also by Guerlain." He looked over her shoulder. "You don't wear it anymore."

"No, only on special occasions," she admitted.

"Lemon verbena and lavender with peppermint," he mumbled softly, almost a whisper, while looking at her hair.

She frowned in confusion before realization dawned on her. "You mean my bath gel and body lotion...you can smell it?"

He smirked at her. "The scents are subtle but discernible to someone who can tell a potion ingredient's potency by both sight and smell," he admitted, then stiffened. "Watch where you are going from now on; ten points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger," he said stiffly.

Hermione was confused, one minute they were talking amicably, the next he was cold and taking points for no apparent reason. Suddenly she realized he was not looking at her, but at something...or someone... She turned and saw Draco Malfoy walking down the stairs toward them.

"I expect to see you in my office at eight o'clock tomorrow. Good night, Miss Granger." He nodded to Draco as he approached them. "Mr. Malfoy."

"Professor," Draco said curtly, ignoring Hermione.

"Mr. Malfoy, a word," Professor Snape said, falling into step with Draco and walking away toward the stairs.

Hermione sighed and walked toward the prefect pool for her nightly swim.

They had been brewing Amortentia in Potions for days, setting the potion on stasis at the end of each lesson. It would affect the efficacy of the potion, but at least they were learning all the steps. Still, as Hermione added her love near the final stages, her potion was already obtaining the mother-of-pearl sheen. Not surprising Harry's potion was too, and Ron's, who'd started copying Harry and using the Half-Blood Prince's book, was a reasonable rich garnet color. It irked her that the boys were cheating, but each time she tried to talk to Harry about it, he only became defensive.

She added the cardamom, stirring thirty times with an added counter stir at the end to stop the whirlpool effect, and put the ground cinnamon in, stirring her potion again fifteen times twice with a counter stir in between, then let it simmer. The steam wafted up slowly, not yet swirling, but her potion seemed to be turning out right. After a whole fifteen minutes, the garnet color turned a deep burgundy red. She added the rock rose petals and the Star-of-Bethlehem essential oil, stirring twelve times, paused, counting off sixty seconds and stirring it twelve times again, letting the potion whirlpool this time. Now all she could do was wait.

The steam seemed to undulate as it rose, shifting. She watched it breathlessly, biting her lip as she waited, praying for it to spiral. Beside her, Harry set down his stirring rod and picked up his book, reading the Half-Blood Prince's annotations on the next few pages as if totally unconcerned about how his potion would turn out.

Ron grimaced as he added the Star-of-Bethlehem essential oil to his potion and began stirring, although a little too vigorously.

"Ron, slow down, smooth strokes or it'll explode," she told him, wanting him to get good marks.

He nodded and slowed down a little, and his potion stopped sputtering.

Finally, a soft swirl caught her attention. *It... Is it...?* She held her breath, scared to disrupt the steam. *Yes! Yes it is! It's spiraling!* She leaned over, inhaling deeply, savoring the scent of freshly mowed grass, then the distinctly heavenly smell of parchment and books and... the third scent... *The smoky scent of herbs, Ron's cologne...*

Ron leaned closer, taking a whiff of her potion. "Blimey Hermione, you got it! New clothes, my mum cooking bacon, and... that flowery perfume you used to wear."

Hermione looked at him and smiled, giving him a one-armed hug and sniffed at him discreetly.

She leaned close to her cauldron and inhaled deeply, waiting for the third scent to come. *Freshly mowed grass. Parchment and old books. And... Yes, that heavenly mix of herbs...slightly smoky, amber-like citrus with oakmoss...woody smoke, vetiver...* But her smile faded quickly. It was different...off. Ron always smelled of homemade soap...slightly smoky, orange oil, oakmoss and cedar, but the scent from her potion had *amber-like* citrus, not just orange oil, and it had vetiver notes.

His scent doesn't match! She inhaled her Amortentia again, concentrating on the third scent. *Yes, amber-like citrus and cedar...musky, slightly smoky, earthy and rich oakmoss and... vetiver? It's different!* She knew this scent...she'd smelled it recently... Her eyes widened in recognition. *OHMYGODS! Professor Snape?* She stepped back, staring at her cauldron in shock. *It's Professor Snape's scent!*

And she had to see him tonight!

The rest of the day seemed to go by as if in a haze. She got better marks than Harry on her potion, but she was in such shock over her revelation she barely acknowledged Professor Slughorn's praise. In Herbology she was so distracted that the Venomous Tentacula actually ensnared her, and Neville and Professor Sprout had to help free her. Professor Sprout sent her to the hospital to get an anti-venom, and Hermione packed her bag, glad to escape a greenhouse full of dangerous plants when she was still so distracted.

After seeing Madam Pomfrey, Hermione went to the library to search for material for her Alchemy essay and to give her something to concentrate on before dinner. Still, her mind drifted to the enigma that was Severus Snape. *There is no mistaking it,* she thought as she walked through the corridors, *I'm attracted to the way Professor Snape smells.* She was certain of it...but what did it mean?

She entered the stacks where the Hermetic principles and theories were located and collided with a stack of floating books, and heard a loud "Oomph," as the books and a student all tumbled to the floor.

The student sat up, running his hand through his hair. "Oh, gosh, I'm sorry. I couldn't see you," he said the same time Hermione cried out, "Dennis! Oh my god! I didn't see you!"

"Not surprising," he said with a huge grin as he picked up two of his books and set one on top of the other. "Happens all the time actually. I'm short."

She immediately set down her own books and began helping him, pausing to look at the title of one of the books. *Transmutation Theories?* Dennis, are you taking Alchemy?"

"Yep," he said as he continued stacking the books up again by size. "And Ancient Runes, Arithmancy and Care of Magical Creatures, as well as the ones I had last year. I wanted to take Necromancy, too, but McGonagall thought it was too many subjects to take all at once, and I'd have to take Divination, but I didn't much like Professor Trelawney." He leaned in closer to her, adding softly, "She's wonky, but don't tell anyone I said that." He sat back on his heels and placed the last book on his stack. "But, so far I'm keeping up fine...like you! You take all those lessons, too, don't you? I see your name on the lending cards all the time."

Hermione smiled as she helped him to his feet. "I don't take Care of Magical Creatures anymore; I dropped it after my fifth year to concentrate on my other subjects."

"Makes sense, I suppose. I took it because I thought it would be fun...you know, a light optional lesson. Colin's taking the same lessons as Harry and Ron...he wants to be an Auror," Dennis said proudly. "But so far I find Alchemy utterly fascinating." He looked down at his arm as if he could see the scars from the brain through his clothes.

She eyed him speculatively. She remembered the huge bandage that covered his upper arm and shoulder at the end of her fifth...his second year *He was so young,* she thought. *Too young to have gone off with them...but so brave as well.* "What is it, Dennis? Do your scars still bother you?"

He looked up and smiled. "Nah, they don't, not really. Sometimes my shoulder feels tight, but only when I play Quidditch with Colin for too long." He looked at the book on her pile. "Hermione, may I have that when you're done?" he asked in a small voice, pointing to *Metaphysical Aspects, Substances and Physical States* in her hands.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "It's an advanced text," she said.

Dennis smiled. "I know, but Professor Newton says he's never seen anyone take to the subject like I have, and there is a principle in it that I wanted to review."

Hermione cocked her head, and he smiled at her. "It's on how to bind two chemical elements into a compound, and transforming it into another through a combination of magical and primitive chemistry, then balancing the compound in stasis while changing its structural form into a more purified form. Do you know the principle?"

Hermione nodded. "Bernard Seward Hazleton's theory of binding elements under stasis and then dividing them in a more purified form, leaving the impurities in the magical filter," she said, and began describing the theory as if by rote. Dennis listened raptly, adding in his own thoughts, and soon they were deep in discussion that seemed as natural as when she'd talked about magical theory with Severus.

"Did you know that early Alchemists developed the equipment that is used today in all those chemistry labs?" Colin said, startling Hermione.

She was surprised to see him; she hadn't seen him approach.

"Dennis told me," Colin continued, smiling proudly at his brother. "All that stuff, beakers, crucibles, filters, stirring rods...all invented by magical Alchemists."

"They weren't all wizards, Colin, but many were," Dennis said. "Colin likes hearing about it, but sometimes I find it hard to explain it to him."

"Dennis is going to be purifying mercury, sulfur and arsenic," Colin said, then turned to his brother. "But it's time for dinner. You can't eat books, you know."

"Oh, okay," Dennis said and turned to Hermione. "I really liked talking with you; maybe we can do it again sometime." He picked up his books, Colin taking half, and the brothers hurried over to Madam Pince's desk to check the books out of the library.

Hermione watched them go. Dennis was working on a fifth year project, one she'd done in her second term of school, in his third year. It amazed her. She collected her books, grateful for Dennis' distraction. It had been fun talking to him...he was so knowledgeable, it almost made her feel jealous.

Of course, Ron and Lavender were still lip-locked in the common room, when she went to put away her books, both occupying Lavender's favorite chair over by the windows.

After dinner, Hermione gave up on doing revision in the common room; her mind kept wandering off, mostly on the subject of Professor Severus Snape and her Amortentia Potion. She hurried upstairs to change into her bathing suit under her jeans and blouse, opting for a quick swim before going down to see Severus.

Unfortunately, she bumped into Severus in the corridor on her way to swim, literally colliding into his chest.

"This is getting to be a habit, Miss Granger. One I'd prefer not happening again."

"Sorry, Professor," she stammered, trying...and failing...not to breath in too deeply. "I was... lost in my thoughts." It didn't work; his scent fill her nostrils and muddled her thoughts. *But damn it all, he smells good. Bugger.*

His eyebrow arched as he examined her. "What's bothering you?"

She wasn't about to tell him that his scent was one of the things that attracted her the most...he'd hex her, or curse her, or simply take an unbelievably huge number of House points from her, because he would think that she was mocking him. In any case, she'd die of embarrassment. "I... I had a conversation with Dennis Creevey today that... I don't know how to put it; it was like those times when we'd sit and talk about..."

"Hush," he snarled as he grabbed her arm. He flung open the door with a wave of his wand and pulled her with him into the prefect bath. As soon as the door closed, he locked it and whirled to face her, his expression angry. "Do not *ever* mention that where others can hear you."

"I'm sorry, sir. I was just..." Hermione knew she was attracted to Severus: at least according to her *Advanced Potions Making*. *That which attracts us the most'...it's Severus...Professor Snape, he is my third scent.* She had to think about something else...anything else. "Something about what Dennis said... I'm worried about him."

"Mr. Creevey is fine," Professor Snape said.

"But his arm," she said as she looked up at him, looking up into those dark, intense eyes that, thankfully, were not glaring at her. "He said it doesn't bother him anymore, but just now in the library, he was looking at it rather oddly. And, well, he's incredibly clever; we've discussed things that a first-year of Arithmancy shouldn't have dealt with yet." She looked at his buttons; it was safer. "It's just so surreal, talking with him as if he were in my year. I never realized he was that bloody brilliant."

"He's not," Professor Snape said, his tone softening. "Mr. Creevey was assaulted by the memories from the brain of Mordrid Swithin Wroithesley, the eighteenth century Necromancer and Alchemist."

Hermione nodded; she knew the name. "He's mentioned in the book, *Famous Eighteenth-Century Fiends*." Professor Snape's eyebrow rose, and she felt the need to elaborate. "I borrowed the book for a project in Alchemy last year."

"Mr. Creevey was able to successfully assimilate the memories of Mr. Wroithesley, a blending if you will," Professor Snape stated, and Hermione gasped.

"Assimilated...as in he has the wizard's memories? But the wizard was demented!"

Professor Snape smirked. "Yes, Wroithesley was, but Mr. Creevey is showing remarkable restraint. Although he has the memories, he seems to be discovering things on his own, although he's quite advanced for his age, as you guessed. Professor McGonagall is watching the boy quite closely, as are Professors Newton and Vector, I assure you. The boy is fine."

Hermione felt relieved. "Too bad it hasn't affected Ron," she said wistfully. *He could use a little influence...in the right direction.*

"Hasn't it?" Severus asked. "I've seen a remarked difference in his essays as of this year."

Hermione gaped at him. "He has?" *All that time in the library... of his own accord? Not because of Lavender?* She shook her head. "I'm glad that Ron and Dennis are all right."

He smirked and opened his mouth to reply, but then he paused, closed his mouth as if he'd changed his mind, and he looked at her intently.

She felt her face begin to blush under his scrutiny and dropped her eyes to his chest.

"Well, Miss Granger," he said eventually, "judging by your... attire... it would appear that you were planning on doing your nightly swim before our session this evening."

He cleared his throat, and her eyes jerked back to meet his again. He was still staring at her intently, and she felt the flush deepen in her skin from her chest to her ears. "I'll leave you to your swim. See you at eight o'clock. We will be dueling again, so don't wear yourself out," he said, turning to go. "By the way, ten points for Gryffindor, for your discretion regarding Mr. Creevey."

Hermione smiled as she watched him leave, her heart pounding out an irregular rhythm. When the door closed, she looked at her watch *Damn*, she only had half an hour to swim!

~ T. B. .C. ~

Chapter 43

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Snow was falling, swirling icy patterns on the windows all day, not that Severus needed the coming of the snow to remind him that his least favorite holiday was steadily approaching. Hagrid, full of good cheer, even without proper libations to liven his mood, had spent the afternoon hauling in the twelve Christmas trees to be set up that evening to decorate the Great Hall. Filius and his usual band of helpers set about levitating the garlands and ornaments onto the branches as soon as the evening feast was finished. Severus sneered at the boxes of ornaments, the same ones used every year. Naturally, the only green on the trees would be the pine needles. Sighing heavily, Severus adamantly refused to participate in the decorating and disappeared into his potions lab to try and resolve a cure for the seemingly incurable curse eating away at the Headmaster.

Severus could so easily predict the decor every year: everlasting candles inside the helmets of the suits of armor, which were charmed to sing Christmas carols as people passed, and those holding spears had colorful pennants and ribbons. Wreaths of garland were draped around the necks of the statues and gargoyles. Everlasting icicles and swags of greenery covered every banister; great bunches of mistletoe, holly and pine were strung across the corridors, which all the girls enjoyed loitering underneath in hopes of being kissed by that 'special' boy, and the boys tried every possible way to avoid...well, except the ones who liked kissing the girls. Either way, the congestion in the corridors and the occasional kissing pairs cost most of the houses dearly in the deduction of House points.

The next morning, as Severus entered the Great Hall to take his seat, he tried not to stare at the trees lining the walls, a hard feat considering each tree stood at an impressive eighteen to nineteen feet tall. Five trees stood on either side of the Hall, the shortest being at the back of the Great Hall, with two more standing in the corner behind the staff table, each of them hosting several thousands of fairies for the month. Eight of the trees, in sets of two...one on either side of the room...represented House themes: the Slytherin trees were almost all white and sliver, whereas the trees for other three houses were much more glaringly obvious, almost to the point of ridiculousness: reds and gold, blues and bronzes, yellows, gold and iridescent black. The four trees in the corners of the room were decorated in Dumbledore's favorite combination of orange, royal blue and purple with ample amounts of gold moons and silver stars, which matched his favorite set of robes.

Even the castle seemed to be in the festive mood, the Great Hall had easily widened the additional eleven to twelve feet on both sides of the already huge room to accommodate the extra space needed so that the students who sat at the Hufflepuff and Slytherin tables could actually get to their seats for meals.

The huge trees also provided ten very secluded recesses for amorous teens to hide away for various nefarious activities, adding an additional ten minutes to Severus' nightly patrol of the castle.

He turned to face Minerva, who for some ungodly reason had a twig of holly and thistle pinned to her hat. "Er," he said, lowering his gaze from the ridiculous adornment, "you wanted the list of students remaining at school over the holiday this year." He handed her the sheet of parchment.

Usually there were only two or three names on the list; few Slytherins ever stayed over the holiday, but this year he had twenty-seven, several whose parents wrote to him weighing in their concerns for their child's safety over taking the risks of bringing home for the holiday. Seventeen of them were, of course, Severus' group of Slytherins who had all wanted to stay at the castle to avoid entanglements with the Dark Lord's supporters. He'd already received several letters, and more than a few Howlers, from their parents about this, writing in outrage that their son or daughter was not traveling home. But Severus had replied that it was a family matter, and although he'd be supervising them while in residence, he had no say in whether or not they chose to remain at the castle. He did mention in the letters that he would purchase them tickets if the student changed their mind, but only gave them two days to reply. He was sure the Dark Lord would summon him over this matter in the next few days or so.

Minerva accepted the parchment, and her eyes widened when she scanned down the list of names. "Twenty?" She turned to look at him. "Twenty...?"

"Yes, twenty-seven, as of last night; all of them confirmed," he said drolly as if this were not at all unusual. "In case you haven't noticed, there is a war brewing out there, and they wish to remain here where it's safe."

"Surely your Slytherin's are not in danger from You-Know-Who?" Minerva asked as if this were utterly obvious to anyone.

Severus's jaw clenched. "Being a Slytherin *does not* automatically equate to being a Death Eater," he growled through gritted teeth in frustrated anger. He lowered his voice as he leaned closer to her, "Not all Slytherins are destined to join him, and not all the Death Eaters are Slytherin alumni...there are quite a few Gryffindor Death Eaters, Minerva. You'd best remember that."

He sat back and placed his napkin on his lap, ignoring her icy stare. He sipped his coffee as the morning post arrived. He opened the *Daily Prophet* and absentmindedly scanned down the list of new Ministry appointments, and the article on the confiscation of three kiosks in Diagon Alley supposedly selling medallions and amulets to ward off Dark wizards and various unlicensed brews and tinctures as cure-alls for curses and hexes that the terrified witch or wizard might be conned into buying for protection. *Staying home, hidden under their bed would work better* he thought bemusedly.

There were, of course, more people declared missing, although apparently Brigid and Alexander MacChlurian had simply been on holiday when their residence had been burned to the ground with the Dark Mark floating in the smoke.

Hamish O'Conchobhair, a well respected magical carpenter and creator of Vanishing Cabinets, apparently fought off two Death Eaters in his shop the day before, but no one knew where he was presently. *Not surprising*, Severus sneered. *He was either transfigured into a log or he ran off to Honduras or someplace with tall trees to hide.*

He scanned down the page recognizing the name in the next article immediately.

Robert Osborne, Muggle-born and loving father and husband, was found dead several blocks from the Brahms and Liszt pub in Clerkenwell, the victim of serious internal injuries apparently caused by a curse that left no discernable external symptoms. Healers are stumped by the cause of death. ... continued on page four

Severus knew Robert Osborne; Mr. Osborn had been in his sixth year when Severus started teaching, and he'd caught Mr. Osborne on several occasions brewing illicit potions, absinthe and ale in unused classrooms. He turned to page four to read the article on Robert Osborne's murder and was surprised to read a Healer actually described the full effect of the curse... in print.

"The Aurors thought it was the Killing Curse at first until we did a diagnostic check and saw all the damage done: heart, lungs, intestine, everything. We've seen this type of curse before, but it's not the Killing Curse, more a slashing and tearing of the internal organs, like a knife or dagger slashing a zigzag motion on the inside, tearing everything up. Usually we expect to see a zigzag wound or deep lacerations on the victim's body with this kind of internal trauma, but thing is, Osborne didn't have any outward marks...no lacerations or curse burns on the skin...nothing. However, with a strike this vicious, we have no means of saving the victim's life. Whatever they call this one, it should be another Unforgivable Curse," Healer Pye said in an unofficial statement. "We know of one victim to have survived this curse, a girl, just this last June, in fact, but the victim was not treated here. I think she was healed at Hogwarts, and I was told the laceration on the girl's chest didn't go in very deep...just down to her chest bone and ribs. But how the young lady survived is a mystery. She was extremely lucky to have lived..."

Of all the...the dunderhead, should have kept his trap shut! Severus snarled to himself. *Divulging so much information to that scandal-mongering, Wilma Warren. The witch is a bad as Rita Skeeter.*

It was Antonin Dolohov's twisted version of the Entrails-Expelling Curse, he was sure of it.

Robert Osborne was a Muggle-born who married the last daughter of the Throckmorton line and sole beneficiary of Erasmus Throckmorton. Mr. Throckmorton had died last year, leaving his entire estate, including a sizable property in Warwickshire, to his daughter, Katherine, nineteen at the time, to care for his sickly sons, Clemet and Nicholas, instead of giving guardianship to his half-sister, Marjorie Dolohov nee Throckmorton. Katherine married Robert Osborne three months later, and the boys died of dragon pox last summer, the center of some scandal within the Dark Lord's circles.

A movement at the Gryffindor table caught Severus' notice. Miss Granger appeared upset by something, shaking her head while Miss Weasley and Mr. Potter both seemed to be consoling her. Severus wondered who said what to upset her so, but doubted that it was Potter, or she'd have brushed his arm off her, and Mr. Weasley was too busy shoveling food into his mouth as if it were his last meal while Miss Brown babbled away at him to have been the culprit. And across the table, Mr. Thomas was looking at whatever Mr. Finnigan was showing him under the table... There was no one else around her. One small book sat on the table near Hermione's plate, although from his angle he couldn't tell if she'd received a letter this morning. He had noticed that she'd had three post deliveries that morning: a barn owl had delivered the *Daily Prophet*, a grey owl had delivered either a magazine or journal publication, and a school horned owl had delivered something wrapped in brown paper and tied in a string, possibly a package from home or the book by her plate.

As he watched, covering his interest by taking a long sip of his coffee, Miss Granger quickly stood up and grabbed her bag. Miss Weasley grabbed the book and scrambled to get up as well as Hermione fled from the Great Hall. He set down his cup and took a bite of eggs. Whatever it was, Miss Weasley would console her. He finished his breakfast and left the Great Hall to prepare for his first lesson.

When Miss Granger entered his classroom, she looked forcefully composed, but she didn't have the normal tell-tale signs of having been crying, if she had been crying. He stood up and began his lecture for the morning on how the effects of some spells, once used for practical purposes, could be modified and twisted into Dark Arts spells or Dark Curses. He had a list of two hundred examples on the blackboard; some that on first glance seemed benign, but with the right intent were, in fact, quite cruel and manipulative, but the others on his list could be misused for ill intent, causing physical and mental harm, even to the point of death or permanent damage to the victim.

Throughout the lesson, Miss Granger had taken fastidious notes, as she was wont to do, dipping her quill quickly so as to catch his every word. However, when she raised her hand at every question, her eyes did not have the enthusiastic sparkle they normally did.

"Jelly-Legs for example," he said, starting with one that he hated in particular, having been the victim of it in his youth, noting that a few students snickered slightly under their breath, "seems to be a benign spell, a simple prank, but the base of the incantation is *gelato*, from *gelāta*...Latin for frozen, equivalent to the Latin *gel*...for freeze plus *āta* or *ate*, and combined with the specific body part to affect, in this case, *cruris* meaning the leg. *Gelato cruris*. However, creative minds also came up with the following: *Gelato brachium*, *brachium* meaning the forearm from elbow to wrist, or *Gelato humerus*, effecting the upper arm and shoulder, and *Gelato lingual*, which affects the tongue, and finally, *Gelato cerebrum*...which as you all know, turns the brain to mush, into a gel. Thankfully, modern healing has a known treatment for the Jelly-Brains Hex, however, fifty years ago when this delightful hex was created, they did not. The victim lived in a state of catatonic coma, or brain death, eventually dying a very slow death. Lately, a variation of the spell, possibly *Gelato viscerum*, has been seen...a modification in which the internal organs or entrails are turned into a gel-like state. Unfortunately, so far, this variation is fatal."

He could see Mr. Longbottom cringe at the description; the boy had been the victim of the Jelly-Legs and Jelly-Brain Hex before, both times having been quickly set to right by Madam Pomfrey.

Yes, they were beginning to understand. He continued down his list, not sparing them any of the grotesque details of the effects, or the type and permanence of the damage inflicted.

Eventually he got to the spells that were the more dangerous and difficult to defend oneself against. He should know...he'd personally seen their effect on more than one occasion. "Sometimes, a wizard may develop a curse whose effect is varied depending on intent or strength of determination behind the incantation." He flicked his wand at the blackboard and a new list appeared, some of the more ghastly but newer curses currently being used. As he went down his list, graphically describing each curse and knowing which of the Death Eater preferred which curses, his gaze frequently paused on Miss Granger, watching her for any signs of distress. She rarely looked up unless he posed a question, and when she did, her eyes looked haunted.

In a way he was pleased when he got to the end of his list. "The Entrails-Expelling Curse has been around since the thirteenth century. In its earliest form, it was created as a means of magically gutting game or livestock, but it was often used as a killing curse in time of war. Many of the victims were thought to be slain by means of a sword, those few who survived or who died slowly claimed to be victims of witchcraft or the work of a demon. If poorly executed, the curse will only slash the skin across a victim's abdomen as if cut with a saber, or can be as weak as a scratch...depending on the conviction of the caster to cause harm. To gut a person the caster has to mean it...they have to want to slash the victim open...want to kill them to make the spell effective." He noticed Miss Granger's face turn pale and her hand began shaking. "Miss Granger, is there a problem?"

"Er, no, sir," she replied weakly.

He nodded, watching her a moment and then continued, "The Entrails-Slashing Curse is a deviation of the Entrails-Expelling Curse. It is defined by the purple hue of the spell matching the zigzag motion of the wand movement. It was invented to cause severe internal damage, tearing and rending the internal organs without actually gutting the victim. If the determination behind the intent is not strong enough, or if the caster is unfamiliar with the spell, it could mimic the Entrails-Expelling Curse, however slicing through the breast bone and ribs as well. The Entrails-Expelling Curse does not generally slice through bone. However, someone attempting the Entrails-Slashing Curse could simply slash the victim from chest to navel if the intent isn't desirous enough."

Miss Granger was grabbing at her chest, her expression stricken and her face paled.

"The Killing Curse is the only spell known today that does not have a modified effect, it either kills or it doesn't." When the bell tolled the end of the lesson, Severus called out, "Miss Granger, remain behind."

She nodded and slumped in her seat. Potter, ever the concerned friend, patted her arm and said he'd wait for her, but she shook her head and gave him a weak smile. "No, Harry, I'm fine. I'll see you in the library later, all right?"

"All right, Hermione," he replied, grabbing his bag.

Severus waited until they were alone before flicking his wand at the door. "What is bothering you? And don't say nothing, I can clearly see that something has upset you," he said, leaning against the side of his desk, watching her intently as she looked down at her hands and shrugged. "Is it what happened at breakfast?"

She looked up, startled, so apparently he'd guessed correctly.

"It was one of the articles in the *Daily Prophet*."

He narrowed his eyes; that was not what he'd expected. He tried to recall which article would have upset her this much. He didn't think she knew any of the missing victims of the Death Eaters.

"The one about Mr. Osborn," she added to fill in the silent void.

He wondered if she knew Katherine or Robert Osborne, but seriously doubted it. Katherine had left Hogwarts in 1994, the end of Miss Granger's third year, and she'd been in Slytherin, taken Charms, Herbology and Ancient Runes, if he recalled correctly, but little else. So he waited, keeping his expression one of mild concern. He wasn't good at this, emotional support, but for some reason he was willing to try.

She lowered her head. "I was..." She looked up but did not meet his gaze. "I'm the girl mentioned in the article. I thought that... medical information was private."

Severus didn't know how to respond to that. "Healer Pye behaved unprofessionally in disclosing your medical details to that reporter, but I assure, most Healers keep patient information confidential."

"It was Antonin Dolohov who cursed me. Neville said he used a spell with a purple zigzag... just how you described it... that Entrails-Slashing Curse." She looked up at him. "He wasn't caught...that night, he's still out there, isn't he? And now he knows it was me...that I survived his curse. The article all but said my name."

He knew that Dolohov hated Hermione, blamed her for making him miss cutting Potter, but Rabastan Lestrange and Mulciber had both told him a different version; Dolohov never had a clear shot, Potter, Hermione and Neville were under a desk, all three firing defensive spells at them. "Hermione, your medical information was not divulged to anyone out side of school. Madam Pomfrey must make reports of all school-related injuries to the Headmaster, the student's Head of House and the student's parents, but she'd never divulge information to anyone else without proper consent. Your parents were informed but they were not given specifics, only that you'd been hit by a curse and properly healed," he said, but by her downcast expression, that was not the problem.

He reached out and tipped her face up so he could look her in the eyes. "Hermione, what's the matter?" he prompted, hoping she'd confide in him.

"I survived. Like Harry did, I survived a curse most people die from. It's... it's unnerving." She turned to look at the blackboard, and he regretted that he hadn't erased the list of spells yet. "How did I survive? I tried blocking it, but I missed, didn't I? Or it went around...got by my deflection charm and," she said while tracing her finger diagonally across her chest and down between her breasts. "I'd failed to defend myself, yet I managed to... to somehow stop it from cutting my insides all to shreds."

Severus remembered the wound; Madam Pomfrey had consulted with him on how to heal her. Most of the damage hadn't gone too deep. Sure Dolohov had sliced her breastbone and a few ribs, but her lungs were only minimally damaged, and Madam Pomfrey had healed her in a matter of seconds. Severus had made her healing ointment himself and knew that she only had a pale line making a lightning bolt-like scar that ran downward left to right diagonally across her chest between her breasts, cutting back from under her right breast to her left, and then pointed down about six inches toward her navel. But it was not all that noticeable now. The image of her standing in front of him in her bikini, her breasts cupped in two tiny triangles held by thin string-like straps as she took the towel from his hands came to his mind. Her breasts were perfect. Her body was perfect.

He forced himself back to the present; no point dwelling on that which was utterly unattainable. "Your..." He froze, the words *scar doesn't show* stuck like a craw in his throat. He realized he had been staring at her chest where her fingers rested, still touching where her scar was. He couldn't finish the sentence out loud.

He looked at her; her expressive, guileless doe-like eyes staring back at him with unconditional... what? Trust? He threw up his shields, straightening his back so he stood taller. The effect didn't work so well in her school shoes; she was only four or five inches shorter than he was, so she could almost look him in the eyes. That and she was no longer intimidated by him, a fact he appreciated and that annoyed him at the same time. "I'm not sure how you survived," he said, breathing in before adding, "But I'm glad that you did."

Her eyes widened as she stared at him, a smile slowly forming, lightening up her face, hell, his entire classroom.

"Go. You..." She had a revision break presently, but his next group of students were waiting to be let in. "I have a lesson to teach."

"Oh, yes, right, sorry," she stammered, backing up toward her desk. "Sev-er...Professor, I just wanted to say, thank you, for everything."

He nodded, smirking inwardly at her slip of tongue. "You're welcome. Now go."

She grabbed her bag and hurried from the classroom, letting his four-years in to take their seats.

Ginny had dragged Hermione out to Quidditch practice, telling her that it was unhealthy to holdup in the library every spare moment, breathing in the dust and mold from the old musty books. Even though Hermione had protested that the library was not moldy, musty or all at all dusty, she finally conceded to read out on the stands and watch her friends play.

Hermione had spent weeks trying to determine who the mysterious Half-Blood Prince could be. She'd searched every Potions periodical, journal, and even the codex of all the Potions books in the library...well, not the ones in the Restricted Section, she couldn't come up with a reasonable excuse to ask any of her professors for permission to search in there. For someone who was obviously extremely brilliant at Potions, innovative and with an intrinsic knowledge of potions and how ingredients interacted that she envied, he, or she, there wasn't even one article or one paper in any of the Potions publications written by anyone named Prince as far as she could tell.

She had checked every social register, every *Witch Weekly*, and every *Daily Prophet*, but there was not one mention of a Prince in the wizarding world or any mention of royalty at all...none. There was something about that book, this mysterious Prince that was utterly suspicious. The spells that Harry mentioned that the Prince created made her apprehensive; the few that Harry had tried seemed terribly dodgy, like Dark Arts, not Charms, meant to harm or embarrass the victim, and according to Harry, most of them didn't offer any explanation as to what the spell did, just a two-word note like: 'for privacy,' 'for revenge,' or 'for enemies.' It was the 'for enemies' which concerned her the most. She'd been furious with Harry on more than one occasion for trying the Half-Blood Princes' spells out on Ron. He could have seriously hurt him! So far he'd tried the Langlock, Levicorpus and the Liberacorpus to counter it, Muffliato, and the Toenail-Growing Hex, Unguiculaqueo, as well as Cornuimmanis that created huge cutaneous horns on the victim's body, although who he'd tied that one on, Hermione didn't know.

And she didn't think it was *entirely* fair that Harry was using it to cheat in Potions. Nor would he let Hermione look through the book. He kept it with him all the time, hiding it quickly if she got too curious, or stormed up to his room. Ginny didn't think the book harmful, at least not in the same sense as Tom Riddle's diary had been.

Hermione looked up as Ron made a spectacular save and saw Romilda in the stands cooing and cheering at Harry, the same as Lavender used to do to Ron...well still did. It didn't matter; Harry was infatuated with Ginny, anyone who knew him as well as she did could plainly see that. Although with the upcoming Christmas party Slughorn was planning, there were a number of girls who wanted to go...any chance to dress up in fancy robes and dance the evening away, apparently. Even Ron wanted to attend. Hermione turned her head, easily spotting McLaggen as he shouted suggestions to the Quidditch players, not that they were paying him any mind.

He turned, jutting his chin up as he smiled at her, and Hermione forced herself not to cringe. She'd accepted his invite simply because there had been no other offers. She

had planned on asking Ron, but he was still seeing Lavender.

She turned to watch Ron. When Professor McGonagall had collected all the names of those staying in the castle for Christmas or needing passage booked on the Hogwarts Express, Hermione had put her name as one of the students leaving for home, since she had decided to spend Christmas with her parents this year. So far Ron hadn't extended the invitation to the Burrow, but Ginny had, although she'd said she'd understand if Hermione chose not to.

Hermione had been noticing at the few times she'd seen professor Dumbledore at meals, that his right hand looked dead...shriveled and necrotic, but when she'd passed Dumbledore in the corridor, his hand hadn't smelled like decay...it hadn't smelled at all. And he was holding his arm in such a way as to protect his forearm, as if whatever was ailing him extended to his elbow. Hermione knew it had to be a curse, some sort of curse that Severus and Madam Pomfrey couldn't reverse...she was sure of it. Severus' project, the one he worked in into the late morning hours, it was trying to find a cure, another thing she was sure of.

If it was this bad, and neither Dumbledore, Severus or Madam Pomfrey could find a cure, that meant it was bad, really bad.

Hermione wondered if this would be her last Christmas spent with her parents.

She looked up at the castle. *If Dumbledore dies, then what? What would happen to Severus, would he have to go and be with Voldemort all the time, doing his bidding? Would Voldemort make another attempt on Harry? Is Harry ready?* She forced herself not to answer her own questions, as she watched Harry flying high up in the pitch on his broom. *Oh god, Harry, are we ready for this?*

Professor Snape flicked his wand at the blackboard and another list appeared. "Your assignment is to write a list for each of these hexes: the effect, the trajectory pattern and color, wand movement, the counter spells, and *listing* which defensive spell would be the most effective against each one. The yellow ones are all the hexes you *should* have learned to date, if you'd had competent teachers in this subject," Professor Snape stated. "The white hexes have been documented by the Healers at St. Mungo's and the Auror office, and many do not have known reversing spells yet, but they *are* variations of preexisting spells...identify which ones. I want you *toestimate* what the trajectory pattern and color of the new version would be, if the wand movement were the same. You're to consider the Latin words that may be used as their incantation based upon what the hex does, and then hypothesize which defensive spell might best protect you from the hex...due by Monday's lesson."

There was a general groan in the room, and Professor Snape's eyes narrowed. "Yes, all three hundred. I would think you'd be too busy writing them all down to protest against the assignment." He crossed his arms and glared down his nose at the class. "I doubt any of you will do well on the newer spells, but I want you to try. I will give you ten House points for each correct answer." He turned to look at Hermione. "I expect a *list*, Miss Granger, *not* an essay on each one," he stated, staring pointedly at her. "Not a sentence or an explanative dribble, a list, or you'll be spending every Monday night with me in detention."

Hermione simply nodded as she finished copying the list on the board.

On Harry's other side, Ron mumbled, "As if the git needs a reason to put her in detention."

"Ron, hush," Hermione hissed as Lavender scowled at him.

"What?" he asked Lavender.

"At least it's a list," Harry stated. "Not a five foot essay like he normally sets us."

"This is for our own good," Hermione stated as she began stacking her parchments.

Professor Snape looked up at her and then casually dismissed the class.

"Whew," Harry said with a whistle. "You escaped that one."

"No whistling in my classroom, Mr. Potter, you are not a teakettle. Ten points from Gryffindor," Professor Snape snapped.

"Git," he hissed softly as he turned to hurry from the classroom.

"Harry!" Hermione said, looking up from packing her bag. He looked at her and furrowed his brow in confusion. "Nothing. Go on, I'll catch up to you."

Harry shook his head and hurried out after Ron. She approached Professor Snape's desk cautiously, hoping to ask him about wandless magic.

"Not now, Miss Granger," Professor Snape said, flicking his wand to make the blackboard read the list of defensive spells for his next lesson. He looked tired to her; his shoulders were relaxed, but slightly slumped as if he was fighting fatigue. She wondered if he was sleeping well. "I haven't the time lately to add anymore private lessons, but if I can find the time, I will inform you, disguised carefully to seem as if it were a detention to your peers."

She nodded in understanding, but that was not what she wanted to ask. She bit her lip, deciding to voice her concern. "Sir, I was wondering, the spells...the new ones, are they..."

"Are ones that the Order have asked me about or that have been reported to Dumbledore as well as ones that have been relayed to me through other sources," he said, his voice thick and wary, not the normal tone he used while teaching.

She nodded, understanding. "Is there anything I can do to help? Maybe some research..."

"And just how much do you think you could contribute?" Professor Snape turned to look at her, and she could see the dark circles under his eyes. "There are people whose sole occupation is curse and Dark Arts reversal, and not only in the Ministry and St. Mungo's."

"And yourself," Hermione added softly.

He looked down at the desk between them. "I have been asked, yes, but I have a project that has taken up much of my time as of late."

"Can I help you?" she asked, wondering if his project could be a potion.

"No, unfortunately," he said softly. "You had best go; you'll be late for Potions."

"You once said I was a big help," she said, trying not to sound hurt and failing. She turned away from him, hating how pitiful she sounded.

"Hermione," he said softly.

She turned back to face him, but he was leaning on his arms, his hands flat on his desk, his head bowed so his hair partially concealed his face. "Yes?"

"No one is supposed to know." His head rose so he could look her in the eyes, his hair limply framing his face. "I work late into the evening, sometimes into the early morning hours. Having you in my rooms that late at night would be inappropriate...you have to understand." He straightened slightly, moving his hair from his face. "It's not like when I was young and you were sleeping in my lab anyway. This is different," he said, moving his hand to indicate, "us, this...it's different."

"I understand," she replied. She did; he was right, it was inappropriate, but she wanted to all the same. "I should go," she sighed in regret. She turned to look at him as she

opened the door. He was still watching her. One side of her mouth pulled back in a crooked smile. "See you at dinner," she mumbled softly and turned away.

Hermione left the classroom and hurried down to Potions. She saw Harry and Ron, thankfully Lavender free, up ahead in the Entry Hall, and she called out their names before Harry reached the stairs to the dungeons. Harry stopped and turned, waiting for her. As she passed Romilda Vane and her friends loitering near the marble staircase, she heard one of the girls mention Harry's name as she leaned close to Romilda's ear.

"I think Romilda Vane likes you, mate," Ron said, watching the girls over his shoulder as Hermione approached.

"Ron, watch where you're going," Hermione said, pulling on his arm so he didn't plow into a girl walking in their direction.

"She's all right," Harry said, turning to look. Romilda's friend giggled. "Why do girls giggle like that?"

"Really, Harry," Hermione said with a roll of her eyes. "Not all girls do."

"Yeah they do," Ron said as he lumbered down the stairs. And one second later, Ron and Harry switched the subject to when to schedule the next Quidditch practice, leaving Hermione to wonder what project Professor Snape was working on.

Severus managed to extract himself from the small group of revelers Slughorn insisted on introducing him to...again. He knew that Hermione was here, somewhere, in the crowd; he'd heard McLaggen asking Miss Lovegood if she had seen her. Miss Lovegood simply replied that she was avoiding all the nargles in the mistletoe or some such rot.

He scanned the revelers, avoiding eye contact with all of them, but didn't see her...hadn't seen her all evening. Too bad, she would have been the only person he'd have wanted to talk to at this bloody boring excuse to drink, not that he could be *seen* talking to her. *Damn it to bloody hell.* He hated parties.

He saw McLaggen and heard him ask Potter if he'd seen Hermione, smirking when Potter shook his head. Severus wondered where she was. After excusing himself from another group of inebriated guests, he overheard McLaggen asking Miss Weasley where Hermione, his date, was.

I can't believe that she came with that addlebrained oaf. But apparently she had. He looked around and couldn't see her anywhere either *Is she even here or has she come to her senses and left?*

Suddenly Argus appeared, hauling Draco with him into the room. Severus moved closer as the boy confessed that he'd crashed the party, but he didn't believe the boy. Finally having a reasonable excuse to leave the soirée, he made his polite retreat. He pulled Draco out into the corridor and away from the few loitering outside the doorway.

"Why won't you confide in me, Draco?" Severus asked, not for the first time that evening.

He listened to the boy rant about not needing help, not wanting Severus to steal the boy's glory in his accomplishment, and how he was doing just fine without his help.

"So far your attempts have been incompetent, poorly thought out and easily thwarted," Severus sneered. "I made a Vow to your mother to assist you in any way I can."

"Yes, an Unbreakable Vow, right?" Draco spat. "Yes, my aunt told me about it."

Both of them turned at the sound in the corridor, the definite sound of a shoe scuffing on dirt or grit on the stone floor. *Potter. Damn the boy's incurable curiosity and insufferable need to meddle.* Unfortunately, the distraction gave Draco the opportunity to evade him and leave.

Severus watched the Hogwarts Express pull away from the platform from the shadows alongside the depot. Hermione was onboard, heading home. He'd overheard her telling Miss Weasley as they walked through the school gates that she wanted to spend the holidays with her parents. The idea both pleased and concerned him; she would not be moping about the Burrow mooning over Mr. Weasley, but she'd be in a Muggle home with the normal magical protections.

He turned to look at Madam Hooch and Hagrid as they strolled toward Hogsmeade, most likely joining others in a round at the Three Broomsticks before returning to the castle.

He leaned against the wall of the depot, staring at the junction in the road; one path led to the castle, the other to Hogsmeade, the station behind his back represented escape to a false sense of freedom and ultimately a slow painful death. An apt symbol of his life: Dumbledore...the Dark Lord...or run and be despised, hunted down and killed. He felt like he was stuck between masters, both manipulative, both scheming and either would sell his soul for their cause. One, a dying man who wanted Severus to kill him, his mentor for years, to rend his soul so he could take his place as headmaster and be loathed by everyone he liked and admired, or he could succumb to a narcissistic madman and wreck havoc on the world, becoming the black-hearted beast Lily always said he'd be.

Severus didn't want to spend the holiday carrying out Dumbledore's every whim like an attention-starved crup, or genuflecting before the Dark Lord, listening to him rant and rave about his superiority, his conquest of the ultimate power, and his ranting about bloody Harry Potter at every turn, hoping not to be Crucioed or fed to his pet snake.

He couldn't go home; the rat, Peter Pettigrew, was still living there.

He couldn't leave the country; the Dark Lord would want his services, and if he left the school, he would expect him to join the other Death Eaters in some murder, mayhem and madness devised by either the Dark Lord himself or Bellatrix or Avery. If he did leave the country, there was also the added threat of termination; the Dark Lord had killed Karkaroff and many others for fleeing after his reemergence into snake-like human-ish form. And his influence was spreading wider, even as far south as Italy and east to Belarus and Romania...and anyway, if he did join his brethren in basking in the Dark Lord's presence, he'd have to listen to Lucius bemoaning his fall from grace and Bellatrix's zealot machinations and constant fawning over the Dark Lord.

Happy Christmas, indeed.

A movement caught his attention: a student in Gryffindor robes hurried down the path toward Hogsmeade. She had chestnut-colored curls that bounced as she ran, but in his mind, Severus saw Hermione, only fourteen as she ran with him into the Forbidden Forest.

Well, if he couldn't do it for himself, he could ensure that hers was a happy Christmas.

She had been the only really positive thing in his teenage life; she had helped him and supported him without expecting anything in return, and she would still help and support him unconditionally today if he'd let her. Even now, months after her Bloom, he was still attracted to her, try as he might to fight against it. Sometimes late at night, when the weight of it all felt like it could crush him, when he was ready to call it quits, he'd read his diary, and remembered how his teenage self had felt. How his other selves had felt. Regret. His regret. Always regret. More than once he'd thought of going back, using her Time Turner to escape...to change his fate. But it had been destroyed during that bungled raid on the Ministry. *Bugger.*

Bugger it to hell. He knew where she lived. He knew that the Ministry had put protections on her home. But they wouldn't be enough. The standard protections wouldn't keep her safe...the Death Eaters knew the spells as well...knew how to break them. If they knew where the house was, she'd be in danger. It wasn't all that hard to find Muggle homes; Muggles gave their addresses out too easily and to too many sources. *Hell, even a bloody junk mail flyer or a magazine... All one had to do was look in the trash bins.*

He also knew warding spells that even the Dark Lord didn't know...many of which he'd invented. And he'd put protections on their vehicles; that way, even if she...they left the house, she'd still be safe. He knew spells that made automotive transport very difficult to follow or track, especially if they left from a place that was secret kept, as he was sure her house was.

Decision made, he pushed off the wall and Apparated to Bexleyheath.

Severus sat in the chair in front of his fireplace, a snifter of fine whiskey beside him, holding a brown paper package on his lap. As per usual, the Headmaster and Heads of House had sent him their usual tokens: Dumbledore gave him a whirling, spindly gadget that whistled, which threatened to annoy him, and a book. Minerva gave him a book and a black scarf. Pomona gifted him a book, and Filius gave him a bottle of liquor. Madam Pomfrey gave him a vial of phoenix tears, several bezoars and some powdered unicorn horn and a few Chocolate Frogs. He smiled. Poppy had given him Chocolate Frogs ever since he was a third year when she found out he rarely received Christmas presents. The potion ingredients were her way of telling him to be safe.

But the plain brown package was addressed to him in simple, precise print that merely said,

To Professor Severus Snape

Head of Slytherin House, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Scotland

He'd cast every hex, curse, Dark Arts and jinx detection he knew, and even used his foe glass on the package, but nothing seemed remiss. It remained inert, benign and apparently safe to open. He pulled the string and unfolded the paper.

It was a vintage, black Muggle men's travel toiletry case. He unzipped the case and peered inside, finding a Muggle Christmas card.

Below the sentiments Hermione had written, *Happy Christmas, Severus. I hope this serves you well.* Under the card were glass vials made from led crystal, tempered glass, fused quartz, Hebron glass and Bristol blue glass, a few silver and pewter tins and silver and ceramic jars... to hold his potions or potion ingredients for travel.

Once again she'd given him something thoughtful and meaningful. He'd simply sent her a beaded purse and a pair of tiny shears in a pendant sheath that she could wear around her neck when she was knitting that he'd seen in Hogsmeade the day she'd left on the train.

He stared into the flames, wishing that he was sixteen again, rather than her stern acerbic teacher. Life was so unfair.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Chapter 44

Chapter 44 of 54

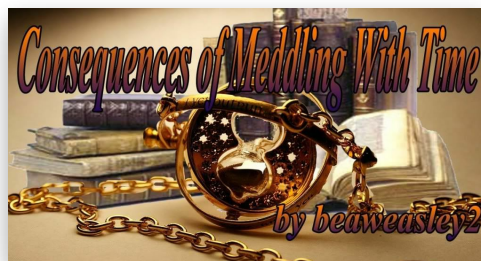
Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun.

Once again, the events that are not mentioned in this story that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to Phoenix for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



The wedding of Tiberius Flint and Catherine Chittenden was a lavish affair, whereas the wedding of Raithe Macrae and Tammorah Merkle the previous week had been a quaint, reasonable ceremony and reception, but neither had been particularly enjoyable. Severus had never really liked weddings. However, his attendance had been expected and thus it was a required obligation.

He had been surprised to see Raithe and his new bride at the Flint wedding, but apparently, Tiberius and Raithe had become friends in the last few months, although Severus still questioned Flint's true loyalty in the war. Elise Chittenden and Drusilla Flint had both thanked him for helping the young couple, although in fact it had been entirely Augusta Longbottom and Niharika Patil who'd intervened on the young people's behalf. However, both pairs of newlyweds looked happy, even with everything else that was going on.

Raithe, Duane Hartshorne and Grantham Thortenson had approached him at both weddings, giving Severus updates on what they knew, which didn't amount to too much, except for some vague warnings on planned Muggle Attacks. So far, even though Hermione and her friends were on the 'hit lists' none of them had been attacked. Apparently the Ministry wards and those added by the Order and their families were holding up.

"Raymond and Serena are married now," Raithe said softly before taking a sip from his flute, his eyes following Tammorah Merkle and Grantham Thortenson on the dance floor. "I heard they are still at the beach house."

Severus moved his head minutely to acknowledge the statement.

The boy angled his body toward Severus while at the same time maintaining the appearance of watching his wife dance. "Grantham took the Mark," Raithe said a bit louder, as if proud for his friend, but Severus knew better; neither Grantham nor Raithe had had a choice. "His father, Mr. Hartshorne and my dad all stood for him. Bletchey and Bole are due to join the werewolf hit squad, even though we're supposed to be friendly with the vermin."

Severus's mouth drew back in a slight smile, knowing that he'd have to pass this information on to Lupin. "And you?"

"Duane, Grantham, Flint and I won't find out our assignments until next month, but rumor has it we'll be under Runcorn."

Severus smiled, then lowered his voice considerably, "Be sure that you keep an eye on a Metamorphmagus witch in the Aurory, she could be of some import. You'll recognize her by her ridiculous pink hair color."

"So, not hard to miss then," Raithe said with a smirk. "Friend or foe?" he asked softly behind his flute.

"Friend," Severus very softly, then, with a curt nod, he walked away casually. He socialized for another hour, then slipped away and returned to the castle.

Severus changed from his formal robes and used the mirrors to contact Dumbledore. "Where are you?" Severus asked without preamble as soon as the old wizard's right eye and nose could be seen. "I have your potion. If you don't take it, the curse will spread."

"Ah, Severus, good to see you, my boy," the mirror said in Dumbledore's voice. "I'm afraid that the curse will have me all in good time, all in good time."

"Better later than sooner, don't you think, or would you like me to do away with you now?" Severus asked. The ever dreaded and despised 'request,' reinforced by his Vow to Lily half a life ago, still grated on his nerves, almost as much as the old fart's nonchalance regarding his treatments. "*Daily*, Headmaster, or may I remind you that skipping doses cancels all efforts in keeping the curse in a slow progress *towards your heart*"

"Yes, yes, I shall meet with you briefly," Dumbledore replied. "Use the Floo in my office and come to the Ivy House in Bangor-on-Dee. This week, I'm particularly fond of Aniseed Balls."

Those awful things? Severus grabbed the vial of potion and left immediately. Fawkes greeted him with a happy trill when he entered the office. "So, not crying over the old man tonight?" he asked the bird. "Don't suppose you'd shed any tears for me?" he asked and was surprised when Fawkes ducked his head once and ruffled his wings.

Severus pulled out a vial and showed it to the bird. Fawkes angled his head as he leaned forward slightly. Severus held up the vial and deftly caught the offered tears, amazed by the gift. When Fawkes felt he'd shed enough of them, the phoenix sat up and fluffed his plumage as he resettled on his perch. "Thank you," Severus said softly, stoppering the precious tears. "I'll use them well."

Fawkes made a loud 'C-werp' and closed his eyes.

Severus, feeling dismissed, traveled through the Floo to his destination. He arrived at the small cottage and gruffly greeted the older wizard, sitting comfortably in a chintz wingback chair. "Isn't this a bit of a risk?" he asked as he swished his wand to dust off the ash from his robes. "I've heard that the Dark Lord has placed a few of his followers in the Ministry. I warned you that he will take control of the magical transportation departments first."

"We shall not be here for very long," Dumbledore said, taking the flask and drinking the potion.

Severus hoped the new potion would counter the effects. *If not...well...* He looked at the shriveled hand. "Miles Bletchey and Cameron Bole are to join the werewolf hit squad. Four of the students in my Slytherin group are to be assigned to Runcorn and may end up in the Aurory or another hit squad," he said and listed off their names. He didn't tell him he'd told Raithe to make contact with Tonks; he wanted to talk to her personally about it first. He told Dumbledore the rest of news he'd gained at the reception, most of it inconsequential in his opinion.

As he spoke, he'd pushed up the Headmaster's sleeve. Severus frowned as he examined the darkened forearm while Dumbledore forcefully gulped down the last of his potion. *This is not good.* The shriveled and blackened tissues extended several inches up the forearm and the streaking tendrils of the curse stretched up to the elbow *I'd guess he has only four months if he doesn't start listening to Poppy and me....* "The curse is already up to your elbow," Severus observed, then made the coffee table grow taller with a pointed jab of his wand.

Dumbledore gently set the arm on the table. "Yes," he said sadly. "It makes it rather hard to bend my arm."

Severus used his Drawing-Darkness Counter-Curse, drawing the curse down the forearm, pulling at the evil he could sense through the spell, forcing the tar-like ooze to fall into the empty vial that had held the potion. He managed to extract about four tablespoons of the vile pus into the vial, although not nearly enough. But the good news was that the pus fizzed where it contacted with what little amounts of the potion had remained in the glass vial. A hopeful, positive sign.

"How much time do I have?"

The resolved tone made Severus look up, feeling a surge of disgust. "At this progression I'd say it will reach your shoulder sometime in mid to late April...unless you take your doses *regularly* and at the same hour *every night*, then it will likely reach your heart by the end of May," he stated. "So if this final battle is to happen, I suspect it will be this spring..."

"I'm not ready to have Harry face Voldemort," Dumbledore stated, ignoring Severus' sharp hiss.

"You mean the *boy* isn't ready?" Severus asked with mock incredulity. "He's not likely get to any more ready than any of his other encounters have been. What would be the difference?"

Dumbledore smiled as he pulled down his sleeve. "There are things Harry must know, and things I must do, Severus, to prepare him to face Tom Riddle. We simply must hold out until he is of age when he reaches his magical maturity and comes into his full powers."

"You honestly think *you'll* hold out that long?" Severus asked, looking at him as if he were delusional before quickly controlling his features once more. "So you hope to stall the Dark Lord until August?"

"That is my hope..."

"Then you might want to take your treatments a bit more seriously, because as things stand, you will *not* be here to see him come of age," Severus stated angrily as he rose to leave.

"I will not see Harry come into his own, I know this," Dumbledore said softly, making Severus pause. "It will fall to the others to see this through."

"You expect me to..."

"Take control of the school. I believe that Tom will appoint you, his trusted informant, as Headmaster after I am gone," Dumbledore stated.

"Be Headmaster...are you insane? I will be thrown into Azkaban without a trail...if I'm not given the Kiss! That is all that killing you will achieve," Severus sneered. "Then my vow to you and Lily will have been for naught and the boy will fall into danger."

Dumbledore sighed and shook his head. "Harry will have Mr. Weasley and Miss Granger with him to look out for him." He looked up at Severus steadfastly. "Fudge and Umbridge greatly weakened the Ministry's defenses and the infiltration of the Death Eaters and their supporters progresses steadily...his influence is already growing stronger. The Ministry will fall, and as soon as that happens, I'm afraid that Tom will take over the school governors and the school quite easily."

Severus crossed his arms as he glared at the old man. "Do you really think that the Dark Lord will give me control of the school?"

"Do you really believe that Tom will not make *you* Headmaster of *his* school?" Dumbledore countered.

"He has long coveted being in control of Hogwarts," Severus countered back. "He wanted the Defense post, cursed it if I'm to believe you, because you didn't give it to him all those years ago."

"He wants access to Hogwarts, not the responsibility," Dumbledore stated patiently. "You are his logical choice, Head of Slytherin House and one of the few that Tom trusts to see to his interests done. You are also the only Death Eater the current school governors will consider as a candidate, if he doesn't dispense with all of them."

"Alecto Carrow..."

"Is a governess, not a Hogwarts professor for fifteen years with fifteen years experience as Head of House and primed by me," Dumbledore stated. "Minerva will, unfortunately, be bypassed; her loyalty to me and her age will be held against her. But you must protect her, Severus, you must protect them all."

Severus was unsettled by the revelation, but he did not allow it to show. He stood. "Be in the hospital tomorrow at eight, every night, or the failure will be yours," he said sharply and turned to leave. Severus used the Floo and returned to the castle in the early morning hours and walked to the owlery to send a message to Tonks to meet him in Hogsmeade early the following morning, knowing that few of the Dark Lord's followers were early risers.

Hermione was so glad to be back at school. The lessons, the constant new discovery of what was possible with magic, being taught things she once thought to be utterly impossible, really thrilled her. But the most exciting was the discovery of Apparition, translocation as her parents would say, being able to instantaneously leap from one place to another simply because she determined that was where she wanted to be was a heady thought, and all it took, apparently, was to visualize in her mind a destination and deliberately go there. All it took was determination and deliberate action and voila...you're in a new location. Oh, yes, Hermione couldn't wait until they started Apparition lessons!

Of course she'd read everything she could on the theory. Now if she could only find any reference at all on what a Horcrux was or what it did, that would be great, or find any reference to a magical prince, one that was a half-blood no less. She'd even tried sussing out if maybe they were related to any of the royals, but it seemed that members of the royal families *never* developed magical powers.

Hermione stood in the corridor deciding which to do first, find Professor Snape or swim. She absolutely had to see him on this night of all nights, regardless if he was busy on something or not, and she'd been so busy in the library trying to determine who the thrice damned bloody Half-Blood Prince was or for *any* information at all on Horcruxes, to no avail, that she'd lost track of time. Deciding that she could forgo swimming for one night, she turned and headed for the dungeons, not wanting to be trapped down there late at night. She only hoped he was still in his office, because if he was somewhere else... She shook her head. No, he had to still be here.

She passed Draco and Goyle on the stairs leading down to the fourth floor. Draco snarled at her, his usual disdain of, "Watch it, Mudblood," echoed by Goyle's, "Yeah, watch it, Mudblood."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "As if I take up the entire staircase like you two do," she quipped and made to hurry away from them, but paused and turned to watch them instead. Goyle spotted her, scowling fiercely at her, before Draco grabbed his arm and pulled him aside. Hermione walked back up a few steps and saw them disappear down the corridor. She wondered where Draco was going. He wasn't a prefect anymore, so technically he wasn't supposed to be using the prefects' bath, and Goyle wasn't allowed to use it. According to the school rules, it was reserved only for prefects and team captains, as a perk. There wasn't anything but classrooms on the fifth floor; the library was on the third floor and the hospital on the first...

Shrugging, she turned around slowly and proceeded down to the dungeons, contemplating where Draco and Goyle could be going on the fifth floor. Besides two loos and the prefects' bath, there wasn't anywhere logical that they could be going to. *Ravenclaw tower is on the west side of the castle and the Astronomy Tower on the... but it's not logical that they'd be headed to the Astronomy Tower together, unless they were both meeting girls up there.* She immediately tried to dismiss the unpleasant thought of the pair of them, each engaging with their girlfriends at the same time... *No. Too appalling to think about.*

When she reached the dungeons, she walked confidently up to Professor Snape's door and knocked, hoping he was still in his office. The door across the corridor opened, startling her. "Hi, I, er, just wanted to see you. Do you have a moment?"

He turned his head, looking at the room behind him, then turned to stare at her again. "I have a moment," he said and stepped outside, closing the door behind him. "In my office."

Hermione followed him, wondering if he had someone in their training room, then dismissed the idea. It didn't matter really. It could be another student having trouble with their Surges, but she dismissed that idea as well...he'd told her she had been the only student he'd worked with on controlling their magic... and he wouldn't use the room for a detention? But whatever it was, it didn't really concern her.

He opened his door and ushered her inside. "What is it, Miss Granger."

She dug into her bag and pulled out a rather crumpled package, wishing she'd cast a protection spell on the wrapping, and a small, gaily wrapped box. "Happy Birthday."

He stood unmoving, his eyes searching her face, his arms crossed. She extended her gift toward him, urging him to take the packages, and he tentatively accepted the gifts. She waited, watching him apprehensively as he stood there holding them.

"Oh, of all the... sit, if we have to do this, now," he snapped, and she smiled at his embarrassment.

She sat down in the chair that faced his desk as he took the seat next to her. Hermione bit her lip as he set the box down and began to open up the crumpled gift. He looked up at her. "Don't bite your lip."

She smiled. "I just..."

"I know," he said and pulled out the knitted scarf. It was black with tiny speckles of green and blue made out of a soft Peruvian highland wool and superfine Alpaca blend.

"I made it," she said, stating the obvious. She hoped he liked it; the crisscross basket weave and cabled edging had been difficult at first, and the scarves, one for Professor Snape and one for her father, had taken her a week straight.

He sat there holding the scarf in his hands, his right thumb stroking the luxurious wool, his expression guarded. He set it carefully on his desk (the action in of itself telling her he did like it) and opened the other gift.

Hermione waited as he opened the box of votive candles. "It's sea breeze," she said as he picked up a blue votive. "I thought it would make your room smell nice." She blushed, hoping he didn't think she thought his room would smell bad...the bedding he'd brought her when she'd slept in his potions room three years ago hadn't smelled bad at all, they had smelled like him. "They will turn liquid, so you have to burn them in a votive holder..." *But if he doesn't have one* "or a small cup, I suppose."

He nodded and set it aside. "Thank you."

She smiled at him. "You're welcome."

Neither spoke, and he didn't move or indicate she had to leave. Hermione glanced at the bookshelf and then back at him. "How was your Christmas? I haven't had the chance to ask."

"I was here," he stated, but he didn't elaborate any further.

"We stayed at home for most of the time. Decorated a tree, baked, and mum taught me some new knitting patterns... It was nice to see them and have a normal Christmas." She looked up at him through her fringe.

He simply watched her as if he didn't have anything to say to that. She wondered if maybe his Christmas had been boring or unpleasant, and he didn't wish to talk about it.

She smiled again and changed the subject. "I read all the reading material on your list."

His lips curved back into a bemused smile. "I'm hardly surprised. I will try to schedule time to work with you, but I don't know when. The thing is to practice and focus."

"I already can do a few things," she stated, glad to have a subject to talk about. She turned and faced the bookshelf, concentrating on focusing her intent on one particular book on his shelf, centering her determination to have the book come to her and said the Summoning Charm silently in her mind. The book wiggled, slid toward slightly and then sailed to her outstretched hand as if jumping at her. She caught it and turned to face him. "I can send it across the room as well, but not with the precision to put it back on the shelf properly."

He stood and backed away from her. "Send it to me," he instructed.

Hermione held the book up, focusing her intent to send the book to him while nonverbally saying the Repelling Charm in her mind with all her determination she possessed. She felt her magic surge, and for a moment wavered, then centered her focus on her desired aim again, smiling as the book shot from her hand as if she'd thrown it at him, only her arm was still fully extended. She grinned triumphantly. "I can move larger objects, too, like a chair."

He nodded, but she could see the approving glint in his eyes. Her smile widened. "I can light candles, and even a fire in the fireplace...I did that at home. And I can levitate the cushions as well as the sofa, I did that, too. But I couldn't repair a glass I dropped, though. I had to use my wand."

"Then that is where we'll start," he said, his expression thoughtful. "Plan on spending part of this weekend with me, I'll let you know what time, and we'll work on a few of your rudimentary spells."

Hermione grinned happily. "Okay, this weekend. I'll brush up on all my first and second year spells," she said.

He chuffed a laugh. "I'll make you a list," he said and walked up to her. "Put my book back before you go."

She took the book and put it on the shelf as asked.

"Thank you, Hermione," Severus said softly as he walked her to the door.

"You're welcome. I hope your birthday was pleasant," she said as he opened the door.

He lowered his head, but she could see a lopsided smile from between the curtains of his hair as he said, "It has been," and thought he might have even blushed.

"Good night, sir," she said and hurried away, certain that he liked her gifts.

"How are you doing with your nonverbal spells in Charms and Transfiguration?" Professor Snape asked. He was leaning against a desk in an unused classroom on the first floor.

There was an assortment of objects thrown haphazardly around the walls of the room, mostly left where they'd landed when Hermione had demonstrated her ability to levitate and move objects wandlessly. The boot, large beanbag poof, crate and the thick oak log had been easiest; the long sofa, heavy wood table and steamer trunk of bricks had not, mostly because he had insisted that she set them down properly. Likewise, conjuring fire was easy, and her precision with smaller objects had improved, although she'd had a trouble reshelving the books in their proper place in the library. However, she still couldn't properly repair the glass bottle to its original form, though, no matter how hard she tried. And she couldn't alter its shape.

"I can manage most of my first through third year spells nonverbally...well, the one's I've tried, that is," she said. "We are reviewing complex transformation spells in Transfiguration with larger animals. I've managed to change my rock into a pug once nonverbally and can make a stick turn into a fish. But to animate them, I had to verbalize what I wanted."

He stroked his lip with his thumb, and she found herself mesmerized by the small action. "Miss Granger, stop staring at me," he said.

She quickly looked away, trying to hide her discomfort. He'd never liked being watched, she knew that.

"Because of your encounter in France, your wandless abilities are strongest in direction spells, which, if you get powerful enough, will serve you well in a defensive situation. Conception spells are harder since you're used to using a wand as your conduit, and all you had to do was focus on your intent with sufficient determination and visualize what you wanted to happen. So, let's try deflection spells."

Hermione swallowed, it was hard enough defending herself against him with a wand, now he was suggesting she face him unarmed! "All right," she said, inhaling deeply in her resolve to do her best.

Professor Snape chuffed a laugh as he wandlessly summoned the boot. "I'm not going to hex you, I'm going to toss an object at you, silly girl," he said as he caught the boot with one hand. "I want you to use magic to keep it from hitting you."

She watched in amazement as he transfigured the boot into a cricket ball. He casually tossed it in the air, then caught it as if he played the sport. "Have you ever played cricket?" she asked. She'd tried playing cricket at primary school, but she had not been any good at it. She had been so terrified of being hit by the hard, leather ball that she had frequently ducked out of the way when it had been thrown or hit towards her.

"No, of course not," he said, his face actually scrunched fractionally as if offended. "I've seen a game, naturally, but I'm not a follower of the sport." He quickly resumed his teaching mode again. "You are quite adept at defending yourself with a wand; the principle is the same, reaction with determined intent to halt the object or push it away before it hits you." One side of his mouth curved back as he lofted the ball and caught it again. "Ready?"

She inhaled as she braced herself. "Ready."

He chuffed a laugh again as he lobbed the ball at her. She tried to deflect it, but her magic didn't flow and the ball landed at her feet. She cursed at herself as he summoned the ball back to him.

"Pitiful. Try again. This time focus."

He lobbed the ball at her again, harder this time. She tried to do the Deflection Charm, but as the ball came at her, her concentration faltered and she caught it instead. He scowled as she tossed it back at him, but he deflected it, making the ball fly to the wall to his right instead. "I said deflect it, we're not playing catch," he said as he made the ball fly back to his hand.

Three more tries, and she'd only managed to cast the Deflection Charm once, but not in time to stop the ball from bouncing off her abdomen. "I'm sorry, I don't know why I can't do this?"

"You're not reacting quickly enough. Stop over thinking it and just do it." He smirked and drew back his arm.

Her eyes widened in surprise as he threw the ball at her full force. She only had a second to think *No! Deflectere*, as she moved her hands to cover her face, and her magic surged inside her, seemingly to pulse away from her out of control. The ball rebounded away from her and shot directly at Professor Snape. He easily deflected the ball, making it bounce off the wall to her left.

"There, you did it," he stated, a cocky grin on his face as she gaped at him in astonishment. Suddenly a small chime sounded in his pocket, like an egg timer. "Now go and analyze how you did it for our next session. I have to go." He quickly strode for the door.

Hermione snatched her robe off the floor and hurried after him. "Go where?" she asked, following him into the corridor.

"I have a potion to attend to," he replied, moving quickly.

"May I come?" she asked, almost running to keep up with his long stride.

"If you must," he replied as he descended the stairs, and she practically ran down the stairs after him. He led her to his personal lab.

As Professor Snape approached the worktable and began chopping a hornbeam root, Hermione examined the blackboard. The directions on the left she recognized as a pain potion, but he'd added anti-inflammation ingredients and mandrake root extract... The one on the right was a potion generally used for concussions, but Professor Snape had written stinging nettle, oatstraw, red clover, and comfrey in between the lines... all protein-rich herbs.

But the center potion, which took up two thirds of the space, looked like a page of his old potions book; the base potion had a second, very similar potion written alongside it with arrows and lesser or greater marks drawn between the lines, as if he thought one line in the directions were better than the other. Additional ingredients were written in any available space, some with arrows or crossed out. There were added comments between the lines and on the top and bottom of the board and even crossing the dividing lines of the other potions, and there were smudges where he'd erased something... He even had sticky notes in places with Arithmancy equations on them. It was the most complicated amalgam of directions she'd ever seen, even by his standards.

She focused on the ingredients. "You're creating a healing potion?" she asked, realizing that most of the ingredients were similar to the ones they were using in Potions. Only this didn't look like an antidote...

"Did you wish to help me or simply stare at my notes?" Professor Snape asked.

"Help!" she said, pushing her sleeves up as she turned around.

"Then come over here and add the bromelain extract, then grind up the white willow bark," he directed, indicating the potion on his left.

Hermione dropped her robe on a stool and got to work immediately, thrilled to be able to brew with him again.

Hermione entered the library and sighed as she saw Won-Won and Lav-Lav sitting at her favorite table. Won-Won was spending most of his revision periods actually revising, or trying to, when Lavender would untangle herself from around him. The only times she saw them sitting properly in chairs, one chair each instead of trying to occupy one chair together, were the times that she'd spotted them in the library, an occurrence that was happening more frequently so far this term. She was glad that Ron was applying himself more academically, but she missed reviewing his essays for him in the common room. Harry sat across from them, reading a book with his head propped up in his hand and trying to avoid looking at the pair.

Hermione chose a quiet corner to sit. She was still angry with Harry over cheating in Potions, but for the last three weeks, Harry had stumbled through Potions just like everyone else since he had not been able to simply cheat and pull out a bezoar! Every Monday they had to actually *try* breaking down a potion into its separate components to identify the potion's ingredients. Then they were expected to use logical deduction and intuition to deduce which ingredient or ingredients would transform the disparate elements into an antidote, which they had to brew on Thursday. Hermione had had a very nasty one last week; she'd separated out fifty-three ingredients, but the one the previous week only had thirty-nine ingredients.

And Harry wasn't the shining star anymore, either. Hermione felt sorry for him, but that's what cheaters got. In their second lesson, Harry had failed miserably. Professor Slughorn had leaned forward to check Harry's potion, then had backed away hastily, coughing as he'd fanned his hand in front of his face. Served him right, but that didn't mean she wanted him to fail. As soon as Harry had admitted he was sunk, Hermione explained the principles of Golpalott's Third Law to try and help him, and Harry spent hours with Hermione reviewing how to properly separate the components and the appropriate spellwork. After that, he was actually doing much better identifying the potion's ingredients, but he was rubbish at creating antidotes.

Not that Professor Slughorn bothered to notice...he kept giving Harry full marks without even bothering to examine Harry's antidote too closely.

And unfortunately, Harry still hadn't obtained the full version of Slughorn's memory since Harry's botched attempt to talk to Professor Slughorn the last time; the more Harry tried to speak to him, the more Professor Slughorn avoided him. Slughorn would look at Hermione's workstation and smile, then sidestep Harry altogether and move over to Ron's. That and Professor Slughorn would not give Harry the opportunity to talk to him after each lesson, and he'd not been available to talk to Harry during his office hours either. Not good...Harry needed that memory.

The potion Professor Slughorn had given Hermione this week wasn't too much of a mystery; she'd read about it in a periodical while searching for the elusive and annoyingly ambiguous Half-Blood Prince. The poison, although complex, was created in a base of poison ivy, poison oak, poison sumac and kettlesfish venomous spines in rainwater. It was one of the rare times Golpalott's Ninth Law applied where multiple ingredients shared the same neutralizing ingredients, in this case mugwort and milkweed; the antidote was simply the ingredient or ingredients infused with a bezoar. So she'd been able to brew the antidote easily enough. She'd simmered a bezoar in her base for half the lesson, then added mugwort, milkweed, powdered moonstone and honey.

Hermione checked her revision guide. Since she had her Arithmancy and Herbology assignments finished, she decided to forgo reviewing the composition book she had for Defense, which also had her notes on wandless magic in the back, and pulled out the journal dedicated to the 'lessons' Harry had with Dumbledore, if that's what they could be called. In it she'd listed all the facts Dumbledore told Harry about Tom Marvolo Riddle.

In Harry's first session he'd told her about the Gaunts and the Riddles, and a locket supposedly belonging to Salazar Slytherin, and Marvolo's ring...Voldemort stole Marvolo's ring...the one that supposedly had the Peverell coat of arms on it. Hermione looked it up. *Only wizards don't have coats of arms...they don't live in a feudal*

system or have titled nobility. Odd. She tapped her quill to her lips.

She saw Draco leaving the stacks and lowered her head, but watched him slyly as he walked toward her. However, he was engrossed in a book. He snapped the book closed as he passed her, and Hermione got a glimpse at the title, or part of the title; the first part of the first word was, *Carp*, and beneath it was *Charming*, something beginning with a *Ma*, possibly magic, then *inetry*... his fingers were in the way. *Charming Magical Cabinetry, possibly*. She'd always been really good at guessing the word puzzles on Wheel of Fortune. *Carp... as in something to do with cabinets. Cabinetry...?*

"Want something, Granger?" he sneered at her.

She jolted at the question. "No."

"Well then stop staring at me, Mudblood," he snarled and walked away.

Hermione shrugged and opened her journal to the pages on wandless magic. *So what if he wants to charm his wardrobe? That's his business.* She turned her thoughts to her own project.

So far, Professor Snape had only had one more lesson with her on doing wandless defensive spells. Naturally after their last lesson, Hermione had analyzed every minute aspect of her actions and why she'd only been able to do the spell when she was frightened the ball would hit her. He'd explained how wandless conception spells were done and had her practice repairing or transfiguring small objects like a vase or a boot, concentrating on controlling what she was doing. She replayed the conversation in her mind:

The potato now looked like a lumpy slipper made out of a potato peel. She felt utterly incompetent. "I feel like I'm Surging again," Hermione said as she looked up at him.

"It does, doesn't it?" he replied. "You're right; it is very much like drawing on your magical Surges simply because you have to pull your magic from your magical core and have it flow out to your fingertips, but at the same time you must concentrate on constricting the energy flow as you focus your determination on your intended action, and say the incantation...without losing focus...then release it, controlling the velocity, accuracy, and strength as you do."

"Releasing it while at the same time controlling it," she repeated with a nod, silently grousing how anyone could do this considering the contradictions involved. "I understand that part, but won't it drain me like drawing on my Surges did?"

"Yes, it will," he replied definitively, which didn't really reassure her. "The larger the object, the greater the desired effect or desired action is, the more magical energy is needed. Without a conduit focus, such as your wand, the energy isn't channeled through a magical object, enhancing it, such as the magical core of the wand will do, so therefore all the energy comes from you."

In a sense, if she simply trusted herself, set her determination and intent firmly enough and trusted her magical ability, then she found she could do the rudimentary charms easily enough, but transfiguration spells were immensely harder. Focus, determination and control while releasing her magic... She'd been practicing in the Room of Requirement with Ginny, whenever the room would open for her. The thing was, sometimes the room was quite obstinate, as if the castle didn't want her doing wandless magic or teaching herself the techniques, which didn't make any sense since the room had been so helpful last year, even providing tons of defense books and everything they'd asked for as well as anticipating things they'd needed.

She closed her journal and sighed. She wished Professor Snape would make another appointment with her. She'd thought of doing something reckless and getting a detention, but that was just being childish. She wondered if he was still working on the complicated potion on the blackboard in his lab. If not, then whatever he was working on had to be important or, quite possibly, he was doing something for the Order. Either way, each time she'd tried to talk to him after her Defense lessons, he'd briskly told her he didn't have any time and to go to her next lesson.

Hermione looked around her to see if anyone was watching her or paying her any attention at all and smiled. She chose a book on a high shelf and summoned it to her wandlessly. The book slipped out and fell to her hand. Grinning, she held up the book in her hand and made it float up to the shelf and back into place. She was getting quite competent with those two spells, even on larger objects. *So, now to work on transfiguring objects and casting shields... Can you do the shield charms wandlessly, or must you have a conduit focus to create one?* she wondered. *If I can deflect, I should be able to shield, right?* Not that she was at all adept at wandless deflection spells yet, either.

She really wanted to work with Professor Snape again.

Hermione went down to the dungeons after her swim. She'd purposefully chosen to swim earlier than normal so that she could talk to Severus before curfew. As she approached his office, the door opened and about seventeen Slytherins walked out into the corridor. She immediately recognized Boughton, Nott and Tracie. Tracie said something to Candice, who turned and giggled. A few of the other girls turned and laughed softly as well.

Hermione paused; it was never good to be alone in the dungeon corridors this late at night, especially when Slytherins were strolling about.

Aubrey and Higgs, seventh-year Slytherins, gave her rueful smirks, and Higgs elbowed the boy in front of him. The boy turned, and Urguhart chuffed a laugh. "We're not going to hex you, Granger," he called out, rolling his eyes.

Aubrey put his arm around Penelope as the group walked away, a few of them laughing or making comments Hermione couldn't quite make out.

Rayne Boughton turned around as his friends continued to walk down the corridor. "He's not in his office," Boughton stated. "He left through his Floo."

Hermione nodded. "Thank you," she called out, watching them walk away for a bit before turning and heading out of the dungeons, wondering where Professor Snape would have Flooed to at this hour.

She had no other choice; she needed to have access to the Restricted Section. She simply didn't have a good reason to be in there...well, she did, but not one she could talk to Professor Snape about. This assignment Harry had, of securing the memory from Slughorn about the Horcruxes, was going nowhere, and Hermione knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this was really important...and secret.

The Restricted Section held all the Dark Arts books, wicked and cruel magical spells and curses, the most horrifying magical inventions... but it was possibly the only place that she could find out what a Horcrux was and what it did.

She knocked on his office door and waited for him to call out, "Enter." She pushed the door open and stepped inside.

"What is it, Miss Granger? I'm very busy," he said without looking up.

She walked forward and stood before his desk. "Sir, I would like to ask you... I have a request," she stammered.

He looked up at her, but she could see he wasn't in the best of moods. "Get to the point quickly," he said, his quill poised over the parchment he'd been grading.

"I have a project I'm working on, actually, Harry and I are working on," his eyes narrowed at the mention of Harry's name, so she forged ahead, remembering to keep Harry's name out of it, "but I cannot find the answer I need in the books in the library. So..."

He set the quill down as he regarded her. She inhaled to calm her nerves. "I would like permission to use the Restricted Section."

"What is it you are working on?" he asked.

She bit her lip as she thought about the best way to phrase her reasoning.

"I see," he said smoothly. "Is this anything to do with Draco Malfoy?"

"Oh, no, sir!" she exclaimed.

"Or some harebrained escapade adventure in the castle, meddling into something you have no business being involved with?" he asked, staring at her directly in the eyes.

"No, sir!" she replied, meeting his stare. "I...we ran across a spell that I can't find any reference to. I believe it to be a Dark Art spell of some sort, but wondered what it was and what it did."

"I see," he drawled out slowly, lacing his fingers together. "And what, prey tell, is this Dark spell."

Her heart sank. She was certain that this was a secret, well, a need-to-know type of thing between Harry and Dumbledore, that he'd told her and Ron, when they were still getting along. "Well, you see, it's..."

"Yes," he intoned in his deep silky voice.

Normally that tone sent a warning chill through her, but for some reason the chill was oddly stimulatingly...*sexy* even. She shook her head mentally, dispelling the idea. *He's your teacher!* "Well, it has something to do with what Dumbledore and Harry are doing in their meetings. Something that was mentioned, and Harry asked me if I'd read about it...but I haven't. So, I've been searching through all the books, in my spare time, to find it, and I can't." *There that's close enough to the truth.*

"And you are not going to tell me what this is?" he asked, his eyes seemingly to bore into hers.

She bit her lip as she shook her head. "...the thing is, well... Dumbledore kind of told Harry in private. It has to do with his facing," she suddenly remembered not to say Voldemort around him, "You-Know-Who. You know, this Chosen One thing, and the fact that You-Know-Who seems to have a personal animosity toward him and this *connection* with Harry... I...it might have something to do with Harry's scar." There, not exactly the truth, but close enough so that she wasn't exactly lying to him. She hated not being able to ask him...to talk to him about it. He knew so much about the Dark Arts, he'd probably know what Horcruxes were.

"And I'm to assume that you are only interested in the definition and effect of this spell, academic research only. You have no intention *raising* the spell" he asked pointedly.

"Oh gods, no, sir! Never," she replied emphatically, shaking her head. "I only want to know what it is and what it does."

He sat there watching her, and she resisted the urge to fidget under his intense stare. She'd said enough, hopefully reassuring him it was academic curiosity only.

He leaned back and opened his desk drawer and pulled out a pad of six by four parchments. He picked up the quill in his inkwell stand and dipped it into the black ink. She waited, almost giddy with happiness that he was going to honor her request.

He looked up at her after placing his quill back in its little holder. "As far as anyone is concerned, this is a personal request pertaining to your Defense Against the Dark Arts lessons, and you are being supervised by me," he said and handed her the permission slip.

"Yes, Professor," she agreed, accepting the slip. "I'll be discreet."

Severus watched Hermione go. He knew that while she wasn't being completely forthright with him, she hadn't been lying either. He could read her well, and he knew that whatever spell Potter had mentioned to her, her curiosity was purely academic.

He wondered what the spell was.

It didn't matter. He'd be notified which book or books Hermione checked out, and from there he might be able to discern that which intrigued her and Potter. At last he'd have an insight in what was going on in those private meetings between Dumbledore and Potter.

With a satisfied smirk, he resumed his markings.

Hermione slammed the cover of *Darkest Magick of the Ages* closed and set it on top of *Ye Horrific Enchantments and Beguilements*. She opened up *Magick Moste Evile* and turned to the index.

"Harridan Curse... Heart-Horns Hex... Heart-Rending Curse...Hindrance Curse see Retardation Jinx..." she mumbled softly as she scanned down the list. "Horcrux! There it is!" *In the index...? That's odd.*

She flipped all the pages over and began to scan through the index. There, in the fourth page of the introduction, was one sentence, "...of the Horcrux, wickedest of magical inventions, we shall not speak nor give direction, for it is a most foul invention that must never be mentioned." "That's it?" she hissed, turning the pages forcefully to the index.

Horcrux page xiii

Hermione slammed the book closed. She'd been through every book in the Dark Arts Charms and Curses sections in Restricted Section. The only way they would find out what a Horcrux was would be for Harry to get the complete memory from Professor Slughorn.

She had to show this to Harry.

Hermione put away all the other books and carried *Magick Moste Evile* up to Madam Pince's desk.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Chapter 45

Chapter 45 of 54

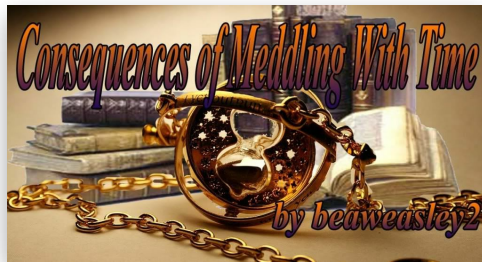
Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun. Oh, and all of Professor Twycross' dialogue, the snippets that I have, are borrowed without permission from Mrs. Rowling's book. I truly hope she doesn't mind.

Once again, the events that are not mentioned in this story that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to Phoenix for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



It started to rain the end of January, a heavy, cold rain, melting the pristine white snow that had covered everything like frosting in a mere four days, replacing it with muddy walkways, slippery wet lawns and bare, cold rock. But Hermione was too excited with the prospect of doing Apparition to care.

At breakfast on the morning before her first Apparition lesson, the purplish-grey rain clouds were once again reflected in the ceiling overhead in the Great Hall, and heavy raindrops fell down between the floating candles that thankfully evaporated several feet above everyone's heads. It had been too cold to be outside this week, but all throughout the castle, wall mounted torches and the braziers burning dragon stones helped keep some of the chill out of the corridors and classrooms. Still, Hermione had been grateful for lessons like Potions, with all the steaming cauldrons and the magical Dagworth burners, and for the practical lessons in Defense and Charms. The Ancient Runes classroom, on the other hand, was chilly, even with the braziers glowing in the corner since Professor Bathsheba Babbling, who was Scottish, always liked having the windows cracked open a little to let in a bit of fresh air. Thankfully, Hermione became quite adept at warming charms, but she and her classmates still kept on their scarves to fend off the cold.

But nothing was going to dampen her mood today. Even watching Harry leave to find a place in the back of the room wasn't going to ruin her first Apparition lesson. All the Heads of Houses were present to keep order and, Hermione assumed, to help out students who needed it. It was so exciting.

Professor Snape positioned himself in the center of the room, two rows ahead of where she'd taken her place. He'd discarded his robes, favoring his frockcoat and trousers, but he was still a formidable presence in the huge Hall. When Professor Twycross began his lecture, Hermione paid rapt attention, repeating everything he said in her mind to make sure she remembered every word since she had no way of writing it down. Not that she hadn't read every possible book on Apparition in the library twice and the hand out pamphlet three times.

"Destination. Determination. Deliberation," she repeated after him. *Destination. Determination. Deliberation*, she iterated three times. She was going to get this right.

As Professor Twycross started his count down, Hermione almost panicked. *What? Now? No preparation? We don't get to ask any questions?*

She saw Professor Snape look at her, directly at her, as if to say, 'You can do this. Focus,' and she affirmed her determination, and concentrated on what Professor Twycross was saying as she stared at the center of her hoop. *Destination...my hoop. Right there. Now focus... you can do this. Into the hoop...right there.*

"... determination to occupy..." the professor was saying.

Okay, I'm determined. I can do this. Yes. Right. I am going to do this.

"... deliberation! On my command now... one..."

She inhaled, once again catching Severus' eye as he scanned the room, his gaze sweeping across every face, alert, aware, wand in his hand.

"...two..."

Right, focus. Into the hoop. Into the hoop. I can do this. I'm a witch...I can do this.

On, "Three!" Hermione turned on the spot, willing herself to be in the hoop. Determined to go from where she was to into the hoop. Her destination. She was determined. She willed it to happen.

But that's not what happened.

She'd made an awkward pirouette and almost lost her balance.*How embarrassing!*

But as she looked around, she realized that she was not the only one who failed...everyone had! Moreover, Professor Twycross was giving directions to adjust their hoops and try again as if he'd *expected* everyone to fail. Blushing, Hermione made sure her hoop was in the right place and mentally prepared to try it again*Right. Okay. You don't always do your spells on the first try. I'll do better this go.*

Her second, third and fourth tries were just as embarrassing. However, behind her on her left, there was a horrible cry of pain. She instantly whirled around to see who it was and gasped in stunned horror. One second Hermione was staring at Susan Bones, wobbling on one leg, looking as if she'd faint...the next, all four Heads of House converged on Susan, each casting spells on both Susan and her leg, which had been five feet away from her. Before Hermione could blink twice, Professors Snape and McGonagall, for they were the ones she could see clearly, were flicking and swishing their wands with incredible speed, which made a loud bang and sharp crack as their spells collided and layered together...a puff of purple smoke and... Susan was fine. Standing there completely normal, although she looked horrified, shaking uncontrollably as Professor Sprout tried to comfort her.

Hermione searched the Hall for Professor Snape, amazed at what she'd witnessed. He was moving about the room, telling everyone, "Miss Bones is fine. Mind your hoops and prepare to try again," as if this were a normal occurrence to be fully expected.

Professor Twycross was saying, "...that when the mind is insufficiently determined..."

She turned her attention to the Ministry Professor, trying to take in what he was saying. He demonstrated Apparation, making it look so easy.

Hermione faced front, trying to block out what had happened to Susan from her mind. She made several more attempts, but in her mind, she was always afraid to lose an arm or a leg, or worse, her head. She tried to banish the thought, and focus, to be sufficiently determined, but she had a hard time doing so. Thankfully, she'd not Splinched.

However, she'd failed. Miserably.

She started following the other students out of the Great Hall and heard Ron ask Harry how he'd done. She made an uncalled for remark, then hurried away. She hadn't meant to be so rude to him, but she knew that he'd never ask her how she was, nor would he care. Following the crowd, she hurried up the marble staircase and went up two more flights of stairs, then paused in the corridor. Without really thinking about why, she rounded the corner to the staircase leading up to the Astronomy Tower and kept going, fighting back the rising panic.

Hermione didn't stop until her path was barred by the parapet of the tower. She stared out at the vast vale: she could see the black water of the lake, the Quidditch pitch and the rugged mountains... But her chest felt restricted, tears stung her eyes, her hands were sweaty on the cold, wet stone, and her heart pounded in her chest. She was shaking, completely oblivious to the rain. Since the Astronomy Tower was the tallest tower of the castle, its view was completely unimpeded, and normally she'd have attributed it all to the dizzying height, but what gripped her was her fear of failure.

She'd failed. *Insufficiently determined*, she chastised herself. *Completely inept. A coward. Inadequately focused on my destination, completely heedless in my deliberation...totally negligent...gods! It could have been me standing there with my leg standing by itself across the room!* She couldn't bear to think about it; it was too revolting for words. All she could think about was seeing her professors heal Susan's severed leg back onto her body.

She could see him in her mind. Professor Snape, his wand movements so rapid and precise, the combination of spells cast so swiftly, efficiently and confidently... He'd anticipated it...been ready to stop the bleeding and attach the leg... all in a matter of a second it'd seemed. He'd saved her life! His spells and Professor McGonagall's combining, layering effortlessly, and immediately staunching the flow of blood before any actually fell... the four of them reattaching the leg...

There hadn't been any blood? But her femoral artery had been severed! Hermione tried to recall if Susan had bled. *She must have... or did it take a while for the body to bleed? No.* She'd cut herself before; it happened quickly...immediately.*It had all happened so quickly, sure, but... How did he know?*

She heard his boot steps on the stone behind her and closed her eyes.

"Miss Granger...?"

"I couldn't do it," she admitted, absolutely ashamed at her failure.

"No one does on the first day," he said smoothly.

She turned to face him.

He stepped closer. The rain had made his hair hang lank about his head, and his frockcoat was becoming soaked. "No one is able to the first try."

"No one?" she asked, staring up at him in disbelief. "Did you...I mean...you didn't either?"

He smiled at her, unconcerned about the rain. "No. I didn't."

She smiled at him, feeling the tightness in her chest dissipate and the tension leave her body.

"Why are you up here? You hate heights," he said, coming to stand right in front of her.

She shrugged. "I don't know. I just...this is where I ended up," she said, not really knowing why herself. Her hands felt cold, but her heart still raced in her chest, and now she was starting to feel quite chilly. "Why are you here?"

He chuckled a laugh. "There is always one student who does," he stated. "Every year there is someone who feels like you do. Although, normally I deduct House points and send them running back to their dorm."

She looked down at his buttons as she smiled. "Are you going to make me run away?"

"I should," he said, although his tone was affable, almost light. "You're not a failure."

She looked up at him, really needing to hear this.

"Professor Twycross gives the same speech every year, the same directions. He forgets one very important aspect every time," he said, gazing at her, his eyes searching her face. "Can you determine what that might be?"

Hermione cocked her head slightly, mulling over everything Professor Twycross had said, hoping her teeth were not chattering.

"I know you were sufficiently focused on your destination, and you are the most determined witch I have ever taught, and I'm quite sure you were deliberate in your action, but you forgot one very vital aspect in accomplishing Apparition."

She stared at him. What did he mean? It was only after seeing Susan Splinch that she'd lost her nerve. But that wasn't what he meant. She tried to think about what, if anything, Professor Twycross may have forgotten to mention.

"Miss Granger, we are getting soaked," he stated, making her look up at him. "May I suggest we take this*inside* the castle and dry off?"

She nodded, crossing her arms about her, suddenly realizing how cold it was. Once they were inside in the corridor, Professor Snape drew his wand and dried and warmed their clothes.

Nonverbally.

She could have smacked herself. She remembered his words:*focus your determination on your intended action, and say the incantation...without losing focus...then release your magic...* After all the lessons on controlling her magic...and the lessons on wandless magic...she had forgotten to draw on her magic when she'd attempted to Apparate. "I forgot to use my magic. I didn't trust myself; I focused too much on my destination and determination, and being deliberate, I forgot my magical ability."

"Very good, Miss Granger," he said with a nod and a slight satisfied smile. "I'd give you House points, but as you were up on the Astronomy Tower when students are not allowed to be there, we'll call it even."

She smiled at him. His approval meant more to her anyway.

"Now, I suggest a hot bath and sleep," he intoned in his most stern voice.

"Yes, sir," she said as she nodded and smiled. "Good night, Professor, and thank you."

"Good night, Miss Granger," he replied and walked away.

Ever since their first Apparition lesson...Harry went on and on about what he'd overheard Malfoy say to Crabbe 'do as they were told and to keep a lookout' to the point of distraction. He was completely convinced that Malfoy was plotting something. Harry took the map with him everywhere, checking it between lessons and during breaks, occasionally discretely *during* lessons and even slipping into the boy's loo more frequently than usual. Hermione suspected that he even kept his Invisibility Cloak in his bag.

He even said that he thought Malfoy had left the school grounds to do whatever it was he suspected Malfoy of doing, but that was ludicrous. And Harry would point out Crabbe and Goyle whenever they passed the two Slytherins, or when Harry saw one or both of them loitering in the corridors. However, Hermione had to admit, Malfoy was suspiciously absent. Sometimes she passed him in the corridors or on the stairs after her swims, and occasionally between lessons, but there were a number of times when he was alone without his friends lumbering along behind him. But there were enough occasions when he'd had only one of them with him.

Also, Malfoy usually hurried by her on the occasions he was alone, often times simply grunting at her to "move" or "get out of my way," but he looked haggard, agitated or despondent, and his eyes had dark circles as if he wasn't sleeping well. Not that she really cared, but for a boy who'd been meticulously groomed for five and a half years, seeing him ill-kempt was noticeable, and the only time he called her Mudblood anymore was when either of his friends were around, if he bothered to at all.

But Hermione had other things to concern her. She was not getting any better at casting wandless shields or at deflecting objects, no matter how much she and Ginny practiced. Only when Ginny charmed the cricket ball to fly like a Bludger was she able to effectly deflect it...her flight or fight reflex, only more controlled.

And they had Apparition lessons every weekend in the Great Hall. Of course, she'd yet to actually Apparate into her wooden hoop, much to her frustration. But she was determined to learn how to Apparate and do it well. The prospect of being able to was just too exciting. She clearly remembered Professor Snape's advice on the Astronomy Tower, and really tried, but so far, she still hadn't Apparated even one meter.

She wasn't alone; no one had managed it yet either. Harry hadn't Apparated yet, Won-Won couldn't do it, and neither could Lavender. In *facto* one had managed it yet, and more and more students were becoming frustrated with Professor Twycross, calling him Wilkie Twycross or Cross-Eyed Twycross, Professor Dunderhead, Professor Dog-Dung and Dung-head... any manner of rude names beginning with a 'D', which incensed Hermione. Just because someone couldn't do Apparition right away didn't mean he was a bad teacher. Apparition was difficult, dangerous and could be deadly.

Each lesson someone Splinched. Hermione watched in horror as Professor Snape and the other Heads of Houses swooped down on the individual immediately, Professor Snape's wand flicking and swishing so fast it was merely a blur, well all the Heads of House's were. Their healing charms were cast on the student so quickly that the collision and combining magic made that loud bang, the resonance of which Hermione could almost feel in her chest each time, followed by puffs of purple smoke as the student was set to rights again. How Professor Snape knew which student would be in trouble when, she didn't know, but he did, reacting so quickly, the separated body parts hardly bled at all. Most Splinchings involved limbs, occasionally smaller body parts like an ear or a fingernail. Hermione was terrified that someone could lose a head... but she'd shove that thought away and focus on her own destination, with determination and deliberation, trying to get her magic to flow at the same time...

It was utterly maddening.

Hermione counted doors as she walked down the corridor, stopping at the fifth on her right as had been indicated on the note she'd received from Professor Snape. She knocked on the classroom door, smiling when she heard him call out, "Enter."

They were in one of the larger empty classrooms, possibly so he'd have more distance in which to throw the cricket ball at her. She'd worn her jeans and a jumper, since it was Sunday, and she knew that she'd be defending herself from the hard leather ball again. He, however, was in his usual white shirt, coat and trousers and holding the cricket ball casually in his hand. He raised an eyebrow at her as he took in her appearance. "I happen to know that you've been practicing with Miss Weasley," he stated.

He caught her off guard. Hermione gaped at him, wondering how he'd found out. "She and I have... We've been practicing deflection spells. I've been trying to do them wandless, and she's been trying to do them nonverbally."

"I see," he said smoothly. "And how is Miss Weasley doing on her nonverbal skills?"

"All right," Hermione admitted slowly. "She still mumbles, much like I did at first, but she's getting better."

"Why are you practicing with Miss Weasley and not Mr. Potter or Mr. Weasley?" he asked, casually rolling his wand in his fingers. He sounded agitated.

He never mentioned she should be practicing wandless spells with either of her friends...well, Harry was still her friend, even if Ron was otherwise involved. "Ron is seeing Lavender," she replied, wondering why he thought practicing spells with Harry was better than doing it with Ginny. "Harry can't do nonverbal spells so I assumed he couldn't do wandless... Was I wrong?"

Professor Snape's eyes searched her face dispassionately. "No. Few possess the ability to do wandless magic. Even though the same determination, concentration and mental discipline are necessary to do both wandless and nonverbal magic, most wizards become too dependent on their wands, relying on a magical conduit to focus their magic." He paused. "Wandless magic can be particularly volatile, and it can only be effectively used by powerful and disciplined wizard...or witch."

Hermione smiled at the implied compliment.

His lips pulled back into the semblance of a challenging smile as he tossed the cricket ball in the air and caught it. "So, shall we see how well you've progressed?"

"Oh, yes," she said and rolled her shoulders as she readied herself, determined to do her best. "Ready."

He laughed. "Relax, Miss Granger, stay light on your feet and concentrate. Just deflect it."

He tossed the ball at her, and she swept her hand as she released the spell, making the ball fly to the wall next to the door. He summoned the ball to him, then deflected it in her direction. Hermione acted quickly with another focused pulse of magic as she flicked her wrist.

"Stop swinging your arm," he snapped. "You're projecting your intent too much. Keep your hand gestures to a minimum."

"Right, okay," she said, gritting her teeth. *Really?*

The ball came flying at her from the side, and she managed to block it, making the ball land five feet away from her. It bounced about three feet before he made it sail back at her. It hit her in the hip. He tilted his head slightly as he smirked at her. She picked up the ball, intending to hand it back.

"No, either reflect it at me or repel it at me, or summon it and then deflect it at me, but don't touch it with your hands," he said firmly.

Her eyebrows rose as she took in his new rules. *Magical handball without using our hands? Okay.* She tossed the ball into the air and tried to deflect it, but the ball bounced on the floor with a thud, but then it shot in Professor's Snape's direction.

He flicked his wrist, and the ball turned midair, flying back at her. She barely had time think, reacting on instinct so as not to be hit with the hard ball. It sailed right back at him, which he deflected easily enough, and it came back at her. She managed to deflect it just before it hit her hand, flying toward the window.

Hermione gasped, watching as the ball hit the window and sailed back to Professor Snape. He caught it deftly. "What, you didn't think I'd forget to magically fortify the window, did you?"

"Naturally you would." She laughed at herself for her naivety. "I was just...I hadn't realized...it surprised me."

His eyebrow rose and she blushed. "I wasn't laughing at you; I was laughing at myself, for thinking that it would break the window," she explained.

He raised his chin, then leveled his gaze on her again. "Then let's try this again," he said as he tossed the ball.

Almost an hour later, Professor Snape called out, "That enough for today," bringing a halt to their exercise. She waited as he donned his teaching robes and opened the door for her. *He really is a gentleman at times,* she thought as they walked down the corridor, talking about her Potions lessons with Professor Slughorn. She was surprised when he turned and casually walked up the stairs with her. Yes, he really could be quite the gentleman when he wanted to be.

He had to go to give Dumbledore his potion. Severus intended to walk with her up to her dorm. He knew that she'd be depleted and wanted to make sure she got back all right. That was his excuse, if he was honest with himself. That and the entrance to the Headmaster's tower was on the same floor. He was surprised when Hermione stopped on the fifth floor.

She looked up at him. "I thought I'd go swim for a bit."

"Not really advisable, Miss Granger," he said, amazed that she was so naïve about the danger. "The perfect pool is really deep, and you have been using a lot of your magical reserve this evening."

"I feel fine," she replied, her large doe like eyes gazing up at him questioningly.

He inhaled to fortify himself. "But if you exercise now, you'll tire easily, and I don't want you to exhaust yourself in the water."

"I'm not that tired, really. I'm not even sore. I have gone swimming after our lessons before, and even when I was aching all over, I managed to stay afloat and not drown. I'll be fine. Really."

The girl was going to try it anyway; he could see it in her eyes. *Damn.* He'd have to hurry back and make sure that she was all right. "We should change your password," he suggested.

"How about black scat-rat...we saw one our first hike together, remember?" she asked.

Reflexively, a disparaging "Uh, yeah," noise escaped his throat. Of course he remembered.

"Or ice castle..."

"Snow castle, it is then," he said and turned to face the door. He remembered her reaction to the large, cat-headed squirrel...a magical crossbreed between a kneazle and a red squirrel. He'd never been that fond of them though, ever since one of them scratched his arm with its retractable claws. He still had a scar on his wrist from the encounter.

Knowing he couldn't linger, Severus turned and strode up to the Headmaster's tower. The old man accepted his potion after the usual dialogue of pleasantries on the old man's part and the inane offer of the ever-present lemon drops. Severus couldn't understand why he kept foisting the nauseating sweets, considering he'd never, ever, accepted one.

Dilys asked how the new formulation was working, evolving into a brief discussion of the new ingredients they'd worked out together as Dumbledore casually drank his potion. Severus checked the progression of the curse on the Headmaster's arm.

"So far, you are lucky; the progression appears to be slowing down again. It might be going into remission," Severus replied, pushing the sleeve further up to examining the old man's arm closely. "The tendrils haven't progressed as far as I'd predicted, but I believe that the elbow is beyond repair at this point."

"That's good news, although my elbow gets so stiff it will not bend," Dumbledore said with a sad sigh.

"See if Fawkes will shed some more tears," Severus suggested, wondering where the bird had gone. The familiar's perch stood empty next to the open window.

"I shall ask him when he returns," the Headmaster replied. "How is Master Malfoy progressing?"

"I have no idea if he's *progressing*. Thankfully, there haven't been any new attempts made since that infestation of dimarwolaeth fungus on your chair that I'm aware of."

"The fungus under my chair was a clever attempt, if not horribly dangerous, but it was never connected to the boy," Dumbledore replied.

"Who else would have put the dimarwolaeth fungus under your seat in the Great Hall?" Severus sneered angrily. "It was another attempt on your life."

"No, no, it could have been anyone, my boy. The house-elves caught it and disinfected the Hall, and they searched the dorms. There wasn't any trace of the fungus or the spores in any of the student's things or their rooms," Dumbledore said. "How it got there is still unknown. But I do not believe that he's given up on his task of killing me."

Severus was not convinced, but he couldn't prove Draco had a hand in the infestation. The house-elves cleaned the Great Hall every night after dinner...as they did after every meal. If they hadn't caught the infection that evening, the spores of the magical fungus would have been released with the rise of the full moon, becoming deadly to everyone within twenty feet of the Headmaster's chair at breakfast.

Dumbledore steepled his hands as he smiled at Severus. "The antidote for the spores was administered to every student and every familiar, and Poppy tells me no one

came to her with symptoms."

Severus knew that the antidote had been added to the pumpkin juice, so as not to raise concerns of the students, and the house-elves had laced treats for all the familiars that same morning. They had also given all the cats in the castle baths in case one of them had come in contact with the fungus. "So you're dismissing it?" Severus asked incredulously.

"Since there is no definitive proof of the culprit, or any indication on how it got into the Great Hall at all, I'm dismissing it," Dumbledore replied. "Good night, Severus."

Severus stood, accepting the dismissal. "Good night, Headmaster," he intoned politely and left the office, fuming at the old man's intransigence.

He paused by Althea's portrait and nodded to the likeness of the lady and her friend, Rosalba. "Ladies," he said. "How are things in the castle this evening?"

"I have little to report," Rosalba answered with a smile. She'd always been friendly with Severus, even when he'd been a student. On more occasions than he could count, she'd given him warnings about the comings, and more importantly, the goings of Potter, Black, Lupin and Pettigrew. The woman abhorred bullies. "Potter and his friend are in the dorm, but I've yet to see the young lady."

Althea leaned forward as if to lean out of her frame and share a confidence with him. Severus moved closer to the portrait, and the pallid-faced witch glanced across the corridor and back at him. "She's still in the bath, Severus," she said softly. "It's been such a long time, and she looked so worn-out when you parted ways... I...do you think...you don't think she, um..."

"We could try to find one of the ghosts," Rosalba suggested. "Possibly the Grey Lady; she'd be in the library at this hour."

"No, no, I'll handle this," Severus said, beginning to be concerned. It was late, and he'd warned Hermione to skip her swim. He checked his watch; it had been a good half-hour already.

He began to get nervous as he walked across the corridor and entered the pool. He scanned the room, seeing Hermione floating in the water in a tiny coral bikini. She was face up, thankfully, not face down as one expected a drowned person to be. Her eyes, however, were closed, her arms relaxed, angled gracefully from her body. For a moment he panicked. *Is she ... dead...?* Her hair fanned out in the water, a brown aura about her head, and her face, breasts, thighs and feet peaked above the surface of the water, making her look like a version of *Ophelia* by Millais, only mostly naked...

"Miss Granger," he called out.

She didn't respond. She didn't move. The taps were still running, so he raised his voice in order to be heard over the crashing noise of the scented water hitting the bath, "Miss Granger."

The girl in the water remained as she was. He panicked; floating as she was, he couldn't tell if there was a rise to her chest. The immortal words of Queen Gertrude to Laertes came unwelcome to his thoughts: *As one incapable of her own distress, or like a creature native and indued, unto that element: but long it could not be till that her garments, heavy with their drink, pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay to muddy death.*

He kicked off his shoes as he slid his fingers down his buttons with the incantation to magically make all of them release. He wrenched his coat and shirt off, tossed them carelessly aside, and dove into the water, coming up under her. Hermione began flailing, coughing and choking as he lifted her up in his arms. Her elbow hit him in the nose, and he felt the cartilage snap, a sharp excruciating pain, but he tightened his grip on her as she screeched out in alarm, "What the *fuck*," at the same time as he demanded, "Will you calm yourself, woman!"

"What are you *doing*?" she asked as he snapped, "You swore at me!"

"You're naked!" she said, her voice shrill and strangled.

He immediately let her go and stepped back, and Hermione sank underwater, coming up gasping for air. She was leaning back to dunk her head under the water so as to get her hair out of her eyes, then trod water, staring at him with an extraordinary range of emotions crossing her face. Irritation, confusion, and surprise eventually gave way to concern as she paddled towards him.

"You're bleeding!" she exclaimed, moving toward him.

Severus instinctively backed up farther as she reached out her hand to touch his face. "You elbowed me."

"Oh my gods, I'm sorry," she said as she advanced upon him again. "You startled me."

"I thought...what are you doing in the pool? I told you you'd used too much of your magical reserve this evening. You should not have stayed in the water this long," he jabbered, thoroughly disconcerted by the situation and his own stupid reaction to it.

"I was floating...it's quite relaxing," she countered calmly, her eyebrows caught together in a frown as she continued to look at him.

She was standing in front of him now, or possibly balanced on her toes, because she was almost, but not quite, equal to his height. "I thought...you could have exhausted yourself...I thought you'd drowned," he stammered as she summoned a towel. The rush from his adrenaline was starting to fade, and his nose was throbbing dully with an insistent pain. He was a fool. He had to get out. She was now standing so close he could feel the heat from her body... her mostly naked body.

"Here, let me," she said as she reached up with a corner of the towel. He jerked his head back. "Severus, at least let me fix your nose."

"It's been broken before," he stated, standing ramrod still as she gently dabbed at his face. "I can fix it myself..."

"You're going to have a nasty bruise," she said as she examined him.

His mind was racing, his thoughts a complete incoherent jumble; this was so wrong...and yet he didn't want to move and end the moment. She had been in his arms, her skin pressed to his. He'd held her; her lithe body struggling to be released, squirming against his... No, he couldn't...wouldn't...he must get out of here. This was inappropriate in every aspect. He should have never come in here.

"We should get out," she said, lowering the towel. It was now discolored red from his blood. "My wand, I...it's over there with my clothes."

Her clothes? His clothes! Oh, fucking Merlin! "Yes," he said as she moved around him, walking through the water for the side of the pool. He watched her clamber out, getting an eyelevel view of her bikini clad rear and the long, wet length of her legs. *Merlin, help me!*

"Are you getting out?" she asked.

He took a mental stock of himself. Yes, he'd reacted...*damn it*...as any male would in his position. For a second he dithered, but then he hoisted himself out of the water as she walked casually to the benches. He quickly summoned his shirt and coat and turned his back as he donned the garments, willing his body to relax. The thought of her skin, warm, smooth and slick against his, the heat of the contact a contrast to the cool water. *Water that wasn't really that cool...moderately warm, tepid*... He inhaled. He had to think of something else. *The bath oil: it smells of lavender, chamomile, ginger, basil and jasmine aromatic scents that generally soothed fatigue and stress. Good choices...*

"Professor?" Hermione asked.

The title grated on his nerves; she'd used his name in the pool, now they were back to formalities. *As it should be*, he sternly reminded himself. "Yes, Miss Granger," he said and slowly turned around. With his frockcoat properly buttoned, she couldn't see his discomfort.

"Please sit down," she asked, holding the same towel, this time with the other end in her hand, the cleaner side. "Let me fix this."

"No need." He pulled his wand out and quickly fixed his nose as best as he could without the aid of a mirror. The pain flashed through him for a second, and he welcomed the primitive way it stifled his unwanted emotional discomfort.

Her eyes widened at the sound of the cartridge reforming. She silently handed him the towel. He took it from her stiffly and wiped his face clean, an action he'd had plenty of practice doing.

She nodded when he looked at her. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," he said softly. Her concern was real. Not the 'I struck a teacher' type...a real concern for him. It was almost touching, but he shoved the feeling such sentiment evoked aside. It would not do to dwell on what was unobtainable. *Men always want what they cannot have*, he'd heard Bellatrix coo when he'd been young. Avery had often said the same thing; he'd meant Lily, of course. He stared at the witch before him. "Get dressed," he said, more sharply than he'd intended.

He turned his head slightly as she pulled on her clothes, refusing to watch her. When the activity stopped in his peripheral vision, he turned to look in her direction. In her jeans and a jumper she looked like a young woman, not the schoolgirl he'd taught for five and a half years. *But now things are different*, his treacherous subconscious reminded him, *legally she's a young woman, an adult in our world....* He stopped that train of thought ruthlessly. She was still his student. "We should go," he finally said.

She nodded as if in regret. "I'm really sorry that I have hurt you," she apologized yet again.

"Miss Granger, I startled you. Let us forget this matter and not speak of it again," he suggested, leading the way to the door. Once outside, he noticed that both Altheda and Rosalba had left Altheda's frame for another painting in the castle.

He turned to look at her again, noting the slight flush to her cheeks, the brightness of her eyes in the flickering light from the sconces on the walls. She often looked upon him in such a manner.

"Will you be all right walking to your dorm?" he asked, hoping that she would say, "Yes." He badly needed get away to recover his equilibrium.

She smiled warmly at him. "Yes, I'll be fine, thank you."

"Very well," he said, hiding his relief with a sharp nod. "Then I shall wish you a good night."

"Good night, sir," she replied and turned to leave.

He watched her go. If all went as Dumbledore planned, if the events fell into place within the time frame he expected them to, she would come to hate him in merely a few months time. He sighed heavily. *Damn you, Dumbledore, damn you to hell.*

For Ron's birthday, Hermione had sent him some Chocolate Frogs; even though she disliked seeing him with Lavender, she had been friends with him for so long and hated that their relationship was strained. Besides, first crushes rarely lasted forever, and eventually they'd tire of each other, or so she told herself.

She was sorry that the Hogsmeade weekend had been cancelled, but given that Katie was still in St. Mungo's and the *Daily Prophet* occasionally reported people missing or odd unexplained occurrences happening, maybe it was for the best. She'd been at breakfast when Harry was sulkily escorted down to breakfast by Professor McGonagall and told to eat something.

He related everything to Hermione and Ginny grimly, apparently feeling that it was entirely his fault even though his quick thinking of the bezoar had saved Ron's life. In that instant, Hermione forgave Harry for having used a bezoar to cheat at Potions.

Hermione paced outside the door to the hospital wing, while Fred and George consoled Ginny, telling her that there wasn't anything they'd managed to do to themselves that Madam Pomfrey hadn't sorted out in a jiffy.

"And you know what clever ideas we've come up with," Fred said as Harry, who was sitting against the wall next to Fred, picked at something on his trouser leg.

"Not that all of them were successful, but with each set back we learned a lot," George stated.

"Which only opened up the possibilities for other options," Fred continued.

"Some much more successful and profitable than others," George pointed out as Hermione regarded him quizzically.

He was right; those two had done some rather reckless and dangerous experimenting while in school. Professor Snape had even commented on it and that he'd had to create potions and antidotes to heal them.

"Right," Fred stated with a half-hearted grin. "So, little Ronniekins will be all right, Ginny."

"Right as this blasted rain," George grumbled, then quickly forced a huge grin for Ginny's sake.

Hermione checked her watch. It was nearing time for Hermione and Harry to go to the Great Hall. She looked at Harry, sitting dejectedly next to Fred, running his hand through his messy hair, even messier than the normal mess. She looked at the door. Could she be deliberately determined on a destination knowing that her friend...well, someone she'd cared a great deal about for five and a half years lay dying in the hospital?

Only, Hermione didn't really believe Ron was dying, but he was recovering from being poisoned, which was close enough. She turned her gaze away from the door. "Harry, I'm going to stay here with Ginny and the twins," she said, watching him.

Harry looked up and nodded. "Yeah, until we know about Ron, all right?"

"Yes, that's what I meant," Hermione agreed and turned to smile at Ginny. "Until we know he's fine."

Children Floo To Safety Are Lost

Last night in Barnsley, Yorkshire south of the city, Gladwyn Turbot and his family in Bungie Briar were found dead in their lounge apparently attempting to Floo out of the house at the time of the raid. No word yet on their two youngest children, Maggie and Julian. The Floo authorities suspect that the parents sent their children through first, but to where is still unknown. If anyone has word on the children or if you've had two children suddenly appear in your living room unannounced, please contact Jilly O'Meara at the Floo Regulation Office or Child Care Services at St. Mungo's.

Severus scoffed at the article in the Daily Prophet. *As if that would be a good plan.* Two members of the Dark Lord's followers were now working in the Floo Regulation office; notifying this Jilly O'Meara would only ensure the completion of the raid...the elimination of the two children.

He folded the paper and tossed it in the fire. The edges of the paper curled as it burned, framing the other front page headline: *Apparition Professor Wilkie Tywycross Instructing Apparition at Hogwarts.* The article went on to read that the Ministry professor thought that the young people at Hogwarts would all do well on their Apparition tests at the end of April even though none of the students had managed to learn how to Apparate as of yet.

Not if they don't bloody well attend their lessons, Severus grumbled.

After all the attention he'd bestowed on her to ensure she'd do well in the endeavor, after pointing out the one factor the Ministry professor failed to mention every year in his speech on how to Apparate, the girl had skived off her lesson to sit outside the hospital door and console Harry bloody Potter.

The thought sickened him almost as much as seeing her sitting on the bedside of the witless sidekick, holding his bloody hand.

In his potion induced delirium, Mr. Weasley had called out Hermione's name, and she'd gushed at the boy, sitting at his bedside, fawning over the boy, while his self-proclaimed girlfriend wailed in lament and ran from the room. Teenagers and their hormonal outbursts had always annoyed him, but to see Miss Granger, smiling at Mr. Weasley as if she'd won his affections... it appalled him.

The girl was far superior to the boy in every way. He knew that she was too kind, too loyal a friend to have left the side of Miss Weasley and her two brothers, Fred and George, in their time of grief, but the boy would be fine in a few days. The poison was hardly a Level two restricted toxicity poison; the antidote he'd created for Mr. Weasley was a simple, fifty-seven ingredient draught, not that he received any gratitude from the boy's family or friends for the quick work he'd managed in creating it. *No,* Potter got all the credit, considering most of the immediate effects of the poison had been nullified with a bezoar, for an augury's wail.

And now Hermione was sitting at the dunderhead's bedside, lavishing her attention on a boy who hardly deserved her, and once he was back to his usual half-witted senses, he'd hurt her with his insensitivity and selfishness. Hermione deserved a better wizard than an unmotivated, barely average student who never applied himself to anything except wizard's chess and how to toss a Quaffle.

He was a perfect match for the equally academically unmotivated, self-absorbed, boy-chaser, Miss Brown.

Severus picked up his glass of Firewhisky and stared into the warm amber brown liquid. It was the same color as Hermione's eyes. He took a long sip.

Ever since that bothersome night in the prefect pool, he'd been having dreams of the girl, although in his dreams the scenario rarely imitated the actual events that had occurred. He knew that his temper was shorter due to the lack of sleep, and the House points he'd deducted this last week alone had bested his own record. The other professors tried to compensate for the lost points: Minerva went as far as awarding points if her first-year students had tied their shoes properly, Filius awarded points for greeting him properly, and Pomona awarded points if her students working on Leshypuffs, covered their mouths when they sneezed.

But Severus couldn't shake the memory of how Hermione had felt in his arms. Or the tender way she'd tried to clean his face. Or the look of anguish when she'd heard his cartilage realign, the slight flush that warmed her cheeks when he stood close to her, the brightness of her eyes when she was happy or the way she would smile warmly at him...

In his mind, she'd gazed up at him, longingly, desirous. Her mouth parted invitingly, and her tongue had brushed her lower lip tantalizingly. In his mind, she'd kissed him, breaking his resolve until they'd melded together in the water, both needing what the other could give, taking from each other what was so willingly offered.

He took another swallow of the fiery liquid. He was used to the burn as it slid down his throat. He had started to take ice cold showers to dispel the images in his mind, but the cold water had begun to make his sensitive skin itch, so he'd had to change his soap from his usual soap to one with a moisturizing cream base.

He didn't like the way it left his skin feeling... well, not exactly oily but different.

The clock on his mantelpiece chimed the hour. If he didn't drink himself into a stupor, he'd have the dreams again, but tomorrow he had two lessons with Gryffindors and Slytherins and he had to be on his toes.

Severus set the glass down. He'd make a round of the castle, walking each corridor of each floor and through each wing. If that didn't help, he'd run up the stairs until he reached the top of the Astronomy Tower. One way or another, he'd have a peaceful night, by Merlin, or he'd drug himself on the same sleeping potion he'd made for Weasley.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Chapter 46

Chapter 46 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun. Oh, and all of Professor Twycross' dialogue, the snippets that I have, are borrowed without permission from Mrs. Rowling's book. I truly hope she doesn't mind.

There are some deviations to canon in this chapter: the fight between Ginny and Dean as well as Ron's breakup with Lavender will happen in a different time than in the books, and Aragog doesn't die in this chapter. (Who'd want a humongous dead spider lying around for several days?) Likewise, since I consider a concussion to be a serious medical condition, I have Harry in the hospital ten days instead of three days like it happens in canon. He will also have a girlfriend for a short time before his interest turns to Ginny. But other than that, the events that are not mentioned in this story, especially pertaining to Dumbledore, Draco Malfoy and Professor Slughorn, that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books, at least the parts from Harry's perspective.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to Phoenix for combing through this and helping me

clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione went to see Ron after her Ancient Runes lesson on the following Monday. She was worried about him; Madam Pomfrey had kept him in the hospital all day Sunday, and she hadn't released him this morning. She feared that Harry's use of the bezoar hadn't been enough to heal him. "Ron, how are you feeling?" Hermione asked as she approached his bed. She couldn't stay long; she had double Defense Against the Dark Arts after the break, so she was glad to see him awake. Lavender had been complaining that he was always asleep when she stopped by.

"I still get tired easily," he replied, pushing himself up so he could sit and talk to her. "You didn't see Lavender on the way here, did you?" Hermione shook her head, which made him relax and look immensely relieved. "Good. She comes in here like six times a day! I'm supposed to be resting, not snogging her every two to three hours."

Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes.

"May I ask you something?"

"Of course," she said, sitting on the very edge of his bed.

"I was wondering if you'd get me some books," he said as he reached for a slip of parchment on his bedside table. "I'd ask Harry, but you probably already know where they are, and you don't have a lending limit like Harry and I do."

No, that was true; she didn't have a lending limit. "Okay, Ron," she said as she accepted the parchment he held out to her. The six books on his list were rather advanced...well, more advanced than she'd seen him reading before, and they were all magical theory books...not one of them related to Quidditch. "I'll bring these by after dinner, all right?"

"Great."

She noticed that the marker in his book, *Golpalott's Magical Principles Pertaining to Potions* showed that he'd already read about three fourths of the book. "How are you getting on with Bertrand Golpalott's Theological Laws?"

Ron shrugged. "The bloke's pretty up himself, but I understand him all right. His Ninth Law seems like a copout. 'Whenever multiple ingredients share the same neutralizing ingredient or ingredients, then that ingredient or ingredients, infused with the magical properties of a bezoar, is the antidote,' seems very narrow-minded."

Pretty up himself... a copout? Hermione was a little shocked by his odd answer; it was not the kind of reaction she was used to from him. Usually she had to explain the theories to *him*, and here he'd just quoted it to her, then called it a copout!

"Obviously the bezoar is the neutralizer, because it apparently neutralizes the poison, but not the effects, and the other antidotal ingredient or ingredients neutralize the poison's ingredients again, not the effects the ingredients combinations that counter the effects should therefore be combined to make the cure. I think he missed that," Ron continued. "One could then argue that Neville Hinshelwood's theory on acrogenic flora for neutralization of acidic poisons is analogous just as easily, if you take into account that old red flora is used for its acid reduction capability of neutralizing many acidic ingredients, but is rarely used in Healing potions. When red flora is immersed in an arsenic-laced solution, it neutralizes the poison, but not the effects of the poison...same thing goes for a bezoar."

"I remember her theory; she came up with it after testing old red flora on Fireproofing Solution burns and Exfoliating Potion rashes and found it neutralized the boric acid," Hermione said, amazed that he knew of it. She couldn't believe how weird he was being or that she was even having this discussion with Ron, of all people. He never wanted to talk about magical theory.

"Yes, rather like Jean-Ambroise Paré's proven hypothesis; both old red flora and bezoars are effective against some acidic ingredients in acidic poisons, but they have no effect against alkaline poisons."

Hermione was once again shocked; *Jean-Ambroise Paré's proven hypothesis...?* "The man used *his father's* experiments on Muggle criminals to substantiate his theories... but *he* hadn't actually done any experimentation of his own."

"But his theory was proven...I'm living proof of it; Paré simply reported his findings from his father's research," Ron insisted and then asked conversationally, "Do you know Jean-Ambroise Paré's hypothesis? It corresponds perfectly to Robert Goyle's Law on Alkalines."

Hermione nodded, not in agreement with Ron, just acknowledging that she'd read it, wondering when he'd read Goyle's Law *Oh, this conversation is too bizarre! It's...it's almost like he's not Ron!* Even though this felt like a sort of suspended reality, she answered his question like she'd always done. "Of course I do; it's based on his experiment of using a bezoar for arsenic poisoning. The toxic compounds in arsenic are arsenate and arsenite. Bezoars have a mineral brushite which neutralizes arsenate, and the sulfur compounds found in the protein of degraded hair, one of the key crystalline structures in the bezoar, binds to the arsenite, rendering it harmless."

"Yeah, well, that's what I'm basing my essay on for Slughorn: the comparative of Golpalott's Ninth Laws and Neville Hinshelwood's theory to Jean-Ambroise Paré's hypothesis and Robert Goyle's Law on Alkalines."

"*Professor Slughorn.* Really, Ron, would it hurt you to address your teachers properly?" Hermione asked, rolling her eyes. She had to admit it though, his thesis for his essay was brilliant, unorthodox, but brilliant. Ron explained theory on alkaline versus acidic antidotes and his rationale of separating the neutralizers from Healing potions, then explained his reasoning of having the victims of the poisoning take them consecutively. Hermione disagreed with him, and she was more than a little disconcerted by his ideas, but for the sake of discussion she heard Ron out. She was amazed while at the same time felt slightly concerned at his reasoning. But this was Ron she was talking to...Ron who never quoted books or theories before.

But if he is right... She immediately dismissed the idea; it was too dangerous to consider. There was a reason that antidotes both neutralized the poison and healed the effects...the victim could die. She wanted to discuss it with Professor Snape to see what he thought of Ron's theory. She quickly changed the subject, telling him what a pest McLaggen was being now that Harry was letting him play for the house team.

After her Defense lesson, Hermione approached Professor Snape and waited as he changed their list of spells on the backboard to reflect the parchment in his hand with a

few swirling movements of his wand. "What is it, Miss Granger?" he asked, his back to her.

Hermione had been looking at his parchment and was thrown momentarily off-footed by the indifference of his tone. "Sir, I was wondering if you have some time to answer a question."

He faced her fully, almost bumping into her as he turned around, and appeared taken aback that she was standing so near. "Does it relate to today's lesson?" he asked.

She caught a brief whiff of his cologne as he sidestepped her and set his parchment on his desk. "No, sir, not really," she said, shaking off the brief headiness from the scent. *Merlin, he always smells so good*, she thought and stepped forward to stand closer to him, but he moved to sit behind his desk.

She rested her fingertips on the surface of his desk, lightly brushing the smooth wood as she formulated the best way of wording her concern, and his gaze dropped to them as if the action was offensive. She removed her hand, watching his expressionless face for any clues to why he was behaving this way. He'd avoided her earlier in class, although truthfully, her nonverbal skills were greatly improved, and even Neville was doing much better, so they'd hardly needed his intervention.

She asked the first logical explanation she could come up with, hoping it wasn't the case, "Are you angry with me for breaking your nose? If you are, I'm so sorry, but it was an accident, really."

"No," he said, his tone still firm, but not angry. "Considering the circumstances, no, I do not hold it against you." But he seemed so stiff and... as if he was using an outward show of indifference to distance himself like she'd observed him do with others, especially on Order members he wasn't friendly with.

"Professor, what have I done to offend you?" she asked, perplexed.

He inhaled sharply. "I am not offended; you've done nothing untoward." One corner of his mouth twitched. "Yet."

Her lips quirked slightly at what she hoped was a sarcastic, but friendly jibe. *He's in professor mode...we could be interrupted...* She decided to be honest with him and told him about Ron's theory. "The thing is, it's... it's not like Ron to talk like this. He never used to want to talk about magical theory in any subject, and some of what he'd suggested... well, it makes me feel concerned."

"I see," he said and the fingers on his right hand drummed rhythmically on his desk. "I don't understand the problem."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say he was someone Polyjuiced to be Ron, but that's preposterous, right?" She paused, maybe she was worried over nothing. "He quoted Bertrand Golpalott's Theological Law, and then called him narrow-minded, then quoted Neville Hinshelwood's theory on acrogenic flora and the chemist-chemist Jean-Ambroise Paré's hypothesis... and he mentioned Robert Goyle's Law on Alkalines. But Jean-Ambroise Paré's book is in the Restricted Section as is the book on Robert Goyle's Law on Alkalines. The thing is, I've never read anything comparing these theories before in such a way, and Ron hasn't been given permission to use the Restricted Section, that I know of, so where had he read it?" She could see in his eyes that he was disturbed by her revelation.

Professor Snape stood. "Miss Granger, follow me," he said and led her all the way to his office. He'd opened the door and told her to wait inside, then returned with an old tome in his hands. "I think this will interest you," he said and thrust the book at her.

She clasped it with both hands and examined the title: *The Collected Works of Lucien M. Underwood's Potions Experiments*

"This book may not leave my rooms. It is illegal to possess that book," Professor Snape said, and she looked up at him in shock. He cocked his eyebrow at her and continued, "I have special dispensation from the Ministry of Magic and from Dumbledore himself. I use his books simply as reference material, but some of his potions have, on occasion, saved the life of a student...or Order members. St. Mungo's has a copy of all his works, naturally, as do I, but I also know that there are copies of his work in the Lestranges' library as well in the Malfoys' and the Goyles'."

"How did you get them?" she asked.

His expression darkened. "That, I will not tell you. Turn to the chapter titled, *Experimentation Utilizing Alkalines and Acids*"

She turned to the chapter and began to read. It looked like someone had simply taken the wizard's handwritten journals and compiled them into a book. Professor Snape waited patiently as Hermione read the first several pages. She turned the page again and was surprised that he'd copied the periodic table with dynamic layouts showing the names, atomic numbers, electron configurations, oxidation, trend visualization, orbitals, isotopes, and recurring chemical properties. She looked up at her professor both questioningly and confused.

"Yes," he said before she voiced her questions. "He, like some Potioneers, studied Muggle chemistry. Not all of it applies to brewing potions, but as I've said before, it helps to fully understand the elements involved."

Yes, she remembered seeing his books in his office.

Professor Snape pointed to the book. "He proposed several theories for the creation of antidotes for poisons, some of the antidotes poisonous in of themselves, but he was not really concerned with the creation of healing antidotes or for devising ones for his creations. However, his initial summations about bezoars are quite accurate, and he quotes Jean-Ambroise Paré on several occasions. Lucien Underwood was well known for his experimentations in several magical arts, the search for answers without any regard of the products he created. He cared more about the knowledge he gained in creating than in the use someone may make of it."

"Wasn't he a Dark wizard who became the right hand of Gellert Grindelwald...?" Hermione asked, scanning through the page Professor Snape had indicated. Ron's theory, all of it, was right here, in what looked like Lucien Underwood's own handwriting.

"The very same," he said. "You do know that you cannot quote this book as one of your references."

She nodded and turned the page. "But he makes some interesting assumptions."

"Yes, he did," Professor Snape said, leaning against his desk with his arms crossed.

She read through a rather disturbing alkaline poison containing both lye and ammonia, feeling her stomach knot as she read through the description of the physical effects of the victim. When she reached the end of the chapter, she looked up at her professor again. "I..." But she really didn't know what to say. He was brilliant...but horrible.

Professor Snape held out his hand, and she closed the book and handed it back to him. "Do you want to discuss his work?"

She slowly shook her head as she crossed her arms, hugging herself. "No, not really. I appreciate you're showing me his theories, but what I don't understand is how Ron knows about them."

"Can't you determine how he'd gain this knowledge?"

This was the second time he'd challenged her this way this year. She stroked her lips with her thumb, trying to come up with a logical answer. Ron couldn't have seen the book...it was restricted...illegal. Professor Snape mentioned that Lucien Underwood had other books, 'all his works', but she was certain that they were not in the Restricted Section, only his autobiography was. There were two biographies on him in the library and a very detailed one in the Restricted Section... She'd read all four, looking for information on Horcruxes, but they didn't include very many of his theories, only summaries, and they certainly didn't have any of details on his experiments or listed out his potions. But Ron knew the wizard's theory...he had practically quoted it.

She turned her head, trying to rationalize it, and her gaze stopped on the frame with the background that reminded her of the Mona Lisa and a jar holding a small brain in

formaldehyde. Seeing the brain sparked another memory; Dennis Creevey...Professor Snape said that Dennis had been *assaulted* by the memories from the brain of Mordrid Swithin Wroithesley in the Department of Mysteries, and that he'd successfully assimilated the memories of the eighteenth century Necromancer and Alchemist with his own. "Is...was the brain that attacked Ron... Lucien Underwood's brain?" she asked slowly, fighting back the horror and revulsion she felt at the thought.

Professor Snape nodded, and Hermione thought for a moment she'd be sick. "Yes, the alien memories from Lucien M. Underwood's brain were a bit more befuddled when I first checked Mr. Weasley. Professor McGonagall has been watching him, as have the other Heads of House, for obvious reasons, and so far, Mr. Weasley does not show any inclination toward Dark Arts or magical experimentation, although he has developed an interest in Dark Arts theory...but it appears that he still is repulsed by the Dark Arts themselves," he said smoothly.

She could read concern in his voice as well as his reassurance that Ron would be all right, but this information still bothered her. "So this could be the reason Ron is more studious this year," she said, somewhat oddly gratified that it was due to this horrible Dark wizard's influence and not because of Lavender Brown. Ron had been very interested in the annotations of Harry's potions book...apparently even tried a few of the spells...but as far as she knew, he hadn't done any experiments on his own.

"Professor McGonagall has noticed that Mr. Weasley has shown more initiative in his lessons," he replied, and Hermione nodded; she had seen a change in his participation in their lessons. "And he is demonstrating a better aptitude in his magical application and in his homework, but beyond that, I see no difference in the boy at all. Although, this is the first time I've heard that he's quoted one of the wizard's theories."

Hermione's mind raced: she wondered what else this could mean for Ron. How much would Lucien M. Underwood's memories influence him? The wizard had created some truly horrible spells and potions...he'd done some horrific experiments.

She felt his hands on her arms and inhaled slowly, detecting earthy and rich oakmoss... that subtle hint of vetiver combined with orange oil and cedar, savoring the intoxicating aroma, before he said roughly, "Miss Granger, sit."

She looked up at him. His dark eyes were searching hers, and his expression clearly showed his concern. She complied, landing in a chair she hadn't realized was behind her, feeling regret when he backed away.

He conjured a glass out of nowhere, filled it with a subtle, *"Aguamenti,"* and handed to her.

He filled it wandlessly! she thought, taking a sip. It was ice cold.

He watched her, scrutinizing her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, sir, I just... if Ron is...how much will the memories influence him?"

"That's hard to say," he replied, leaning back against his desk and crossing his arms. "We were under the opinion that the assimilation was complete. I will have to discuss this with Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster." He looked away for a moment. "He will be observed, but he's not done anything of concern. However, I do appreciate you coming to me about this."

She nodded as she swallowed another mouthful of water. "Of course. I'm grateful to you for taking time to talk to me."

"You've only to ask," he said with a slight smile, but then he became serious again, "Let me know if you see anything else out of the ordinary or out of character."

"Of course," she readily agreed.

"Good. Lunch started ten minutes ago, you should go to the Great Hall..."

She shook her head. "No, I...I don't think I could eat anything."

He scowled. "You have to eat something. Two pieces of toast at breakfast are hardly enough to sustain you until dinner."

Hermione gaped at him, wondering how he'd known...why he knew what she'd had for breakfast.

"I suggest you go up to the Great Hall and eat something," he said firmly, rising up to escort her out.

"Yes, sir," she said, smiling at his concern.

Hermione heard Mrs. Weasley's voice as she rounded the corner. "Ron really seems to have finally buckled down in his school work," Mrs. Weasley commented to Professor McGonagall, then looked up as if surprised to see her. "Oh, hello, Hermione dear, are you going to go see Ron?"

"Yes," she replied and greeted her professor politely. "I have some more books for Ron. He's trying to keep up on his revision so he doesn't get too far behind."

Mrs. Weasley smiled. "I always knew you'd be a good influence on Ronald," she said.

Hermione smiled benignly and didn't comment that Ron's sudden scholastic interest had little to do with her.

Mrs. Weasley turned to Professor McGonagall. "I have to get back and start dinner. Bill is staying with us."

Hermione watched the two women walk off and hurried down the corridor to see Ron, her bag loaded with the books he'd requested. She was so happy that he wanted to keep up with his school work, who or what had inspired the change in him didn't even matter.

Hermione entered the hospital and waved to Madam Pomfrey. As she approached the curtain separating off his bed, she heard Harry's voice. "I just think it's odd, you know...that Professor Snape had an argument with Dumbledore...not wanting to do what he'd been asked to do. I mean, he always does what the Headmaster wants, so what could Dumbledore have wanted..."

"Enough, Harry, so he had an argument. Adults argue; it's no big deal," Ron said, cutting him off a bit curtly. "Knight to H-six. It doesn't mean anything."

Hermione purposefully walked around the corner and saw Ron and Padma sitting crossed-legged across from each other with a chess board floating steadily in the air between their knees. Padma was doing quite well apparently, judging by the look of concentration on Ron's face, far better than Hermione had ever played.

Harry sat on the chair, his forearms on his thighs as he watched them playing wizard's chess. He looked up at Ron, his expression troubled. "Teachers don't usually argue with Dumbledore though, do they?" he persisted as the little knight swung its sword and chopped off the head of a pawn.

"I heard Professor Flitwick argue with the Headmaster once, something to do with Professor Slughorn," Padma said adding, "Rook to E-three." She smiled as her bishop and rook cornered his king. "Checkmate. Good game, I really enjoyed it."

Ron was scrutinizing the board as if trying to determine how he'd lost. "Yes, me too."

"Maybe we can play again some time?" Padma asked.

Ron looked up and gave Padma a goofy-lopsided grin. "Yeah, I'd like that."

Padma smiled as she passed Hermione, and Hermione watched her leave, wondering when she'd become friendly with Ron and Harry. She turned back to face the boys when she heard Ron ask Harry, "She's pretty, don't you think?"

Harry shrugged. "I think she's forgiven you for the muck up at the Yule Ball."

"Do you think so?" Ron asked, leaning over to watch Padma walk away.

Hermione rolled her eyes. *Great. Now he's interested in Padma.* "When did you two get friendly?" she asked, dumping her bag on the foot of his bed.

"She came to see me with Lavender and Parvati," Ron said, collapsing on his bed and crossing his arms as Hermione set the chest board on his bedside table.

"Ron, have you called things off with Lavender?" she asked, turning to face him. "She still thinks she's your girlfriend."

Ron's ears turned pink. "Er, no, not yet."

"Ron, you can't start things with Padma if you're still seeing Lavender," she pointed out. Boys could be so daft.

"Do you think she wants to?" Ron asked hopefully as he propped himself up on his elbows, his eyes going wide.

"Well, she's been here twice to see you, hasn't she?" Harry said, smiling at his friend.

"She's Lavender's friend! Parvati's twin...it just isn't done!" Hermione exclaimed.

"Relax, Hermione, it will sort itself out," Ron said, sinking back down onto his pillows.

"Yeah, just keep feigning being asleep every time Lavender comes, and she'll get the hint eventually," Harry said with a soft chuckle.

Hermione palmed her face as she shook her head. She looked at the broken pieces scattered on his blanket. "Do you want me to restore these?"

"Yeah, will you?" Ron asked still looking at the ceiling. "I don't have much strength right now."

Hermione looked at the pile of rubble. It was so much easier repairing them as they were 'killed' during the game, rather than trying to sort them all out later. *Books Repairo*," she tried first with a flick of her wand, pleased to see three pieces quickly repair themselves neatly.

"Now about Snape," Ron said, looking at Harry as Hermione flicked her wrist again saying, *Bishops Repairo*."

"I've been thinking..."

"*Professor Snape*," Hermione corrected him, "and I thought you said it was no big deal *King Repairo*." The black king literally popped as it came together.

Ron turned to look at her. Well, they both did. "Of course, I said *that* in front of Padma! I wasn't about to get into this with her around...it's private!" He turned to Harry. "Dumbledore set Snape a task or maybe to help him with a cursed object? Nah, he'd like that. Or something he dislikes... something to do with teaching you something again...or possibly having ..."

Hermione rolled her eyes saying, *Knights Repairo...Queens Repairo* with twin flicks of her wrist as she repaired three knights and both queens. "Really, Ron, it could be anything. He could be telling Professor Snape to..."

"...to do with getting a memory from another Death Eater... That could be it," Ron continued as if he hadn't heard her.

"You're only speculating. Hagrid only heard a fragment of the conversation, not enough to deduce anything," she said, looking at the pile of debris that used to be the pawns. She lowered her voice. "He's Dumbledore's *spy*, remember? It could have something to do with Order business, something Dumbledore wants Snape to do...or find out, but it could be risky, obviously something he doesn't want to do. It might have something to do with a memory, yes, that could be... but think. If Professor Snape was to take a memory from another Death Eater, something that might pertain to," she lowered her voice even lower, "Horcruxes," so that both boys had to lean in to hear her, "and that Death Eater remembered...it could be really dangerous for him. He might have to Oblivate the man...or witch," she added remembering that Bellatrix and Mrs. Malfoy were Death Eaters. "And if Voldemort somehow found out that that person had been Oblivated...from using Legilimency on him... Thing is, even though someone uses an Oblivate on another person, it can leave a trace, or there might be a lingering memory of the person who did it... The mind is really complex. I've read all about memory charms." She wasn't ready to tell them why.

Harry's expression became stubborn as if she wasn't taking him seriously, but Ron was listening aptly, nodding occasionally as if he were really considering what she was saying.

"That's one scenario," Ron admitted and then turned to Harry. "All you have to do is go down and confront Hagrid, get him to talk about the argument again. You know how he slips up, says things he realizes that he shouldn't. Maybe he'll divulge something more."

Harry nodded and smiled.

Hermione wanted to smack her forehead and bury her head in her hands. Instead, she aimed her wand and cast the strongest Restoring Charm she could, *Pawns Repairo*," making the bedcovers, and Ron's legs jump as well as all the broken pieces reassembled themselves.

"Bloody hell, Hermione," Ron yelped. "You don't have to repair my legs, too!"

Apparition lessons were cancelled due to the Quidditch match. For some reason Professor McGonagall allowed Luna to commentate the game. Hermione couldn't remember a game she'd enjoyed more. That was until Gryffindor lost when McLaggen pelted Harry with Bludger and cracked his skull.

The next day, Hermione visited Hagrid before dinner to see how he was doing, because he was still worried for his friend, Aragog, the Acromantula he'd had as a pet. As she left Hagrid's, the air seemed bitingly cold compared to the warm hut.

"It's a bit late for you to be outside."

She turned and smiled at Professor Snape; she hadn't seen him or heard him approach. "I was visiting Hagrid and lost track of the time," she explained, rubbing her arms to warm up.

"And how is the Acromantula doing?" he asked.

She shrugged. "Apparently it's very ill." She fought the urge to hurry up to the castle, delighted to have a chance to talk to him some, but she wished she'd had the forethought to bring her coat.

Professor Snape removed his traveling cloak and draped it across her shoulders. "Won't you be cold?" she asked.

"Unlike yourself, I dressed for the weather," he said with a bemused smirk.

"It was warmer when I left the castle, and Hagrid's hut was really warm," she said in her defense, holding the edges of the cloak with both hands. She pulled the cloak tighter and raised one edge over her nose, inhaling deeply.

"What are you doing? Smelling my cloak?" he asked, his brows creased as he watched her.

She shook her head, embarrassed to be caught, and could feel her face heat up. "I...my nose is cold."

"Uh huh," he murmured. He inquired as to how her lessons were going as they walked together, and she told him about the spells she'd been learning. "Dennis is working on an Alchemy project involving stabilizing the alkaline metals so they can be used in water based potions."

"That would be some feat, considering that the alkali metals and alkaline earth metals, except for beryllium, react with water: alkaline earth metals form alkaline hydroxides, and alkali metals react vigorously or explosively with water, especially tepid or cold water, producing a basic alkali metal hydroxide, which releases hydrogen gas, thus all should be handled with great care in the laboratory," he said.

She smiled. She loved discussing things...anything...with him. "The heavier alkaline metals react more vigorously than the lighter ones," she said as they reached the castle doors, "which is why the potion base must always be heated to the right temperature, to reduce the possibility of asphyxiation."

"Precisely," he said and opened the door for her, then followed her into the Entrance Hall.

She handed him back his cloak once the door closed. "Thank you."

"My pleasure," he replied, draping the black cloth over his arm. "Good night, Miss Granger."

"Good night, sir," she replied with a warm smile, although neither of them moved.

He breathed a heavy, "Huh," nodded to her, then turned to go, and she did the same, walking away with a heavy sigh. It was still hours before curfew so she decided to go visit Harry in the hospital wing and hurried up the stairs.

She was surprised to see Romilda Vane visiting Harry.

"Oh, hi," Romilda said, sitting up straighter. "Uh, I suppose you..." She turned to look at Harry. "I'll come by later, all right?"

"All right," Harry replied with a goofy grin on his face.

Romilda gave his hand a little squeeze and gracefully rose to leave. She smiled at Hermione, a weak one-sided smile, and quickly hurried away. Hermione watched her go for a second before turning to face Harry. "Romilda Vane? Really, Harry? She tried to poison you with a love potion, or have you forgotten?"

"It's not like that, Hermione, she...she just really likes me and didn't know how else to get my attention. She's really nice once you give her a chance."

Hermione watched him critically, wondering if Romilda had slipped Harry another love potion.

Harry crossed his arms. "Hermione, really, she explained everything and even apologized to Ron. Besides, don't you think Madam Pomfrey would notice if someone slipped one of her patients a love potion? She's already checked in on me twice today, and other than this bloody headache and feeling nauseous and dizzy when I move too quickly, I'm fine."

He had a point. Besides if he was experiencing nausea, he'd be given his potion before every meal. At least he didn't seem to have slurred speech or sensitivity to sound and lights. "Do you still have the ringing in your ears?"

"No, not so much anymore, but then it's really quiet in here when Ron's not snoring."

"Oi! I heard that," Ron said from the next bed.

"My equilibrium is still off a bit, but Madam Pomfrey says it will go away once the swelling is gone, and she assures me I'll be able to fly a broom in no time."

"Well, that is a relief," she said, sitting in the chair. She spotted the map folded up under his pillow. "So have you given up watching Draco on the map?"

"No," Harry replied sulkily. "But I have asked Kreacher and Dobby to tail Malfoy..."

"Harry, you didn't!" She hated that he would use Kreacher in such a way. Dobby, she knew, would literally *do anything* for Harry, but that was beside the point. She listened to him go on about Malfoy and Harry's theories and speculations.

"Hagrid said to tell you hello," she said when he was winding down, hoping to change the subject. "He's really concerned for his friend Aragog."

"That mangy spider?" Ron asked. "Well, good riddance, if you ask me. Imagine, there's a whole nest of them in the forest now."

Hermione smiled, knowing Ron's fear of spiders, pleased that at least there were some things unchanged about her friend.

Professor Snape kept his distance, only talking to Hermione in class, and so far they hadn't had another practice session of magical handball, as she affectionately dubbed it. Ron was released from the hospital Friday but he was not cleared to attend the Apparition lesson and went to library instead.

Harry was dismissed from the Hospital after spending ten days under Madam Pomfrey's care, the same day that Ron finally managed to call it quits with Lavender.

Harry had his fourth meeting with Dumbledore (because Hermione hardly considered viewing old memories a lesson regardless of how informative they were about Voldemort) the following day. Harry related everything to Ron and Hermione afterwards: about seeing the memory of Tom Riddle visiting Hepzibah Smith, and Dumbledore's memory of Tom asking for the DADA teaching post at Hogwarts and what Harry remembered about Dumbledore's conclusions. She had been as surprised as Harry that Tom had worked at Borgin and Burkes after failing to secure a teaching position from Professor Dippet, who had been the Headmaster at the time, considering what an exemplary student Tom had been...she'd have thought he'd have had larger ambitions. She had not been surprised that he'd stolen Hufflepuff's cup and Slytherin's Locket and framed Mrs. Smith's house-elf.

A diary, the ring that had belonged to his grandfather and supposedly has the Peverell's coat of arms on it, Hufflepuff's Cup, Slytherin's locket... Is there a pattern she'd thought as she'd made a list on the margin of her journal. Two of them supposedly belonged to two of the founders of the school. The ring didn't, and the scratches she saw matched a symbol she'd seen in both Gellert Grindelwald's and Lucien Underwood's biographies in the Restricted Section: the triangle with a circle in it, bisected by a line. She wished that she could ask Professor Snape about the symbol, but knew she couldn't betray both Harry's and the Headmaster's confidences.

Wednesday, Hermione saw Romilda and Harry walking together in the corridor, and Romilda sat next to Harry in the Great Hall that evening. Hermione asked Harry about his friendship with Romilda that night as she reviewed his essays and, after a few probing questions, he admitted to having kissed her. Ron on the other hand, talked about his possible romance with Padma. Hermione supposed she was happy for her friends, considering that neither girl seemed to show the same jealousy toward Hermione as Lavender had.

When Saturday rolled around, Ron still wasn't allowed to attend Apparition lessons, which had angered him considerably. Harry was not cleared to attend either, but he chose to spend the afternoon with Romilda, so Ron had sulked off to the library by himself. Hermione went to the lesson alone, determined to finally make a successful Apparition, but no matter how hard Hermione tried, she still hadn't managed to Apparate. She was starting to feel like the rest of the students, although she couldn't resort to voicing her grumblings to anyone.

As she walked down to the following lesson a week later, Hermione contemplated the mystery of Draco's task. Dobby had informed them that Draco has been using the Room of Requirement. Ron deduced that the students keeping watch for him were possibly Crabbe and Goyle under Polyjuice Potion. Harry had described a room, one of the possible options that the Room of Requirement had, a huge store room full of all sorts of old junk... but even though he tried getting in all week, the door never opened for him.

However, once in the Great Hall, Hermione pushed all thoughts of Malfoy aside. She stood by her usual hoop and when Professor Twycross told them to begin, focused on her destination. She was determined. As she spun deliberately, she tried to let her magic flow, intent on the task of doing a successful Apparition.

She failed. Again. As well as on her second and third time. She was no closer to it her fourth or fifth. She stared at the hoop and tried to determine what she was doing wrong.

"Miss Granger?" Professor McGonagall asked as she walked by. "Is there a problem?"

"Ah, no, professor," she replied and saw Professor Snape watching her. She heard his words in her mind, *Focus your determination on your intended action, say the incantation, and then release your magic... without losing focus...* What if releasing my magic is the wrong course? She remembered what she'd read in *Physical Shapeshifting Through Transformation* by Phaedrus Goldschlager her third year; *something about melding her magic with her physical form...* She'd thought it an odd concept at the time, but right now it made sense. She was, in a sense, casting a spell on herself. Her magic had to flow in her, taking her with it to the desired location...in this case the hoop in front of her. She closed her eyes, focusing her magic, letting it build up as she thought of where she wanted to be, sufficiently focused on her destination, determined that was where she was going to go, and released her magic within as she made her deliberate action...

Nothing.

Bugger! Bugger.

But she'd felt something, something different, she was sure of it. She tried again.

She'd moved two feet. She wasn't sure if she'd moved because of her turning or if she'd only Apparated two feet. Either way it didn't count, she wasn't in her hoop.

She tried again; the space within the hoop clearly visualized in her mind, determined to get it right this time, and deliberately released her magic within herself as she made her attempt....

Hermione screamed in pain, grasping her hand as she opened her eyes. Her finger was missing! She lost her finger. It was just starting to bleed when she felt a tremendously forceful pulse hit her from two sides, heard the ear-deafening bang as the magic surrounding her clashed and bonded, layering together as it seeped into her every pore. She felt her hand grow cold, bone-chilling cold, then felt the sensation of hundreds of fiery needle pricks on her hand. She stood there, gasping. Trembling. But when she looked at her hand, it appeared normal.

"Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said, wrapping her arm about Hermione's shoulders.

Hermione looked down. She was standing in her hoop. She'd Splinched...but she was standing in her hoop! She looked up at her professor and saw Professor Snape standing four feet away from Professor McGonagall, watching her intently. "I did it! I failed...I Splinched, but I did it, didn't I?"

"Yes, on all accounts," Professor McGonagall said, nodding with a sympathetic smile. "Steady now. It's all right, you're fine now."

But Hermione felt elated. Yes she'd Splinched, but the more she thought about it, the more she focused on exactly what she'd done and how she'd done it, the more she felt like she could do it again.

"I think you should go up to the hospital wing..." Professor McGonagall was saying.

She tried to protest, wanting to try again, but the other students were leaving and Professor Twycross was magically collecting their hoops.

"It's best you go, Miss Granger," Professor McGonagall said kindly.

"I'll see to her," Professor Snape said. "You should see to Mr. Longbottom; he looks green."

Hermione turned and smiled at him. "I did it...you healed me, but I did it!"

"All right, Severus," Professor McGonagall said, and hurried over to help Neville.

"Miss Granger, come with me," Professor Snape said, taking hold of her arm gently and guiding her from the Great Hall. However, he led her to his office instead of the hospital wing. "Sit down," he said, a softly spoken demand.

She complied. He left the office for a moment and returned a few minutes later with three small potion dosing cups and a small jar on a small tray. She looked at the potions, then up at him.

"They are healing potions," he said with a roll of his eyes. "Steadfastness and Calming Draught for the shock, and a Rejuvenating Potion to help your hand. Take them in succession, right one first."

He waited patiently until she finished all three. She immediately felt better. Professor Snape then rubbed a little of the emollient from the jar into her hand, massaging her fingers. She watched him, feeling that warm fuzziness she sometimes got when someone brushed her hair, only it emanated from her hand to her head. She was disappointed when he let go of her hand, but her hand felt much better and more flexible.

He wiped his hand on a handkerchief as he turned his head and barked, "Toopsy, bring two plates of food, one for myself and one for a student, and two drinks."

A house-elf appeared with a tray. She placed a plate with a thick sandwiches, crisps and some fruit on his desk near Hermione with a standard student goblet, and levitated a plate with an open-faced roast beef sandwich and boiled potatoes and his goblet, with the Slytherin crest on it, to his side of the desk. She added two sets of silverware rolled up in napkins and stood back. "Does Professor needs anything else from Toopsy?" she asked, holding the tray with both hands.

"No, this is all," Professor Snape said and sat down. "You should eat." He waited until she took two bites of her sandwich and a sip of her pumpkin juice before asking, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Hermione smiled. "It was incredible...well aside from the Splinching. I remembered what you said and, well, do you remember when we'd talked about Phaedrus Goldschlager's Animagi theory from *Physical Shapeshifting Through Transformation*? I remembered something about melding my magic with my physical form and deliberately released my magic *with* my determination to Apparate, not *releasing* my magic as I moved, before... and it worked."

His lips quirked slightly. "Yes, and do you think you can do it again, without Splinching yourself?" he asked and took a bite of his potatoes.

"I think so," she said. "I don't want to go through *that* again...the sensation of being healed is horrible."

"Yes, it is," he admitted.

"How did you learn it?" she asked after swallowing another bite.

"All the Heads have to learn how; it comes with the job, although, some are better at it than others," he admitted. "Professor McGonagall and I are well matched magically, and therefore our magic works well in conjunction with each others."

"I'm amazed at how quickly you react," she said and thought she saw a little color appear on his face. "Although when it's you, it seems to take a lot longer than when watching someone else being put back together."

"It's the same when casting the spells, time seems to slow down, but you move as quickly as you're able," he said.

She looked up at him thoughtfully. "I don't believe I thanked you."

"You're welcome," he replied. "Now eat."

Despite his firm demand, she peppered him with questions about Apparition and asked which places he'd Apparated to. He answered her, listing a few locations, and slowly the conversation moved to locations they'd both like to see someday, although he was considerably less forthcoming than she was.

The next Apparition lesson, Ron had been cleared to go. But he hadn't managed to Apparate and blamed it on the fact he'd missed three lessons. Harry hadn't been cleared by Madam Pomfrey, so he'd stayed in the common room with Romilda, although he'd promised to go to the library and finish his essay on Dementors for Professor Snape which was due on Monday. Try as she might, Hermione couldn't manage to do a successful Apparition on that day. Three students had Splinched that afternoon, and each time, Hermione had felt sympathetic pains in her hand, making her determination falter. But at least she hadn't Splinched herself.

Professor Snape had asked her to follow him to his office, and then asked her what was bothering her. He'd listened patiently as she'd expressed her fear. She remembered his advice and tried to take it to heart.

"You should not concern yourself with other's Splinching. I know the feeling; I've done it, and yes, it's horrible, but put it behind you. You cannot allow your fear to control you."

She stared at him in disbelief. "You've Splinched yourself?"

"Yes, I have. Once. The thing is to get over it and believe in yourself. Don't let it break your concentration or ruin your self-esteem."

Harry became more and more obsessed with Malfoy and trying to get into the Room of Requirement, so much so that Romilda was beginning to complain, but Harry wouldn't let up. He even tried to get Hermione and Ron to help follow Malfoy into the room.

Harry was cleared in time to participate in the last two Apparition lessons before they would have their test in Hogsmeade, but when he'd read the notices, he'd lost heart. He'd have to wait a year before being able to take the test, and because he'd missed so many lessons, he'd have to repeat them next year as well. Of course it hadn't helped that Hermione managed to Apparate successfully in both lessons. She'd looked about the room, catching Professor Snape's eye both times and saw him nod, barely perceptibly, with a tiny twitch of the corner of his mouth.

The morning of the examination, an owl dropped a folded piece of parchment on Hermione's plate and flew off. It read simply *Concentrate, focus and believe in yourself*, and although it was signed with only one 'S', she recognized Professor Snape's printing easily.

Hermione walked down to Hogsmeade with Ron the day of the Apparition testing. Harry promised that he'd try again upon acquiring the needed memory from Professor Slughorn rather than follow Malfoy around. When she and Ron arrived in the magical village, she was surprised to see so many Healers standing around talking to Ministry officials, everyone one of them wearing large badges.

She was directed to a location across from Scrivenshaft's Quill Shop and told that she would be Apparating to the Hog's Head, while Ron had been directed to Madam Puddifoot's on Grove End, his destination being next to Scrivenshaft's off High Street.

Hermione waited her turn, maintaining her focus. She'd done this successfully in the Great Hall, so she felt confident she could do it again, all she had to do was suppress her pre-exam nerves, believe in herself and concentrate. She walked up to the magical mark on the street when the Ministry official called her name.

"Now, concentrate, Miss Granger. Picture the Hog's Head in your mind..." the woman was saying.

Hermione tuned her out, willing her to shut up. She closed her eyes. She focused on her magic as she pictured the Hog's Head in her mind. Once she felt sufficiently focused on her destination, determined that was where she was going to go, she deliberately released her magic within herself as she willed herself to go...

Three butterbeers later, having to endure Professor Twycross extol her achievement as he praised her clean and perfect Apparition for at least a half an hour, Hermione ran all the way up to the castle and down the steps to the dungeons. She knocked exuberantly on Professor Snape's door and rushed inside the minute he opened it.

"I did it!" she exclaimed as she flung herself at him, hugging him tightly. "I passed!"

He set her down firmly on her feet. "I knew you would," he said as she bounced once in pure joy.

"Thank you," she said, smiling broadly, grasping his arms. "Thank you!"

"I didn't do anything," he said, drawing himself to his full height.

"Yes you did, you believed in me," she said and hugged him again. He stood rigidly, his hands on her arms, but he didn't shove her away as quickly as before. She inhaled his scent and smiled contentedly... then quickly remembered herself. She backed away quickly. "I just, er, sorry. I was a little overly excited."

His hands hung by his sides as he stared at her. "It's understandable. Earning your Apparition license on your first exam date is an impressive feat."

"Thank you," she said again. She couldn't believe that she'd simply hugged him like that, but all she'd thought of the second she'd arrived successfully in front of the Hog's Head was telling him about it. "I wanted you to be the first person..." She paused, trying to calm her pounding heart.

His lips quirked briefly, a quick smile, before he said, "Thank you." He stood there, immobile, just watching her and for some reason she was at a total loss of words.

She thought that she saw a movement out of the corner of her eye and turned her head reflexively, seeing a sleeve vanish in the lonely background scene. She shrugged and turned to face him, feeling her heart skip a beat. He was still watching her intently as if memorizing her face, her expression. "I should go..." she said and regretted the words. "I don't want to, but it's almost lunch time, and I didn't have much to eat."

His mouth drew back slowly into a small smile. "I've told you before, two slices of toast is not a significant breakfast. And pushing your eggs around with your fork doesn't count either."

"I was nervous," she replied, shocked once again that he had observed her so intently at breakfast.

"I have some potions to bottle before lunch," he said softly. "Would you care to assist me?"

"Yes!" she said, glad to have the opportunity.

He nodded and led her to his lab, and told her which potions went in which bottles.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Chapter 47

Chapter 47 of 54

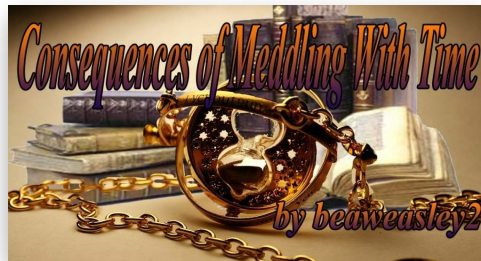
Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Oh, nope, no money either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia and FrankQ for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!

There are some deviations to canon in this chapter: Ron is seeing Padma, the fight between Ginny and Dean will happen in a different time than in the books, and Aragog dies in this chapter after the Apparition exam. (Do I have to give you a character death warning for him?) Likewise, Harry is seeing Romilda presently, before his interest will turn to Ginny. But other than that, the events that are not mentioned in this story, especially pertaining to Dumbledore, Draco Malfoy and Professor Slughorn, that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books, at least the parts from Harry's perspective.



Hermione left the common room for her nightly swim. Ron had promised to come and get her, or bring Harry with him to the prefect bath*if* Harry returned while she was in the pool. For that reason, she'd transfigured a tank top and knickers into more conservative swim attire. As she approached the bath suite, lost in thought about Harry's emotional state, she was startled out of her reverie by a noise ahead. She looked up and thought that she saw Draco turning the corner ahead of her. When she rounded the bend however, he was nowhere in sight. Instead, a lanky second-year Slytherin boy was sitting against the wall under the tapestry of the dancing trolls, idly playing with a set of scales. She frowned, trying to remember if she'd seen the boy in that area of the castle before, and wondering why a second-year Slytherin boy would be hanging around here near the corridor to the Gryffindor common room.

"Are you all right?" she asked, still trying to puzzle out why the boy was just sitting there.

She was surprised when he looked up at her with a hostile glare. "Yes," he said rather waspishly.

"Where's your friend?" she asked, wondering if she'd been mistaken that the other boy she'd seen walking around the corner moments before was Malfoy. Her gaze swept the corridor, certain she'd seen him.

"There isn't anyone else here, you daft cow," he snapped.

"I thought I saw Malfoy?" she asked as she scanned the corridor in both directions, certain that she wasn't mistaken...she'd seen another boy. If it hadn't been Malfoy, it had been another platinum-haired boy.

"No, what would he be doing here?" the boy said contemptuously.

She looked down at the boy again, considering him just another Slytherin with a puffed up, arrogant sense of superiority. "Mind your attitude, I'm only asking...I am a Gryffindor Prefect, and your presence here is rather suspicious."

"I'm not doing anything," he grumbled, crossing his arms defiantly.

Technically he wasn't doing anything wrong; even though the boy was alone, he wasn't breaking curfew, and although she could deduct House points for his rudeness, she had become used to such contempt from some of the Slytherins. Although why he was here was a mystery, unless he too knew about the Room of Requirement and had tried to get in only to find it stubbornly unresponsive. "You'd best not be caught up here by Filch," she said, forcing herself to maintain a calm friendly tone to avoid a scene. "It's only twenty minutes until your curfew."

"Not that it matters to you, but I am fine. Now, go away," he said and went back to playing with his scales.

Hermione rolled her eyes as she walked away. She spotted Filch on the fifth floor mopping something up and waved at him. The old caretaker grunted something in return and resumed his cleaning.

She entered the bath, turned on her favorite taps, then pulled off her school robe, jumper and jeans and dove into the water at the deep end as soon as the tub was almost full. She swam to the side, turned off the taps, and began her laps.

Normally swimming was relaxing for her, but tonight she was on edge. It had been quite a week so far and it was only Thursday! She couldn't help mulling over everything as she did her laps. Harry had received a note from Hagrid on Tuesday, telling him that Aragog had died, the same day that Katie returned to Hogwarts. Harry had been elated to see Katie, and even more so because Madam Pomfrey had declared her fit to play Quidditch again. Dean was disappointed of course, but Harry had assured him he wanted Dean to continue to practice with the team, as a back up just in case, which for some reason hadn't pleased Ginny very much. Harry had made two more unsuccessful attempts to talk Professor Slughorn into giving him the real memory, but each time Professor Slughorn managed to give Harry the slip.

She did a flip turn, pushed off the wall, came up and continued her freestyle stroke.

But instead of trying to see Professor Slughorn...he was breaking the rules to go console Hagrid! Hermione and Ron could hardly believe that Hagrid had expected them to *'nip down for the burial... around dusk'* because that was the monstrous spider's favorite time of day. At the time, Harry had agreed with her...it was too risky to go. But thanks to the insane influence of a mouthful of his Felix Felicis, that was precisely what Harry was doing...going to pay his respects to a monster that had tried to eat him. It made no sense. She'd read about Felix Felicis, and from what she'd learned, it was *supposed* to help you achieve anything you set your mind to doing. Harry had been set on retrieving the memory for Dumbledore when he took the potion. *So what bloody well happened?*

Hermione did another flip turn, kicked off from the wall and resumed her swimming.

When Harry had pulled on his Invisibility Cloak after declaring his intent to go see Hagrid and ran down the stairs, Hermione and Ron had followed him, hoping to get him to see reason. He needed the memory...not to go off like a fool and get himself in trouble for going to the funeral of an Acromantula! However, Lavender didn't know about the cloak, all she saw were Ron and Hermione coming out of the boy's dorms together. Hermione supposed it looked bad, and Lavender had always been jealous of her and Ron's friendship, but this had been the last straw for the girl, especially since she'd never forgiven Ron for calling out Hermione's name in the hospital. Lavender broke it off with Ron, in the common room in front of everyone.

On the plus side, though, Ron was now free to pursue Padma.

A body length away from the wall, she did a quick flip and a twist at the wall and pushed off, this time opting to do the backstroke.

The candlelight reflected on the marble reminded her of Malfoy's blond hair. She was absolutely certain that she'd seen Malfoy in the seventh floor corridor, regardless of what the rude little boy had said. It was possible she'd been mistaken, but she doubted it. *It is possible that Malfoy entered the Room of Requirement, he certainly knows about the room, but if that was the case, then why is the Slytherin boy waiting outside the entrance? Unless the boy had tried to get in the room and it wouldn't open up for him.* Harry had described a room where people had left things through the years, a virtual warehouse of discarded things. *It is possible that the boy had wanted in the room and was simply waiting to see if it would open up again. But how did he know about the Room of Requirement?*

Hermione stopped before her hand hit the edge of the pool, and turned, kicking off in the other direction.

Still, she was certain that she had seen Malfoy, there was no mistaking him; his silhouette was too familiar to her, his build, the way he walked, his blond hair, his profile and his sneer and his cold grey eyes. No, she could spot Malfoy the length of any corridor or clear across the Quidditch pitch, even on a rainy day. *There is only one door in that part of the corridor, the Room of Requirement...the classroom doors are too far away for him to have vanished so quickly.* She wondered what use Malfoy would have in the magical room, and then dismissed that line of thought; anything she'd come up with would be speculation and completely inconclusive. But even Romilda was getting annoyed with Harry's preoccupation with whatever he presumed Malfoy was doing.

Hermione turned at the wall and increased her pace, trying to clear her mind, to no avail. She couldn't stop thinking about Draco bloody Malfoy and his odd behavior as of late. It seemed that Malfoy looked thinner and paler than normal, a little grey around the gills, as her grandmother used to say. Not only that but he seemed to have lost his arrogance, the usual smugness, or show any of his typical excitement in his lessons, and he rarely demonstrated his usual sense of superiority anymore. He didn't even take the time to snarl at her or call her Mudblood, even in front of the little second-year girls that trailed after him.

She turned over to do the free-style on her last lap and then climbed out to dry off. She dried her hair with a towel and used a liberal amount of leave-in conditioner on her hair, then redressed for the walk back to her dorm room. She saw Professor Snape in the corridor as she was leaving the bath. "Good evening, sir," she said politely.

"Don't good evening me," he growled in response.

Hermione was surprised by his gruffness, suddenly feeling off-footed and wary. "What's the matter?"

"Where is Mr. Potter?" he demanded.

"I...I don't know. Isn't he in the common room?" She looked at her watch *Holy shite!* It was two minutes after curfew. "Oh, gods!" she exclaimed and looked up at him, alarmed. "I'm so sorry! I completely lost track of the time."

"No, Potter is not in the common room," he said angrily. "Rosalba informed me that he has not been in the common room all evening. What is he up to?"

Hermione was immediately confused and alarmed. *Can portraits see Harry through this cloak?* She wondered briefly if Rosalba had been in one of the portraits in the common room. She'd seen Rosalba in the room before, either visiting the portrait of Almerick Sawbridge, who had bravely removed the river troll that had been terrorizing people crossing the Wye River in 1658, or Philomena Plarkin, a Hogsmeade resident who had sheltered, defended and cared for the wounded during the 1612 goblin rebellion. *No, they can't...all those times we've used it and weren't caught...*

"Well, have you seen him or not?" he snarled, snapping her out of her reverie.

"I don't understand, sir," she said, still confused. *She couldn't have seen him. He was under his cloak, and he'd taken Felix Felicis!* Last I saw Harry was in his dorm room before I came down for my swim."

"And what were you doing in his dorm room?" he asked, his eyes narrowing as he crossed his arms.

"Talking!" she exclaimed. "Just talking."

"What about?" he asked.

"I don't remember, loads of things: his sessions with Dumbledore, Volde...oops, sorry," she flinched at his annoyed hiss, "You-Know-Who, whether his scar has been bothering him, and of course the ever ongoing Quidditch talk..." she rambled off. "Mostly, Harry suspects Malfoy is trying to kill the Headmaster." It wasn't all true, but those had been subjects of recent conversations. She purposefully didn't mention Hagrid or his bloody dead Acromantula.

He seemed to visibly relax, although lines of tension were still evident on his features. He looked away and inhaled deeply, then turned his attention back to her. "You

should get back to your dorm."

"Yes, sir," she said with a shake of her head. "That's where I was headed. Good night, sir."

"Good night, Miss Granger," he said, moving aside to let her pass. "In the future, time your swims so that you are not violating curfew."

She smiled at him. He hadn't deducted House points. "I will, I promise. Thank you, sir." She turned and hurried for the stairs, praying she wouldn't get caught by Filch.

The common room was empty when she entered. Even the fire in the fireplace was little more than ash and glowing coals that barely gave off any light at all.

Harry told Ron and Hermione what had happened in his last session with Dumbledore the next Tuesday in Charms, but Hermione waited until they all had one of their rare joint free periods to get him to tell it to them again in detail so she could write it all down in the journal. Hermione had a hard time believing what they were up against...an immortal Dark Lord. Voldemort had possibly, although Harry had said it was an absolute certainty, made six of those Horcruxes. Six. She looked at the list in the margin and wrote *five* and *six* below them, then wrote *snake* after number six since Harry said that Dumbledore thought it the last one created *We have one that is an unknown. It could be anything!*

Now she had three things to research in her free time, what little free time she had. She was no closer to finding the identity of the Half-Blood Prince, but she was determined to find out, and now she had to add historically significant artifacts that might have belonged to either Ravenclaw or Gryffindor...and that could include items people *claimed* belonged to them. In addition to that, she needed to know how to destroy Horcruxes. At least now, thanks to what Harry had related to her about Slughorn's true memory, she knew what a Horcrux was...just not how to destroy one. Sometimes being the brain of the three of them was really quite taxing.

On Saturday, Harry held Quidditch practice. Hermione sat in the stands with her journal and a few thick books on the founders, trying to figure out what, if any, possession of theirs may have survived all these years.

Ginny and Dean had another fight the night before, and although Dean was a second string player, he still practiced with the other Chasers. Off the court their relationship was obviously strained, and Ginny was overcompensating her discomfort with Dean flying with the team by acting out; she taunted Ron, teasing him that he fluttered about in front of the goal posts like a hummingbird, and taunting Harry about his inattentiveness during practice both times he'd been hit by a Bludger, because his attention seemed to be more focused on Katie and her.

At least Katie was flying well and was trying to get the strength back in her throwing arm.

Romilda sat in the stands with her friends, but it was apparent to Hermione that she was getting a little jealous because she couldn't get Harry's attention since his focus was on Katie and Ginny, whistled shrilly when Harry made an impressive move.

But between Ginny's antics and Romilda's loud obnoxious behavior, Harry got so side-swiped by a Bludger. Harry scolded both Jack Sloper and Andrew Kirke to keep better track of the iron balls. Thankfully Harry didn't seem too badly hurt and kept flying.

Ginny, still acting outlandishly, imitated Harry's roll and shouted, "Oi, whatcha doing Harry? To busy scolding Sloper and Kirke like you did McLaggen to watch your own back?" which Harry took in good stride, laughing at his own expense. However, Harry failed to see Jack Sloper miss the Bludger again, and it hit Harry on the side, knocking him from his broom and ending the practice. Romilda screamed, as she and several others rushed from the stands. By the time Hermione made it to the field, Harry was being supported by both Ron and Andrew up to the castle with Romilda tearfully following in their wake.

Thankfully, Madam Pomfrey was able to heal Harry's fractured ribs easily, if not rather painfully, coated some nasty bruises with Bruise Paste, then put him to bed for the night. Hermione and Ron returned to visit him after dinner, however, the only thing on Harry's mind was Malfoy's supposed plot to kill Dumbledore. "Ron, take the map and keep an eye on Malfoy," Harry asked as soon as Ron and Hermione sat down next to his bed.

Ron rolled his eyes. "I thought you had Dobby and Kreacher tailing him," Ron said.

"Harry, I thought you put an end to that!" Hermione shrieked, getting a stern glare from Madam Pomfrey.

Harry was cut off from answering when Romilda stepped around the curtain. "Hi, Harry. I thought you'd like company, but I see you already have some."

"Nah, it's all right," Harry said, but there was a slight disappointed tone to his voice that apparently Romilda didn't pick up on as she came over and kissed him, and then sat down beside him on the bed.

"What were you talking about?" she asked.

"Quidditch," Harry and Ron both answered at the same time, which, of course, became the topic of conversation for the rest of the visit.

Hermione tried to talk some sense into Harry on Sunday, but every time she stopped by, Romilda was there, so she gave up and went back to her research projects. Hermione finally found a moment to talk with Harry Sunday night when he joined her and Ron by the fire in the common room before her swim.

"No, I don't think Mrs. Malfoy was in the Three Broomsticks the day Katie was attacked...she doesn't exactly blend in well with the usual crowd of the pub and a bunch of students," she told Harry, and Ron, for once, murmured his agreement. "And I know you're convinced that Malfoy stole a cauldron full of Polyjuice Potion during the first week of school, Harry, but even if he did, there would only be fifteen or sixteen doses at most. Besides, why steal it? He received an Outstanding on his Potions O.W.L., so it's possible that he could brew a batch on his own somewhere in the dungeons. I mean, if his mother is helping him in whatever this task is, it's fair to assume she she *could* have sent him the boomslang skin he'd need. I'm sure he'd have no problem finding the recipe in *Moste Potente Potions*...I did!"

"And all packages are checked?" Ron stated, for once being helpful.

Hermione smiled at him. "They are, Filch and the professors looking for dangerous substances and products from your brother's shop," she then turned Harry, "but boomslang skin and lacewing flies are hardly dangerous substances," she explained. "But this is all speculation. You have no proof he's doing anything wrong."

Harry crossed his arms and sunk back into his pillows. Hermione knew that no matter what she said, or how logically she explained the improbability, she knew Harry just wouldn't be swayed to see reason.

As the weather turned balmy, Harry was becoming more and more obsessed with watching for Malfoy on the map. He would get frustrated when he was unable to locate Malfoy, and would make excuses to go to the Room of Requirement to try to get in and see what Malfoy was doing. Tuesday, Harry tried to leave Herbology by disturbing a Snargaluff, intentionally getting quite a few nasty scratches, because he thought he saw Malfoy's name on the map beside Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. But Professor Sprout had him dip his hand in Essence of Dittany and told him to get back to work. In Charms on Wednesday, he tried taking a Nosebleed Nougat to skive off, but Professor Flitwick was onto Fred and George Weasley's trick treats and handed him a nougat, telling him to eat the turquoise end and hand him back the red end, which of course, stopped the bleeding instantly.

A second-year girl passed Hermione a note from Professor Snape before her Ancient Runes lesson later that day, telling her to come to his office after dinner, which meant she'd have to cancel the dueling practice that evening. Hermione found Ginny before dinner and told her about the note.

"What does he want?" Ginny asked as they walked down to dinner together. Up ahead, Harry and Ron were listening to whatever Romilda was saying.

"I don't know," Hermione admitted. "But if you want, could we switch the meeting for Thursday or Friday?"

"All right. I'll ask Neville and Seamus to lead it tonight, and you and I can practice together on Friday," Ginny said as she waved at Luna. They waited until she caught up to them. "Luna, spread the word, dueling is still on, okay?"

"I can do that," Luna said cheerfully and skipped away. Hermione spent dinner between Ron and Ginny, with the Creeveys and Andrew Kirke across from them, talking about the upcoming game of Quidditch.

When Hermione saw Professor Snape leave the Great Hall, she quickly said good bye to her friends and hurried out of the Great Hall to catch up to him. "Professor," she called out at the bottom of the stairs.

He stopped and waited for her, then led her silently to the small practice room. "You wanted to see me?" she asked as soon as he closed the door.

"Yes," he said in a stern tone. "It has been noted by both Professor Sprout and Professor Flitwick that Mr. Potter tried to skive off his lesson today...don't deny it, and there have been numerous times he's been caught examining an old piece of parchment during his lessons. Professor McGonagall is going to speak to him about this tonight. However, I want to know what is going on and if this in any way involves Draco Malfoy."

Hermione let her bottom lip slide out from under her teeth as she considered what to say. She couldn't lie to him, just couldn't, but she hated admitting the truth and hurting Harry. The thing was, she was a lousy liar and knew it...he'd see right through any lie she tried to tell him. "I know he's concerned about Malfoy...I told you that already," she finally admitted. "I told him he shouldn't skive off lessons, but he tried anyway...and neither time worked."

"I see," he said slowly. "Miss Granger, Hermione, listen to me; I want you and your friends to stay away from Draco Malfoy."

She gaped at him, wondering if maybe Harry was right after all. "So he is the one making the attempts on Headmaster Dumbledore," she said, surprised by his warning.

"That's still an unfounded accusation, Miss Granger, and I'd have thought better of you..."

She lowered her head and exhaled heavily. "I'm sorry, sir. You're right." *Stop jumping to conclusions.* But it was starting to all add up, and even though logically she couldn't connect Malfoy to things that had been happening, she'd passed him too many times, either coming or going, on her way to the prefect bath. He had to be using the Room of Requirement for something, but she had no idea what.

Professor Snape looked away, lowered his head and exhaled heavily. "I don't want you and Mr. Malfoy to get into an altercation," he said, sounding weary. He looked at her and a small sad smile quirked his lips before he asked. "How is your practicing going with Miss Weasley?"

"So far, all right. We've been doing some dueling with the fencing moves you taught me," she admitted. "We're getting rather good, I think."

His mouth quirked back into a crooked smile. "Would you care to show me?"

Hermione smiled back. "Waverly rules or the International Wizarding Regulations?" she asked.

"I hardly think you're ready for Death Eater rules," he said with a smirk.

"Waverly it is then," she said as he led her to the huge room with the arches.

To make things more interesting, he charmed the Cricket ball to fly like a Bludger about the room, so not only was she fighting him, but she had to look out for the cricket ball and deflect it as well.

Hermione tried to control her breathing, but it was labored. Her heart was pounding fiercely in her chest, and all her senses were on high alert. She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, counting to ten in her mind. She heard the cricket ball smack into the ceiling followed by a scuffle, a boot-on-gravel sound, and she turned, moving to the side of the pillar quickly and as quietly as she could, then peered around it.

The glow orbs and torches elongated the shadows, but hers was angling away from where she'd heard the sound across the space between two other pillars. Suddenly she saw a torch flicker and the cricket ball change direction. She took aim, staying close to the pillar at her back, and fired a nonverbal Stunner and Tripping Jinx at where she thought he was. A jet of light bounced off the nearest pillar to where she stood just as the cricket ball came at her from above. Using a perfect *Sixte* movement, she immediately fired a Jelly-Legs and Tripping Jinx in quick succession at the dark space between the pillars and managed to deflect the ball in time, making it soar into the space as well, gratified when she heard an, "Oomph." *I got him! Four out of six!*

She hurried over to the next pillar and saw a dark form on the ground. "Oh my gods!" she cried out and hurried over to where Professor Snape lay on the ground. She saw the cricket ball lunge for her in the corner of her eye and blasted the thing, then knelt next to him. She looked him over worriedly, feeling thankful when she saw him move slightly. She helped him roll onto his back and propped him up on her lap. "I'm so sorry!" she cried, using the cuff of her sleeve to blot the blood on his forehead. Not knowing what else to use, she severed her sleeve and pressed it against his wound. "Oh, gosh, Dobby! Can you hear me? Please come, I need help."

There was a loud crack in the quiet room, and Dobby appeared. "Dobby hears Harry Potter's friend...Dobby is happy to help a friend of Harry Potter," he said bowing. "What does Miss need of Dobby?"

"I need a flannel and water and Essence of Dittany, and please hurry," she rambled off and Dobby disappeared. "Oh, please be all right," she pleaded to the wizard lying in her arms.

She heard a soft moan and smiled in relief. "Professor, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you," he said softly as Dobby returned. "You're practically shouting."

Hermione grabbed the Dittany as she said, "Hold still, this may sting a little." She eased her sleeve away from the cut and let a little of the Essence fall into the wound. He hissed as the Essence healed his cut.

She put the bottle down and reached for the wet flannel as he tried to sit up. "Here, let me help you," she offered.

He swatted her hand away, but swayed, and she scooted closer to him, supporting his back. "At least let me clean your face," she offered. He looked up at her as she leaned over him and gently wiped the blood away. "I'm really sorry about this."

"About what? Helping me, or clobbering me with that bloody ball?" he snapped, but remained as he was, watching her as she rinsed the flannel in the water.

To her amazement, the bowl emptied and refilled itself. "Of course I'd help you. I'm just sorry about hurting you," she said as she finished wiping his face. She dropped the flannel into the water and both vanished.

"What happened to your sleeve?" he asked, taking her hand in his.

She looked at his fingers wrapped around her wrist, feeling a heady tingle at the soft contact and felt her face warm up. "I, er, used it to stop the bleeding. I didn't have anything else." He dropped her wrist and her skin cooled from the loss. She looked down at him, and their gazes locked. For a few heartbeats neither moved. "Can you stand?"

"Yes," he replied, moving slowly as he sat up. Hermione rose quickly and offered her hand again to help him off the floor, but he shook it off.

"I'm fine, Miss Granger," he said as he drew himself up to his full height. She walked with him back to his office, still worried that he might have a concussion.

"I'm fine, Miss Granger," he repeated once they reached his door.

They said good night to each other, a clear dismissal on his part, and she truly hoped he was as all right as he said he was.

Severus watched Hermione walk away before entering his office. His head hurt like hell, but he had the needed potions in his cupboard. He had brewed them himself, keeping a good stock of pain potions and the one for concussions in case a student in his lessons got out of hand, along with the potions he had for when the Dark Lord became incensed or a raid went wrong. Severus was not impervious to pain, but he'd learned long ago to be prepared for all possible contingencies.

He selected what he needed and swallowed liberal doses of the potions, slowly starting to feel the throbbing in his head recede. He pulled out a small mirror and looked at the wound. It already looked several days old. He'd have a slight scar, but not all that noticeable, not that he cared about his appearance. Scars like this made him look rakish and rugged a witch at a revel had told him once. He put the mirror back.

He sat down wearily at his desk. Hermione had been generally concerned about his welfare; the concern in her eyes had warred with the guilt she felt from the accident. She hadn't meant to harm him, only incapacitate him. The combination of the nonverbal Jelly-Legs and Tripping Jinx had been a bold move but risky because if he hadn't been hit with the cricket ball, he'd still had full use of his wand.

Still, she'd done well, besting him three times out of six...he hardly counted being incapacitated by a ball a point in her favor.

He pulled the remnant of her sleeve out of his pocket and examined the bloodstain. She'd ruined a blouse in order to care for him. Being cradled by her as she'd healed him and then cleaned up his face had felt both comforting and awkward. Unintentionally, the image of her leaning over him, his head cradled between her perfect breasts, came unbidden to his thoughts, and before he forced the memory from his mind, the scenario changed. *Hermione leaning over, her soft lips brushing his, her hand cupping his face so as to deepen the kiss between them, and his hand slid up into her hair.* In his mind, he took control of the kiss, turning in her embrace so they faced each other, his position making her angle backward. *And by mutual consent, no words spoken to break the impassioned connection of their mouths, they lay back onto the ground, him over her, her lithe body stretched out along his...*

He shook his head, ignoring the rush of pain that helped to clear his thoughts.

She is your student, you filthy bastard! He cursed himself. *She'd no more kiss you than she'd kiss Potter.* Thankfully, that was at least true; for once he desired a woman that held no interest in a Potter.

Severus pulled out his diary and opened it to the corresponding day, writing 1997 before documenting what actually took place in the dueling room.

Not even halfway through dinner, Severus noticed Dumbledore kept scratching his arm frequently. He'd have written it off as simply the skin of his blackened arm bothering him, but then both Minerva and Filius began scratching their arms as well, specifically the arm closest to the Headmaster. All three quietly rose and left the Great Hall through the staff entrance, and Severus rose to follow.

"Headmaster, what is it...?" he began to ask as Minerva, wearing a rather nice red robe, commented about black specks covering her sleeve.

Severus drew his wand swiftly and encased all three of them in a magical bubble. "Let me see your arm," he said loudly, moving closer to the three of them.

Minerva, fuming at his impertinent behavior, raised her arm. Dumbledore peered at the fabric through his spectacles as Severus leaned forward to get a closer look. Dumbledore in his dark green robes with Sandpipers embroidered in variegated colors on the cuffs, hem and down the front, and Flitwick in his black and royal blue robes. He couldn't see anything on their persons, but when Filius shook his arm vigorously, tiny black specks fell to the bottom of the magical sphere, some of the speckles hopping back onto their robes.

"Well, spotted, my boy," Dumbledore said, straightening. "I do believe that we may have an infestation of chizpurples. Do go back into the Hall and very quietly pass the word to the rest of the staff to cast a containment shield on their persons. Then alert the house-elves and notify Madam Pomfrey."

Severus understood immediately. "Yes, Headmaster, I'll take care of it from here," he said. He passed along the Headmaster's orders, and slipped away to retrieve the necessary disinfectant, a bee smoker, and put six small vials of the antivenin (in case his coworkers had been bitten), three bottles of his disinfectant shampoo and three bars of the disinfectant soap in his pocket. Since Slughorn put chizpurples on the school Potions ingredient lists, he had more than enough on hand...enough for multiple infestations.

He had no idea how Albus could have been infested with live chizpurples since the supply of the insects sent to the school were supposed to have all been freeze-dried. Severus summoned some house-elves. He gave a house-elf wearing a jumper and knitted hat a five gallon container of the insecticide. "Take this to Madam Pomfrey immediately."

"Dobby will do as Master of Potions and Professor of Defeating Dark Arts commands Dobby," the elf said bowing low and disappearing with a loud crack.

Severus refrained from rolling his eyes as he turned to the others. "The rest of you, distribute the disinfectant shampoo and bar soap in those boxes in each one of the staff's and students' showers, and temporarily remove any of the students' shampoos and soap. The students' soaps and shampoos can be put back in place later tonight after the students use the ones with the chizpurples disinfectant. And everything, *anything* made of cloth or upholstered in cloth of any sort must be cleaned."

"Caddy will see that it is done as Master of Potions and Professor of Defeating Dark Arts commands us," the elf closest to him said, bowing low as the others picked up the boxes and disappeared with loud cracks.

Severus shook his head at the deferential titles the house-elves continued to use even though he was no longer teaching Potions. "You might also have the house-elves use it as well so you don't get infested either. It should be safe enough for you to use."

"Thank you, sir!" Caddy squeaked and smiled. "Caddy will tells all house-elves to wash with Master of Potions and Professor of Defeating Dark Arts' soap and shampoo tonights, sir!" He vanished with a soft pop.

Severus shook his head again and left his office in a hurry. He returned to the corridor between the staff room and the staff entrance to the Great Hall the same time as Pomona. "Headmaster, I've put all the house-elves on alert," Severus practically shouted as he made his way through to the magical bubble. "I've sent Madam Pomfrey the insecticide, but I've also taken the liberty of asking the house-elves to distribute the shampoo and bar soap in all the showers."

"Good, good. Now as discreetly as you can, and without drawing the attention of the students, put the Compulsion Charm on every student so that they will want to change their clothes and take a very long hot shower. Inform the house-elves to collect the students' clothes and have their bed things ready for them. Hopefully, none of the students will be the wiser," Dumbledore said, and Severus heard the soft crack of Apparition from the side of the room. "Someone will go to the library and see if the infestation reached there, and I must ask that all of you use Severus' soap and shampoo liberally as well."

The rest of the staff, who were so far thankfully uninfected, dispersed to carry out his orders. Severus turned to the three in the bubble. "Okay, now for you three, you'll need to hold your breath and close your eyes," he instructed them, and the three inside obeyed. He pushed the funnel of the smoker into the bubble and filled the space quickly with the smoke until he could barely see them anymore and waited to let it saturate their clothes.

Albus cast a sweeping charm on them, trying to remove as many of the insects as possible so the insects would die in the fume. Severus released the bubble and eliminated the smoke and fallen chizpurples as each professor added a Bubble Charm on their persons.

"You will have to change out of your robes, and you'll have to continue the containment shield until you can be properly disinfected," Severus said, ushering them into the staff loo. A house-elf appeared with coveralls and towels as Severus transfigured three of the loo stalls in the lavatory into showers.

Bloody hell but this was a nuisance.

Between the well-practiced discipline of the staff and the efficiency of the house-elves, the castle was rid of the infestation within a matter of an hour and a half.

Good thing too, he had a meeting with Hermione in half an hour to practice her wandless magic skills, and he didn't want to miss it.

Hermione entered her dorm after taking an exorbitantly long shower, one towel wrapped around her body and drying her hair with another. Lavender and Parvati were gossiping on the recent break up of Romilda and Harry and speculating on who he'd date next. "She is really upset, but then she kept complaining that he spent all his time obsessing over Draco Malfoy," Lavender was telling her friend.

The announcement didn't surprise Hermione at all...Harry's obsession with Malfoy's comings and goings grated on her nerves as well. She grabbed her brush and began to comb out her hair, then divided it and plaited it for the night. By morning it would be all kinky, but with the lovely conditioner she'd just used, at least it would be manageable.

She glanced at her clock, and her hand dropped in shock at the time. She was supposed to see Professor Snape in less than half an hour, and she was still wrapped in a towel with wet hair! She opened up her wardrobe but her clothes were all missing. She checked her trunk, finding even her swimsuits were missing. Her night pajamas and dressing robe were on the bed, but the rest of her clothes were gone. *Okay, calm down, there's a logical explanation, I'm sure.* Glancing around, she saw that her dorm mates were casually putting on their night clothes and climbing into bed as if nothing was amiss.

Inhaling deeply, she tried to rationalize things out, but came up with no plausible explanation other than the house-elves must have her clothes and they hadn't returned them to her yet. But that seemed so unlike them. *Think.*

Doing the only rational thing she could come up with, Hermione transfigured her pajama bottoms with its little rose print into something more closely resembling pants, and made the matching top edged with lace a little thicker. *Bra, no bra!* "Bugger," she breathed aloud. She turned her matching soft hooded dressing robe into a zip up hoodie and hoped that Severus wouldn't notice anything was amiss. She quickly transfigured her slippers into trainers. Fighting the compulsion to go to bed, she headed for the door.

She saw Ron and Harry by the fire when she exited the stairs. "There's Hermione. Maybe she knows."

"Knows what?" she asked, standing behind their favorite chairs. Both Ron and Harry looked like they had just showered as well and were both wearing their night clothes. "All my old dirty socks under my bed are missing, and everything in my trunk has been cleaned. It's like Mum just packed it for me," Ron said.

She was about to remark, 'Well at least you *have* clothes,' when Harry spoke up. "Yeah, no more manky odor from under your bed," Harry chided Ron with a chuckle, which made Hermione roll her eyes at them.

"I noticed it, too. There isn't a dirty anything anywhere," Neville commented. She turned around to see him point up at the wall. "Even the tapestries are clean."

But they were right. Looking around the common room she realized that it was spotless, more so than normal, and now that she thought about it, all the rugs, cushions, drapes and tapestries in the common room looked as if they had been cleaned, too, and there was a soft lemony, pine and pepper smell. "I have detention with Professor Snape," she said, turning to go.

"But, Hermione, it's bedtime," Ron whined.

She paused, feeling a strong compulsion to go back upstairs to bed. "It's not even eight o'clock yet," she pointed out and turned to go.

She eyed each tapestry she passed on her way down to the dungeons, and they too had been cleaned *Everything seems to have been cleaned!* The armor appeared to have been polished, the pennants looked crisp and new, the tapestries were clean, and there was a peppery pine and lemon smell, which reminded her of something, something that was right at the tip of her tongue.

Hermione looked up at the portraits, examining the frames as she descended the stairs. *The portrait frames haven't been oiled... but the canvases looked normal. Portraits have cloth.* Hermione shook her head. "The canvas is permeated with oil paints, and I suspect that the portraits have acid-free, water resistant backings," she mumbled to herself.

"Of course we do," a woman in an 1800's frilly white dress with blue bows said haughtily. "Otherwise the moisture from the walls would ruin my paint."

"So you weren't cleaned today?" Hermione asked.

"Oh, of all the indignity," the portrait of a wizard with a pointy nose and long pointy beard painted in the Neo Rococo style exclaimed. "I was cleaned last month, I'll have you know."

Hermione hurried down the stairs, hoping Professor Snape wouldn't be angry with her for being late. She was actually looking forward to her time with him, but dreaded it as well. The last time had been a week ago when he'd been clobbered with the charmed cricket ball because she'd knocked him to the ground. She still felt guilty about it, but the memory of him leaning up against her on the ground had stirred some rather disturbing thoughts, and it had replayed in her dreams, although not in any way to do with what had really happened. In her dreams, he'd reached out and touched her face, slid his fingers in her hair, drew her down to him and kissed her. The remembrance of the dreams still made her blush.

He'd turned, in her mind's eye, and kissed her. She could even imagine what his lips would feel like *soft, firm and yielding...gentle yet demanding, tentative, as if unsure, then becoming firmer, pressing, consuming and...*

She shook her head. *He would never do that...he's my teacher!* But in her dreams, in her fantasies, he'd propped himself up, so they were face to face, sensually kissed her senseless as he slowly lowered her onto her back while deftly removing her clothes, and then made love to her on the soft rug that always appeared on the cold dungeon floor.

She paused at the door to collect herself. *It's a dream. It didn't happen...wouldn't happen. It's like that bloody dream you had of kissing him in the prefect pool. You are only thinking like this because you're attracted to him. It's a phase, and you'll get over him.* She wiped her clammy hands on her pants and knocked on the door.

He opened it, and she stood there gaping at him. He'd showered. His hair was wet. The aroma of his cologne was as strong as if he'd just applied it. The scent made her heady, disoriented as much as his very presence did.

"Stop gaping at me," he said in an annoyed tone, pulling her from her reverie, and moved aside to let her enter.

"I'm sorry, it's just that you look..." *Oh gods*, she was about to say he looked like he did in the prefect pool...in her dream of them kissing in the huge pool. Him diving in and sweeping her up in his arms like he'd done that one time, kissing her as they clung to each other while floating in the water. Sinking, still locked mouth to mouth and somehow not drowning or needing to breathe at all. *Just his lean body pressed up to mine, his warm skin and the cool water..*She looked away from his intense stare. "I'm sorry I'm late."

"I'm surprised you came," he said, eyeing her as if trying to read her.

I almost didn't, she thought, and for a moment, she again felt the compulsion to run back to her dorm room and go to bed. She glanced around his office and spotted the bee smoker. *A bee smoker!* She suddenly remembered cleaning the library with him, and afterward he'd given her a shampoo and soap to use in case she'd been infected. She and Professor Snape had been very careful to spray each other down after, and Dumbledore and Mr. Moody had inspected them, but he'd insisted she use the soap and shampoo anyway, as a precaution. *It was the same... everything with cloth, all the books, and even the rug had to be coated with the insecticide from the smokers.* She suddenly remembered the little bottles of shampoo in the showers. *It was Severus' shampoo!* She wondered if they'd used his soap as well. *Compulsion Charms! They cast Compulsion Charms on us to shower and disinfect ourselves in case we were infected!*

"Chizpurples and whitefurries! We had an infestation," she hissed softly. *The house-elves must have had to clean everything made of cloth or covered in cloth.*

He made no comment as he crossed his arms. He simply stood there regarding her.

She looked up at him. *He had showered. The rooms, heck the entire castle, had a peppery pine and lemon smell. Oh Merlin, had he been infected? But how?*

No point in worrying about it; if there had been an infestation and the professors had dealt with it quietly so as not to alarm anyone, then there was no reason to say anything. *Besides, it might have just been precautionary, and I'd be causing a scene over nothingshe* reasoned.

"Why are you surprised I came? We had an appointment," she said, recalling his comment when he'd let her into his office.

He nodded once as he dropped his arms. For a fleeting second, his mouth quirked, but then his normal calm expression was back in place. "I should have known you'd come," he said.

"Of course I'd come...I love our times together," she blurted out and immediately chastised herself for her slip of the tongue, then quickly recovered. "You...I learn so much from you, and I know you're trying to prepare me for what I'll face in the real world when we leave Hogwarts."

He tilted his head slightly, his eyes studying her but the flicker of a smile played on his lips before he spoke. "What little I can in the time I am allowed. So, what shall it be tonight: dueling or working on your wandless magic skills?"

She smiled. "Wandless magic. I've already showered, and if we duel, I'll only have to shower again," she replied with a smirk. She paused, contemplating the fact she'd showered before coming down to see him. She had done so automatically without really considering it, a compulsion...like the need she felt to be upstairs and in bed. "But first, do you think you could lift the Compulsion Charm off me?"

He shook his head, a ghost of a smile on his face. "I think not," he said, confirming her notion that she, and likely everyone else in school, had been put under the same compulsion suggestions: shower and go to bed. He flicked his wand and the compulsion grew stronger. "I think we'll use the charm to test your resolve at doing the tasks I give you."

"Because, in war I might be hit with spells that weaken my resolve as well as those that physically impede me from fighting, so this will make me focus harder."

"Not likely, but there are other distractions, other things that will break your concentration," he replied. "We'll work on your Conception spells tonight."

Hermione sighed. She was crap at wandless Conceptions spells.

Chapter 48

Chapter 48 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun. Oh, and all of Professor Snape's and Myrtle's dialogue in the girl's loo, the snippets that I have, are borrowed without permission from Mrs. Rowling's book. I truly hope she doesn't mind.

I have made a few deviations from canon, but the events that are not mentioned in this story that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, ArabellaBloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia and FrankQ for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Severus had been conferring with both Albertus Newton and ex-Headmistress Dilys Derwent about Dumbledore's potion. By now the curse had progressed to a critical level. The shriveled and blackened tissue invading the Headmaster's arm extended a few inches above the elbow and the streaking tendrils of the curse stretched up to just below the deltoid muscle, making it dangerously close to where the old man's brachial veins joined the basilic vein to form the axillary vein. From there the curse would have only twenty centimeters to reach the old man's heart.

Professor Newton had kindly hung a portrait in his Alchemy classroom and his study so that Dilys would be able to join them in his quarters for their discussion. Severus had been considering switching the goldenseal for Blue Bloodenweed and lemon balm, and adding oleander milk, linderia bark, and Splindipperer spleens, although they were a tricky combination when using frankincense, blue Scullcap, dittany, juniper and St John's-wort as well. Headmistress Dilys was against the idea since the potion was still using phoenix tears, which didn't react well with poisonous ingredients. Instead, she suggested adding some of his powdered unicorn heart in an infusion of grand wormwood together with aniseed, hyssop, sweet fennel and angelica in the second phase.

Professor Newton's suggestion of switching potassium for sodium in the first phase and using Gwydion burl and Blodeuwedd oil with magnesium in the third phase would allow for Dilys's suggestion in the second. It was a bold suggestion, possible, and seemed to have a very high probability of increasing the potion's efficacy. He just needed to work out the calculations before attempting it. He would also calculate the probable impact of Blue Bloodenweed, and adding oleander milk, linderia bark and Splindipperer spleens as the second phase and use the Gwydion burl and Blodeuwedd oil with magnesium as a fourth phase. He decided to confer with Septima Vector regarding his calculations since there was so much at stake if they were wrong.

Severus left Professor Newton's rooms on the sixth floor in time to drop his parchments off at his classroom before dinner. "Don't think I haven't noticed, Dilys, that we were considering adding the ingredients of Absinthe to the potion: *Artemisia absinthium* extract with aniseed, fennel, angelica, lemon balm, dittany and juniper?" he said to Dilys as she slipped from the portrait of the mystic Amelia Reinhardt's to Aed to Mael Oirdnides' frame, who were both famous for training river trolls. "The only ones missing are hyssop, star anise, nutmeg, and veronica.... your recipe, if I recall." *A good one too, although, I prefer to add melissa, peppermint, coriander and veronica to my liqueur.*

"I always did believe in the healing power of the Green Fairy. Ta-ta," she said from the portrait of Eunice and Prudence Warren, the notorious Warren Sisters of Warwick, and waved bye as she sped on to her frame in the Head's office.

Suddenly a binding tightness in his chest made him falter, and his hand reflectively grasped the wall to keep himself upright *Bloody hell, not again?* He stood up, his hand rubbing his chest as if that could dispel the discomfort. *The bloody Vow...damn it! Potter? Draco? It could be either, or both...blast it all.*

He tore at his sleeve to see which boy was in such grave trouble. If this had been any other year, he'd know for certain it was Potter, but now thanks to his idiocy in goading Bellatrix, he had two boys to consider. Both bonds glowed, the red glowing chain representing the bond created by Bellatrix and the searing yellow chain representing Lily's both showed vividly on the back of his hand and wrist. *Fuck. Where? Which way?*

Only because of the countless punishments he'd had to endure at the Dark Lord's displeasure was he able to push aside the pain and pull himself erect *Where the bloody hell would they be...?* He forced himself to move quickly down the corridor. He heard someone say, "STOP!" followed by a loud bang and a girl's scream up ahead in the vicinity of the girls' loo.

That would be where. He heard another voice shout something, but it was drowned out as the searing pain increased and the bond grew tighter, almost suffocating the life from him. He didn't have much time.

"MURDER! MURDER IN THE BATHROOM! MURDER!"

The girl's scream brought him back to his senses as the red chain grew hotter *Draco.*

It was only blind fury that propelled him forward the last few yards. He burst into the bathroom and saw Potter kneeling over Draco's body on the waterlogged floor in a growing pool of blood. Thankfully, Draco was shaking; even though the boy's face and chest were bright red with blood, the boy was still alive...but barely. "Move over," he snarled, shoving Potter out of the way as he knelt beside Draco.

Taking quick stock of the situation, Severus saw that he'd been slashed across his cheek and down across his chest *My Sectumsempra...how...?* He had time, seconds only, but time.

He began the incantation and the blood stopped oozing from the cuts. Severus gently wiped the blood off Draco's pale face to examine the wound. The gash was a clean, straight laceration, thank the gods...all of them. He started the incantation once again, this time with more focus on knitting the flesh back together.

It took three repetitions before the wounds were sufficiently healed. But the boy still needed Blood-Replenishing Potion and he'd be in a lot of pain tonight.

Potter stood to the side of the bathroom the whole time, watching horrorstricken. *Good. Serves you right. See what you've done, you arrogant little shit.* He'd have the boy expelled for this. There was no way the Headmaster could cover this incident up and pretend that the boy was still good and decent.

"You need the hospital wing," Severus said, helping Draco to sit up. Already the tension in his chest was abating, but the chains of the Vows were still making his hand and wrist prickle. He looked more carefully at the boy's face. "There may be a certain amount of scarring, but if you take dittany immediately we might avoid even that..." he was saying as he helped Draco to his feet. "Come..."

He pulled Draco's arm over his shoulder and wrapped his arm around the boy's waist to support him, careful not to put any pressure on his chest. Severus looked at Potter as they approached the doorway. "And you, Potter, you are to wait here for me."

He didn't wait for the boy's reply. Not even the Headmaster could save Potter if he ran from that room.

They walked in silence. Various students, those rushing to get to dinner on time, were looking at them curiously as they scurried by, some gaping in horror at Draco's bloodstained clothes. By the time they reached the third floor, the castle was silent except for their shuffled footsteps. "Draco, why won't you confide in me, I could help you..."

"I don't need your help," Draco replied curtly, his voice laced with pain.

"Don't be silly, Draco, I'm only offering my assistance, nothing more. Why won't you let me help you?" Severus asked, trying to make the boy see reason. He'd just saved the boy's life...surely that wasn't lost on the idiot.

"You told my Aunt Bella that you already knew what my task is," he sneered.

If any other student in any other circumstances had spoken to him like this, he'd have taken hundreds of House points and suspended the culprit. Instead, he had to suffer the insolence quietly. "Of course I did, but I will not intervene unless you ask me...this is your task. You're in charge of it, I am only offering my help...resources..."

"I don't need your help! And my mother sends me everything I need," Draco snarled venomously. "This is my task...he entrusted it to me...ME!"

Severus controlled his temper. "I am not interested in taking any of that away from you, but I have books, ones not held in the library," he reasoned.

"I have books," Draco said.

"Implements, tools, magical devices," Severus continued as if uninterrupted.

"No."

"Draco," he said softly. Not pleading but with a faint edge of warning.

"I said, NO," the boy said firmly, raising his voice at him.

Severus understood; it was no use. Narcissa had warned him in one of her letters; Bellatrix had poisoned the boy's mind in regards to him, and she felt that there was nothing either she or he could do to gain back the boy's trust in him. *Damn that bitch.*

"He's going to kill me..."

The words were so softly spoken, if the corridor hadn't been so quiet he'd have missed them. Severus stopped and turned to look the boy in the eyes. "Yes, he will," Severus said coolly, knowing the boy didn't mean Potter. Draco looked away, but he pressed on, "Those that fail him are...and cruelly. *After* they watch those they are trying to protect suffer or die before them."

Draco's head snapped up, and he looked him in the eye. Severus saw real fear in the pale grey eyes. "I have seen it before and it will happen again. He is a harsh master, and his word is law."

"We are almost there," Severus said, indicating the door. "Heed this, Draco, I have offered my advice and any means at my disposal to assist you with this task. Your mother came to me, and I give her not only my word...made an Unbreakable Vow to help you...and to do the deed if you shall fail. I intend to fulfill that Vow. I have no intent to step in and take over, and you're a fool not to take help where offered, especially since I'm not trying to undermine you in any way or steal your glory should you succeed." He let go of the boy and let him lean against the wall. "Even your father, the great wizard that he is, knew when to accept assistance and when to employ those who would help him succeed...in every aspect of his life."

"Yeah? And he's in Azkaban for it," Draco spat. "I don't need you. Aunt Bella told me not to trust you. My mother is weak and afraid without my father to back her up...so, like a coward, she turned to you, because you're the only other Death Eater here."

Severus inhaled sharply. *He doesn't know about the other two!*

"And I know you...I've watched you for years...you're Dumbledore's man, through and through," he snarled. "You may have been able to sway my mother with your words, but I saw the memory as if I was there, and you're good...you're smooth...but you don't fool me."

"And when you fail, Draco...and you *will* fail...I will be there to finish the deed," Severus said coolly. "I have watched you for years as well. I've known you since you were an infant; I was there in the beginning, brewing the potions to help your mother to conceive. I have seen you come in second and third to a Mudblood and Potter time and time again. You are not your father's son...you are not even half as skilled as your mother. You are like your Aunt. You are spoiled and arrogant but you don't have your parents' intelligence, their power or wisdom or their abilities. Oh yes, pampered prince, I know you, and I'll wait you out. In the end, I will have to step in and I will not fail." He pulled open the hospital door. "Unless you wise up and accept my offer to assist you...to *assist* you...not take over *for* you. It's your choice."

Madam Pomfrey appeared and gasped. "Take care of him; I have to deal with Potter," Severus said and walked away.

Naturally Minerva had argued in favor of her favorite cub, but this time Potter would pay by losing the one thing that would hurt him the most...Quidditch. Potter would not only miss the game but it would likely make Gryffindor lose any chance for the House Cup. But Severus would be damned if Draco Malfoy would be punished for defending himself.

"No, Mr. Malfoy will not be expelled...he is the victim in his fight. He is the one in the hospital wing recovering from the near fatal attack," Severus snarled.

"Draco was, according to Miss Myrtle Waynfilet who witnessed the confrontation, defending himself from Mr. Potter's unprovoked attack," Dumbledore said with a weary expression. "Minerva, I agree with Professor Snape in this incidence. Harry should have shown better judgment, not just in provoking a duel with Mr. Malfoy, but for his choice of spells. It's unfortunate he didn't know what the spell did, but that doesn't excuse the fact. As for Mr. Malfoy, he should spend two nights in detention for the fight as well, but I'll leave the specifics of the detention to Severus."

Although he'd won a small victory, Severus was in a rage.

Of course the old fart put Draco in detention for defending himself Severus snarled to himself as stormed through the castle to the dungeons. *The old man had done the same to me countless times when I was a student.* He drew his wand and aimed it at the door of his training room, which burst open with a bang. *Potter would have been given a slap on his hand and would no doubt be congratulated by his friends if I had not taken the boy's Quidditch privilege away. I know exactly where Potter had learned the spell.* "I invented it!" he snarled to himself as the door slammed closed behind.

The boy has my book! He fired at the training dummy. His velocity on the forehead of the sparring dummy registered two hundred and eighty and the strength indicator a dark nightshade aubergine. *The boy lied to me, blatantly defied me.* The book Potter had shown him had not been Potter's...his book...it had been Weasley's, he was sure of it. Severus fired again, his curse making the dummy sway with the impact, his velocity registering two hundred and ninety and his strength grew even darker.

Roonil Wazlib is not a nickname...it is a misspelling! Severus grumbled to himself, and fired again, his velocity reaching up to three hundred, the highest score possible and strength showing a dark midnight-purple. *Roonil...Ronald, it was so obvious any dunderhead could see it! It was something one of those Weasley Wizard Wheezes Spell-Checking Quills would create.* He'd confiscated a few of them to know that the trick quills malfunctioned.

He fired at the dummy, getting an accuracy rating of a perfect three hundred and the strength indicator color becoming such a dark purple it almost looked black. *Had I not been in the corridor, Draco would have died.* Severus thought with heavy contempt and fired again. *'I'd have died,'* he snarled to himself and fired again, the indicator growing darker as his fierceness increased until the indicator was so dark it was black. *By the hand of the boy Lily made me swear to protect...her sodding son!* He fired again, snarling the name, "Potter," and the blast of his hex cracked the dummy.

He fired at the target dummy, getting an accuracy rating of a perfect three hundred and the contact indicator was the darkest burgundy-black. *There will be questions and*

protests that I will need to handle...excuses for not expelling Dumbledore's favorite Gryffindor golden boy.

He fired again, and the target dummy hit the wall and wobbled, his accuracy number flashing three hundred and the indicator now the color too dark to distinguish the hue. He dropped his arm, watching the dummy settle, and hung his head.

Hermione was glad that things had worked out between Harry and Ginny, and she was glad that the Gryffindor team had won the match and thus secured the victory of the House Cup, but she was still angry with Harry for using the Half-Blood Prince's curse on Malfoy, especially since he'd had no idea what it'd do. The following day, however, Harry handed Ron back his copy of *Advanced Potion Making* as they settled down on the chairs by the fire.

"And what book do you intend to use?" Hermione asked.

"My book," Harry said defiantly as he pulled out his copy.

"You mean the Half-Blood Prince's book!" she shrieked as Harry set the book down and rifled in his bag for his Potions essay. "Harry, you can't be serious?"

Harry glared at her as Ron said, "Of course he's serious, Hermione, we retrieved the book from the Room of Requirement on our way back from dinner."

"After what that spell did to Malfoy," she said and snatched the book from him. "You can't! Those spells in the book are horrible...you can't keep using his book!"

"Like hell I can't," Harry replied, absolutely livid and trying snatch the book back. "I just know that I have to test out any of the ones I don't know before I use them on anyone."

"Harry, you have detention every Saturday because of that book," she tried to reason with him, but he grabbed the book from her hand. Harry had already told them about his last detention with Professor Snape having him re-copy all the old detention files pertaining to his father's and Sirius' misdeeds while at school.

He opened the book up to their assignment, and Hermione leaned forward and slammed her hand down on the page. "But the spells he wrote in this are dodgy, and..." She looked down and her mouth fell open. "Oh my gods!" she screeched and snatched the book back. She looked at the writing on the page. "No! It can't be!"

"Can't be what?" Harry asked, reaching for his book, but Hermione turned her body so the book was out of his reach as she turned the page. "Give me my book back!"

Hermione wasn't listening to him. The writing was unmistakable. It was Severus'...*teen Severus!* She'd recognized it immediately, but she couldn't let herself believe what she was looking at. "The spells...those horrible spells...the one that almost killed Malfoy came from this book?!" she mumbled, swatting Ron's hand as he attempted taking the book from her. She turned the page and felt her chest restrict.

"Give him back his book, Hermione," Ron was saying, making another attempt at obtaining the book.

She swatted his hand again and turned so that neither could reach it. She remembered that Severus wrote in his books, he couldn't afford journals to write his thoughts and annotations in as a teen, and he didn't have a lot of spare parchment as a boy either. *It is his. It is...* "Oh my Gods! I don't believe it!"

"What?" Harry demanded getting up and walking over to her as she turned the page again and scanned down the minuscule writing.

Hermione couldn't believe what she was seeing. 'Yeah, I write in my books,' she remembered him telling her. He used to make annotations while revising... 'It's not scribble...they're my notes' he'd told her. 'I experiment with the potions, try to improve them.' She turned the page again and there on the bottom of the Imagination-Enhancing Elixir, under all the added instructions and crossed-out bits for making the potion better, was the word *Muffliato*.

Ron stared at her, asking, "Hermione, what is it?"

"Harry, the spell you used on Malfoy, it came from this book?" she asked although she already knew the answer.

"Yeah, you know it did," he answered and her heart sank in her chest. "Give it here, Hermione."

"What page?" she asked, flipping through the book. She saw that the page with the Rematerialization Draught had been folded down. She unfolded the corner and gasped. There on the top right corner: *Sectumsempra. For enemies.*

She handed him back his book with a feeling of acute disappointment.

Hermione went through the week in a daze. She focused solely on her schoolwork and perfecting her spellwork. The more she concentrated on her scholastic pursuits, the less time she had for thinking about her disappointment with Severus Snape, the Half-Blood Prince. She knew that Harry would never believe her that his most hated professor was also the original owner of the book he prized so much and was the Half-Blood Prince that he held in such high regard. And she knew she'd have a hard time explaining how she knew it was Severus' handwriting considering the handwriting in the book wasn't exactly the same as the handwriting they were all familiar with. As a teen, Severus' handwriting had to be legible so that his teachers could read it easily, so while it had been slanted and spiky, the writing was more precise and legible, even when he wrote very small letters, whereas as an adult, it had become tighter, more sharply slanted, as if hurried. And naturally she didn't have any examples of his earlier handwriting to prove it.

So for now, she kept it to herself, unless she found some proof that Severus was the Half-Blood Prince. Not only that, but her errand bounces back to Professor Snape's sixth year had been kept a carefully kept secret, one she'd not told her friends about, so Harry was not likely to take the news well or possibly believe her. Only five other people knew: Professor Snape, the Headmaster, Professor McGonagall, Mr. Latimer of the Department of Mysteries and Hestia Jones.

Hermione picked up one of the books she'd borrowed from the library *The Life and Legacy of Rowena Ravenclaw*.

Hermione did spend her free time searching through the library for mention of any artifacts that might have belonged to either Ravenclaw or Gryffindor and any information on how to destroy a Horcrux. But so far she was coming up with nothing on Horcruxes, not even another mention of the curse, and most of the articles in the *Daily Prophet* that mentioned a historical artifact as having belonged to one of the founders said that the claims of the owners were unfounded; that, and none of the items were reported as lost or stolen.

There was a lost diadem of Ravenclaw, which was last seen in 1012, and was considered missing by the middle of the eleventh century. Rowena Ravenclaw was often pictured with a ring or earrings, occasionally a bracelet, but no one claimed to have those items, as far as Hermione could tell. Helga Hufflepuff was always depicted with a cup or a wooden spoon in her hand, but no jewelry. Godric Gryffindor was always depicted with his sword in one hand and either his wand, a ball of fire or an owl in the other, with or without armor. And Salazar Slytherin was always shown with his locket, his wand and a ring, a black onyx ring, but nothing else.

Because Ginny was now hanging around with them, she found it harder to find time alone with Ginny to work on her wandless magic, and the DA was still meeting to practice dueling or using the target dummies in the Room of Requirement whenever someone was able to get the room to open up in the evenings.

Hermione finally had time on Saturday to look through Severus' book again when Harry served his second detention with Professor Snape. Harry had switched books with Ron again, and Ron let her read through it as long as she didn't walk off with it. She had worked from this book, followed the deviations Severus had made to the potions... his alterations... Why hadn't she seen the spells in the book back then? But many of them, such as Levicorpus and the Langlock spell, seemed to be little more than nonsense, tiny scribbles with crossings-out and revisions, alterations in the margins and blank spaces until she really looked at them closely. *Because the writing is smaller.*

I was looking at the writing between the lines of the directions, the ones with arrows and caret insertion marks, not the ones written sideways in the margins or at the bottom of the pages below the potion instructions.

She turned to the page where another grotesque spell was written, several variations crossed out: *lapidcranium* and *capitulapisum*, but *cranilapis* was not, although there were no additional comments about it. However, it wasn't too difficult to hazard a guess as to the intent of the spell...turning the cranium or skull to lapis or stone. She wondered briefly if the spell worked and then sucked in her breath. *What if Harry had used this on Ron? Or anyone? Would Madam Pomfrey be able to reverse it?...could Severus?*

On the facing page between the drawing of a Phoenician sea snail and a sprig of sweet fennel she read *Lingualapis (n-vbl - It handed) for enemies. Turns the tongue into blue lapis. Faceresax* was written beneath it. *Lingualapis* apparently transfigured items to stone, but did not work on animated objects. *Good gracious...lapis! Turns the tongue to lapis? And how...who did he try the Lingualapis on that it didn't work...Harry's dad or Sirius?* At least he had the counter curse, *Faceersax...if that was the counter-curse?* She couldn't tell.

The spells were clever but the ideas behind them were horrible. He'd obviously tried to create spells to defend himself, but he'd created ones that would cause harm...Dark Arts. She remembered what Sirius had said about Severus in her fourth year, although she knew there was a lot of animosity between them so she had always been somewhat skeptical of Sirius' motives, especially where Harry was concerned.

Severus...Sirius had called him Snape or Snivellus...had 'always been fascinated by the Dark Arts, he was famous for it at school.' He knew more curses when he arrived at school than half the kids in seventh year...which was really saying something...but Severus had told her that Lucius had spread that rumor, a kind of protection because Severus had been a small, skinny child when he started school. Although, when she'd met him at sixteen he was nearly six foot. But Sirius also said that Severus had been part of a gang of Slytherins who had all turned out to be Death Eaters, which ended up to be true. *But when had he invented these spells?*

There was no way of knowing, except to assume it was some time during his sixth or seventh year, because he wouldn't have had the book before that, would he? *Unless the book had been his mum's?* But Lily started seeing James in their seventh year, after James stopped being a prat, or so Harry had explained *Which means these could have... would have been in sixth year at some point.* Keeping her finger to mark her place, she checked the title page. *It was published in 1946! It's a first edition! His mum's book. So he could have had this book in his trunk at any age...and he brewed potions that were quite advanced with such ease when I stayed with him...*

She opened the book to the page she'd been examining and turned the book sideways. On the bottom near the page number there were the words *pssum* or *ossis*, which mean bone in Latin, followed by *calxossum* and *saxumossum*, which were crossed out, but then he'd written *Petraossum. Rotate medial with forceful jab...turns the bones into stone. Rennervate or Finite won't work. Ossis reviviscere works, but the subject has to hold still. Murexossis turns the skin to a rough shell, but Finite reverses it.*

She flipped through the book to find Burns, Sprains, and Fever Potions, Pepper-Up Potion and his pain potions all had annotations for improving the potions in every available space as well as his variation of the potions. She looked up the Piles Potion and Coagulant Draught and it was the same. *The potions they'd brewed together didn't have any of the spells he'd invented.*

Hermione closed the book and set it on the arm of Ron's chair.

"Hermione?" he asked, taking the book. "You all right?"

"Yes, Ron," she replied with a sigh. "I'm just tired." But she wasn't, she was confused. As far as she could tell, Severus...the Severus who'd been so wonderful to her...had created Dark Arts spells as a student to use against Harry's dad and Sirius. "I'm going to go swim," she said and rose to leave.

"All right," Ron said, looking up from his essay. "Should I wait for you?"

"No," she said wearily, "I'll probably go to bed afterward."

"Okay, have a nice swim," he said and turned back to his homework.

But Hermione couldn't shake the images in her mind of seeing Severus fighting against Harry's dad, Sirius and Lupin, and using those spells he'd created.

The next Monday, when Hermione and her classmates entered Defense, she was surprised to see two sparring dummies standing at the front of the room, Professor Snape standing between them with his arms crossed. "Deposit your belongings and line up behind the protective barrier at the back of the room," he instructed. Used to his orders, everyone scrambled to do as he asked. "The sparring Dummy has been activated to throw pulse blasts that will act very much like a Blasting Hex," Professor Snape said. "They will fire in succession but in random order, so even though the right fired first for your classmate doesn't mean it will be the same for you. You are to deflect or shield yourself, with each blast, nonverbally. Any mouthing your spell will lose you five points, any vocalization will lose you ten, and failure to block the pulse will lose you fifteen."

There was a general grumbling at his remarks. "Including any comments from the class," Professor Snape admonished them. "Successful nonverbal deflections will gain you twenty points."

Hermione nodded. At least he was being fair about this.

"Mr. Potter, you may start. Step up to the mark on the floor."

Harry stepped up to the blue line and drew his wand. The sparring dummies raised their arm then in quick succession, first right, then left fired, right firing again a few seconds later. Harry deflected the bursts, staggering back a step at the impact of the assault, but he still lost Gryffindor twenty five points.

"Miss Patil, step up," Professor Snape said from his place between the dummies. Parvati managed to block two, but she lost Gryffindor twenty points for mumbling all three times and failing one block. Neville did well as did Seamus, but Neville only earned five points because his lips had moved and Seamus didn't win any.

When it was Hermione's turn, she stepped up at the line ready to defend herself. Professor Snape flicked his wand at each dummy and then crossed his arms again. The left dummy fired first, followed immediately after with a second pulse as the right dummy fired. It didn't matter, with all the practice she'd had against Professor Snape in their sessions, she deflected each one perfectly. She straightened up, feeling triumphant when the right dummy fired at her again. Shocked, but now having fine-tuned her fighting reflexes, she deflected the pulse, making the desk next to her slam into another. She inhaled, ready just in case there was another pulse, but the dummies remained motionless.

"Very good, Miss Granger, sixty points," Professor Snape stated.

"Eighty," she said defiantly. "I deflected four of them."

"Your score is sixty," he said, his eyes narrowing. "And you will address me as sir or professor in my classroom."

"As you wish, *professor*," Hermione said a little too annoyed to care how she sounded. "But I deflected four...not three...so *earned* eighty."

Ron, Harry and Neville's mouths all dropped open, apparently shocked that she was actually being so rude to him.

"All right, Miss Granger, eighty, but minus thirty for your insolence," Professor Snape said coolly. "And you'll stay behind after the lesson."

Hermione stormed to the back of the classroom, ignoring the comments from her housemates. *How dare he, the hypocrite. Everyone else only had three to deflect! He fixed the dummies to make it harder on me and then gets angry when I expect what's due?* She watched as Lavender tried to block her three pulses and ended up costing Gryffindor thirty points, then slumped into a chair to wait.

After their practical, Professor Snape continued his lecture from the previous week on spells for detecting Dark Arts and avoiding Dark Art entrapments. Hermione tried to get down everything he said, knowing that if she'd be helping Harry hunt Horcruxes, anything Professor Snape could impart on the subject on the Dark Arts would all come in handy. When the bell tolled, Hermione set down her quill, crossed her arms and sank back in her seat as all her classmates hurried from the room. Even Harry gave her a sympathetic touch and smile before rushing out after Ron.

When the last student left, the classroom door slammed closed. "What is wrong with you?" Professor Snape asked, coming around to lean on his desk.

"Nothing is wrong with me," she replied firmly, staring at her quill.

He moved forward. "Miss Granger, there is certainly something bothering you if you are rude to me in my own classroom." His voice was patient, smoothly spoken in that way she'd always liked, but she couldn't look at him.

She inhaled deeply, staring at her hands in her lap, not sure if she really wanted to talk about the spells he'd created.

"Miss Granger, please, what is bothering you?"

She looked up, surprised to see him in front of her desk. He was looking at her with the same concern he'd had when he'd followed her into the loo when she'd been crying, his dark eyes searching her face as if trying to read her. She looked away and saw him stiffen slightly. She thought she knew him, knew the young man she'd stayed with, but it was so hard to reconcile that Severus with the spells he'd invented. But as much as she hated what he'd done, they'd become friends, both back in his youth and now in their present. She looked up at him, really looked at him, and decided that she needed to know why. "The spell Harry used on Malfoy, the one that cut him open...it wasn't a version of the Entrails-Expelling Curse or Entrails-Slashing Curse, it was different..."

"No, it is not," he replied, placing his fingertips on her desk. "You know."

"Yes, of course I know," she replied, getting to her feet so fast she knocked her chair back into the desk behind her. "But why would you invent something like that? How could you?"

"I was young and foolish once, Hermione," he said softly.

She looked up at him and felt her eyes fill with tears. "I knew you back then, and you were not foolish...you were brilliant, smart and... I trusted you...I know you...thought I knew you!" She palmed her forehead. "How could you invent something so horrible?" Her arm dropped, then rose, extended at her side. "For enemies...you wrote *for enemies*. Harry's dad, right, and Sirius Black...they were your enemies." She dropped her arm and exhaled heavily.

There was a deep haunted look in his eyes.

"Of all the...that spell is meant to kill! *To kill*, Severus, not to harm or wound... I don't understand?"

"I intended to use it against werewolves," he said, and she whirled on him, not realizing she'd been pacing.

"On werewolves...you mean Professor Lupin?" she screeched. "You invented that to *kill him*?"

"Not him specifically, but yes, werewolves," he said, sitting with one hip on the desk beside hers. "You once told me you were afraid of heights, that you couldn't ride a broom because you were afraid to. Why is it so hard to believe that I have fears as well...one that I had a very strong reason to be afraid of? I'd...the Werewolf Hit Squad had had to dispense with a werewolf in my neighborhood once. I was almost twelve. I saw it, but I was able to get away."

"Twelve?" Hermione gasped. "When? Where?" She hoped it hadn't been Professor Lupin.

"During the Christmas holidays, at the end of my first year of school," he admitted, looking at his clasped hands. "It was in the alley behind my house." He looked up at her but his eyes looked haunted by the memory. "I was coming home from a friend's house when I'd heard the beast growl. I managed to get into our back garden and into the house before it got me."

Hermione covered her open mouth with her hand. She couldn't believe that he'd faced a werewolf at eleven. But then she'd nearly been killed by a mountain troll her first year and that had been at school, not to mention a basilisk in her second year and had faced Lupin as a werewolf herself in her third. She lowered her hand. "What did you do?"

"Nothing," he said with a shrug. "I told you; my mother contacted the Ministry, and the Werewolf Hit Squad came and killed the beast. My mother told my father it was a vagrant, but he..." He looked away for a moment. "We occasionally had tramps in my neighborhood and sometimes had squatters in the abandoned homes. My mother used to scold me when I was out late on nights with a full moon. You see, her uncle had been killed by a werewolf, and she'd told me all about them."

She nodded; she knew there was more to the story, but she could tell it was difficult for him to tell her this much. Still, the experience must have been terrifying. No wonder he was afraid of werewolves.

"I knew that Lupin was a werewolf...I'd always been afraid of them...and I was very suspicious of Lupin." He rose to his feet. "I couldn't believe that he'd been allowed to attend school considering...and if I was ever to be attacked by him again, I was going to be prepared," he said vehemently, his hand clenching into a fist.

"Again, when were you ever attacked by Professor Lupin in his altered state?"

"Besides the night three years ago when you and your friends snuck off to the Shrieking Shack?" he asked.

"Yes, besides that time...which by the way, he didn't attack you...he came after Harry and me," she stated without thinking that he might not know that she'd also been in the forest with Harry at that time, thanks to the Time-Turner.

"In my sixth year," he snarled softly with suppressed anger. "When Black tricked me into going down that tunnel so I'd end up face to face with Lupin in his werewolf form."

She gasped. "He did *what*?" she shrieked, hardly believing Sirius would do it, but had Severus never lied to her.

He related his version of the night Black tricked him into going down the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack so he'd run into a fully transformed werewolf. "Potter did not go into the tunnel to save me...he went to protect his friends, Lupin and Black. Normally...or according to wizard law...had Black succeeded, Lupin would have been sentenced to death, and Black expelled and sent to Azkaban for attempted murder. Instead, I was told not to talk about the incident and had to serve detention with Professor McGonagall for a week."

She was shocked by the last part. "You had to serve detention? But...you were the *victim*, not the... No!"

She gaped at him in astonishment when he nodded.

She shook her head. *How could his professors...our professors have been so cruel?* she asked herself, realizing they were speaking of the same professors. "Professors Slughorn, McGonagall and Dumbledore?" she asked, and he nodded again. "How could they?"

His eyebrow rose. "I was in Slytherin. Potter, Black and Lupin were in Gryffindor and, not unlike you and your two friends, the students the Headmaster had hopes for."

"And the other spells?" she asked, trying to keep the accusation out of her voice as she listed the spells, "The Lingualapis, Langlock, Levicorpus, Muffliato, the Toenail-Growing Hex and the Cutaneous Horns Hex. And you created Murexossis and Petraossum to turn people to stone!"

He signed and sat down on the edge of the desk again. "The Toenail-Growing Hex and the Cutaneous Horns Hex were not of my devising, but I had been the victim of it several times. I did however, figure out the counter spell so I could avoid... get away or defend myself."

"Potter and Black?"

"Potter and Black...they used them on me," he said with a curt nod. "I admit to having created the Levicorpus spell, but I also created Liberacorus to counter it. I likewise take responsibility of the Langlock and Lingualapis. Black wasn't not very good at nonverbal spells."

It all made sense. She remembered when he used it on James Potter, but he'd told her that they had used it on him. She was lucky, she didn't have as much trouble in school as he'd had. "And Murexossis and Petraossum, I know you created them. Whom did you intend to use them on?" she asked, her anger rising a little.

"Murexossis and Petraossum?" he asked, then sighed. "Yes, I invented them, but I only used them once I thought out how to reverse them just in case...I wasn't stupid, Hermione, I never used a curse I couldn't reverse. I wasn't about to be expelled over... Look, you of all people should understand...they would attack me; two, sometimes three or four to one, for no reason other than I existed. You helped heal me once, remember, that ointment you used on my back? I recreated it after you left, because it worked so well, and you had told me I had been the one to create it."

"And I left you a jar of it since I knew I could easily get more," she said as she leaned against her desk, realizing she'd inadvertently created a time paradox.

"Yes you did," he said with a slight smile. "I found the jar in the desk after you'd gone. You created a paradox, but one that worked in my favor."

"There were probably a few paradoxes done," she said looking down. "Like the use of the slotted spoon...we all have those in our kits now, and using the borer on the Phoenician sea snails."

"Yes, and other things as well," he replied not elaborating as she had. "Does Potter have my book?" he asked, and she looked away as she nodded.

"Yes," she replied, "But he won't give it up." She looked up at him. "He doesn't know it's yours; Slughorn apparently lent it to him first day of Potions, but when Harry's copy arrived by post, he put the new book in the cupboard."

"I want my book back," Severus stated firmly.

Hermione gave him a small sad smile. "He won't part with it, and unless you want to let him know you're the Half-Blood Prince..." She cocked her head. "Why did you call yourself that?"

"My mother was Eileen Prince," he said. Then as if suddenly noting the time, he stood up. "Toopsy, bring me some sandwiches." He shook his head. "You're missing lunch," he said as the elf delivered two plates with sandwiches and chips and two goblets. "Eat."

She sat down at her desk again and grabbed a roast beef sandwich off her plate. "Severus?" she asked between bites.

"Hummm," he murmured behind his hand, his mouth full.

"How can you detect Dark magic on an object? Is it a thrum? Is there a tingle of some sort?" she asked. "I know that you are teaching us how to detect Dark Arts and avoiding Dark Art entrapments this month, but you're talking about known items in our lectures, things we know are cursed."

"Gringotts' curse breakers spend five years learning all there is to know about detecting and discerning what types of Dark Arts have been used to protect items and places. I'm merely giving you the basics," he said, relaxing in his seat next to hers. "If I'm still teaching next year and nothing ill has befallen me..."

Hermione covered her mouth as she exclaimed, "The curse on the teaching post!" then quickly added, "I'm sorry. I interrupted you."

"Yes, you did," he said, his eyes narrowing but he didn't look angry at all. "The curse. So, if I'm still teaching, next year you would have more information on detection of Dark Arts, discerning which spells are used, and disassembling and reversing the spells, although, not to the level of competency needed to actually do it in a real sense, but enough to avoid getting hurt. I also plan on teaching how to stave off the effects of a curse until help can be obtained."

"I'm really looking forward to that," she said, sipping on the ice cold butterbeer in her goblet.

He huffed softly, a soft laugh, as he set down his own goblet. "I bet you are. Why all the curiosity of dealing with Dark magic?"

She shrugged slightly with one shoulder. "You don't know? I'm Harry's friend. We always seem to run into the unexpected Dark*something*. I never know what we'll face until its imperative that I know *something* to get us out of the fix," she said, and he sighed heavily as he shook his head. "Besides, I happen to find it fascinating. Not that I'd start creating Dark Arts, but reversing it, avoiding it or escaping it is very high on my list of priorities."

"Getting new friends might be a start," he said dryly, but there was a teasing look in his eyes.

"I have, but we call ourselves Dumbledore's Army for some reason," she quipped back.

He shook his head as he swallowed. "That's not what I meant."

She set down her sandwich. "I'm Muggle-born, and like it or not, I'll be defending my very right to exist, my right to be who and what I am. So, like it or not, want it or not, I'm going to be involved."

He didn't comment. She took another bite of her sandwich and washed it down with a sip of her drink. "You never answered my questions," she finally said.

"Which one did you want answered?" he offered.

She thought about it for a moment. "How can you detect Dark magic on an object if you're not sure it is one, or how can you detect if a place has been cursed if you're not sure?" she asked, carefully wording her question to engage him in a discussion.

He laughed. "Is that all?"

"For starters," she said, smiling at him.

They spent the rest of the lunch hour talking about dark arts detection and disassembling Dark magic until the bell tolled the resuming of lessons.

But because of Professor Snape's interest in retrieving his book back, Harry kept the Half-Blood Prince's book in his trunk. He'd found another edition of the book from somewhere that he'd swapped with Ron for his copy, so that if Professor Snape asked Harry to produce his Potions book, Harry's still had the one with the name Roonil Waslib in it. So because he wasn't using Severus' book, Harry was once again brewing potions based upon his own skills and not using the changes Severus had invented. Slughorn, still favoring Harry regardless, contributed his poor performance to lovesickness.

Hermione was looking through the 1947 Daily Prophets for anything on stolen or missing artifacts when a moving photograph of a skinny girl on the bottom of the page caught her attention. The girl was plain with straight, dark hair, heavy eyebrows on a long, pallid face and dark eyes. Her expression seemed both sullen and cross as she tried not to look at the person taking the picture even though the caption read:

Eileen Prince, Captain of the Hogwarts Gobstones Team

Second Place in the International Gobstones Championship

Eileen Prince...Severus' mother! She looked like Severus in a way, the same facial shape, dark eyes, and hair was similar to Severus'. The nose was different, and he had a nicer mouth, but it was thin like his mum's. The article mentioned all of the interschool competitions that Eileen had competed in and won.

Back in the common room, Hermione tried to show the picture to Harry, but he shrugged his shoulders and went back to his prep. Her second attempt at trying to make Harry guess at the connection between Eileen Prince and Severus failed. Miserably.

"Harry, about the Potions book," she said, trying to get his attention again.

"Drop it, Hermione," he snapped as he checked something in *Left-Handed Wand Movements for the Right-Handed Wizard*.

"I'm not dropping it," she said exasperatedly. "Okay, I think that book belonged to his mum." She handed him the page from the *Daily Prophet*, again. "Look at it! Doesn't she remind you of anyone? Isn't there any resemblance to anyone you know?"

"No," he said stubbornly, handing back the article.

"So it doesn't mean anything that her name is Eileen Prince?" she asked.

Harry looked up at her. "Hermione, the Half-Blood Prince is a bloke. Not a girl. I know that girls can be smart and all, but the stuff in the book is written by a guy."

"Harry, the date is 1947! She is his mum," she tried to argue, but he shook his head. He remained stubbornly unconvinced. Exasperated, she left the common room in search of any proof of the connection between Eileen Prince and Severus Snape, anything that Harry couldn't ignore or dismiss off. She'd try the birth announcements and obituaries.

Author's Notes:

Color meanings for the Unbreakable Vow chains: I chose red for Bellatrix's bonding of Narcissa and Severus: it is the color of fire and blood as well as representing both Cupid and the Devil, so it is associated with conflicting emotions from passionate love, desire, and true love to violence, energy, war, danger, strength, power, determination. Dark red is associated with vigor, willpower, rage, anger, leadership, courage, longing, malice, and wrath.

I chose yellow for Dumbledore's Bonding of Lily and Severus: it is a warm color that, like red, has conflicting symbolism. On the one hand it denotes sunshine, happiness and joy but on the other hand yellow is the color of cowardice and deceit. For years yellow ribbons were worn as a sign of hope as women waited for their men to come marching home from war. Today, they are still used to welcome home loved ones. Yellow also symbolizes mourning in Egypt, and actors of the Middle Ages wore yellow to signify the dead.

Lapis is a very pretty blue stone.

Lapideus and lapideum are Latin for: of stone

Petra is Latin for: rock

Ossum means: bone

Saxum is Latin for: large stone, boulder

Reviviscere means: to come to life again, revive

Murex is a type of shell and the prefix for a sea creature

Calx is a substance made up of calcium or calcified new bone growth.

Chapter 49

Chapter 49 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun. Once again, what events that are not mentioned that happen in the books is as it happened in the books.

I have made a few deviations from canon, but the events that are not mentioned in this story that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books. Warning: as we know, it's getting to that time there is a Character Death and Violence in this chapter as we near the end of Hermione's sixth year. Sorry about that.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking and to DuchessOfArcadia and FrankQ for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Severus strode down the sixth floor corridor looking for Draco. Althea had said he'd passed her frame on the fifth floor, but Lady Violet, who was carrying messages to him from both the Fat Lady and Rosalba, had said the ladies had not seen him from their frames on the seventh floor, so Draco was somewhere between the sixth and seventh floors. Severus flicked his wand at each classroom, making the door open forcefully as he cast a revealing charm on the room, then he secured the door as it slammed closed. To his vexation, each room was dark and unoccupied. There was no indication that the boy was anywhere.

He turned heel and strode down the corridor, stopping at the bottom of the stairs on the landing, ignoring the few students that passed as they scurried up the stairs to the seventh floor. There was no point checking the fifth floor, unless the boy had doubled back down from another staircase. He considered searching the seventh floor again and then dismissed it. He'd already checked it and, like the sixth floor, found nothing amiss.

Out of habit he hurried down to the fifth floor and strode purposefully along the corridor, checking the various rooms on the way. He mounted the stairs to the Astronomy Tower two at a time, forcing himself to remain calm the more his frustration grew. He thrust open the door as he stepped out and looked around, but saw no one.

He walked to the wide-set crenellations, placed his hands on the rough stone and hung his head. He'd asked Mr. Boughton to try to befriend Draco since he was in the same year as Draco and Mr. Boughton's father was a devout Death Eater. Likewise, he'd asked Miss Rushbridge to try and befriend Misses Parkinson and Bulstrode. But neither seemed able to gain their dorm mates confidences, and therefore, they were no help with his predicament.

Mr. Nott was still keeping mostly to himself, but then he was a shy swot. However, he didn't seem to have his father's prejudices or share his family's blind loyalty to the Dark Lord. Misses Longacre and Davis were distancing themselves from Miss Parkinson and Miss Bulstrode, now that Misses Parkinson and Bulstrode had become more vocal about their loyalties to the Dark Lord, although he'd seen Misses Longacre and Davis with Misses Greengrass and Rushbridge on occasion.

He looked up and gazed at the outline of the mountains and the dark, forbidding forest. A Thestral rose up above the trees, followed by another *And such too is the grandeur of the dooms, we have imagined for the mighty dead*, he silently quoted John Keats*, his favorite poet.

The skeletal horses dodged each other, turned on their wings playfully before one dropped below the trees. The solitary Thestral made one last wide circle over the treetops before descending from view.

He shivered. Spring was late this year; he could feel the crisp evening wind ruffle his hair and it chilled him.

Some shape of beauty moves the pall from our dark spirits. Such is the sun, the moon, trees old and young, sprouting a shady boon he thought, turning his back to the forest as he crossed his arms. *All lovely tales that we have heard or read: An endless fountain of immortal drink*. Except he was far from immortal. The Dark Lord claimed to be thus protected, having devised by some magic the protection of his new corporeal body, but Severus had his doubts. Some things even magic couldn't achieve, regardless of Dumbledore's conviction to the contrary.

One way or another Severus knew his time at the school was coming to an end; he'd be surprised if it lasted to the end of the school year. If he didn't work out what Draco's task was before it was too late, or if the boy failed in any way...the Vow would kill him. *If Draco's task was to kill Dumbledore, and the boy wasn't able to follow through and commit murder...which neither Severus nor Dumbledore believed the boy had it in him to do...he, Severus, would have to do it.* And if he ended up the one to kill the beloved old man, regardless of the fact that he was dying a very slow and painful death, Hermione would hate him.

She'd hate him.

He hung his head.

He loved her, everything about her, and she'd come to hate him.

Euthanasia, regardless the reason or sentiment behind it, wasn't something that people forgave. And he couldn't tell anyone why he'd have to do it. He had to maintain pretenses to gain the Dark Lord's favor so he'd end up headmaster of the school, should the Dark Lord take over the Ministry as he planned. He'd have to destroy one of the few men Severus admired, looked up to, regardless of how manipulative he was, regardless of the promise he'd made to Lily. He hoped that his promise to Dumbledore didn't contradict the previous vow he'd made to Dumbledore, to Lily, or any hope of him surviving... No, the old man had considered this conundrum himself and had phrased his request specifically and purposefully, but still Severus was filled with bitter resentment for the onerous obligation imposed on him.

He looked out again to the forest, remembering the warnings that he had been given in his youth about the dangers that lay within the dark trees...the same warnings the staff told the students today. The warnings given to him as a student went unheeded of course, just as some students ignored them now. His thought turned to those times he had ventured within the Forbidden Forest in search of ingredients. He'd loved being in the forest, under the canopy of the ancient and new trees, always on guard for unseen dangers and the possibility of attack. He smiled at the memory of the times when he had journeyed in there with Hermione as a teenager, defiantly braving the dangers. His sweeping gaze paused at the place he'd taken Hermione during one of their hikes and then lowered his gaze to the grounds as he thought about the snow castle he'd built her. He recalled the day they had come across a dead unicorn foal and the mare that had allowed them to harvest it. Although she'd been disgusted with the harvesting, she'd bravely given him her aid simply because he asked her to.

That was what he loved about her: Hermione, with her innocent expressions, always trusting, always open and sincere, her expressive doe-like eyes, her thirst for knowledge and skill, and her fearlessness was both aggravating and enthralling. She tested him in lessons, merely because she came to his classroom not only prepared with her assigned reading, but well read on the subject at hand, much more than any other student. She could answer any question he put forth to the class. It grated in his nerves that she quoted the books; he wanted to know what she thought, to have her extrapolate and theorize, but he had to refrain from demanding it from her in his lessons or showing her favoritism of any sort.

He sighed heavily.

His gaze swept the surrounding mountains.

No, he had never felt threatened there, in the forest or in the surrounding mountains. There were more dangerous places closer to home.

Fuck it. What's one more murder anyway, he sneered to himself.

He hated himself for the thought.

Hermione walked down to the dungeons, carrying the crumpled note in her hand. She'd slipped a message under the door to Professor Snape's office after Potions, asking to speak to him, and he'd given Euan Abercrombie a message to give her, telling her that he'd have only a few minutes after dinner if she were brief. She wanted to talk to Professor Snape about Harry's suspicions of Malfoy being in the Room of Requirement. Between her, Ginny, Harry and Ron, one of them were constantly watching the seventh floor corridor for Malfoy, and they now knew that Malfoy was indeed using the Room of Requirement a lot lately. However, he seemed to have stopped using Crabbe or Goyle as lookouts, possibly because Malfoy had run out of Polyjuice Potion. Neville and Seamus had commented that the room had been unresponsive all day Tuesday and Wednesday when they'd wanted to continue practicing with some of the DA members. Even the Creevey brothers had commented on the fact that they couldn't get into the room on Friday.

She knocked on his office door and waited for his reply. She knocked again, and his door creaked as it opened slightly. She stepped inside, finding the office empty, but there was a light coming from under the door to his private lab. Hoping he was in his lab brewing, Hermione crossed the office and knocked on the door, but there was no response. She knocked harder, and the door swung open a fraction. Curious, she peered into the room. Two cauldrons sat on burners and there were numerous ingredients spread out on the worktable in small containers and the remnants of ingredients he'd used.

On a side table, a small black cauldron sat over a very low flame, surrounded by a protection shield to keep anything from falling into the potion. She wondered what he was brewing in the small cauldron, not that she could distinguish much through the shield. The first time she'd noticed the cauldron was the evening after her wandless deflection lesson when Professor Snape had first used the cricket ball, but she'd been too thrilled to be brewing with him to have paid it much notice at the time, and her focus had been on the two potions he had set up on his worktable. That was back in the first week of January, so this potion took over five months to brew, possibly longer. Just off the top of her head she could think of four potions that took five months to brew and two that took six months, not that she'd tried any of those.

She shook her head, knowing that it didn't really matter what was in the cauldron, and walked up to his worktable. There were several sheets of parchment with all sorts of Arithmancy and Alchemy calculations. Hermione picked them up and examined them closer. He'd used Greek numerals for several of the ingredients listed on one of the pages in his algebraic equations, but she was able to follow along with his equations easily enough, even though they were quite complex.

Curious, she looked at the black board. It was the same potion he'd been working on before, only he'd made a lot of changes. In the first phase of the potion, Goldenseal was crossed out, and Blue Bloodenweed and lemon balm were written in next to it, and he'd switched potassium for sodium.

The second phase started with oleander milk, linderia bark, and Splindipperer spleens were written on the space above the frankincense, blue Scullcap, dittany, juniper and St John's-wort with a warning asterisk. The phoenix tears were crossed out, which made sense since it didn't react well with poisonous ingredients like Oleander milk. Instead, his directions substituted powdered unicorn heart in an infusion of grand wormwood followed by aniseed, hyssop, sweet fennel and angelica in the second phase.

And he'd switched Blodeuwedd oil and Gwydion beryl with magnesium in the third phase.

There was an arrow from sodium that showed he'd moved it down from the first phase to the fourth, then added Blodeuwedd oil blended with magnesium.

The parchments in her hands had his calculations of the probable impact of Blue Bloodenweed with oleander milk, linderia bark and Splindipperer spleens, and their reaction with frankincense, Blue Scullcap, dittany, juniper and St John's-wort. The Arithmancy algorithms were correct, she'd double checked them.

He'd used the Hopcroft and Lexicographic algorithms to describe the correct parameters of usage for each ingredient. She could feel her heart beat increase as she read his calculations. Her eyes narrowed as she read through the Arithmantic ciphers, noting how he had used a form of the Poisson statistical process to judge the interaction between the different substances, and then to balance the order of all of the ingredients in order to effect to best combination. *He is brilliant, simply brilliant.*

She placed the parchments back on his worktable and looked at the board. Artemisia absinthium extract, aniseed, fennel, angelica, lemon balm, dittany and juniper...those eight ingredients were written in blue. *Artemisia absinthium. Absinthe wormwood? The base ingredients for distilling Absinthe?*

Professor Snape thrust open the door with a bang as he swept into the room. "What are you doing in here?" he demanded.

She blushed under his harsh tone. "I'm sorry, sir. I saw the light under the door and thought you were in here," she said, glad that she'd put the parchments down where he'd left them.

He crossed his arms. "You didn't get my note cancelling our meeting?"

Her eyes widened momentarily in shock. "No, sir, I only got the message you had Abercrombie give me," she said, regaining her composure. "If I'd known you'd cancelled, I wouldn't have come."

"I see," he said as he relaxed somewhat. He walked up to his desk, and she blushed when she saw his forehead crease as he picked up his parchments.

"I..." she started to say, then inhaled. "I looked at them," she admitted. "I...they are bloody brilliant. I've never seen the use of the Hopcroft and Lexicographic algorithms with the Poisson statistical process before."

"It's my own preference," he said as he opened his drawer, and she was glad that he didn't seem angry at her confession. He withdrew a composition book and looked up at her. "Ask."

She smiled. "I was...is this the same potion I saw before?"

He nodded. "A variation of it, yes."

"You've added the ingredients for..." She paused. It was silly, merely a coincidence. He cocked his eyebrow, giving her an expected look, so she went ahead and asked, "Absinthe?"

His mouth pulled back into a one-sided smile. "And what, pray tell, do you know about Absinthe?"

"Nothing! Myths...stories," she said automatically, then blushed when he his mouth quirked ruefully. "I recognize the ingredients as being those...I've never brewed it!"

"I should think not," he stated. "I don't see you as the type to have a still in your room."

"Do you?" she asked, then mentally cringed at her audacity.

Except he didn't seem at all fazed by her question. "Naturally, although not in my room...it's here in my lab."

Her eyes widened in surprise, and he laughed softly. "Certain elixirs are best created in a still, especially if they are brewed in alcohol."

"Have you made Absinthe?" she asked, now immensely curious.

He smirked. "I just admitted that I have. Although I prefer to add melissa, peppermint, coriander and veronica to my liqueur." He moved out from behind his desk. "Why? Did you want to try la Fée Verte, the Green Fairy, sometime, Hermione?" he asked, and she swallowed at the deep silky resonance of his baritone voice.

"Does it cause the mind altering effects?" she asked. She knew about the drink's intoxicating effects; she'd been curious about Absinthe and knew that it had been popular among bohemian French artists in the 1900's for its uplifting sensation. "Drinkers of the liqueur used to claim to feel clear-headed and enlightened while drinking it."

"I assure you, mine is Suisse, and not the dangerous drink you've read about," he said smoothly, a silky drawl that held her almost hypnotized. "Wormwood does contain a substance called thujone, as you know, which can cause delirium if taken in high doses. But in small doses..." He moved closer, standing right in front of her. "It's a shame that I have to be somewhere else or I'd satisfy that curiosity of yours," he said smoothly.

She swallowed at the implications of what he offered. She was an adult now, but he was her teacher. She wanted very much to say yes, but she didn't want him to get in trouble. But to share this experience with him, of all people, to taste his liqueur, knowing he'd brewed it was almost too good to pass up. She nodded, looking up into his intense dark eyes, wondering what it would be like to drink it with him...if the rumors about the liquor were true.

He laughed softly, his hand brushing a curl of hair from the side of her face. "You would, wouldn't you, my little Gryffindor."

The gentle touch combined with the soft whiff of his cologne was intoxicating enough. She nodded. Her heart was beating so rapidly, pounding in her chest, and her breath had quickened. Being able to try Absinthe...his Absinthe...alone with him in his rooms. It was a truly heady thought. She wanted to. She waited for the offer.

"Unfortunately however, it's against the rules," he said, letting his hand drop.

She felt crestfallen; she nearly moaned as he backed away and his mouth quirked in response. "I do have a meeting, Hermione."

She lowered her eyes, feeling regret that he had to leave. "Of course, sir, I understand."

"I'm sorry, but you have to go now."

She heard the slight inflection of regret in his tone, and she looked up at him and smiled. "Maybe another time?"

He laughed softly. "Come on, you should go."

The fact that Harry was going out with Ginny seemed to interest a great number of people. Ron was naturally uncomfortable with the match and kept making comments like "as long as you're not snogging all over the place" or "I could withdraw my permission any time I want," but Harry and Ginny simply ignored his comments. Ginny even called him a hypocrite on more than one occasion, and Hermione agreed with her considering how he'd carried on with Lavender. But between Harry and Ginny now cuddling together in the common room all the time and Ginny sitting beside Harry at every meal, not to mention Ron slipping out to be with Padma whenever he could, Hermione felt like a gooseberry.

More and more, Hermione's thoughts turned to Professor Snape. Whenever she wasn't trying to find information on the founders, searching for artifacts, or how to destroy a Horcrux, she'd been practicing wandless magic whenever she could and was getting better at rudimentary spells, almost able to do all her first and second year Charms and Defense spells with reasonable results, but she was still having trouble with Conception spells, especially those from Transfiguration.

Hermione left the common room, leaving behind Harry and Ginny sitting together in one squishy chair by the fire, hoping that Professor Snape would be in his office. She waved to Rosalba as she passed her frame and headed for the dungeons. She smiled with relief when she saw that there was light peeking out from under his door. She knocked lightly and waited.

She knocked again, slightly harder. She thought she heard something, not his usual bark of 'Enter,' but a voice. Curious, and hoping she was not assuming anything, she tried the latch, smiling as it gave. She pushed open the door and peered inside. He was sitting in his chair facing away from the door. She entered and walked confidently to his desk, then paused.

He was asleep, sitting up in his chair with his head against the backrest and his forearms on the arm rests. The way his head tilted back at rest made his hair fall back, allowing her a seldom seen view of his face. In slumber he looked, not exactly peaceful, there were still small creases in his face, but the slack in his facial muscles made him look younger. The planes of his face were still sharp, his lips were thin with fine lines at the corners, and his nose in this position was more sharply pronounced, but he seemed more like the young man she'd known in her earlier encounters when she'd stayed in his lab during her Time-Turner mishaps. She noticed that his nose was not perfect, not that it was crooked, but then she knew it had been broken and magically mended a few times. No matter what anyone said, she liked his nose, and she didn't think it was really all that large, just prominent, especially considering how he wore his hair.

And his eyebrows were thicker now, but still in a nice enough arch. All in all it was a nice face...not handsome, no, but masculine, and uniquely his. In a way he'd grown into his features nicely, all considering.

Her gaze traveled down his form, away from his face. The years had thickened his body, not by a lot, but somewhat, even though he was still quite thin. She remembered with a smile what he'd looked like the day he'd tried to save her in the prefect pool. She knew that under all those layers of wool and linen he had a lithe, muscular body, with strong, lean arms and well-defined pectorals. Like a runner or a swimmer, she thought appreciatively. Hermione rather thought she'd prefer a body like his than one like the wizards in Lavender's and Parvati's magazines, all bulky and brawn.

She looked at his hands. She loved his hands with his long fingers she knew were quite strong and very dexterous. As expected, his nails and cuticles were meticulously manicured, just like they had been when he was young, to prevent hangnails or cuts in his skin; it was a precaution she knew he took because of the toxins and poisons from some of the various ingredients he worked with. However, the everyday toil of his work made his hands appear rougher now, and there were ink stains on his fingertips in both red and black, so apparently he'd been writing before he'd fallen asleep. She looked up and saw two neat stacks of parchment on his desk, the top page of the one stack was covered with his red markings, and the other had a handwritten letter to Mrs. and Mr. Crabbe paper clipped to the parchment beneath it.

"Miss Granger, why are you here?"

His voice startled her. "I...I wanted to see you," she replied, the words sounding lame even to her.

He ran his palm over his forehead as he sat up and then looked up at her. "You shouldn't be here."

"It's an hour before curfew," she said lamely.

"But well after my office hours," he pointed out, then clenched his jaw to stifle a yawn. "Hermione, I'm tired and have an early staff meeting before breakfast and end of term exams to complete yet tonight."

She nodded, feeling dejected. "When would you have time? I'd like to review my progress or lack thereof."

He yawned. "I can check my schedule and get back to you. But with exams coming up and Apparition testing, I'm really quite busy."

"I understand," she said, nodding. "If I can help, possibly, with anything, you've only to ask me."

His mouth stretched into a smile. "Nothing comes to mind." His smile faded. "Write me a list of what you are having difficulty with, and I'll see what I can do. But please, be brief and concise. I don't want an essay or dissertation...just a brief statement."

She smiled at his remark. "I'll have it for you by tomorrow. I hope your evening goes well."

"Thank you," he said then turned to face the desk. "Good night, and don't stay up all hours revising."

"I won't," she said, walking along his desk. She stopped at the corner and looked up at him. "I know it's presumptuous of me to say this, but you, too. Try and get some sleep tonight. You look exhausted."

His expression became stern. "Good night, Miss Granger."

"Good night," she repeated and walked out of his class room.

Hermione was sitting with Ron in the common room when Harry came running in and rushed upstairs to his dorm. "That was unusually quick," Hermione said, referring to Harry's meeting with the Headmaster. She looked at Ron in confusion, and he shrugged. "Maybe Dumbledore found one?" she asked.

"Yeah, right," Ron stammered as he sprung to his feet.

Hermione jumped up and followed him, wondering if that was what had Harry so excited. She didn't even notice that both Seamus and Dean had stopped talking as she and Ron hurried past them toward the stairs to the boys' dorms.

"I don't have much time," Harry said while digging into his trunk as soon as she and Ron entered the room. "I'm supposed to be getting my Invisibility Cloak." He pulled out a pair of balled up socks. "Listen," he said and told them where Dumbledore was taking him. "Malfoy is in the Room of Requirement, and he's done it...whatever it was he was doing in there...he's done it. So, he's going to use Dumbledore's absence to do whatever it is he is planning on doing."

"Harry, you don't know that! How would Malfoy know that Dumbledore is leaving?" Hermione asked, but he wasn't listening.

"Rustle up the DA, Hermione. You still have those coins, right? We used them for practices, don't we? So you can get hold of everyone," Harry said and then started rambling about what was going on so quickly, Hermione couldn't get a word in edgewise. Dumbledore had found a Horcrux in a cave. Harry and the Headmaster were going there tonight. Professor Trelawney told Harry that someone in the Room of Requirement and had thrown her out, someone who was celebrating about having done something, and Harry suspected that it was Malfoy. And he insisted that whatever it was that Malfoy was going to do, he was convinced that he was going to do it tonight.

"Harry, are you sure you didn't misunderstand her?" Hermione asked, but Harry went on as if he hadn't heard her.

"Dumbledore told me he has arranged extra protection for the school, but if Snape is involved with Malfoy..." Harry said, digging in his bag.

"Professor Snape is not helping Malfoy, Harry, he was trying to get Malfoy to confide in him," Hermione emphasized emphatically, getting really tired of his mistrust in Professor Snape.

"But he'll know what the protections are and how to avoid them," Harry insisted.

"How do you know its tonight?" Ron asked.

"Malfoy was whooping and celebrating," Harry said as he handed Ron the socks. Ron looked at them as if they were poisonous.

"Who?" Neville asked.

"Malfoy," Harry said, not realizing that the room had filled up with people. "Professor Trelawney told me she was in the Room of Requirement, and he shoved her out. Don't you see...he's done it?!"

"What did she see," Lavender asked, pushing her way forward.

"Nothing, it was pitch black," Harry said as all the Gryffindor's in the DA formed a kind of circle around Harry. "But then she went on about the lightning struck tower, calamity, disaster...some wonky stuff like that...and then she started saying something about eight hearts being sacrificed and the ten cups were inverted and he'd lose friendship and betrayal or some such rubbish."

"No, Harry, that's what the cards represent," Parvati stated. "It's a portent of what's to come! Lightning Struck Tower, the Eight of Hearts and the inverted Ten of Cups...I've been getting those cards for days when I've done readings, too." Lavender nodded.

Ron held up the socks. "What do I want with your manky old socks, mate?" he asked, not listening to Parvati.

"That's my Felix Felicis," Harry said as he shoved the map into Ron's hands as well. "Here, watch the seventh floor corridor," he said as he started moving quickly for the door. "Malfoy will show up as soon as Dumbledore leaves the castle and if he does...be ready!"

Hermione grabbed the socks and called out, "Harry, wait," brushing passed Dean and Parvati so she could stop him and talk some sense into him. "You'll need this..."

"I haven't got time. I have to go!" Harry was saying as he hurried out the door and down the stairs.

Hermione followed him, hearing all the thuds of all the DA following her. "Harry, I have mine, remember? You take that this! You don't know what you'll be facing," she was saying as she followed him across the common room.

"Hermione, I'll be with Dumbledore," Harry shouted as he scrambled through the portrait hole. "You'll need it more than me."

"Will someone please fill us in?" Seamus shouted.

"Hermione...Crabbe and Goyle are both in the corridor," Ron stated, pointing at the map. "Blaise and Bulstrode are coming up the stairs."

"They're what?" she asked, stopping and turning. Ron showed her the map; Goyle was outside the Room of Requirement, and Crabbe was pacing the corridor. Zabini's and Bulstrode's dots were coming up the dungeon staircase. Pucey, Warrington and Crane were walking across the Entrance Hall.

"What if Harry is right?"

Hermione and Ron turned to Ginny. "Everything adds up," Ginny insisted. "First, we have no idea what Malfoy has been up to in the Room of Requirement...and if his two thugs are in the corridor and the others are running up here, they probably know that Dumbledore is leaving the castle, so it is the perfect opportunity to do whatever it is Malfoy's planning on doing. Secondly, Fred thinks the attempts on Dumbledore were a diversion, because really, none of them were successful. If Dumbledore was the target, you'd think Malfoy would get it right at least once. I mean, Malfoy is a git, but he's not stupid."

"Who is trying to kill Dumbledore?" Neville asked while as Seamus said, "I heard Malfoy talking to Crabbe in the library, telling him he better not complain or he'd tell the Dark Lord. He was showing him something on his arm."

"And Dumbledore's arm is getting worse," Colin stated. "I asked him about it, and he told me it was nothing to be concerned about, but it looks dead."

"Okay, here's the thing," Ron said, turning to everyone. "If, and I mean if, Malfoy decides that tonight is his best chance of doing whatever it is he's planning, then we should be ready."

Hermione stood stunned as those gathered around her nodded or voiced their agreement. Ginny already had her Galleon on her hand and was activating the coin with her wand. "But we don't know if Malfoy is doing anything. He could simply have, I dunno, found another means of..."

"...Trying to kill the Headmaster," Ron finished for her.

She wanted to protest, but he cut her off. "Hermione use the Galleons," Ron suggested, then shook his head. "No, wait, it's late; they may not have their coins on them." He turned to Parvati and Lavender. "Parvati, you and Lavender go alert the Ravenclaws; Ginny, you and Neville go alert the Hufflepuffs."

"Ron, you, me and Dean can see what we can get out of Crabbe and Goyle," Seamus suggested with an eagerness that worried Hermione. "Or at the very least we send them back to the dungeons where they belong."

"I know a shortcut, there's a hidden stairwell between the statue of Thorance Welldinger of Kent and the tapestry of girls feeding unicorns that leads to the main corridor to the fifth floor," Ginny suggested, and Hermione glared at her.

"Good, we won't have to use the moving staircases," Parvati said with a grin as she moved to follow Hermione. "Good idea."

"Yeah, but Neville and I will," Ginny said, following the others. "We'll meet you on the fifth floor."

Hermione tuned to go with the girls, but Ron stalled her. "Hermione, Wait! Get your Felix Felicis, and share yours with everyone who shows up on the fifth floor," Ron said and indicated the Creeveys, Seamus, Dean, Katie and Demelza behind him, adding, "I'll share Harry's with everyone here."

Hermione nodded once, then turned and ran up to her room.

Downstairs in Severus' office, Rosalba shook Altheda's frame to make the bell ring out in alarm. "Gryffindors in the corridor, Severus..." she called out, then blushed as Severus looked up at the portrait. She quickly added, "Er, Professor Snape," upon seeing Messrs Boughton, Urguhart and Aubry and Misses Reilly, Maguire and Rushbridge all turn to look at her as well. "Misses Weasely, Brown, Patil and Mr. Longbottom left the common room and headed down the hidden stairway."

"It's a bit late to have a DA meeting," Urguhart stated, turning to look at Severus.

"Rosalba, go back and watch the corridor. Let me know if any of the others leave the common room," Severus said kindly *Especially if Hermione leaves*, he thought but didn't voice. "And see if the Fat Lady will allow you to visit her for a few hours." That way she'd know for certain if Miss Granger snuck out so close to curfew.

"Of course, Professor, I'm sure she and Violet would love to inform me on all the latest gossip," Rosalba said politely but with a hint of disdain.

"This could have something to do with Malfoy and his two friends," Mr. Boughton stated as he stared at the floor.

Severus agreed, but with no information to go on, there was little he could do.

"Malfoy has been gone for hours, and just now, Crabbe and Goyle left in a hurry," Mr. Boughton continued. "I followed them up to the sixth floor...they were running up to the seventh."

"This is all speculation! You sound like one of those conspiracy theorists," Miss Reilly stated, pointing her finger at him. "We have no idea what Malfoy is up to up there."

"Exactly," Mr. Boughton said, turning on her. "He's up there all the time, and we have no idea why." He turned to look at Severus. "I've tried to befriend him like you asked me to, but he'll have none of it. He won't trust me. But he was actually having an anxiety attack last night in the loo on the first floor, and it wasn't the first time either. He's under tremendous pressure to do something..."

"Or his mum will be killed," Mr. Aubry finished for him.

"I haven't had any luck either," Miss Rushbridge said solemnly. "I've tried, but only Daphne has befriended me. Pansy and Millicent are still rather cool, and I've not gained enough trust to be in their confidences."

Mr. Aubry leaned forward slightly in his seat. "My father goaded about it in his last letter. He said that Aldebaran's dad," he indicated Mr. Urguhart, "knows that whatever this task is, no one but the Malfoys and Mrs. Lestrange know about it, but Mrs. Lestrange keeps going on about how it will elevate their place in the Dark Lord's favor. My mom said that Mrs. Malfoy cries a lot, she's waif thin and her nails look horrible, so she's feeling the pressure as well."

"So, if this is the night, and not just some lame attempt on the Headmaster's life, do we do anything?" Mr. Urguhart asked.

"That's a good question." Severus placed his fists on his desk. "Unless the Dark Lord is ready to face Potter and end this once and for all, I'd say no. If you tip your hand now, and it's only another attempt on the Headmaster, your lives will be in jeopardy and everything we've done will be for naught." He thought about the potions he'd finally finished. Two vials of the Quickening-Reflexes Potion and Felix Felicis rested in his pocket. He wanted to give them to Hermione. Now he wondered if his time had run out. "Wait in the Potions classroom if you want, but I wouldn't suggest going to the common room until we know for sure. You don't want Messrs Pucey, Warrington, Zabini or Crane to see you leave if I have to summon you."

"Or Fitzgerald, Grey, Parkinson and Bulstrode either," Miss Reilly pointed out.

"However, we can make the common room entrance lock down," Mr. Urguhart suggested, then turned to look at Severus. "Or you can, sir. That way if Malfoy's task does involve exposing the school so that the Death Eaters can make a raid on the castle, then the ones we know who side with the Dark Lord will be trapped in the common room."

Severus smirked. He'd already done just that. "Mr. Urguhart, you and Mr. Boughton and Miss Reilly go on patrol of the castle. If Malfoy does make an attempt on the castle, keep your head down, help, but be cunning and don't be seen or caught doing so. The rest of you, return to the common room. Keep the other's inside. A simple *Impedimentum morari* on the inside of the common room door will prevent anyone from leaving but allow returning students to get in."

"Consider it done, sir," Mr. Aubry said with a conspiratorial smirk as the students all got to their feet.

Severus watched them leave. His Dark Mark prickled, but the irritation only meant that the Dark Lord was projecting his feelings again. It wasn't a summons or an alert...just something. It was not always easy to read the emotions being projected...as unpredictable as the Dark Lord himself.

He picked up his quill and stared disconsolately at the essays that lay on his desk. Grading essays seemed pointless now; his Slytherins, Urguhart, Aubry and Boughton had come to tell him that their father's had informed them to be ready to serve the Dark Lord. The Dark Lord had yet to alert Severus, but if the boys in the school were being alerted to be ready, then something was up.

He mentally cursed one Draco Malfoy. Severus set down his quill and opened his drawer, placing a small vial of Felix Felicis on the surface *Potter is with the Headmaster, but if Hermione and her friends are in the corridors, then they, too, know something is up*. He feared for Hermione. Somehow he had to get the potion to her.

He called for Dobby.

A loud pop startled Hermione as she entered her room.

"Oh no! Dobby is sorry to startle Miss, but Dobby is to leaves this for Miss Granger and not be seens," Dobby said and disappeared with a pop.

"Dobby, wait," she called out, too late. "Who sent this?" was spoken to the empty room.

Hermione gaped in shock at the small golden potion as she picked it up, wondering who could have asked Dobby to give this to her and what for. It looked like Felix Felicis, the same molten gold color, but this potion looked thicker and had a richer color and sheen than the one she'd received from Professor Slughorn. Hermione looked at her little vial of molten gold potion and the slightly larger mysterious vial. It had to be the Felix Felicis...no other potion she knew of looked like molten gold; that and the sheen were indicative of the Liquid Luck Potion.

She mentally tallied up the number of people and sighed. Harry had taken a small mouthful, almost a fourth of his potion, and his vial was supposed to hold enough to last a day...sixteen hours of extremely good luck. She didn't know if she had enough to go around, but between the two vials she might have enough. *I need some way to divide it*, she thought, wondering how much would each person really need.

She had a unopened bag of Honeydukes' Golden Snitch Chocolate Malt Balls in her trunk and estimated that there were more than enough for everyone and she'd have extra should they need them. *But not enough for everyone to have two. Oh well, it's the best I can do.* "Okay," she mumbled, drawing her wand. *Infusus, or better, infundere means to pour into and it worked in Potions, but will it work?* She uncorked both vials Felix Felicis and poured them into the bag, rotating the bag to evenly coat the candy as best she could, and then aimed her wand. "*Infundere intus*," she said and watched with a satisfied smile as the potions seeped into the sweets. If she calculated right, each Golden Snitch should have enough potion to last an hour. Hopefully two.

She hurried out of the room to meet up with everyone on the fifth floor.

"Hermione," Ron called out. She was in a hurry, but she stopped as Ron and Dennis ran up to her. "Look," Ron said, showing her the map.

She had to move his finger to read the names moving steadily up the stairs. "Pucey, Warrington, Montague and Zabini are on the stairs heading for the second floor." She looked up at Ron. "Why are they...could they be coming up here, too?"

Ron shrugged as Colin approached. "Something's up and all the Slytherins are coming up here."

"Not all of them, Ron," she said and looked at Dennis and Colin. "Oh here." She opened her bag and gave a Golden Snitch Malt Ball each to Dennis and Colin. "Eat this. It has Felix Felicis in it."

Colin handed his to Sebastian Kirchner, saying, "I took some."

"Right, okay," she said and looked at Ron. "I have to go...the others."

"Yeah, okay," Ron said. "Be careful."

"I will," she shouted as she ran for the exit.

Hermione arrived in the corridor just in time to see Cho leading the others from Ravenclaw toward her. Hermione was surprised that seventh-years, Marcus Belby, Eddie Carmichael and Grant Page, had joined them, but a few more wands couldn't help. She heard the Hufflepuffs approach before seeing seventh-years, Jerome Dorny, Mike Fletcher and Duane Harkness, walking around the corner with Ginny and Neville.

"We have a few more," Ginny said with a huge smile.

"Will Stebbins, James Summers and Gerald Summerby joined us as well," Neville said proudly. "So, are we all here?"

Hermione gaped in confusion. *What are they expecting...a war?*

Luna approached. "So, Harry thinks the castle may come under attack?"

Hermione was about to respond when Bill and another wizard walked up. "What are all of you doing in the corridors?" Bill demanded. "You're supposed to be in your common rooms."

"What are you doing here?" Hermione asked, then blurted, "Dumbledore's extended security."

Just then, Professor Flitwick came bounding down the stairs. He slid to a stop and breathlessly announced, "Oh there you are! Death Eaters...in the castle...seventh floor! They broke in! I have to warn Severus. Find the others." He took off running as Bill and the other wizard drew their wands, and Bill turned to the others as the other wizard ran up the corridor.

"Right," Bill said to the assembled group. "And you...back to...oh, shit. The Great Hall."

"No, we have to defend the school," Neville said stubbornly.

"Most of you are under age!" Bill argued adamantly. "You're going to go to the Great Hall."

"I have Felix Felicis!" Hermione said, pulling out the bag of sweets. "I put a dose in each of these. If everyone under seventeen takes one, they will have at least two maybe three hours of good luck."

Ginny quickly took the bag and, after eating one, started passing it around. "You have to be kidding me...No!" Bill said adamantly. "You lot are not going to fight...you're going to the Great Hall!"

Luna ate hers as if savoring the sweet, then turned to Hermione. "We should go see to Professor Flitwick, he'll be in the dungeons," she said serenely as if suggesting a visit. She turned and walked purposefully for the stairs.

Hermione couldn't believe it. "Luna, wait!" But then it suddenly hit her, *Severus! Professor Flitwick went to get Severus* She quickly followed Luna, thankful that all the stairs seemed to be cooperating.

"Excuse me, Professor, but there is more activity in the corridor," Rosalba stated.

He looked up at her, expecting bad news. "Messrs Weasley, Finnigan and Thomas left the common room a few minutes ago, but they headed in the other direction, toward the main stairs. Just as I was coming to tell you, Misses Spinnet and Miss Bell went in the same direction with Messrs Green, Dunstan and McLaggen."

Altheda slipped into her frame and said, "Professor Snape! Oh, sorry, Rosalba," blushing as she'd accidentally bumped into her friend.

"No problem, Altheda, I was just..."

"Ladies, please," Severus interrupted. "Pleasantries later. Altheda, what is it?" he asked, concerned. His first thought was for Hermione, hoping she was not in trouble.

"Messrs Pucey, Warrington, Montague and Zabini just ran past my portrait, heading for the stairs to the sixth floor."

Hermione. If her friends are about, she will be too. He didn't want a confrontation with his Slytherins right now.

Just then, Severus' Dark Mark seared. He was needed. *Hogwarts*, the summons was clear in his mind even as he clenched his teeth to the intrusion and pain. He was to be at Hogwarts. *Severus, go to the Room of Hidden Things* came the personalized message.

At that moment, Filius burst into his office, huffing loudly with an audible wheeze. "Death Eaters, Severus! Death Eater's in the castle," he managed to get out between labored breaths.

Hermione! "Where?" Severus asked as Filius bent over, grasping the seat of a chair, gasping for air as said, "On the...seventh floor!" between breaths.

Same place the Dark Lord summoned me. Fuck. He stared at the diminutive wizard. In his prime, Filius was an accomplished duelist, but Severus knew he was old, and in his opinion, the sedentary life of a teacher had softened him. Severus stood and pocketed his potions. "I'm sorry, Filius, but this is one you have to stay out of," he said as he flicked his wand, adding a softly spoken but very strong, "*Immobulus.*"

He left his office in a hurry and ran into Hermione and Miss Lovegood. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"We came to see Professor Flitwick, professor," Luna said serenely. "There are Death Eaters in the castle, and he will be needed."

Severus thought quickly. "He's here. He came to inform me and slipped on something, I'm afraid. He's unconscious," he said, forming a reasonable lie. He could lock her in his office, and she'd be safe...angry, but safe. *Not as angry as she will be when you kill the Headmaster*, he thought sarcastically. "I was on my way to..."

"Defend us against the Death Eaters," Miss Lovegood said and skipped, literally skipped, to his office. He shook his head at the unusually bizarre idiocy. But it solved one problem. He looked at Hermione, still standing before him as if waiting for, what? Directions?

She watched him, gazing up at him, her soft doe-like eyes so trusting, so expressive. Her confusion, fear, determination warred in the warm amber brown. Gods he was a fool, but he loved this girl. Everything about her. And in less than a month, maybe sooner, the curse would reach the Headmaster's heart and brain; the tendrils were already snaking up the old man's neck and across his shoulder, it was only a matter of time. And he wanted Severus to kill him before the curse reached his brain.

"Hermione, please, go to Professor Flitwick," he said softly, pleading that she go to his office willingly. He didn't have time, but she wasn't leaving.

"Luna's with him. We should go and defend the castle," she argued stubbornly, the lioness coming out in her.

No, he thought. /...

He never finished the thought; he reached out and cupped her head, pulled her closer and kissed her.

He looked at her, his hand resting on the side of her face, his fingers buried in her soft curls. She didn't push away, she didn't shove hard at his chest to separate them, or slap him or screech or any reaction he'd expected. She stared up at him, her eyes going wide. *In, what, confusion?*, his mind asked. *Surprise, yes, but she's confused...not angry, not incensed and not repulsed. And she still hasn't backed away.*

I myself am pursuing the same instinctive course as the veriest human animal you can think of the thought, quoting Keats*. *Straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness...without knowing the bearing of any one assertion, of any one opinion. Yet may I not in this be free from sin?* he quoted again as if asking himself permission.

He pulled her to him again as his mouth once again met hers, her soft, lush lips, delectably pliable and accepting under his as he literally drank her in. He felt her arms move to encircle him, and his arms tightened around her, holding her to him desperately. She felt divine against his body, and her contours fit so well against his lanky frame. How he wished he had time to savor the moment, to fully experience what this one kiss could become. But he couldn't. He poured his heart and soul into the kiss, taking and demanding while baring himself to her if only in this one contact. *If there could be no us between us then at least let her remember that I cared, loved her, if nothing else.* His heart both soared at her responsiveness and sank in despair that there would never be another moment like this one, this one stolen moment, this break from reality. But he had to leave. He was expected and the Dark Lord would know he'd delayed.

"Please don't hate me," he pleaded softly, holding her tightly, not wanting to let her go.

But he did. "I do what I must tonight," he confessed with a laden heart.

"Severus?" she asked, confusion and desire in her voice.

Desire. Oh, but I am cruel fate's tortured fool. He turned from the confusion in her lust filled eyes. "Forgive me if you can," he said, knowing she never would. He hurried away before she could speak, hearing his name from her lips as he ran down the corridor. He didn't...couldn't turn around.

I have left no immortal work behind me...nothing to make my friends proud of my memory...but I have loved the principle of beauty in all things, and if I had had time I would have made myself remembered, he quoted Keats again as he ran up the stairs.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

The Latin comes from my favorite online translator: Notre Dame Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid

Mororari in Latin means: to delay, to linger, loiter, stay, to retard, detain, hinder

I heard that we are being asked from here on out to use footnotes for any and all citations we use because of issues regarding to plagiarism. I have quoted Keats here in this chapter, more than once, but I was careful to denote that that is what Severus is doing...quoting Keats. Most of the quotes are from Endymion by Keats, first published in 1818, according to my dear friend Proulxes, and the first few quotations that I cited are from a letter Keats wrote in A Letter to Fannie Brawne, dated February 1820 that I found online at the time I wrote this. No plagiarism was intended.

Chapter 50

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun.

I have made a few deviations from canon, but the events that are not mentioned in this story that happen in the books remain as they happened in the books.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia and FrankQ for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Severus arrived in the French style garden of Malfoy Manor still holding Draco by the scruff of his collar. He dragged the struggling, stumbling boy forward, pointedly ignoring the boy's cursing and protests of the mistreatment. However, Severus knew that if the Dark Lord was still in residence, Draco would have to answer for his own ineptitude and treating the boy roughly with disgust might assuage some of the Dark Lord's displeasure. Narcissa must have seen them from the house, because she came running out of the door and down the path toward them, delighted to see her son. Severus unceremoniously dumped Draco at his mother's feet. "I did what I could, the rest is up to you," he said coolly to the boy.

"Did he...?" Narcissa asked, bending down to make sure her pup was unharmed.

"No, he did not," Severus sneered down his nose at the boy. "However, the deed is done."

"I did too, do it," Draco sneered at him and then turned to his mother, accepting his mother's hand to get up. "I got them in. I did what he wanted; the school will fall now...Dumbledore is dead. *He* will own the school by the end of the night."

"You foolish, idiotic boy," Severus sneered loudly, making Narcissa cringe, even if the boy merely glared at him. "Yes, Dumbledore is dead, but not by your hand and, in case you failed to notice, your associates were fleeing from the castle. You only completed half the task he set for you, you idiot, and failed at the latter part."

"I didn't. I was to get them in so they could capture the castle!" Draco said, his voice rising to near shouting. He turned pleading eyes on his mother as he scrambled to stand up. "I did what he wanted, mother, and Snape killed Dumbledore."

Severus' Dark Mark burned, a summons, and from the painful searing sensation of the burn, the Dark Lord was not pleased. Considering Draco's audible hiss, Severus knew that his Mark was burning as well. "Well, we shall see, won't we?" Severus grasped the scruff of Draco's robes once again. "Come now, boy, it's time to see just how well you've done."

"Severus?" Narcissa pleaded.

Draco was trying to free himself from Severus' grasp. "If you must come, take my arm and don't let go. Side-Along-Apparition with three is rather difficult. I'd hate to Splinch you or your son."

She hesitated as Draco snarled, "I can Apparate myself, thank you. Now. Let. Me. Go."

"Fine," Severus said, letting go. He grasped Narcissa's arm with his left hand. He knew the boy would go, there was no way he'd fail to answer a summons. "Your mother and I will await you in the Dark Lord's presence. Come along, Narcissa. Let's see if Draco's able to convince our master that he's succeeded." He jabbed his wand into his Dark Mark and felt the pull as he and his passenger were immediately transported away.

They arrived on top of the rock face above Hogsmeade which had the spectacular view of the vale Hogwarts sat in, overlooking the village, the lake and the castle below. The same place he'd taken Hermione many years ago on her second jump back to his sixth year. Severus quickly clamped down on his emotions, shoving any memory of the girl deep inside him and out of the Dark Lord's reach should he invade his mind.

"Dumbledore is dead?" the Dark Lord asked as Draco appeared and stumbled.

Severus made no move to steady the boy and clamped his hand on Narcissa's arm to prevent her from doing so, too. Draco had to stand up for himself if he were to survive this. "Dumbledore is dead," Severus intoned flatly.

"But my followers have been chased out of the castle by a bunch of children?" the Dark Lord snarled, his red eyes flashing angrily.

Draco hung his head.

"They were particularly lucky," Severus stated, ignoring the boy. "If I didn't know better, I would have sworn that they were all under the influence of Felix Felicis."

The Dark Lord shot him a questioning glare.

Unperturbed, Severus continued, "I reported earlier that Slughorn had given both Potter and Granger a vial of it at the conclusion of his first Potions lesson. Although... if it were the same vials of the potion, I'm surprised they kept it all this time. I'd have thought Potter would have experimented with it before this."

"I see," the Dark Lord sneered, watching the snake in the Dark Mark undulate and twist as the Mark lingered in the dark blue evening sky above the castle. "What of those who were captured? Cuiléin and Gibbon both mentioned that five were seized?"

Severus's lips pulled back into a mirthless smile that wasn't reflected in his cool and respectful gaze. "When you make your move on the Ministry, it will fall, and those who were unjustly imprisoned will be released."

The Dark Lord smiled. "Yes, when I take over the Ministry, they will be rewarded." He turned, his robes flaring out, and he glanced at Draco, then back to Severus. This was it, the decision would be swift.

"What have you to say for yourself?" the Dark Lord asked Draco, holding his wand balanced lightly in his hand, the tip pointed at Draco's throat.

"I did as you asked," Draco sniveled, fear evident in his eyes, and Severus fought the revulsion he felt at the boy's supplicant behavior. "I fixed the cabinet, it works. We can go back and..."

The Dark Lord struck swiftly. "*Crucio*."

Draco fell to his knees, screaming out in pain. Severus watched with a dispassionate expression plastered on his face as the boy dropped to the ground, curling into a fetal position, kicked as his body arched, then curled up again under the duration of the curse. Beside him, he could feel Narcissa's growing concern. Her desire to help her son warred with the knowledge that if she did, he'd only do the same to her. The Dark Lord didn't tolerate interference with his discipline. The wizard's wand flicked; the determination to hurt the boy had ended. But the lingering effects took longer to subside, as Severus knew well. Draco curled in on himself, holding his middle as the pain ever so slowly ebbed away, barely noticed increment by barely noticed increment, until the pain seemed to ease to the point where breathing deeply felt possible.

The Dark Lord turned his back on Draco, his gaze scanning the view, unconcerned. "Take the boy away, Narcissa, and prepare your house for guests. The boy hasn't yet proven himself worthy, but at least he finally did as I commanded him. Keep him at home...he's not to leave."

"Yes, my lord," Narcissa said solemnly, bowing her head to hide her relief. "It will be done as you command." She helped her son get up off the ground, and Draco clung to his mother on shaky legs, forcing himself to stand. The boy would not easily forget this punishment any time soon. "Come, Draco," his mother said softly and they departed with a pop.

"Severus, there is something more I need of you," the Dark Lord said, rolling his wand languidly in his fingers as he paced on the wide ledge, his robes swishing with each turn.

Severus mentally braced himself for the pronouncement.

The Dark Lord was still very agitated; his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared as he breathed. "I do not fault you. Vincent Crabbe said that young Malfoy was keeping everything to himself; he didn't even trust his long time friend with my task...in that he did as I commanded. And yet his mother did not...she made you Vow to aid him... Why you'd risk yourself for such a whelp, I don't know."

He stopped and faced Severus. "I was very disappointed in your lack of judgment. Had the boy failed, you'd have ruined my plans." He faced the castle. "It would have been the second time my plans regarding you would have been ruined."

Severus knew he was referring to Dumbledore appointing him professor of Defense Against the Dark Arts last summer. "The curse on the Defense teaching position would have found some way to dispense with my tenure," Severus said softly, knowing that he had so far managed to escape the curse. "My delight is in the fact that I can still serve you, my lord."

"Yes, you can and you will," the Dark Lord said, pleased by the response. He glanced sideways at Severus, but Severus merely stood sentinel-like, forcibly remaining calm. "I am well aware that Dumbledore expected me to hand over the administrative duties of the school to you."

Severus let his gaze drift over to the old castle standing proudly on the hill in the growing darkness. He was surprised that the Dark Lord knew. Severus tried to avoid watching the Dark Mark above the Astronomy Tower, and thought of the Thestrals he would sometimes see flying gracefully over the trees from that tower instead. He realized in that moment that Dumbledore was once again correct in predicting the Dark Lord's motives and actions.

"I can see that you are anticipating my plan. Is it possible that you want the position as much as Dumbledore wanted you to succeed him?"

A small fraction of a smile played on Severus' face, but he remained immobile otherwise. A few strands of his hair flew into his face as the breeze began to pick up, but he ignored them. "I admit that I have entertained the idea."

The Dark Lord smirked. "I thought you might. Alec to wants the position, naturally, but she is unqualified. You, however, have been a teacher at the school and a Head of House for fifteen years, and it's time Hogwarts had another Slytherin headmaster. As soon as I have control of the school governors, I will have you appointed as headmaster. You will help me reshape this school into the glory that this school should have been all these years."

"I will gladly accept your appointment," Severus said with a slight bow. "I will serve you in this capacity and bring the school up to the standards worthy of the honor you grant me."

"Of course, I will have to find a suitable position for Alec to at the school...she's expecting it...as is her brother," the Dark Lord said thoughtfully.

Severus' gut clenched. *That didn't bode well; keeping control of the school will be hard enough without those zealots.*

"You'd like to have their help after all, won't you, Severus?" The Dark Lord turned to appraise him. "The Defense Against the Dark Arts is open...Amecus would be suitable in that field, but I will have to lift the curse before he accepts."

And why didn't you do that for me? Severus thought snidely as the Dark Lord continued speaking, "It will no longer be necessary to do away with those appointed to the position since they will be of my choosing. But his sister, Alec to... where to place her particular talents...?"

Severus waited. He had no suggestions, and a flicker of dread punched him in the gut *Not Minerva McGonagall's position*. He'd have to do what he could to keep her as his Deputy. Without her, the rest of the staff will be difficult at best.

"Now go and do what you must to prepare," the Dark Lord said dismissively. "When I have need of you, I will summon you."

"What of Potter and the Order?" Severus asked.

"You are no longer a reliable source where they are concerned," the Dark Lord stated. "I'll have Pettigrew relocated to the Burrow. He can hide in the shed he mentioned and listen from under the floorboards as a rat. I have another who can be persuaded to cooperate as well. He is not as trustworthy as you have been, but possibly useful. I expect you to be ready to move back into the castle as soon as I call for you." With that, he turned and vanished with a crack.

Severus stood on the edge of the ledge, his robes and hair fluttering forward in the breeze. The windows glowed softly in the dark walls of the school *Headmaster*. *You were right, again, old man*. He stared at the charcoal-brown outline of the battlements and towers against the dark outline of the trees and deepening blue sky. He wanted to send Hermione a message, alerting her to the dangers of returning to the school. *If the Dark Lord is going to reshape the school and bring the Carrows on as teachers, it's doubtful that the Muggle-borns will be allowed to return*, he realized. *The Muggle-borns...the school registry. If I can't protect Minerva's position in the school, the Dark Lord will have all their names and addresses at his disposal! I can't take the chance...they will have to hide. All of them*. He hoped Dumbledore had prepared the Order to this eventuality as well as he'd prepared him for the task he'd been given, but someone needed to know so precautions could be carried out.

The Dark Lord assumes I no longer have contacts in the Order Severus mused with a cocky grin. He had one, tenuous at best, and possibly a second. Both were honorable and could see the bigger picture of things, and would possibly listen to him if he gave them warnings. If he could convince them of his true loyalties, he could still help shape the outcome of this war. The fate written on the first pages of the diary still might not come true.

At least he needn't worry about the diary falling into the wrong hands. He'd be able to retrieve it from his quarters tonight, and the other objects he needed to hide, tokens he'd foolishly never been able to part with. Once they were secured in his secret vault in his private stores, he'd find a way to convince Hermione to leave. *If she will even speak to me.*

He closed his eyes to the pain that pinged in his chest.

First things first, the thought, opening his eyes.

He looked up at the sky and remembered the girl he'd taken up here on their hike. This had always been his favorite view of the castle. He recalled how Hermione had inhaled deeply, breathing in the fragrant air as she'd turned and then stared in amazement at the view, her eyes shining with happiness, then drew his wand. "*Expecto Patronum*," he intoned as he waved his wand. The silver deer jumped forth and landed next to the bushes that blocked the trail that led down to the Shrieking Shack. It turned, its sleek head raised to look up at him with soft, guileless, trusting eyes, ready to do as he asked. A doe, more mature in its appearance now than it had been when he'd been younger, but still a doe. "If you'll meet with me, I need to speak to you...to warn you of new developments and new dangers," he said, infusing the Patronus with his voice.

The deer gracefully nodded once, then turned and disappeared into the night.

The headlines of the *Daily Prophet* announced, *Albus Dumbledore Dead and Harry Potter Says Professor Severus Snape Killed Our Beloved Headmaster* The bold print under the image of the Dark Mark floating in the sky over the Astronomy Tower read, *Death Eaters Breached Hogwarts Castle In Raid*. Spiky letters were used to write, *Werewolf Attack In Hogwarts Corridors*, above a picture of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. The article had all the gory details of the attack on Bill and another, as of yet unnamed, student who had been attacked by Greyback himself during the skirmish. Also apparently known was that Dumbledore's secret group of renegades, the Order of the Phoenix, and a group of students calling themselves Dumbledore's Army had chased the Death Eaters and Greyback out of the school along with Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy, who were both named as responsible for the breach of the castle's defenses. The students in Dumbledore's Army were all named and to be given honors for their bravery.

Hermione scoffed at the mention of the award and cringed at the realization that once again, much like they had been after her fifth year, she and her friends would be targets. Only now, the Death Eaters had all of their names and many of Order member's names as well. *Blast the idiocy of the media. Didn't they know or care that what they've done could put us in danger?*

She read every word of the paper. Harry was quoted in several articles, and for once they recorded him accurately. Every professor was quoted and many of the Order members as well. There seemed to have been a question as to why so many 'added security' personnel had been arranged, and if Dumbledore had previous knowledge of the raid, why hadn't the Ministry been alerted. There had only been a handful of Aurors present, each one named. "Because those Aurors are all in the Order," she mumbled with a sigh.

Naturally, Severus Snape was vilified and the articles were full of accusations, lambasting him horribly.

Hermione dropped her hands holding the paper to her lap. His last words echoed in her mind repeatedly *I do what I must tonight. Forgive me if you can* She pressed her fingers to her lips at the memory of his kiss, so hesitant at first as if expecting her to shove him away, to be repulsed by his show of affection, then hungrily demanding to the point it had left her breathless and her knees weak. *Forgive me if you can.*

How could she?

I do what I must tonight he'd said in a deep deadened voice.

He hadn't wanted to, she could see that now. *He didn't want to do it.* It had been in his voice, the resolution to do what he hadn't wanted to do. Whatever it had been...he told her he would be doing what he had to. *Why? What was it he had to do? Kill Dumbledore?* She thought she knew him, had gotten to know him. Dumbledore trusted him, supported and defended him time and time again. He had told everyone that he trusted Professor Snape explicitly. *She'd* trusted him unconditionally.

I do what I must tonight.

She leaned forward, covering her face as she sighed aloud in frustration, and the paper slid off her lap onto the bed. *Why, Severus, why did you do it?* The grotesque image of the Dark Mark waiting over the castle on the paper was glaring up at her accusingly.

Harry described the fact that Dumbledore was weakened by the potion he'd drunk that night in the cave. Harry had told her that Dumbledore didn't have the strength to stand, sagging and staggering weakly against Harry, barely able to walk out of the cave. *How badly hurt had he been? He'd had enough strength to lower the wards on the school so he and Harry could fly to the castle, but Harry said he could barely stand. Dumbledore had sunk, slumping against the wall of the tower when he'd faced Malfoy. He had managed a broom well enough, supposedly, and he'd cast a binding charm on Harry, but then he could barely hold his wand arm up to defend himself?* She tried to picture it: being magically immobilized against the wall as Greyback, Malfoy, Snape and four other Death Eaters faced down Dumbledore on the tower, wands drawn. Professor Snape's expression one of revulsion...hating what he had to do, angry, yes, she would believe that. But Harry had said hate...not anger...hate and revulsion. *He hated what he had to do...hated being in that position.*

"Augh!! What a bloody nightmare." *Severus. Why, Severus, why? Why did you have to kill Dumbledore? Where are you now? What are you going to do? Have you really abandoned us?* She just couldn't believe that...didn't want to, but the evidence was so overwhelming.

She couldn't worry about that now. The war was raging; people were dying, so many going missing, and the Death Eaters were attacking, destroying everything. And she had to help Harry.

Within minutes of scanning through the morning paper, Darias felt his bloodstone pendant vibrate and continue to vibrate. He also felt the small key in his pocket vibrate as well, multiple times. His friends were arriving at his beach house all at once. Fearing they were close to panicking, he excused himself from his father and, as nonchalantly as he could, walked from the room. He walked through the house and out into the early morning as if leaving for an appointment. Once he reached their Apparition point, he took out his pendant and touched his wand to the back of it, activating the Portkey spell, and clamped his hand tightly on the stone.

Darias entered the house through the back door. He was right. All his friends, the ones not already hiding in safe houses, and a few new faces, were crammed into his small lounge waiting for news. There were four new faces: Theodore Nott, Daphne Greengrass, and Bryan and Winnifred Maguire. The first two were standing with his wife, Serena, and Tammorah Macrae and Tiberius Flint; Bryan and Winnifred Maguire stood next to Brambila Rushbridge, who clung to Rayne Boughton's hand, talking worriedly to Aldebaran Urganhart and Terrance Higgs. The rest were gathered around the dining table, talking animatedly.

He shook his head upon seeing three more additions to their group: Eddart Terrance, who had been the fifth-year prefect when Darias had been at school, and Terrance's friends, Gasper Vaisey and William McGariety. *If my memory serves me, they are going to be sixth years next fall.* They stood with Raithe, Duane and Grantham, listening

to Darias' old dorm mates intently.

Raymond Aubry touched Darias' arm. "I think we're all here."

"No," Catherine Flint stated. "We're missing some of the girls. Penelope Reilly and Mary Nolan aren't here yet, and Vaisey, that boy over there," she pointed to the sixteen year old boy, "said that he'll pass on anything we decide to Jessica Arenas and Pauline Gweynewoud after our meeting. They are in his year."

"I also heard from Rayne that Louis Beresford, Charles Lenox, Beatrix Spencer and Eleanor Beaufort are in, but they don't have pendants," Raymond added.

Darias nodded. "I think that Serena may have extras," he said, looking at his wife. "Has anyone heard from Professor Snape?"

Rayne shook his head. "Doesn't look good though, does it? I mean, he'll lose his position at the school for sure now." He looked at the students surrounding the table, and then turned back to Darias and Catherine. "I suppose you're in charge now, unless you want me to since I'll be at the school."

"I'll keep things together the best I can," Darias said. "Duane, Grantham and Raithe keep me apprised on what's happening, but it looks like you and Brambila will have to keep the group at Hogwarts going."

At that moment all conversation in the house stopped as the door opened. Several of those closest to the door had drawn their wands, but lowered them in relief as Severus Snape entered the house. "What happened? I heard you killed the Headmaster?" Darias heard Tammorah Macrea's voice more clearly over the sputtered oaths, mumbles and outcries of the others.

"Calm down. All is not lost," Snape said calmly as he moved further into the center of the lounge, his dark eyes scanning the faces as if cataloging who was present. "Yes, what you heard is true: Dumbledore is dead and by my wand."

"But why would you..." Tammorah asked, but she was quickly quieted by Snape's scowl.

"For reasons I cannot say at present," he said with a tone that everyone knew all too well. "Suffice to say, Dumbledore was dying. From what I've assessed, he'd consumed a potion that had adverse effects on the curse that had been eating away at him all year. Had he been captured or taken before the Dark Lord, it would have been disastrous."

*If the Dark Lord had raped the old man's mind...and he could have...*Darias let the thought drop. It was too horrible to contemplate. He felt a rock-hard lump in his gut. He had no idea how much the old man had known about their group, let alone all the secrets he'd carried of the Order of the Phoenix.

"However, the Dark Lord plans on taking over the Ministry and the school, and he could very well accomplish that." Snape held up his hand to stem off their comments. "There is much to be said, and I've very little time to do so."

Everyone settled down: leaning against walls, filling chairs, sitting on armrests of chairs occupied by friends or spouses, and even sitting on the floor. Snape nodded in approval. "Now, if the Dark Lord does take over the school as he plans, he intends to make me headmaster of the school. If not, then we'll find ways to communicate. Those of you returning," he looked pointedly at the three returning as sixth years in the fall, "you'll have to be careful. Vincent Crabbe has taken the Mark, as has Gregory Goyle. Draco Malfoy will return to Hogwarts as well. Patrick Harper is also a concern. Eugene Caldwell is likely to join us, and Aurora Shidhom is scared to join us but she sides with you. I will arrange a meeting with them and see how they stand before school starts. If I think they might waver, I'll modify their memories."

Vaisey raised his hand, and Snape acknowledged him. "I know who stands where in my year," he said boldly. "Eugene and Seumond will side with us, but Seumond is unsure about raising his wand at his dad in the war. Jessica and Pauline are on our side, too. I'll know for sure in September."

Snape acknowledged his declaration with a nod. "For now, keep your messages brief, and be careful how you pass information to each other...especially to me. If I don't answer right away, it might be due to my circumstances, but I will get back to you. Have patience, keep vigilant, trust only those you know who have sworn an oath of loyalty and above all, watch your backs. When I know more, I'll send word. Mostly, keep up pretenses. He is rising in power, much like he did before, but all is not lost. He can be defeated. We have to stick together and look for opportunities as they present themselves, undermining him as best as we can from within."

"When do you think he'll strike?" Rayne asked.

"Runcorn keeps telling us," Duane said, indicating Grantham and Raithe, "he'll take the Ministry first. There are a number of Death Eaters already employed there. Umbridge and Fudge were idiots. Their blindness to what was really happening has weakened the Ministry's defenses considerably, and the news is that Rufus Scrimgeour will be named as the new Minister, but he doesn't know who is on the Dark Lord's side."

"And if the Dark Lord does pull a coup on the Ministry, then taking over the school will not be difficult," Darias stated. There was a collective sigh in the room.

"We'll be ready," Vaisey said, and Terrance and McGariety squared their shoulders as Rayne nodded assuredly.

"I must leave you now," Snape said. "Remember what I said. I'll be in touch, but I presume the *Daily Prophet* will be announcing anything that transpires quickly."

"Unless Bollard follows through with his threats and buys the paper," Byron Maguire stated, and everyone turned to him. "My dad says Bollard will fire Barnabas Cuffe and Jonathan Vogt because they are too liberal on their ideas of equality, tolerance and individual rights, and make himself Publisher and appoint Beaufort as Editor in Chief, and Rousseau in charge of editorials, and they will take on new staff. If that happens, presume it will only print propaganda and half truths, slanted to what the Dark Lord will favor."

Snape was thoughtful for a moment. "I have seen Bollard and Beaufort at Malfoy Manor talking to Rodolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange and Lucius Malfoy. The Dark Lord has not been happy with the slant the paper has been writing, and if what you say is true and the Dark Lord decides to take action, the Lestranges will back the takeover."

"So, we can't trust the *Daily Prophet*?" Brambila asked.

"For now," Winnifred Maguire said, "The *Prophet* has been reporting the truth, but father says that he will do what is needed to keep his job."

"Keep me informed on what you hear," Snape said. "Now I must go." He turned to leave.

Darias watched his ex-professor leave with a mix of emotions. He wanted to know what had transpired on the tower, and why he'd killed Dumbledore. The brief explanation still left too many questions unanswered. He'd have to look into it personally. He turned to the others.

"Ginny Weasley and Colin Creevey are in my year, and I'd heard that Dumbledore was dying from a curse. It had been eating away at him," Vaisey was saying. "That's why his hand was all black and dead-looking...a curse. From what I overheard Professor McGonagall telling Professors Flitwick and Sprout, it had reached past his shoulder, and Madam Pomfrey had said it would've killed him within a month if Professor Snape hadn't killed him."

"When did you hear this?" Serena asked.

"I was visiting a friend in the hospital that night. They didn't know I was there," Vaisey stated. "There was a man and a woman next to a cot, and they were all talking softly, but I have some of those Extendable Ears from Weasley's Wizard Wheezes."

Darias listened on with rapt attention as he told them everything he'd over heard.

Hermione arrived at Privet Drive in her new, off-white, Coco Chanel sleeveless dress paired with her new black and tan shoes, and carried her Burberry rain coat, umbrella and purse. She'd even taken great pains with her hair, using generous amounts of her mum's deep conditioner and conditioning styling gel to make her curls look their best. She'd heard about the Dursleys and how snobbish they were, so she figured that she'd better dress up if she were going to get her way and be able to help Harry with his Surges. Snobby people respected wealthy people.

Normally, Hermione wore clothes from H&M, Fat Face, M&S or whichever boutique her mum wanted to go to. Hermione usually preferred her casual clothes, which were comparable to what the other girls wore, to the higher end fashions her mum bought for her.

The truth was Hermione's family was really quite well off, something she kept to herself. If Ron knew she was from a wealthy family, he'd only moan about her and Harry having money when he didn't, and Hermione was of the opinion that being rich wasn't everything. She knew that Lavender and Parvati certainly would have treated her differently if they'd known, but then she'd always wanted to be liked for herself, not for her parent's money. The good thing about school robes, they were equalizers, and practical shoes were more comfortable on stone corridors and stairs than fashionable shoes.

She walked confidently up to number four and rang the bell. She heard some voices before a man said, "I have no idea, I'm not expecting anyone," before he opened the door.

Hermione was unimpressed with Mr. Dursley, with the exception of how he'd managed to find a suit jacket in his size. "Good morning, Mr. Dursley. I'm Hermione Granger. Is Harry at home by chance?" she asked politely.

Somehow he took immediate offence to her. "And what would you be wanting with him?" he asked.

"Harry and I are school mates, and I was in the neighborhood and thought it might be nice to come by and see him. Besides, I think he may need my help," she said. Behind the large man, an equally, if not larger, teenager backed away quickly. *That had to be Harry's cousin, Dudley.*

"He doesn't need anyone of your kind here," Mr. Dursley said, and he was about to close the door on her.

Thinking quickly, Hermione said, "And what if Harry has a magical outburst...he's coming of age, you know. Harry will come into his *full magical strength* over the next two months...up until his seventeenth birthday. Our magic surges at this time of our life, and if there are accidental magical incidents, it could manifest at disproportionate levels."

Mr. Dursley started to turn puce. "Do not mention this nonsense on my doorstep!"

"Then let me in," she said, placing a hand on the door and pushing him aside with a very gentle Repelling Charm with her other. He moved back as if of his own accord. Hermione set her handbag, umbrella and coat on the table set across a door under the stairs. *Probably Harry's old room*, she thought with a tinge of indignation on her friend's behalf. *Well, no bother.* She turned and faced Mr. Dursley, seeing Harry and Mrs. Dursley standing in the entry to the lounge. "I seem to recall an incident where Harry blew up his aunt."

Mr. Dursley opened his mouth but closed it when she continued, "Imagine if he did something similar now? You see, from now up to his birthday, Harry is coming of age, both chronologically and magically. His powers likewise are going to come to their full strength, but all at once, and he'll have to learn how to control it. So, as his friend and having gone through it myself, I'm here to help him since its obvious you can't." Apparently no one else was buggered to help him, so she was going to do it herself. At least Professor McGonagall agreed to give her a target dummy and a sparring dummy, both shrunken down to fit in her purse.

She looked up at Harry. "All right there, Harry?"

"Yeah, although, I thought Mr. Weasley or Tonks would be helping me?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nope, it's me. Mr. Weasley and Tonks are overwhelmed with Ministry business, and well, Mad-Eye would have, but everyone in the Order is fighting Death Eaters and Voldemort, so I volunteered." It wasn't exactly a lie, only twisting of the facts a little, but Harry caught on quickly and affirmed her statement with a mute nod of his head. "Now, I strongly suggest we pick a room and set things up."

"I will not have magic committed in my house!" Mr. Dursley shouted.

"How about the garage," Harry suggested.

"Harry cannot leave the residence, Mr. Dursley. It's too dangerous as I'm sure you're aware, or have you been ignoring the wizarding papers?" Hermione asked pointedly.

"We do not read that rot you all call news," Mr. Dursley bellowed.

"That's too bad, because there are wizards who want to kill Harry, and if they do, your protection...the protections Dumbledore placed on the house because of the blood bond between Harry and your wife...might be cancelled..."

"What about your house?" Mrs. Dursley asked.

"My parent's house in Bexleyheath? I'm afraid that my parents are at a business conference at the Mandolay Hotel in Guildford. You can't bring Harry there, practicing there would be a violation of the Statute of Secrecy," she explained patiently.

"What about them wizards who take him every summer, the Weasels. Why can't he do this at their house?" Mr. Dursley asked, shaking a pudgy finger at Harry.

"Mr. Weasley is fighting in this wizarding war we are currently experiencing, as are his eldest sons, and Mrs. Weasley's home is the hub of the resistance, and she's planning a wedding. Unfortunately, Harry can't Apparate yet, and neither the tube nor the bus goes there. It would be unwise for *you* to take Harry to the Burrow...I'm certain you can't get there by car." She looked at Harry. "So we'll use the garage."

"Now look here, young lady," Mr. Dursley barked.

"It would be safest; I certainly don't want to do magical control exercises in your lounge...I'd hate to have any of your lovely things blown up in there...and I'm certain that Harry's bedroom will be too small for such practices," she said calmly, thoroughly enjoying outwitting the man. "No, as Harry suggested, the garage would be the best place."

It took some haggling, and she remained calm even as Mr. Dursley continued to bellow at her, but in the end he relented. When Harry opened the door to the garage and turned on the lights, Hermione gaped in astonishment. She'd never in all her life seen a cleaner garage. The cement floor didn't have any stains or cracks, the cupboards and cabinets were painted a pristine white, and on the walls everything was in its place. Even the tools on the pegboard were outlined, designating their exact place. Together, Harry and Hermione packed all the loose items in boxes, shrunken to fit in the cabinets, and she added spells to the walls: dampening charms, deflection and shielding wards, containment spells, everything she could think of to cordon off the space and protect the house.

"I don't think we're really going to need to spar all that much. You're already a very good fighter," she explained as she set the target and sparring dummies up. "So we'll concentrate on control. Try a Stunning Hex first."

Harry drew his wand and fired at the target dummy. The indicator on the target dummy showed a dark violet-blue. "Too strong, Harry, try to keep it in the greens for now."

His next two were equally strong. "Gah," he exclaimed when the next one was again too strong. "I can't."

"It's okay, Harry, I expected this," she assured him. "You're a really strong wizard, and your magic is obviously Surging. Remember the talks McGonagall gave us?"

He shrugged. "Mr. Weasley tried to tell me about it, too."

She nodded, remembering the talk she'd overheard with a smile. "So for now, we'll keep practicing and focus on your control. Try again, and try to hold back."

The next few results were pretty much what she predicted: too strong.

Severus arrived on the street in Bexleyheath where Hermione lived and walked casually down the street, stopping at the space he knew her house was. As soon as he had the thought, the house magically slowly appeared. He knew immediately that they were home since both cars stood in the drive.

He checked that his wards on the house and their cars were still strong and relaxed upon confirming everything was as it should be. Even the Compulsion Charm to leave the premises in a car remained. Severus knew that most Muggles would walk to the nearest bus or train stop, but if either Hermione or her parents walked off the property they would be vulnerable, hence the protections on the vehicles. He'd also personally added Bumper-Buffer Defensive Charm and Distance-Periphery Spatial Charm on the vehicles so the other Muggles driving on the road would not hit them, and since Muggles typically tried not to collide, no one observing the flow of traffic would likely notice anything amiss. Or so he hoped.

He was worried for her. If the school records fell to the hands of the Death Eaters or the Dark Lord demanded access to the school registry, Hermione's address would be known. Between Draco's constant comments about Hermione's success in school, her tendency to best him in every subject, Severus knew that her name came up in Draco's letters home on a regular basis and in his family discussions during the holidays at his home. And there were other students who were bothered by her intelligence and natural ability to grasp even the most complex magical skill...and not just in Slytherin. Pure-bloods were supposed to be superior, and Hermione proved the pure-blood supremacy theory wrong at every turn...just as Lily had when they'd been kids. Hermione would be a target if only to eliminate the threat she posed.

Moving stealthily, he tried to ascertain if she was in residence. There was a woman running the vacuum in the lounge. Hermione's mother was in her kitchen preparing something, and her father was in a room to the right, reading. Severus used a detection charm to deduce if anyone were upstairs, and nodded when the charm indicated no one else in the house. He walked to the back of the house and repeated the charm, obtaining the same results. Apparently Hermione was not at home.

He wondered briefly where she could have gone. *Shopping, out with a friend, at the Burrow, or...* he thought, but wherever she was, she was not at home, and she had not taken a car. *Bloody hell. Wherever you are, I hope you Apparated.*

He stamped down an irrational anger, realizing that if he were to try and make contact, she would think of him as a killer, and he might get hexed on her doorstep. But he had to warn her. He closed his eyes and forced himself to remain calm. It would be a huge risk, but he'd have to send her a letter and hope to Merlin she didn't disregard his warnings.

He turned on the spot and Apparated for home.

Hermione arrived at Harry's right on time and rang the bell. She heard Harry's footsteps on the stairs and his call of, "I'll get it." She smiled. She could almost see him in her mind, bounding down the steps, messy hair, baggy jeans, shirt that was much too big on him.

When he opened the door, she was a little surprised to see that his clothes actually fit him this time. "Dressed up again for dueling practice?" Harry asked as he let her in.

"What this old thing?" Hermione said, offhandedly as she entered the hall, briefly touching her chest with the hand on which her Dolce and Gabbana handbag hung on her arm. "This is last season's, Harry, it won't matter if it gets mussed." From the corner of her eye she could see Mrs. Dursley's reaction and almost started laughing. She'd been dressing outrageously in designer ensembles, like a model from a fashion magazine, for each session, mostly to keep up the pretenses and to keep the Dursleys off guard. One day, she wore an Antonio Berardi dress with an Anne Klein coat, followed by a Burberry trench dress and Alaxander McQueen boots the next day, then a Saint Laurent blouse with her favorite jeans and Dolce loafers the day after that, a St John ensemble with Chloé pumps another day, and she'd worn a white Sandro blouse with a black Gucci skirt, and black and white Michael Kors pumps. But today she simply wore a light camel Chanel coat and skirt with a Burberry top and Jimmy Choo shoes.

She waved at Mrs. Dursley, who was naturally cleaning with a dust rag in the lounge again. Each time Hermione had entered the house she knew that Mrs. Dursley scrutinized her clothes critically while trying to appear completely disinterested, which really amused her and Harry. At least her mum had been glad to see some of the pricy clothes being worn, although it only encouraged her mum to try and take Hermione shopping.

Hermione pulled two books from her purse to hand to Harry. He eyed the books skeptically; they were a little thick, but they had some really great spells in them. "I thought we'd start with these today," she said softly so her voice wouldn't carry.

"Wonderful," Harry drawled out slowly as he took the books. "Well, c'mon, let's go out to the garage."

"What does she see in him," Hermione heard Mrs. Dursley ask someone she couldn't see from the entry.

"He is so out of her league," she heard Mr. Dursley grumble back. "Now if it were a fine young man like Dudley, I could well understand her attraction..."

Hermione rolled her eyes as she followed Harry out of the house. They practiced for a good hour, and there was some slight improvement, but occasionally he was still using too much force behind his spells. "Think of it like... reigning in your strength, not holding it back. And exhale before casting. Maybe that will help, like taking a cleansing calming breath."

"In a fight, I won't be taking calming breaths," Harry replied.

"No," she said, quirking her mouth and shrugging her arms slightly, "but this is about learning control. No one is going to attack you right now."

Harry huffed, then exhaled heavily, took aim and fired at the target dummy. The indicator was a bright orange-red.

"Better," Hermione said as he tried again, only this time the indicator was a bright red.

He raised his wand, and fired a Stunning Hex just as Mrs. Dursley entered the garage. She stopped short, gaping at the wobbling target dummy, then at the pair of them. Mrs. Dursley swallowed nervously as Harry lowered his wand. "W-would you c-care to join us for lunch, Miss Granger?" she asked, trying to force herself to calm down.

Hermione looked at her as if not understanding her discomfort. She knew that the Dursleys were uncomfortable with magic, but Harry was showing remarkable control of his aim. His spells were all hitting the dummies squarely. Not one item in the garage had been broken or damaged. "Oh, er, thank you, but no," Hermione replied, feigning surprise with a dramatic air. "That's so kind of you, but I promised Harry lunch and stopped by my favorite little deli on the way."

Harry, who'd pursed his lips to keep from laughing, quickly added, "I was going to suggest to Hermione that we sit in the back garden since it's so nice out."

"Oh, that would be delightful," Hermione said as she turned to him and nodded. She then looked at Harry's aunt. "If that's all right with you, of course, Mrs. Dursley?"

"Don't worry, Aunt Petunia, we'll clean up when we're through," Harry said. "I promise."

Mrs. Dursley sputtered her acquiescence while staring at Harry's wand.

"And we won't let the neighbors see our wands," he added as his aunt backed out of the garage.

"Harry, that was mean," Hermione said as he led her to the back garden.

Harry shrugged and a chuckle escaped. "But fun. Did you see the look on her face? You'd think I was blasting holes in the walls and cupboards."

Hermione pulled the food she'd brought from her purse, and they sat on lawn chairs, sipping on Cokes and munching on thick chicken sandwiches as they discussed some of the spells in the books she'd brought.

"Have you been following the *Prophet*?" Harry asked.

"Of course," she replied.

"They got most of it right, but I'm sick of the images they keep reprinting," he replied, and she knew he meant about the Dark Mark over the Astronomy Tower and Dumbledore's grave. "And all the disappearances...the attacks...it's all happening, and I'm stuck here, doing target practice."

"You have to stay here. If you go wandering, you might be seen and then where will we be? If you face Voldemortow, he'd come back. We have to destroy all of them first." She placed her hand on the book and bit her lip, releasing it slowly. "Harry, what really happened that night, up on the tower?"

"I told you, Snape killed Dumbledore," he said exasperatedly.

"Professor Snape," she corrected him automatically. "But there must have been something you missed, some clue, a hint." It didn't make sense. Professor Snape had kissed her...really kissed her and then begged her to forgive him. Yes, he'd knocked out Professor Flitwick, and he'd rescued Malfoy, but he'd told her he had to do something she'd hate him for...something he *had* to. It was like he'd warned her that he'd have to kill Dumbledore. *What else could he have meant by his cryptic words? And why work so hard creating potions to cure the Headmaster if he was only going to kill him... or spend so much time with me, teaching me how to defend myself, how to do wandless magic... None of it makes any sense!*

"Hermione, Snape is on Voldemort's side. He always was. Dumbledore was wrong. He killed him," he said adamantly.

"Professor Snape," she insisted with a sigh. "Are you sure about his expression? He couldn't have been angry because you were there or he found himself in a situation with no way out?" She wished she could view his memory of the evening. She thought she knew Snape by now, she'd gotten to know the real him and then he went and did something like this. It really bothered her. "It just doesn't feel right; I know there is something..."

"It was revulsion. Snape looked at Dumbledore for a moment, and then he stared at him with revulsion and hatred and then he killed him. Dumbledore was pleading with him, and Snape just stood there and killed him."

"Professor Snape. But even on the grounds, he had opportunity to grab you or kill you and he didn't. He didn't, Harry. He let you go." It didn't make any sense. "You said he told you to keep your mouth closed, to use nonverbal spells...he was still trying to impart something to you, even then he was trying to teach you. Harry, he was always trying to teach us, to help us be better."

Harry jumped to his feet. *"He killed Dumbledore! Snape stopped me from stopping him...he could have killed me, but he was a coward."*

"Argh," she growled out, frustrated, and followed him toward the garage. "Professor Snape was not a coward. He was in a situation with no other choice. Or maybe Dumbledore didn't want to be dragged off. Did you consider that? You said he was weak; he couldn't stand...he was slouching against the wall. Imagine if Voldemort had gotten hold of Dumbledore! The damage it would have done to the Order," she persisted. It was no use, Harry wouldn't be swayed, and she didn't have the answers. "Forget it. Forget I said anything. Let's get back to practice."

Harry glowered but stood and aimed his wand at the sparing dummy. "*Confringo*."

The indicator glowed in a deep purple.

She sighed.

"Harry, if he's so bad, why would he warn me to stay away from Hogwarts?" she asked, showing him the note she'd received. It had actually come in the post a week ago. It had really surprised her to receive it, and if anything could, it reaffirmed her suspicions that things were not at all how they seemed. She was going nutters trying to rationalize his actions, but without actually talking to him, she could only come to one conclusion: Dumbledore had pleaded for Professor Snape to kill him rather than be carried off by the Death Eaters. It was the only thing that made sense...and yet didn't. If the Death Eaters couldn't Apparate from the tower, one of them would have had to carry Dumbledore, Imperiused or Stunned, out of the castle.

And yet, Professor Snape had warned her of being in danger...of her parents being in danger.

His note had been brief.

Miss Granger,

Hogwarts will not be safe, do not return to school.

It would be best if you leave, get away from England, as far away as you can. Your parents are in danger, too.

The protections on your house might not be sufficient if he gains power, and if you leave the house on foot, you'll be exposed, you would be in danger.

Do not expect the Ministry to be of any help. He is getting stronger and the Ministry is not as strong as it once was. It may fall to him soon.

It hadn't been signed, but there was no mistaking his handwriting.

Hermione had sat down with her parents and told them everything. They were worried, *naturally*, but they'd listened attentively. Having several issues of the *Daily Prophet* in her trunk, every issue saved up over the previous year helped, but there had been plenty of arguments over what they should do. Thankfully, Severus' note helped support her position on the matter, as did a letter from Tonks and Ginny about the concerns the Order had for her and her parent's welfare, but her parents hated the idea that she would not go into hiding with them. She was seventeen, soon to be eighteen in September and therefore a legal adult in her world. And she had a mission, one she couldn't exactly tell her parents about, except in broad generalizations.

She'd explained to her father that she had artifacts to find, and that these artifacts would, if brought together, combine a magic so strong as to bring down Voldemort for good. It was a horrible half-truth, but she equated it to Dungeons and Dragons and War Hammer, where the mage (or in her case, witch and wizard) could destroy the evil overlord. That he understood. At least hypothetically.

She'd also told him that the Order of the Phoenix would be doing the actual fighting, and that the fighting was also a diversion to the quest set to her, Ron and Harry. Not that her father liked that, but he did eventually come to understand the importance of what she was involved in.

Her mother took longer to convince.

Besides, Hermione knew that as soon as they found the missing Horcruxes, Harry would be ready to face down Voldemort, and how long could that take? A year was a reasonable assumption. Everything should be back to normal by then.

In the end it had been decided that her parents would take a year, or longer, sabbatical from work. Her parents' partner, Dr. Duke, and Melissa Hennings, their office manager, would manage the practice while they were away, and two Locum Tenens dentists would be hired to fill in for the duration. Both Dr. Duke and his family, however, were told that George and Jean Granger were going to join Doctors Without Borders for a year or so, to help those less fortunate and see some of the world. Hermione helped reinforce the idea in Dr. Duke's and Melissa's minds with a little spell she'd read about, the Inception Curse, instilling the notion that her parents had been speaking of doing so for a while now and that all would be well and good until they returned. The Dukes even offered to throw a going away party, which ended up being held in the office.

Hermione found that altering her parents' passports and needed papers with the names Monica and Wendell Wilkins was easy enough. Using the altered identifications, her parents transferred their accounts under their assumed names, which could be transferred to a branch in Australia. That way her parents would draw on their savings for the time being. Her father even suggested that they could work for the Royal Flying Doctor Service in Australia, one of the largest and most comprehensive aeromedical organizations in the world. The house would be locked down and magically secured, and that Hermione could use the money that had been set aside for Hermione's last term of school if she needed the funds.

The next day, Hermione had gone to Diagon Alley to transfer all her funds to a Muggle bank. She hadn't expected the goblins to be able to do the transfer for her, but it had made things much easier. She had been surprised by the amounts her parents had set aside for her. According to the accounting sheet, she had over five thousand, two hundred and ninety-four Galleons, four hundred and seventy-one Sickles and over a thousand Knuts... a fortune in her mind. According to the goblin Tagruk, her parents had already set aside twenty-five thousand pounds sterling for the tuition for her last year, plus two hundred and fifty for books, four hundred for new uniforms, three hundred for her potions ingredients, and a generous amount of pocket money for quills, parchment and essentials for when she went to Hogsmeade. Combined with her building society savings, she should have enough to support her, Harry and Ron for a while.

"I have some money put away," she admitted to Harry. "But we'd have to make it last. So, that means no hotels."

"Too risky. What about camping?" Harry asked, glancing down at her shoes. "Would you be all right with that?"

Hermione shot him an incredulous look. "Despite my current *flair for fashion*, I assure you I can endure some time camping. But, you're right, a tent is really mobile, and easy to take down and relocate with minimal fuss. Plus we'd be able to move about in places where cars can't go." It was so logical. "But I don't own any camping stuff, and I'm certain your guardians won't let you borrow theirs."

"Ron's dad had a tent, remember? A magical one...fully equipped with a kitchen and a bathroom," Harry said, beaming. "Maybe we could ask him."

Hermione nodded. "All right, I'll go see Ron tomorrow and see about it."

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Yes, I know, this update delivery was really quick thanks to my wonderful betas. So, now here we go... on to DH!

Chapter 51

Chapter 51 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun.

Keep in mind, most of the actual events in DH happen as they happened in the book unless I have indicated they happened differently or at a slightly different time. I am, however, adding to the drawn out camping stretches a bit, and some interactions that didn't happen in the book. My creative license says I can do that.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Severus had been pleased to see seven Harry Potter's shooting into the sky above the street in Surrey; that meant that Mundungus had played his part well. The simpleton. It had been a good play, if it worked. He landed his broom in the area below where he'd had the accident with the Harry Potter he'd followed. For all he knew it was Hermione's ear he'd sliced off...a disastrous incident wherein instead of slicing Cuilén's arm as he'd intended, he'd cut the ear off the Harry Potter riding with Lupin

when the werewolf had made a diversionary maneuver and got in the way. The idea that he could have mutilated Hermione gnawed at him ferociously. "*Accio severed ear,*" he said and gasped at the appendage that flew into his palm. It was not hers, thank Merlin. It was larger than her delicate shell, and freckled. *One of the Weasley's then.*

He considered what to do with the offending ear. If it was the youngest Weasley's ear, it would cause Hermione distress, and his hearing impaired could pose a problem for Potter in a sticky situation. God only knows what they would face searching for those cursed artifacts.

He was still angry at Arthur for not heeding his warnings about the Muggle-borns. The *Daily Prophet* was being quiet on the names of the missing and those killed in raids, but then the editors of the paper, Barnabas Cuffe and Jonathan Vogt, had been captured, and Bollard assumed control of the publication, just as Maguire had warned would happen. Severus had been present when Susan Li and Lisa Turpin had been brought before the Dark Lord, tortured and taken down to the Malfoys' basement. What had become of them after that, he had no idea. Charity Burbage had also been captured. She had been a colleague and had always been sociable toward him. The manner of her death had bothered Severus greatly; she'd deserved better than to be pre-dinner entertainment and snake food. Even Draco had paled considerably, and watching her die was something that the boy was never likely to forget, not that there hadn't been many such acts in his home as of late.

Severus could tell that the punishments that the Dark Lord made Draco perform on those who'd displeased him were making an indelible impression on the once arrogant young Malfoy. Draco's use of the Cruciatius on Zane Seymour two days ago had greatly disturbed the boy, regardless of how hard he'd tried to hide it. Even though Draco had frequently called Miss Seymour a Mudblood while at school, he'd barely had the stomach to properly dispense with the girl, much to the Dark Lord's displeasure.

Severus hoped the boy wouldn't crack and could hold out until school started.

At least Hermione had been safe, until today, and he wanted to know if she had reached the Burrow safely.

He needed to know.

Well, one exchange for another, he thought and Apparated.

Severus arrived in the Orchard and moved stealthy toward the house. He saw Molly in the window and quickly cast a version of the Imperious Curse, the Inception Curse, on her. She looked up and stared out of the window, their eyes locking onto one another's, and he reinforced the connection by blending Subicimency with the spell. Using the link, he instilled the mental suggestion, 'Come outside to the orchard, alone.' Molly turned from the window, and Severus slunk back into the shadows.

He watched her walk casually into the trees as if sleepwalking. "*Expelliarmus,*" he said, disarming her. "*Immobilis membrum,*" he added, binding her to an old post, making her unable to move her arms or legs.

Her eyes widened the moment she saw him. "What are...why...? Murderer!" she shrieked.

He smirked, knowing that his use of the previously cast Muffliato kept anyone in the house from hearing her. "Yes, and so much more," he intoned.

She struggled futilely against her magical bindings. "You came here to kill me?"

"No, I did not." He walked up to her as he pricked his finger and placed a drop of blood on her forehead. He aimed his wand at her and with a precise rotation, he said softly, "*Celare-inaudire.*" The color of his blood emanated a soft bright red glow as the enchantment took hold, and her eyes widened in recognition of the Secret-Keeping Enchantment, used by many to bind someone to hold in confidence something heard as a secret.

"Why?"

"I came here to tell you how to heal your son," Severus stated.

Her eyes narrowed. "Why would you have...?"

He cut her off, saying, "I understand your son was the Potter-impersonator who lost his ear." She sputtered obscenities and accusations, which he allowed, then silenced her. "*It was an accident.* I was flying alongside Avery and Cuil  n. Cuil  n shot forward, and I was about to cut his arm before he could kill Lupin, but Dolohov dove, making Lupin swerve and my spell removed your son's ear instead." He pulled the appendage from his pocket. "Had I been able," he lowered his hand, closing his fingers around the ear. "But I could not."

"It was cut off with a *curse!*" she spat at him. "*A curse, Severus, you cannot...*"

"It is not a curse, but a deviation of the Slicing Hex. Few know the spell or can control it properly. Considering the time that has elapsed, the ear may or may not attach, however, I'm here to tell you how to heal the wound."

"Why, Severus? Why protect Remus and kill Dumbledore? He loved you like a son," she said, her expression hurt and questioning.

"*He used me like a pawn...*a role I was prepared to accept, at some cost," he spat angrily and gritted his teeth.

"I don't believe you," she stated, anger flashing in her eyes.

"Do you want to learn the spell or not?" he snapped. "I haven't time for this."

She nodded. He summoned a large box. Inside, a pig lay on its side as if sleeping. "Only immobilized." He cut the pig with his Sectumsempra. The pig didn't make a sound or flinch. Then speaking clearly, he closed the wound with the incantation.

"All right, show me," she said, waiting. He repeated the incantation, which Molly tried to mimic. "No, you haven't got the intonation right. It's a mix of old English and early Cambric, try again." He corrected her several times before she had the words right. He released her, then slashed the pig again and stood up. "Go on, try it," he said, handing her wand back to her.

She did, but it took several tries before she could close the wound properly. "Do it again," he insisted, slashing the pig with more intent this time. The gash was horrid, bleeding profusely. She was sweating now, but calmly leaned over the pig. He watched as she carefully closed the wound, making the blood return, absorbed into the arteries, and the flesh healed.

"You may keep the pig," he said.

He handed her the ear.

"Why, Severus? I don't understand," she asked, looking at the flesh on her palm and then looked up at him. "Why save Remus after you so cold-heartedly killed Dumbledore? After all you did to try and save him, why kill him?"

"I made a *Vow.*" He regretted telling her the moment the words escaped his lips. However, his blood on her forehead still remained a brilliant bright red...she was still bound by the Secret-Keeping Enchantment. He stepped forward, and she moved back in fear but his stride was longer. "I made a vow to him I could not break!" He pulled up his sleeve, showing her his right wrist...his wand hand. "Here is your proof."

Molly swallowed and then looked at his forearm, and her eyes widened as he cast the revealing charm. There were two very thin, fine, white scar-like lines across his skin

above his wrist, interspaced with two lines that still shimmered with a silvery-hue. "Four? There are..." she said as she looked up, imploringly, "two unfinished?"

"Yes, I've made *four* Unbreakable Vows, two of which I have completed, two I have yet to see through," he said bitterly. No one trusted him, it seemed, unless they made him vow to do what they wanted.

"What are they?"

His head snapped up at the question. "Which? The two I completed, or the two unfinished ones?" He pointed his wand tip on the third line. "One to Narcissa Malfoy to protect Draco, to keep him from harm and to complete his task for him should the boy fail. Bellatrix was the Binder. I'm still bound to the first two parts of the Vow. The one below it was to Dumbledore, to kill him myself so that the Dark Lord couldn't use Legilimency on him in his weakened state from the curse that was killing him. He bound that one himself. Of course, he pleaded with me that night to keep my vow, to kill him so that neither Greyback nor Bellatrix Lestrange could torture him...or the Carrows for that matter. Believe me, they would have loved toying with him on the tower that night before taking him before the Dark Lord."

"To kill Dumbledore? The Malfoy boy was to kill Dumbledore?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"No, his attempts were ruses to hide his true intent...the infiltration of the school...to have the Death Eaters invade the castle so they could besiege the school," he confessed. She might as well know the truth, no one else did. "You know that I was trying every way I could to contain the curse, to prolong his life?" he asked, and she nodded.

"Which was why it was such a shock," she stated. "Madam Pomfrey said he was dying...Harry said he'd consumed a potion."

He knew about the potion that Potter gave Dumbledore, but if he'd had time, he could have... possibly.... But there was nothing he could have done, not in that situation. "Yes, he was dying...a very slow and very painful death. That night, he could no longer stand, even his magic was fading. Don't you understand? He was weakened to the point where he could not defend himself." He exhaled heavily to forestall the anger that threatening to rise. "Whatever it was that Potter gave him, it had reacted with the curse eating away at the old wizard. I could see the tendrils of the curse on the man's neck! He'd have died in only a few days anyway."

Molly looked away, her eyes becoming misty. "So you killed him so the Death Eaters couldn't capture him."

"Yes," he admitted. Maybe she was finally starting to see. She was not a stupid woman; it was possible she would accept the truth.

She turned to look at him. "What is the other vow...what other vows have you made?"

He hesitated. "Tell me first...who else was hurt besides your son and Mundungus?"

She eyed him suspiciously. "Mad-Eye fell from his broom and is thought to be dead," she said, then placed her hands on her hips. "Now, tell me! You want my trust, what is the other vow are you still held to and to whom did you make that vow?"

He exhaled, his relief flooding him as he turned his head for a moment. *Hermione is safe. She's unharmed.* He looked up at Molly. The blood was still bright red, indicating that he still had time to seal the enchantment, to bind her to keep his secrets.

He considered whether to seal the Secret-Keeping Enchantment now or to answer her question. He'd feel more confident if he told her while under the enchantment's influence. She would keep his secret; even if she managed to fight through the Secret-Keeping Enchantment, he knew she would keep his confidences, not that it truly mattered anymore, but at least one person would know. But she was a formidable witch, if she did break the enchantment, she might tell Arthur, but that was as far as his secret would go, he was certain of that. He had time. "I made a vow to Lily." At least she and Arthur would know why.

"To Lily...Lily Potter?"

"*Evans*," he snapped, then sighed. "Yes to Lily, the night I begged Dumbledore to hide her. He summoned her, made me tell her what I'd done. She made me swear," he paused, lowering his eyes, not meeting her gaze, "to do whatever Dumbledore asked of me. To do what I could to help them defeat the Dark Lord." He opened his eyes to find her watching him, concerned but not judgmental. "And to help watch over and protect her son until the day came that he fulfilled the prophecy, the day one dies at the hand of the other. Dumbledore was the Binder."

Molly looked at him with sympathy in her eyes that might as well have been pity. "And the other one...the other vow?"

"Another to Dumbledore, to protect the students any way I could once he was gone. He wanted me to take over the school as Headmaster, should the Dark Lord take over the school" he lied, telling her the promise he'd made instead. "Mad-Eye was the Binder." That was safe enough, she couldn't disprove his claim.

"Will you watch over my children for me, Severus? Will you watch over Ginny and Ronald, too? Please."

He nodded once. "Yes, as best I can. You have my word."

She nodded at him, her expression reflecting absolute trust in his promise, so much so that it seared his soul. "I have to go." He aimed his wand at her forehead, and his blood seeped into her skin, binding her to keep everything he'd told her in the strictest confidences.

Her eyes narrowed in indignation. "I'd have kept your confidences, if only to hold you to your promise," she said.

"Yes, but the enchantment had to be sealed or you would have begun to bleed profusely from where I marked you," he reminded her. He turned and pulled his mask from his pocket. He felt emotionally drained. *Hermione is all right.* He'd learned she was unharmed, even though it had cost him to trust Molly with his secrets. *At least here is one who knows on which side I remain*, he assured himself. He wasn't completely alone. Arthur might not have trusted his previous warning, but she might convince Arthur to trust his warnings in the future.

He hoped that the other Order member was still assured of his loyalty. Time would tell.

"Severus?"

He turned, his mask in his hand.

"Thank you."

He nodded, turned, placed the mask on his face, feeling like shit, and Disappeared.

Severus wanted word on Hermione's whereabouts. The Dark Lord was still in a rage...not surprisingly. His spy, most likely Pettigrew, had given him a date and time when Potter would be outside and exposed. At a wedding...on a day when the entire Order of the Phoenix and several Aurors would be present, nonetheless.

After the Dark Lord ranted and raved about the botched attempt to snatch Potter from the Burrow, he'd ordered his Death Eaters to scour England for the boy, to go to places where Potter might have Apparated to and to every house or business associated with someone in the Order. Then he'd placed a Tracking Curse on his name, Voldemort, and evoked the trace through the connection in their Dark Marks.

Merlin, but that had hurt.

Severus needed to know if Hermione were all right. He Apparated to the top of the cliff that overlooked Hogwarts, the lake and Hogsmeade. He knew that the boy wouldn't have been the one to Apparate his friends away...Hermione would have. Potter was unlicensed and as far as he knew, he'd never successfully been able to Apparate before. Dolohov and Rowle had gone to Charring Cross Road, Travers and Merkle had been sent to the Leaky Cauldron, and Hurshiser, McCrae and Thortenson to Diagon Alley, not that Hermione would have been daft enough to go to any of those places. Ronald might...not Hermione; she'd know better.

Still, Severus feared it was only a matter of time before they were caught.

He withdrew the broom case, a canister the size of a tea tin, from his pocket and withdrew his broom. He knew the wards prohibiting broom flight over the school grounds had been reenacted, so he landed at the Shrieking Shack and entered the old house, taking the tunnel to the Whomping Willow. He cast a strong Immobilizing Charm on the tree and strode up the school grounds quickly under a Disillusionment Charm. He was pleased that the huge oak doors opened to his command. He hurried down to the dungeons and opened the door to his old office. Everything had been packed for storage. *Convenient, as the little blighters will be putting it all in the Headmaster's rooms before September.* "Altheda," he called out softly.

"Yes, Headmaster," she replied.

"So you've heard?" he asked, surprised. If she already acknowledged his role as Headmaster, then he'd have access to the Headmaster's Tower. Not that he wanted to see Dumbledore's portrait yet.

She nodded with a huge smile, saying, "Yes, of course. Ex-Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black has been boasting all over the castle; he heard it from his great-grandnephew, Cygnus Pollux Black, who was told by Abraxas Malfoy, that you are to be Headmaster next year. I'm so proud for you. Congratulations!"

"Don't be," he said, knowing that the upcoming year could be hugely problematic. "I'm going to take your frame with me."

"Okay, I'll visit Rosalba," she said.

"Inform her I'll be moving her frame as well," he said.

"All right," she said with a nod and slipped away.

He carefully lifted her frame and carried it with him. His old lab remained unchanged. Taking Rosalba's frame as well, he went to the gargoyle that stood sentry in front of what would now be his new office. But although the portraits had apparently all heard the news, the gargoyle had not, and no amount of arguing would sway the stone statue to grant him entry, so he stormed away. He hurried down to the dungeons again and entered the Slytherin common room. Headmaster Phineas Nigellus Black hung in a place of honor in the Slytherin common room. He set the ladies' paintings on the mantelpiece and gazed up at the portrait. "Headmaster Black, do you recognize my authority?" he asked the sleeping portrait.

"Yes, of course I recognize your authority," Phineas said imperiously as he opened his eyes. "I know the official announcement hasn't been made, but you are assuredly to be the next Headmaster of Hogwarts. Congratulations."

"Are you then honor-bound to give service to me as the present Headmaster of the school, and thus are you bound to keep my affairs secret and to protect the secrets of my office?" Severus asked. If he said yes, he'd be the first of the portraits to make the vow.

"Naturally. Yes," Phineas stated and automatically repeated the vow. His frame momentarily glowed in acknowledgement, sealing the vow.

Severus felt relieved. He had eyes and ears in Grimmauld Place. "The first thing I have need of you is to go to your house and let me know if Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Ronald Weasley are residing there."

"Yes, they are there, and what a racket they caused. Walburga is extremely upset at having those insolent brats in our home. She even came up to my frame, howling at me...so I left," Phineas sneered.

"Will you continue to spy on the Black house for me?" Severus asked, hoping he'd relent.

"But I can't hang around there all the time spying on those teenagers," Phineas said aghast. "I have better things to do than listening to that adolescent lamenting about his family, wondering what happened to everybody and complaining about having to do things for himself..."

"Altheda can help," Rosalba said from her frame, but Altheda quickly hushed her, "Don't remind him...!"

"Emily Beaumont wasn't the only artist to reuse her canvases, and because she did, you can slip into his frame," Rosalba said softly so as not to have Phineas overhear her. But Severus heard her clearly.

"Can you?" he asked, pleased by the revelation as Phineas spouted in indignation, "Of all the impertinent, underhanded, nosey witches...no, I won't have her crowding me!"

"Yes, I can, but he's right; it's rude to reassert my claim considering it's now his portrait," Altheda said. "Besides, Phineas hates sharing." Her voice dropped to a whisper, "It's a small frame."

"Headmaster Black, if you'd consent to sharing the responsibility, it would serve me well," Severus said, and the painted wizard scowled as if being forced into the inconvenience. "Thank you," he added.

"Ladies, I'll be carrying your frames home with me," he said, watching them disappear from view. He picked up the ladies' frames and headed home.

In a matter of one day since the raid on the Weasley wedding...and subsequently the incident at the café on Tottenham Court Road...the trace had reacted to the uses of the name, Voldemort, thirteen times from the same general location of number eleven and number thirteen, Grimmauld Place.

Then nothing.

The trace had random indications of the name being used over the next two days, but only an occasional utterance each time per location and none of them near the Black house.

Then on the fourth day, the trace indicated someone had used the name, Voldemort, again, eleven times in under half an hour, all emanating from the same place...in the general location of number eleven and number thirteen, Grimmauld Place. Headquarters. As if Potter really believed that *that* place was a secure hideout. Utterly unbelievable. If Severus were truly a Death Eater, devotedly loyal to the Dark Lord, Potter and his friends would be bound and kneeling before the Dark Lord by nightfall.

Apparently, either Potter was unaware of the trace, which was utterly inconceivable in Severus' mind considering the incident they'd had in the café, or Potter was arrogant enough to use the name indiscriminately with no regard to the consequences or that he'd put his friends in grave danger by doing so. But Hermione should have worked it out.

'Fear of the name only increases fear of the thing itself,' he remembered hearing Hermione say once a long time ago. The mere idea she would or could be so naïve angered him. He hoped for her sake, she'd realize that the trace was in place soon, or he'd have to find some way to tell her, and a Floo call or sending a letter by owl was *not* an option.

Severus left the Manor and Apparated to a bridge near the Hartshorne residence. Duane Hartshorne and Grantham Thortenson both turned, wands drawn, relaxing when

they recognized it was him. "He agreed?" Grantham asked.

"I'm to find you and take you to...to... the house," he uttered since he still could not say Grimmauld Place, "with the instructions that we are to enter the house and capture Potter. The other two are of no concern to him." At first the pronouncement had sent a shiver of fear down Severus' spine. Thankfully, Severus had been able to slyly maneuver the Dark Lord into accepting that he take the two newly appointed Aurors with him. The plan was they were to meet up with his brethren on the street and enter the house, and between three Death Eaters and two Aurors, they should be able to subdue three teenagers.

"If Potter is there, what should we do?" Duane asked.

"We're not entering the house," Severus stated. "You'll have to conceal this, but I've been inside; there are curses on the premises designed to do away with me." He explained the curses. "Trust me when I say that Potter is not ready to face the Dark Lord. I was told that I would know, there would be a sign...a signal. It's too soon."

"Blimey, okay, so we don't go in," Grantham said. "But won't that be suspicious?"

"Not if you don't mind a little subterfuge," Severus suggested. He outlined a plan. First they would immobilize Mulciber and Pucey, and then use Inception Curse and Subcimentency to ingrain them with the sufficient memories and instructions. Then Duane would cast the Tongue-Tying and Tongue-Swallowing Curses on Severus. It would take little acting to make Mulciber and Pucey think that Severus had attempted to Apparate directly into the house (as if hoping for the element of surprise) and barely escaped the house with his life. Grantham would act as if he'd missed the top step and landed on the pavement instead, his shoulder Splinched, apparently unable to get past the magical protections.

They arrived on the street and immediately Severus and Duane, flicked their wands, saying, *Petrificus Totalus*," nearly in unison at Mulciber and Pucey, who were standing watch on the street. The two had been taken completely unawares. Then Severus cast the Inception Curse on the pair. Severus entered Mulciber's and then Pucey's minds; he instilled the images, creating a full memory of the botched attempt and gave them the instructions, "You will bear witness to my leaving the house in great distress and help the young Auror Hartshorne, save my life, and heal Auror Thortenson, who was Splinched, then report to the Dark Lord that I am unable to enter the house, nor can I take anyone with me."

Grantham nodded, and Severus cast a numbing charm on Grantham's shoulder, then used his Sectumsempra, slicing his sleeves and skin to make him appear to have been badly Splinched. He then carefully sang the cut closed enough to still have him bleed slightly. As Grantham held his hand on the cut, Duane then cast the Tongue-Tying Curse on Severus, making Severus' tongue curl back on itself. Severus then braced himself as Duane added the Tongue-Swallowing Curse on him, making his tongue slip to the back of his throat against the pharynx, causing him to choke violently.

Duane then walked over to Mulciber and Pucey and released the Body-Bind Curse as Grantham and Severus ran across the square of unkempt grass in front of the house to where the other's stood, Severus clutching his throat, utterly unable to breathe, fighting back the feeling of panic that rose up in him while Grantham kept his hand pressed firmly to his shoulder.

"It's the Tongue-Swallowing Curse!" Grantham called out, and Duane and Pucey immediately reversed the curses while Mulciber looked on in horror. "Now me...I've Splinched!"

"Good thing we held back, eh, Mulciber, or that would be you gasping as well," Duane stated as he finished Healing Grantham's cut with Dittany.

Mulciber looked as if he'd be sick.

The ruse worked perfectly and none were the wiser. The Dark Lord had been furious, but since Severus couldn't tell anyone of the location, nor apparently show them in either, the Dark Lord increased security on the street. Severus only suffered a short round of the Cruciatus, but for now, Hermione and her two idiot friends were safe.

On their fifth day in Grimmauld Place, Hermione decided it was time they slept in bedrooms. She went up to the bedroom on the second floor to make Harry's and Ron's beds since Kreacher had yet to return. *Not that the old house-elf did much housekeeping at all when hewas here*, she mused ruefully. She took stock of the room. The room was a mess: the contents of the wardrobes were spewed on the floor as if whoever had been in there had just thrown things out as they searched, the bedclothes were all thrown back and, in the corner, the wastepaper basket had been overturned. A movement caught her eye...a lush green with a bit of silver as if someone had slipped out of the picture frame.

Shaking her head to dispel the notion, she turned to the task at hand. There were spells for this, she was sure, but she'd only ever watched Mrs. Weasley on a few occasions doing housework the magical way. Ginny was not a slob like Ron was and often made her bed without magic. *What was the spell? Think.*

*Componere meant to put things in place, to arrange and settle things, or was it Compositum...to put together; arranged in order, in an orderly way*She should've paid better attention. She'd heard Mrs. Weasley use Disponere when they'd been cleaning here the summer before her fifth year, which in Latin meant to put things in different places, to distribute them and put in them order; and Dispositare was used to arrange nonvolatile items in an orderly fashion, such as to deposit then in order, methodically, but using that spell on volatile items would make them explode. She'd learned that the hard way.

She turned, catching a movement from the corner of her eye. The portrait was blank again.*Whoever it was is certainly shy.*

She turned back to the chore at hand.*Stratum is Latin for a coverlet or blanket*; she remembered Mrs. Weasley and Ginny mention that word.*Vestitus means clothes*, she definitely remembered them using that one in Ron's room, *and Excutare would shake them out...to shake out clothes to find anything hidden in them. Considering no one has been in the house since Sirius died, well, not to live her at any rate, shaking them out would be a good thing.* "Excutare," she said, aiming her wand, then made the broad sweeping motion as she added, "*Componere vestitus*," which only took care of half of the mess. However, "*Compositum mess*" worked nicely. Sighing, she made the beds the Muggle way. She righted the wastepaper basket and left the room.

She looked at the other doors.*No point checking the master bedroom, and the boys can clean their own bathroom.*

But she wanted a warmer blanket for herself.

On the third floor, the room Fred and George had used had been remarkably left alone. The wardrobes were open, however the beds were made, but the bedclothes had odd stains, most likely from the twins' experiments, and she didn't want to look in the old moldy cupboard. She walked to the next room. Remus' room.

Harry was still upset over Remus' desire to join them. On one hand his expertise would have been helpful, but Harry was right...Remus shouldn't have abandoned his family. She opened the door. This room was untouched as well. She took his quilt and carried it downstairs to her room. At least she'd be warmer.

"Hermione, where are you?" Ron called out.

"In my room," she shouted back and heard his thunderous footsteps on the stairs.

"Oi, there you are," he announced as if she hadn't specifically told him where she was. "What's for lunch?"

"Considering I've made your beds and sorted out your rooms for you, you can go make sandwiches with whatever you find in the cupboards," she replied.

When Ron wasn't lamenting about his family and the lack of news of anything going on, he forever wanted something to eat. The third day after Kreacher had gone, she'd left to go to the supermarket for food for dinner, buying things that were easy to make like a roast, vegetables, potatoes, soup in tins, bread, sliced meats and such. She'd returned and prepared the roast with vegetables, knowing that they could eat off the roast for a few days. But Ron had grumbled that her roast was too dry and whinged

about missing Kreacher's miserable cooking. Hermione had left the kitchen and had gone up to her room to cry. After that, Harry helped with the cooking, but no matter what they prepared, Ron compared it to his mum's or Kreacher's cooking. The git.

"And don't even think to ask me to do your laundry," she added, turning on him.

"Whoa, no need to get angry; I was only asking," he said, backing up with his hands up in supplication. "Kreacher can do it when he gets back."

"You can do it," she said with her hands on her hips. "Honestly, Ron, don't you put everything on Kreacher. You'll have to do some of it for yourself."

"Right, I'll just leave you then," he said. "So when will you be down?"

"I'll help," Harry said from the doorway.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Fine. You help him make sandwiches. I'll be down in a few minutes." She grabbed a blanket to finish making her bed. "And don't you wake Mrs. Black. I swear the Death Eaters in the street can hear her!" she shouted.

Hermione left the library and went looking for Harry, but he wasn't in his bedroom. However, (as often happened whenever she peered into their room) the image in the portrait slipped from the frame as soon as she opened the door. It was unnerving; every once and a while she'd see a glimpse of woman's lush, forest green velvet sleeve or a neat chignon with brown curls with an elaborately embroidered high collar with a green satin shawl and green velvet sleeve. But just as often she'd see an ear, short dark hair and a green collar with silver snakes and a dark green shoulder with the silver snake pin. It was like two people occupied the frame, and neither wanted her to see them. Shaking it off, she exited the room.

"I found the directions, Harry!" she tried calling for Harry to no avail.

She clutched the book to her chest and hurried up the stairs, calling out his name on each landing, finally finding him in Sirius' old bedroom again.

Ever since Kreacher returned with Mundungus (nine days after he'd disappeared to search for him), and they had learned that Umbridge had the locket Horcrux, they'd been trying to figure out ways to get it from her. Ron naturally suggested Hermione brew Polyjuice Potion again, as if she'd have all the ingredients necessary in her beaded bag, which she didn't. But then she didn't have the directions in her collection of books either.

However, after searching for a day and a half, and painstakingly working to break through the spells Professor Snape had set up on the Dark Arts section of the Black family library behind the desk, she'd found a copy of *Moste Potente Potions*. "I did it, Harry, I finally broke through the spells," she announced entering the room, extremely proud of herself.

He looked up from the stack of letters he'd been sorting. "Did you find it?"

"They actually have a copy of the book," she said, showing him the cover. "Did you find Sirius' potions kit?"

"Yeah, but it's not great," Harry stated, pointing to the old school trunks. "Sirius' old cauldron is dented a bit on one side, and Regulus' is a bit rusty. He didn't have much in the way of any ingredients. I set up everything they had in the attic."

"No bother, I have my cauldron," she said.

He glanced at the clock. "When is Ron coming back?"

As part of their plans on retrieving the locket, Ron had suggested stalking out the entrance to the Ministry of Magic, and it was decided that they would take turns under the cloak. "Well, he said he was going to watch and see who leaves for lunch, so he should be there from eleven to one."

"I still think that first thing in the morning would be better than noon," Harry said. He set the picture of him on a child's broom and the letter his mum wrote to Sirius aside and rose to his feet.

"I dunno, Harry, there might be less people about during the lunch hour," she said, gazing at the picture of baby Harry on his child-sized broom. Seeing the image again, a few things bugged Hermione: *Dumbledore had Harry's father's cloak. Why? He hadn't needed it, so why take it from Harry's dad? And what did Lily think was incredible about Dumbledore?* The tone in the letter made Hermione think that whatever it was that Lily had found out had been terrible *And Wormy had been there the day before she'd written the letter at their hiding place, looking troubled...could he have taken the Dark Mark at that point? Had he been feeling guilty about what he was about to do?*

"Shall we see what ingredients we have and what we'll need?"

"What?" she asked, breaking from her thoughts. "Right." She pulled her beaded bag from her pocket as Harry opened the book to her marker. "I'm missing loads. Anything that the Blacks had would be so old, it would most likely be useless." She sorted out her ingredients on the bed and made a list of everything she'd need. Her list consisted of over half of the ingredients needed. She rattled off the list. "I don't see how I'm going to get any of this without going to Diagon Alley," she said with a sigh. "And that's not an option. I'd be seen...it's too risky."

"Give me the list," Harry said, taking the piece of paper. "I'll ask Kreacher, maybe he can get them."

Severus sat in his sitting room, enjoying a few minutes to himself with an epic poem by Jeanne Antoinette Cronin-Ladd, published in 1778, when the bell jingled from the frame on his side table. He set down his book and turned to look at the painting.

"Is it safe? Are you alone?"

"Yes," he replied, giving her his full attention. He hoped it wasn't bad news *Please tell me they haven't gone to the Ministry at this hour.* He'd already warned Raithe, Duane, Grantham and Raymond about Weasley's plan, and the young Aurors said they'd be on the alert so they could do what they could to assist Potter, Weasley and Hermione to get the locket that had been stolen from Grimmauld Place. The minute that Hermione and her two friends showed their faces in the Ministry, he knew all hell would break loose. But not knowing exactly *when* Hermione and her friends *would* be sneaking into the Ministry and whom they intended to steal it from was unnerving. Severus wanted enough advance notice as to when the insane plan was to occur so he'd have time to activate the pendants.

He hoped that whatever was in the locket was worth the risk retrieving it.

"I overheard the young people talking about going to Diagon Alley from Alphard Sirius Black's frame, Severus," Altheda said softly. "I think they are going to try and get the ingredients for the Polyjuice Potion."

Shite, she couldn't go there, it is heavily monitored. There has to be a way to send her what she needs without raising suspicion. Besides, several of the ingredients were on the restricted lists, and anyone attempting to buy them without prior authorization would be immediately arrested.

An idea came to him. *That elf who adores Potter, the one Potter freed from Lucius' service... He gave Hermione the Felix Felicis for me, so he might be able to..* Who was the Hogwarts house-elf with the clothes and all the hats?" he asked, hoping if he called the elf, he'd answer. The board of supervisors had met, those not willing to comply with the Dark Lord had been replaced, and the remaining members confirmed the new appointments to the board: Aubry, Gideon, Grey, Malfoy and Rushbridge. However, Severus had yet to hear about his appointment as Headmaster.

"I think his name is Dobby...no, Dobby, Severus," she replied. "Shall I go to the castle and see if I can find him?"

"No, thank you. If the house-elves know I've been made headmaster as well, then I should be able to summon one." He called out clearly, "Dobby, if you can hear me, I have need of your assistance."

He waited.

Nothing.

"Dobby, I...Harry Potter has need of your assistance. Please come to me."

There was a loud pop.

Naturally that worked.

"Dobby hears you, so-to-be-Headmaster, sir," the elf said from behind the sofa. "What does sir want of Dobby?"

"Do you know where Harry Potter...or more specifically his friend, Miss Hermione Granger, is? Don't say where, just answer yes or no."

The elf laughed uncomfortably before mumbling, "Dobby does, sir" after a long pause.

"I want you to go to my personal potions stores at the school, pack up *everything* into a crate and take it to Miss Granger. Do not be seen. Do you understand me, do not be seen."

"Dobby will do as you ask, sir, for Harry Potter. Dobby will not be seen, sir," the elf replied.

Severus heard a loud pop, indicating that the elf had gone. "Altheda, please go back and let me know the minute the crate arrives."

"Yes, Severus," she said and disappeared from her frame. He smirked. He could claim that his stores had been cleared out the same time his personal effects had been boxed up and no one would be the wiser. He'd just put in a request and replenish his stores before school started.

Hermione was practicing the Disillusionment Charm with Harry in the Drawing Room mostly because, after a few near mishaps on the front step, she thought it was advisable. "If you're Disillusioned and the cloak slips again, no one will be the wiser," she'd insisted that morning. Harry was better at it than Ron, since Harry knew that she was right. Harry was certain his elbow might have been seen when he'd returned from watching the Ministry entrance last time, and Ron had admitted to having slipped on arrival as well.

"Why botter? We juf 'ave to wach' our balance," Ron said, his mouth full of fresh hot bun. "Nehx' time, 'Arry, lean forward, nof back."

"Yeah, thanks, Ron," Harry said sarcastically, turning to face Hermione again as Ron left the house. He tapped the top of his head with his wand and said the incantation.

Hermione smiled as he slowly disappeared from head to his toes. "Excellent, you did it perfectly! I can't see you at all." She waited, expecting him to reverse the spell. Then a pillow shifted from the nearest chair, catching her attention, and it and the seat cushion depressed. "Well, except for that," she said, laughing as she pointed to the bum-shaped depression.

Harry came back in view. "But you didn't see me move away. I watched you, and your eyes didn't follow me," he said proudly.

There was a loud resounding crack, followed by another, coming from the general area of her bedroom. Harry and Hermione looked at each other and ran for the door. Suddenly there was another loud resounding crack from below them, coming from the kitchen, followed by another softer pop.

"What the...?"

Hermione looked at Harry, and he turned, running for the kitchen.

"Could it be Kreacher?" she called out, hurrying after him.

"He never makes that much racket," Harry called back.

Hermione entered the room behind Harry, only to see Kreacher and Dobby pulling tug-of-war with a wooden crate on the floor. "Oh, nos!" Dobby squeaked and struggled harder to gain control of the box. "Yous is not to takes it; Dobby is to gives this to Harry Potter's friend and leaves unseen," Dobby was yelling.

"Kreacher will check disgusting ingredients before Kreacher wills allow them in my Mistress' home," the old elf loudly croaked back.

"Kreacher, let go of the box," Harry said softly, more a request than a demand. Kreacher immediately let go, making Dobby fall unceremoniously on his bum, and the crate, which had toppled over, forgotten as he stared at Harry wide-eyed.

"Harry Potter," Dobby said in awe.

"He brings things that should not be in my Mistress' house! Kreacher is only protecting his Mistress' house from unsavory, dangerous poisons and nasty, bad ingredients," he mumbled as he walked away.

"Dobby, what's all this?" Hermione asked, peering into the crate.

"Dobby is a bad elf. Dobby is not to be seen," Dobby said, grabbing a big tin to hit himself with, but Harry, anticipating the act, grabbed his wrist. "Dobby will have to scald his feet!"

"NO!!" both Hermione and Harry said.

"No, Dobby, just make yourself invisible, then I won't be able to see you," Harry suggested. Dobby snapped his fingers, and the tin in his hand appeared to be floating in the air by itself. "Now, where did this all come from?"

Dobby made strangling noises before he mumbled, "Dobby is not to say."

"Okay, so you cannot tell me," Harry prompted, his hands up as if to catch Dobby, "but is there anything in there that will harm us?"

Dobby seemed to struggle again, making strangling noises again before finally, uttering, "Yes. Bad ingredients, poison ingredients, things that can explode!"

"So, normal potions ingredients then," Hermione said as she continued to examine the potion ingredients in the box, amazed at all of them. "Harry... they all have labels..." but stopped herself from saying, 'in Professor Snape's handwriting.' It was as if Dobby had cleared out Professor Snape's personal stores. "Boomslang skin. Basilisk skin... Lace wing flies, muddaubers, lacewort, silvereye lichen..."

Harry had grabbed a large jar. He looked at the label and then up at her. "Snape's handwriting." He looked at where the big tin floated an inch off the table. "Dobby, did this

come from Hogwarts?"

A heavy thud sounded as if Dobby hit himself with the tin. "Dobby was," thunk, "nots to," thunk, "be seen!"

"Dobby, *we can't see you!*" Harry emphasized, and the elf set down the tin.

"Dobby how...where did you get these?" Hermione asked, holding a large jar of salamander blood.

"Dobby can'ts say! Dobby is nots to say! Dobby was to gives ingredients to... to...!" Dobby lamented and then Apparated quickly with a pop.

"It's obvious, isn't it?" Hermione looked at Harry. "It's from Professor Snape, I'm certain of it," she said.

"Hermione, there is no way *he'd* send you ingredients," Harry said, setting the jar in the table. "Dobby must have heard us, or me, talking about needing the ingredients."

"All of this? If Dobby was only bringing me what I *needed*, then why did he bring me all of this?" she asked with a sweep of her hand. "Really, Harry, there is a fortune in here!" She held up two containers. "All of it with Professor Snape's handwritten labels and in large amounts...even the valuable and rare ones. I can brew *anything* we need with all of this!" She had no idea how it would all fit in her bag, but hoped it would.

"Don't you remember? Dobby gave me gillyweed from Snape's stores in fourth year," Harry argued. "How is this different? He must have cleared out Snape's stores and brought them to us since he didn't know exactly what you wanted."

"Professor Snape!" Hermione snapped. "I know I'm right."

Harry walked out of the room, calling her mental.

It didn't matter, she was right, she knew it, deep down she knew it. Her thoughts turned to Severus as she carefully lined the containers up on the table to take stock of exactly what was in the crate. *This is the second time Dobby has brought me something from him, and both times he said he couldn't be seen* She had fifty of the containers out and the crate still looked full. She put the leeches next to the muddaubers and various caterpillars, the fluxweed with the asphodel, lemongrass and mugwort, and then she pulled out powdered bicorn horn and stared at the canister.

It was as if he had some way of knowing that she needed potion supplies and sent them to her. Only, that didn't seem right; if he had a way of knowing what she needed, then why send her all this? Why not send her what she specifically needed?

She looked at them, all of them. There were so many.

She removed three large silver tins.

The labels read: *Powered Unicorn Horn, Powered Unicorn Hoof and Powered Unicorn Liver.*

Hermione immediately covered her mouth, remembering the day they'd harvested the young unicorn. *Used in very powerful healing potions... They couldn't be from the foal we harvested, that was ages ago*, she thought touching her unicorn charm. She checked to see if there was a date. *1995. Her fifth year or the second term of her fourth?* It didn't matter, she thought, placing the canisters back in the crate. She knew the ingredients were viable and if she knew Severus Snape at all, the efficacy would be strong enough for any potions she brewed.

Hermione carefully packed all the ingredients back into the crate.

She had what she needed to begin the Polyjuice Potion.

She tried to heft the crate up, finding it hard to lift. She pulled out her wand, saying, *Relevo*" while encircling the crate, then carried it up to the attic. She was thankful, but still, the gift was extraordinary even for him.

Hermione was upstairs in the attic, doing the next step of the Polyjuice Potion when Ron came up and leaned against the worktable, nearly making the pomegranate juice and bubotuber pus topple over. Bad enough she had the Bulbadox powder lying open on the table. "Watch it! If those mix, it will cause an explosion."

"Did you read this?" he asked, brandishing a copy of the *Daily Prophet*. "Mandy's house was raided, and Mandy and her father, Peter Brocklehurst, were arrested. The article claimed that they stole their magic and that they are criminal infiltrators because Peter Brocklehurst is a Muggle-born." Ron had stated, throwing down the paper. "Mandy's mother, Louise Brocklehurst, was captured at the Ministry when he came into work, too."

"Where did her mother work...which department?" Hermione asked, stirring her cauldron. Between the steps of the Polyjuice Potion, she had started brewing a batch of Bruise Paste using the directions in Harry's, er, Severus' Potions book.

"Magical Floo Connection office...she was pretty high up," Ron stated. "She was the one who approved Muggle Floo connections and assigned Muggle permits. Dad spoke to her when we wanted to connect the Dursley's home to the network for half an hour." He launched into the story about being trapped between the fireplace and the electric fireplace the Dursley's used. She'd heard the story before, but let him talk. It was Harry's turn to monitor the entrance to the Ministry of Magic, and she could tell that Ron was obviously bored. At least he wasn't whinging.

"So, tell me, why did you have to go foraging for ingredients?" he asked, picking up a jar of nettles she'd picked as well. "I thought Dobby stole you everything you needed."

She fought back the urge to tell him that Professor Snape had sent them, but knew that neither Harry nor Ron believed her. 'Fresh nettles have more sting,' she remembered Severus telling her when he was younger. "Some plants need to be freshly harvested so that the milk or sap is still fresh," she stated. Actually, she'd wanted to be alone for a while to think, and she couldn't have done it while on her shift watching the Ministry.

There had been many nights she'd laid in her bed, staring at the patterns of the shadows on her ceiling, contemplating the gift of the potion ingredients and wondered how Professor Snape knew to have Dobby given them to her. Was she just being hopeful, wanting him to still be watching out for her, or was Harry right, Dobby had heard them and stolen everything, thinking that Professor Snape wasn't coming back to the school.

Hermione had peeked into Harry's room earlier and caught a glimpse of Altheda in the frame, but Harry had told her it was Phineas Nigellus Black's portrait. She'd searched the house for Altheda's portrait, knowing that she'd have to have one in the house in order to enter the frame of Phineas Black, which could explain why she kept seeing either Phineas Nigellus Black or Altheda in the same frame...but since there was no portrait of Altheda in the house, it only confounded Hermione. However, Hermione knew that since Altheda could enter the frame it was possible that she'd told Professor Snape that she needed the ingredients.

She set down the stirring rod and wistfully remembered brewing with him in his private lab. It was an honor she was certain he hadn't granted anyone else.

She sighed. It had been a tough week. Hermione's name had appeared in the *Daily Prophet* on the list of Muggle-borns wanted for interrogation.

Then Harry came home the next day with a *Daily Prophet*, announcing that Severus Snape had been given the position of Headmaster of Hogwarts. Ron had wanted to burn Professor Black's portrait upon hearing the news, so Hermione had tucked the eleven-by-fourteen portrait safely into her beaded purse.

And more Death Eaters were lurking around on the pavement outside the house, staring at the place where the door would be if they could see the place. That really unnerved Hermione, let alone Harry, although Ron was not as concerned.

The potion would be ready in a week. Ron was getting increasingly frustrated, making them go over the plans in detail to the point where Hermione mumbled them in her sleep.

Megan Jones, Wayne Hopkins and William Summers had been captured and brought to the Muggle-born Registration Commission for interrogation. Naturally, they had been found guilty of stealing magic and sentenced to Azkaban. Professor Bathsheda Babbling had likewise been brought before the MRC and found guilty of having illegally appropriated her magical ability since her parents were confirmed to have been Muggle-born.

So now, Severus had to replace Professor Bathsheda Babbling. Amicus Carrow had already been offered the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts, and Alecto Carrow agreed to replace Charity Burbage as Professor of Muggle Studies. He dreaded knowing what her idea of Muggle Studies would entail, and she'd yet to produce a syllabus or book list.

He was walking up to the Manor when Catherine Chittenden-Flint approached him. "Professor Snape, may I impose upon you?"

He turned to look upon her with feigned agitation. If she approached him so boldly, she had news to impart. "What do you want, I'm expected," he intoned dryly.

"We were invited to dinner, but I've need to leave, and my husband must stay for the meeting," she replied and placed a hand on her abdomen. "I'm told I shouldn't Apparate myself, and the Floo bangs me around so horribly. Could you please see me to my mother's?"

He was early enough. "Certainly," he replied with the air of reluctance, hoping their act convinced anyone who may have overheard them. He walked with her to the gate, then let her clasp his arm. They arrived at the gate of the lovely London house, and he followed her inside. "Now, what have you to tell me?" he asked, wasting no time.

Unperturbed by his gruffness, she turned to face him, wasting no time on polite offerings. "I'm aware that you need to find a new Ancient Runes professor, and I know the Dark Lord has not appointed anyone yet. I may have a solution for you," she replied with a sly smile. "A friend of my Grandmother's, William Lundergan, is very proficient in the ancient languages. He was a curator at the Cryptanthus National Magical Archives in Italy for several years, and he hasn't the stomach for some of the Dark Lord's... activities as of late. Ask him to teach Ancient Runes."

"But where are his loyalties?" Severus asked. Lundergan was a new recruit, but he'd been friendly with the Chittenden and Greengrass families for years.

"He's a supporter, but I feel he is not as devoted as he'd like everyone to believe. If it weren't for his extensive knowledge in the ancient languages and runes, the Dark Lord would have done away with him months ago," she replied softly. "Ask him, befriend him, and win him over to our side. He's a decent man who was drawn in because of his knowledge and family ties. If anything else, he will appreciate the opportunity to not have to do any more of the Dark Lord's *tasks*."

Easier said than done, he scoffed. He felt his Mark sear slightly and knew he couldn't dally any longer. Tonight would be quite busy. "I have to go. I'll make the suggestion."

"Thank you," she said with a warm smile. "I think he'll be grateful and prove to be a fine professor. He certainly knows the subject."

Severus thanked her and left quickly, Apparating close to the gates. He walked swiftly up to the manor and into the drawing room. At least he wasn't the last arrival, Krause Crabbe and Eugene Nott arrived after he had.

"Ah, Severus," the Dark Lord said as soon as he noticed his presence. "How are the preparations for the school?"

Severus moved forward and bowed. "It goes well." He outlined everything that had been done to date. Severus mentioned casually, after a long list of mundane administrative forms and reports he'd filed with the appropriate people and committees, that with Babbling's death, he needed an Ancient Runes professor. "Why don't I give Lundergan something useful to do?"

"Interesting choice. I hadn't realized you haven't filled the post," the Dark Lord said, placing a finger on his lips. His gaze swept over to where Lundergan stood next to Lucius against the wall. "He is a weaking. He doesn't seem to have the stomach needed to do what is necessary for our cause, and he does have a propensity for the art."

Severus waited as the Dark Lord considered his proposal. Across the room, Lundergan, fidgeted slightly under the Dark Lord's stare. "Yes, I'll grant permission." He called Lundergan over to him.

Lundergan paled, then walked over quickly and knelt, but Severus could tell the man was terrified of having been singled out *Maybe Catherin is right*, he thought. Severus watched Lundergan's face and posture carefully while keeping his own expression neutral as the Dark Lord put forth the request as if it had been his decision. Lundergan began to show some moisture on his upper lip, but looked immensely relieved, vowing to do his utmost and swore that he'd not disappoint either Severus or the Dark Lord.

The Dark Lord dismissed him and turned to the others. "My faithful followers," he began as he addressed those gathered in the room.

As usual, the Dark Lord ranted for a while, cursing a few who'd disappointed him lately, granting praise to those who had performed well, and stirring up the eagerness of the zealots in the room to what opportunities he had for them to further his goals for supremacy. The energy built until many of those gathered were in a stated of anticipated euphoria. Assignments were made and the men and women dispersed.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

Subicimens comes from combining subicio + mens: Subicio means in Latin: to throw or place under, to submit, subject, to put into a mind, suggest, to substitute, insert by guile, counterfeit.

The Latin comes from my favorite online translator: Notre Dame Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid

cello - are[to hide, conceal, keep secret] /+ inaudire [to hear]; esp. [to hear as a secret].

Membrum, I'm told, is Latin for limbs

Chapter 52

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun. Oh and keep in mind, most of the actual events in DH happen as they happened in the book unless I have indicated they happened differently or at a slightly different time.

Ron has been Splinched, and unlike canon, I have him a bit more incapacitated from the trauma of almost having his arm torn off for artistic license and to set up events that will be different from what's in the book. You'll notice other bits I've done utilizing my artistic license, but in the end, most of the actual events in DH happen as they happened in the book. I'm just adding to the drawn out camping stretches.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia and FrankQ for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione walked along the field keeping close to the trees. The area looked so different from the last time she'd been here for the Quidditch World Cup, and the field where all the magical tents had stood was lush, green and empty...and very quiet. She considered going to a grocer, but with Ron hurt and the mess up at the Ministry, she didn't want to go far and take the chance to go anywhere that she might be recognized. Not that she knew the location of any wizard run grocers; the ones she knew were all Muggle ones.

She looked up at the sky. She'd been roaming for a while, and it was starting to get dark, so she had to come up with something. She'd found some Foxglove, angelica, liverworts and even identified some of the mosses, but none of those were edible. She spotted a field rose, *Rosa arvensis*, but the blooms were spent and the berries were not ripe yet, not that they could eat those. And she found some bluebells, which she picked to put in a vase, which she'd made from a rock, for the table. But the best she could do food-wise was some wild mushrooms she found under the trees. Not exactly an exciting dinner, but it was something.

Truth was she'd needed to get out and she needed to think. She felt like an idiot; it was her fault that they couldn't go back to Grimmauld Place *Well, not entirely my fault... Yaxley grabbed my sleeve*, she reminded herself. Yaxley's grip on her arm had slackened enough for her to pull her arm free and Apparate her friends away to this campground in the Yorkshire moors. *Had he simply let go, or had he lost his grip on their landing thinking they'd arrived? Had he seen the door or not? Or had he been knocked off the top landing and fallen onto the pavement...* The uncertainty bothered her; the more she thought about it, the less convinced she was that the house might have been breached as she'd initially thought.

She had no idea if Yaxley had seen the door to Grimmauld Place or not. It isn't a very wide step, and there were four of them, so it is possible he'd fallen off the front step on our arrival and hadn't seen the door. However, if he had seen it, then he could Apparate to the top step anytime he wanted and get inside the house. She wanted to scream but didn't dare. That was the one loop-hole of the Fidelius Charm; if you took someone inside the protections, they can go back if they remember the place well enough. Especially since the original Secret-Keeper was dead. She remembered reading about it at school fifth year, and although some of the books she'd read differed slightly, one thing was clear: now that the original Secret-Keeper was dead, those who knew the secret were all responsible to keep the secret.

And Harry didn't want to call for Kreacher in case the elf could be traced. Harry had made a sound argument that Kreacher had betrayed them in the past, and she agreed with his reasoning. Not that Hermione thought that anyone in Voldemort's circles gave a second thought to house-elves.

She started back for the tent, and her foot kicked something metal in the tall grass. Curious, she picked it up. What was left of the label was illegible, but it was some type of Muggle canned good. She looked around, wondering if she should even consider keeping it. It could have been left here from a campsite or even from when the Quidditch World Cup had been held here. She quickly suppressed the memories of the panic the Death Eaters and the Dark Mark had caused on her last day here. *But this is a campground, right?*

Looking at the ground, she spotted several more that had been left in the tall grass, two that had been dented. Most Muggle canned goods had a long shelf life so the three which were not dented might be safe to eat.

Harry was quite concerned when she returned to the tree that marked where they'd put the tent. "You've been gone ages! I was about to go looking for you," he said, rushing over to her.

"I'm fine, and no one was around at all. I hardly needed the cloak," she said, setting the things she'd gathered on the table.

Harry picked up one of the cans. "What's this?"

"I won't know until I open it," she replied. "How is Ron doing?"

"He's asleep," Harry said, putting the can down. "He mumbles a lot. He kept repeating 'don't say You-Know-Who's name' and 'call him You-Know-Who.'" Hermione looked at him questioningly, and he shrugged. "I almost did, and he got really agitated. Kept saying it's cursed, don't say it, it's how he finds people, over and over. The more I thought about it, the more it makes sense."

Hermione considered it for a moment, and it did make a lot of sense. "If Ron is right, it might explain how they found us on Tottenham Court Road, and why they showed up at Grimmauld Place," she said. She'd thought at the time it had been coincidence.

"They showed up at Grimmauld Place because Snape told them to," Harry snapped.

"If that were true, Harry, then You-Know-Who would have sent Headmaster Snape to investigate, not some Death Eaters who can't see the house!" It was an old argument, and she stemmed off his usual reply by asking, "I wonder if you can place a trace on a name?"

Harry only shrugged.

Hermione had Harry open one of the cans while she cleaned the mushrooms. "It's chicken noodle soup. It smells okay," he announced, enlarging the can so she could add the mushrooms and extra water.

She had no luck making a handle for the can from a twig, and she had to serve the soup with her potions ladle into leaves she'd transfigured into bowls. When Ron was awake again, she fed him his share, feeling a little better for his eating something when he fell asleep afterward. He was still feverish, pale, shaking and in a lot of pain. The Dittany had healed the wound, but the Pain Potion she had only seemed to take the edge off enough so he could sleep. She didn't know what else she could do for him.

Hermione spent the evening taking stock of what they had in the tent. She needed food and supplies for camping. After checking all the cupboards, she realized they apparently needed some cooking utensils and cookware. She could try going to Marks & Spencer, they would have what she wanted, and the likelihood of being seen by a wizard was very slim. But should she take the risk? The one she knew well enough to know a safe place to Apparate to was the one in the Broadway Shopping Centre in Bexleyheath. They were in Yorkshire, and Bexleyheath was a long way away.

Mind made up, she told Harry of her plan the next morning, and he checked over her list, asking if she'd buy some socks and pants for Ron and him. "I can pay you back...would pay you back if I could get to my Gringotts account," he said, looking at the Sickles and Galleons he'd pulled out of his pocket. He picked up his DA Galleon. "Dunno why I keep this."

"It's a good thing, though, in case we get separated or something," she said, but he looked at her skeptically. "If the messages are short or in codes, something only you or I know, they could be useful."

He shrugged. "I suppose." He put his DA Galleon back in his pocket.

He offered her some of his wizarding money, but she waved it off. "It's all right, I have some money," she replied, but he pressed the coins into her hand anyway. "I'll be gone for a while, will you be all right?"

"I'll be fine," he replied. "It's not like Ron and I are going anywhere."

She Apparated to the far side of the Broadway Shopping Centre in case her Disapparition was noticed and blended in with the shoppers until she reached her destination. She found an inexpensive, plain white dining set that she could put Unbreakable Charms on, some mugs that were marked down, a cheap sixteen-piece cutlery set, and some glasses that would do, dish towels and two oven mitts. She passed on the cookware sets; they were pricey, but she did find some grey towels and facecloths on sale. She paid a clerk for her purchases and found a secluded spot to shrink them down to fit into her beaded bag, then headed to the men's wear to buy Harry's and Ron's socks and pants.

She grabbed what she needed. As she looked around at the clothes, it struck her how ridiculous it had been to unpack while at Grimmauld Place. Hermione considered buying Harry and Ron some clothes. Even though Hermione had some of her clothes in her bag, mostly her winter wardrobe, she'd left quite a lot at Grimmauld Place. Each time Kreacher did her laundry, he'd put her things in the wardrobe instead of her beaded bag, and he'd put Harry's and Ron's clothes in their room. She could ask Harry, then make a list of what he needed and come back later.

She went to the ladies department to buy some basic things for herself, including some undergarments and a pair of boots, then left the store, shoving her things into her bag.

She considered where to go next. She decided to try Debenhams Department Store in Bromley. They had reasonable things. She left the store and Apparated to the corner of the building, startling a woman. Hermione hurried inside, thankful that so far she'd been lucky. She did find a stainless steel five-piece cookware set on sale, a mixing bowl set, casserole cooker and a set of two rectangular dishes, wondering if maybe she was being optimistic in buying them. *Better have it than need it*, she convinced herself and selected some cooking utensils that she thought she'd need, including a manual can opener and spud peeler. Once outside between some cars, she shrunk her purchases and considered which pharmacy she should go for the rest.

Darias hated being assigned to the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Stolen and Counterfeit Magical Objects. His office also worked in conjunction with the Improper Use of Magic Office to regulate and monitor any magic done in any unregistered, non-magical residence or Muggle locations. But the primary objective of his office was to detect and confiscate Muggle-born's wands.

The problem was that the grid they had to work with encompassed the whole of Great Britain. On one wall there was a huge magical map upon which every known magical residence, wizard-owned property or business had been designated and registered. If any magic was detected in an unregistered or undesignated location, a red flag would pop up on the map. A tap of the wand would make the map zero in on the location. The flag then identified the date, time and spell or spells used. Hundreds of flags could pop up at any given time, or only on occasion, sporadically, so someone had to watch the map at all times, day and night.

Each incident report was then forwarded to the Magical Law Enforcement Squad. But there was one amusing flaw. By the time the Magical Law Enforcement Squad was notified of the incidents and a hit wizard dispensed to the location, naturally the culprit was nowhere to be found.

Then each incident report had to be filed with head of the Muggle-Born Registration Commission, Dolores Umbridge, and the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Clive Yaxley with a description of the outcome of the incident signed by both the one who reported it and the Hit Squad personnel who followed up on the report. Bureaucracy in all its idiocy.

Darias been assigned here as Supervising Head, a supposed promotion, but he felt like he was constantly being watched. He had four people working for him per shift, and he had no idea where they stood in the scheme of things. He looked at the four working the day shift. Valeria Franklin was a diligent worker; her incident reports were very concise and well written as were Nicole Johnson's, although Nichole was slow and always turned in her reports late. Cressida Penrose was conscientious about watching the map, but her reports were casually written, and even though it had all the pertinent information, he felt she omitted things, although he had no way to prove it. Frederick Shipnuck on the other hand wrote as little as possible with no details at all.

Clyde Abernathy, the Supervising Head of Improper Use of Magic Office, walked into the office as a flag that appeared on the map *Bexleyheath*. *Severus said to tell him about anything appearing there or in the vicinity of the London Borough of Wandsworth*. Darias flicked the tiny flag with his wand. The area identified was in the Broadway Shopping Centre. *Disapparition and a Shrinking Charm. Not anything to get too excited about. Could be a witch out shopping...*

"Anything interesting?" Abernathy asked, standing behind Darias.

"Not likely. A housewitch doing some shopping," he replied, straightening up as the flag disappeared. "We've had hits there before."

"Bexleyheath is a watched zone," Clyde said, leaning in closer. "Which spell was used?"

"Shrinking Charm, most likely so as to put her things in her handbag," Darias stated.

"Well, watch the map. If anything else happens in the general area of Bexleyheath, Yaxley wants to know about it personally," Abernathy said and walked over to Valeria Franklin's desk.

Darias pretended to be keeping an eye on the map as Abernathy leaned one hip on her desk and picked up her paperweight. Valeria set down her quill and smiled up at him. Abernathy stopped by her desk a lot lately; either he fancied her, or they were dating, and Darias didn't trust Abernathy very much. He decided he'd have to be careful

around Miss Franklin. He filled out an incident form, folded it and sent it flying to the Magical Law Enforcement Squad, by way of Duane in the Aurory. *A little mishap never hurt anyone*, he thought. Then he went to his office to send a message to Headmaster Snape on his pendant.

An hour later, Darias saw Nicole write something down on her clipboard. "What have we?" he asked Bromley, he noted looking at the flag. *That is only about six kilometers from Bexleyheath.*

"Ah...er, nothing, really," she replied, holding the clipboard to her chest with both hands.

He nodded slowly as he exhaled, watching her intently, a trick he learned from Severus. It worked.

"It's a-a Disapparition and a Shrinking Charm...in Bromley...in the Glades Shopping Centre there. Most likely a witch doing some shopping," she stammered. "Nothing really. It's a shopping center, so... it's probably nothing."

"I'm sure you're right, but fill out the incident form anyway," he started to say, but her eyes darted to the door, and she looked a little nervous, pursing her lips. "And send it to Auror Duane Hartshorne," he finished. "He's following up on an incident that occurred there earlier today."

She looked at him, questioning, her eyes widening momentarily with disbelief before she got control of herself. However, in that brief moment of eye contact, Darias was able to slip into her mind undetected with a nonverbal, *Legilimens*, and saw Auror Tonks in the girl's thoughts. *She had intended on sending it to the Metamorphmagus. Why?*

"But all incident reports are to be sent to the MLE squad," she said in a hushed voice.

"Do as I say, then meet me in my office," Darias said authoritatively, but still keeping his voice low, in case Abernathy overheard them. "And I want to see your week's reports, and bring me the file on Bromley."

"Yes, sir," she replied, scooting to her desk.

He watched her as she dug around, collecting her things, sorting out which reports to bring. He walked to his office, continuing to watch her from the corner of his eye. She stood, placed a folder on her clipboard and turned, walking confidently to his office. Funny thing, she still hadn't sent the incident form.

Hermione searched her bag. She'd packed the potions equipment and ingredients into her bag after cleaning up after her last batch of Pain Potion and the Polyjuice Potion, so she had that. She had *Wickedly Wicked Warding Spells* by Adalbert Waffling and the Potion books she'd borrowed from the Black library, including *Moste Potente Potions*. But what she was looking for was not in her bag. She realized she'd left the copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* on her bedside table in Grimmauld Place.

Why did I leave the book Dumbledore bequeathed me on my bedside table? Hermione had no idea why he'd given her that book, but there had to be something in there, some clue she was meant to have. She had to get that book back. Did she dare go? *If I'm careful enough, I might get in undetected. If the house is still being watched, I could simply leave right away*, she reasoned. She'd have the element of surprise. She also wanted the books she'd stacked in her room in Grimmauld Place as well as some of the rare books from the Black library that could possibly be so useful in their hunt. *Especially the Dark Arts and Transfiguration tomes*, she reminded herself. *I think I may still have one or two of the Felix Felicis infused Malt Balls!*

Thankfully, she had four balls, and after eating one of the sweets, she suddenly knew that she should go get her things *After having a cup of tea and a sandwich. At the little shop around the corner.* Felix assured her it would be there. Hermione Disapparated on the spot, arriving next to a quaint tea shop.

She made a mental list of what she'd need to get as she sipped on her tea. She would just grab the books from her bedside table and all the books on the coffee table she'd sorted out by subject matter and any other belongings she'd left behind.

Before finishing her third cup of excellent tea, she left the tea shop, knowing with all certainty that the coast would be clear. She strengthened her Disillusionment Charm and Apparated.

She was in luck. The street was empty.

"You cannot be here," Kreacher croaked as soon as she entered the house. "Bad mens come. They toss things around and threaten Kreacher."

"Kreacher, gosh, you startled me," she gasped, surprised he could see her, but the elf was looking right at her. "I know! I'm sorry. But I need our clothes, and Harry's rucksack... the books I stacked in the library, I need to borrow them, and well..." She turned to look at him and hadn't realized that the elf left. *All the better*, she thought as she ran upstairs to pack. She shoved her things into her beaded bag, and the books she wanted. There were voices coming from the window, a man and a woman, not that she could understand what they were saying, so she hurried.

"I puts steak and kidney pies in Master Harry's bag," the elf said, startling her again when she'd exited the bathroom.

"Thank you, but his clothes and things?"

"Kreacher puts all of Master Harry's things in master's bag," he said and handed her Harry's rucksack and a dirty lime green well-worn purse. "Kreacher puts mean boy's things in handbag." He froze, ears spread wide. "They is coming." He grabbed her wrist and Apparated, landing her in a vegetable garden of sorts. "Go through there," he pointed to a small door. "Do nots comes back. Kreacher will protect my mistress' house. Do not calls for Kreacher, Kreacher is being watched."

"Who comes?" she asked. "Severus Snape or Yaxley?"

"Nots the scowling blood traitor in black; a mean wizard with long blond hair...he brings the mean mens in black robes and masks," Kreacher stated and vanished.

So Yaxley did see the door. Damn. Hermione slipped through the little door and Apparated to the tree that marked the location of the tent, feeling the heady sense of euphoria begin to fade. When Harry appeared at the edge of the magical border protecting the campsite, Hermione handed him his rucksack and the green purse and told him what Kreacher said.

"Hermione, that was a huge risk! You can't go back there! What if you'd been caught?"

"I was lucky," she said, going inside to check on Ron to see if he needed any more pain potion.

Harry wanted to move the tent. He felt nervous staying in same location, which under normal circumstances, Hermione would've agreed with him. But Ron was still ill, and Hermione felt he shouldn't be moved until he was doing better.

Only Ron wasn't getting better. In fact, he was getting worse. As far as Hermione could tell, he had the symptoms of an infection, and she didn't know what to do for him. "I'm going to look through my books," she announced and strode over to her room in the tent.

She pulled her things from her purse, randomly piling them on her bed, and began to sort out the books, putting her Herbology and Severus' Potion books on the table by her bed. "Why didn't I take any medicinal texts?" she grumbled. She picked up one of the first aid books she'd taken from her mother's shelf and read up on shock and

infections, convinced that Ron was suffering from one or the other. Naturally, Ron had most of the symptoms for both, as far as she could tell. "Great! He has an infection, and he's suffering from shock." She closed the book and started to cry. "I need a Healer!" she sobbed.

"Hermione, why do you need a Healer? Who's hurt?" a worried woman's voice asked.

Hermione jumped, turning around cautiously and drew her wand. "Who's there?" she asked.

"Hermione, dear, it's me, Altheda."

Hermione lifted the medium-sized frame out from under her jumper and stared at the familiar face of the woman in the beautiful, dark-green Victorian dress she'd been seeing glimpses of. "You...you're... I thought...Harry told me this was Phineas Black's portrait?"

"More like ours. Emily Beaumont did my portrait in 1883 but she never completely finished the piece...she didn't like my dress robes," Altheda started to explain.

Hermione couldn't understand why. "They're lovely," she interjected, not meaning to interrupt.

"Thank you," Altheda said, blushing. "But she set me aside, and in 1918 she reused my canvas while I was visiting my other frame at the house in Peeblesshire. So, in essence, I can enter this painting, although I only do so when Phineas is in Hogwarts. He hates sharing his frame." Her painted face became quite serious. "Now, what do you need a Healer for? What's wrong?"

"It's my friend, Ron...he Splinched, and I tried to heal him with Dittany, but I think he went into shock, and now he seems to have an infection, and I don't know what to do for him. I don't have any antibiotics, and I'm afraid to take him to a hospital," Hermione explained, glad to have a friendly ear. "He's a wizard...he doesn't have any identification..."

She expected sympathy, not to have Altheda slip out of the frame. She slumped on her cot and picked up her Herbology book, wondering if any of the herbs would help Ron.

"Hermione?"

She lowered her book and gave Altheda a sad smile. "What are your friend's symptoms?"

"He has a weak pulse and I know he has a fever, but I don't have a thermometer, and he sweats profusely, and his skin is moist and clammy and he's pale. I can't check if he has low blood pressure...I don't have a BP cuff and stethoscope. He falls in and out of consciousness, and has rapid, shallow breathing. But the scar, it's red and hot to the touch, and swollen, but it's not open, it's closed, so it's not oozing at all..."

Altheda left. Hermione thought it was possible that Altheda would speak to Madam Pomfrey, and if that was so, just the idea of the matron's help gave her a sense of relief.

After what seemed like ages, Altheda was back. "It sounds like he has Splinched Fever; it's not uncommon, and if treated right away, not lethal. If you call Dobby, then he can bring you what you need."

Hermione thought about it as she glanced at Harry reading a book in the main part of the tent. She had questions she really wanted to ask the Healer, especially if this happened again. "Do you think that Madam Pomfrey would meet me somewhere?"

"Madam Pomfrey? Why would you need to...?" Altheda started to ask and then her expression changed from confusion to astonishment. "You mean you don't...? I didn't speak to the matron, dear."

"Professor Snape?" Hermione asked, equally astonished. "It was him, he sent... of course!*It was him! I knew it!*" But her realization only started a whirlwind of questions. *Why ...? But he is.* "All his personal training, all the tips he'd given me while we brewed together, the times he allowed to come to his office and ask questions... and he's still helping me."

Altheda stayed immobile in the frame.

She sat upright. "Altheda, will you send him a message for me?"

"I could," she said slowly.

"Will you tell him, thank you for the ingredients and the things he taught me?" Hermione asked.

"Is that all, dear? I thought you had a question you wanted to ask the matron," Altheda said.

Hermione nodded. "I do. I need some..." *Asking for books would be presumptuous, wouldn't it?* Information on healing Splinching. On *anything* Healing related. I didn't know I'd need it, but I do. Are...does he by chance have a basic healing book, things like healing spells for broken bones, sprains, lacerations, things that may come up? If I get hurt, or either of my friends, I want to be able to help them."

Altheda nodded and left the frame.

Severus listened to the lady repeat the things Hermione had said to her. Altheda had been bringing him reports all week. He hadn't been surprised to learn that Hermione was confused by his actions, but that she seemed to want to believe the best in him had. But hearing that Weasley had Splinched had sickened him.

He rose to his feet. First thing she needs is an antibiotic potion, Blood Replenishing Potion and Rejuvenating Elixir. Weasley will need the Muscle Pain Liniment too, especially if he injured a leg or an arm...especially his wand arm... Not that he wanted Hermione administering the liniment to that dunderhead. The mere thought made his blood heat. He'd remembered all too well how wonderful it had felt when she'd used it on him all those years ago.

"I'll send the elf with what she needs," he stated firmly. He knew that Potter still had his Potions book *Which means that Hermione has access to it, and therefore she will have all my notes on the potions...all my improvements.* For the first time he was glad that Potter had refused to give him back his Potions Book. That was if the boy had given it to her to use or she remembered to ask for it.

"And she would like some books on basic diagnostic and healing spells," Altheda stated.

"Yes, I anticipated as much," he said. He had already written out several pages in a magical composition book for her with a Quotation Quill and removed three very comprehensive Healing books from the library when he'd learned she'd gone into hiding with Potter and Weasley. Madam Pince had been angry, pursing her lips in annoyance, but she'd held her tongue.

I hope she uses my copy of the book and not her own. Altheda, find some way of casually asking her if Potter still has my Potions book. Suggest that she use my improvements, my experiments..."

Severus strode from his office to pack the necessary items for Hermione, but he heard Altheda saying, "All right, but really, you should talk to the girl."

"No, it would endanger her," he said under his breath, but secretly, he wanted to, but didn't dare.

"Dobby," Hermione said softly for the third time. Altheda made it quite clear to make sure that her friends didn't see the elf, but so far he hadn't shown up when she'd called. Hermione was so anxious to have the needed supplies, she'd risk going to Hogwarts to get them. She tightened her cloak about her and toyed with a leaf. At least Harry didn't suspect anything when she'd volunteered to take watch again after dinner.

Suddenly there was a loud snap as Dobby suddenly appeared under the trees, holding a box. "Oh, hello, miss. Dobby comes to bring you things you need."

"It's Hermione, Dobby, you may use my given name," she said, moving forward eagerly.

He looked gobsmacked, as if she'd allowed him a great honor. "Dobby is proud to call you Her-my-knee," he said, repeating her name carefully, and then held the box up to her.

She was about to correct him, but then she got a cursory look in the box. Like before, there was a lot in it, and Severus' generosity amazed her.

"Is Harry's Wheezy doing any better?" he added as she took stock of what was in the box.

She looked at the elf. "How did you...?" she started to ask, but he gave a nervous laugh and shrugged. "You listen for us, don't you?"

"Not all the times, Hermynnee," he said, still dropping the 'o' in her name.

She supposed it was better than Krum's pronunciation or Ron's use of 'Mione, which she hated.

"Dobby has much work to do for the school, Hermynnee. But if you need Dobby, Dobby will come."

Hermione suddenly realized what Altheda meant by her warning. "I'll remember that, but you must be careful as well," she warned the kindly elf. "I don't want you getting caught helping us."

"Dobby will be careful, Hermynnee," he said and snapped his fingers, Disapparating away with a pop.

Severus found it hard to concentrate. Altheda didn't know when or where the Splinching had occurred, or how badly the boy had Splinched, so he had no idea how long Weasley had the Splinching fever. But at least Hermione wasn't asking about reattaching a limb...that was hopeful. Reattaching a limb or appendage was tricky and had to be done immediately or there could be serious complications. *Immediately stem off the blood flow, position the missing part in correct anatomical alignment, knit arteries, veins, nerves, bones if any, muscles, knit the skin,* he recited.

He'd already anticipated her request for information on healing injuries, but the skill he and the other Heads had in dealing with the possible injuries students could inflict on themselves and others had taken intensive learning and training to become competent. Healing a Splinching was an art in of itself; two wands were best, perfectly timed, coordination a must! McGonagall and Dumbledore had worked very hard to prepare him for the first Apparition lesson his first year as a teacher. Thankfully, Flitwick and McGonagall were working with Septima, and Madam Hooch was learning as well, just in case, because the Carrows would be utterly useless.

He glanced at the frame on his shelf. *She'll be back soon.*

He should have sent her the salves when he'd sent her the potion ingredients.

He should have taught her diagnostic and healing charms instead of wandless magic.

He should have spent more time preparing her.

But he hadn't realized his mistake in preparing her until Altheda told him what Hermione had said.

He turned back to his desk, to keep himself occupied with his work until Altheda returned. He read the missive from the governing clerk of the school governors announcing that he was to attend a meeting scheduled for tomorrow to report on his meetings with his Head of Houses and staff. He wanted to tell them that both Aleco and Amycus were utterly inept at teaching, especially Amycus, who although he knew many Dark Arts spells had little knowledge on how to remove them. But that would be reported back to the Dark Lord and Severus was determined to keep things running smoothly so that the Dark Lord had no need to come to the school.

Thankfully, this first part of term, Amycus was following the approved syllabus Severus had set forth when he took over the teaching post, and he only hoped the dunderhead stuck to the curriculum. So at least the fifth years should pass their O.W.L.s, but the sixth- and seventh-years were to start learning Dark Art spells, as per the Dark Lord, much like the students at Durmstrang did. Severus read over the course syllabus with a scowl. Durmstrang divided the Dark Arts into two courses: Detection and Defense of Hexes and Jinxes, and Detection and Defense of Curses and Enchantments. He didn't have the staff to implement the change this year, and didn't want to bring another Death Eater into the castle to supplement the staff requirement to do so, regardless if he felt that it was a good idea. He'd personally mentioned it to Dumbledore on several occasions, but the old fart had never agreed as to its importance.

"Ahem. Severus?"

Severus turned to face Altheda's portrait. "How bad is it?"

"I can't see him, I can only go by what she said," Altheda replied.

"Severus, I'm sure that Miss Granger can work this out for herself. You cannot interfere with Harry and his quest," Dumbledore said from the wall above the desk.

Severus didn't look up, merely angled his head and grit his teeth. "I'm well aware of that, old man," he spat.

Fortescue piqued up. "She isn't like the others...and not likely to trust just anyone, Albus."

"She is a Muggle-born, and one of the most wanted witches in England," Dippet stated as if Severus was unaware of the fact.

Everard shook his head. "If there is even a hint that she..."

"That's enough," Severus snapped. "No, Altheda, I can't contact her directly. You may carry messages, if she wants," he said, knowing it would be impossible to stop her, "but you must be cautious when doing so."

"Really, this consorting with the girl when you have so much to attend to," Phineas started to admonish him, but Severus' scowl made him stop talking.

"I'll not hear another word about Miss Granger...from any of you...except you, Phineas. You and Altheda promised to assist me in this," Severus said, then turned back to Altheda. "Keep me apprised to anything you overhear."

"I will, Headmaster," she replied and slipped from her frame.

Harry was feeling more and more restless now that, thanks to the mysterious potions, Ron was improving. In fact Ron was doing so much better, he was once again complaining; complaining about having to fold his own clothes, complaining about the food, complaining about the smell of the damp tent when it rained. He spent hours

reading over Hermione's journal she'd compiled of Harry's sessions (for she could hardly call them lessons) with Dumbledore and everything Harry could remember from Voldemort, even some of his visions. They talked endlessly about the Horcruxes, and where the Horcruxes could be. But really, they didn't have much to go on.

As the food supply dwindled to watery chicken and mushroom noodle soup again, Ron insisted that he felt ready to move. "But *anywhere* within reach of a bacon sandwich," he requested. "Nothing to do with your cooking, Hermione," he added when she crossed her arms and glared at him, "but a bloke can only eat *soo* many mushrooms."

Since choosing locations seemed to be Hermione's department, they packed camp, erased all indications of their presence on the campsite, and she took them the outskirts of a small market town she'd been to with her parents. After pitching their tent in a small copse of trees, Hermione had cast the necessary enchantments while Harry had gone to town. Problem was, the town had been swarming with Dementors, and due to the locket's influence, Harry hadn't been able to protect himself with a Patronus. He returned with empty pockets and fully frustrated with himself because his stag failed to manifest. They packed up and Hermione Apparated them to the far corner on the edge of a farm she'd seen once.

After Hermione had acquired bread and eggs for their supper, they all felt better. However, Hermione was worried about discovery, and they moved again the next afternoon to a wooded stretch of land upriver. Once the tent was up and the magical protections applied, she tried conjuring her Patronus. Her otter swam happily about her making her feel better. "I think that's why I couldn't conjure my otter at the Ministry, Harry," she said, trying again, this time only holding the locket in her left hand. "*Expecto Patronum*." Her otter appeared and then faded. "At least this doesn't seem to block me."

"But Umbridge was able to cast one," Harry argued, taking the locket back.

"Yeah, but her happy memory is probably all the Muggle-borns and half-breeds she's put in Azkaban," Ron stated.

"Or something equally horrible," Hermione pointed out.

"All her *authority* at the Ministry...she was one power-hungry witch," Ron pointed out as Harry, now wearing the locket, easily produced his stag again.

Hermione shrugged. "I'm certain that she supports Vol..."

"*Oi!*" Ron shouted as Harry's stag stood stately in the main room of the tent.

"Oh right, *sorry, You-Know-Who's* philosophy," Hermione stated. She looked at the locket, hating the thing. "Ron, Harry, I wouldn't wear the locket against your skin. Keep something between it and you if at all possible."

"Okay," Ron said, but Harry didn't look convinced.

So far the Sneakoscope Hermione had given Harry for his birthday stood on the coffee table, thankfully motionless, balanced on its tip, but they still relocated every few days. But there were times when she'd be on watch and she'd feel something, sense something, but whenever she turned her head there was nothing there. Still, the feeling nagged at her. Occasionally, she'd thought she heard someone, some softly spoken murmur, barely above a whisper, but then she'd shake her head thinking it was probably her mind playing tricks on her with the sounds of the breeze through the foliage.

Hermione took them to a grove of trees on the Herefordshire Golf Club, where they stayed for a few nights. Next they spent two nights in St John's Lodge in Regent's Park, and then the next three nights after that in a quiet section of Richmond Park. Since Hermione's father enjoyed golf, she'd occasionally pick wooded areas alongside golf courses, or occasionally small groves or copses of trees on the grounds of hotels or manor houses that Hermione had visited with her parents. Each time they moved, they erased all traces of their campsite before Apparating.

However, as had happened after staying in one place too long, the food dwindled after a few days. So to limit exposure and possible capture while going to buy food, Hermione and Harry would try to ration out the food as much as possible. But that only made Ron irritable. In fact, Hermione observed that Harry fared better than Ron did when food was scarce, and she supposed that it was because of the mistreatment Harry endured while living with the Dursleys. According to the letter's she'd receive from Harry over their summer holidays, they frequently withheld his food or starved him. But Ron was horribly unreasonable and irascible when he was hungry, probably because he'd never had to miss a meal in his whole bloody life. Still, that was no excuse for Ron to refuse the food he *did* get, shoving it away in disgust, simply because Hermione or Harry didn't cook things like his mum could. Not that Ron *ever* contributed to the cooking...or the cleaning up.

They used the Polyjuice Potion and tried visiting Muggle libraries in search of the orphanage in London where Tom Riddle grew up, only to discover that none of them seemed to match the orphanage Harry remembered in Dumbledore's memory. They even tried going to a few of remaining sites, but they hadn't matched Harry's memory either. The one that Hermione thought was the most likely to have been the one Tom Riddle grew up in had been replaced by office tower.

They each agreed readily that there was no point in going to look at Borgin and Burkes or in Little Hangleton. So they were once again at a standstill, much to Ron's dismay.

They left the copse of trees on the edge of the River Great Ouse near Bedford and set up camp in a secluded spot in Southwater County Park. She took watch that evening as Ron and Harry played chess, enjoying the quiet solitude of the beautiful wildlife area. She knew this area well. "We could go see the New Forest ponies or the Long Man of Wilmington, the charming Oxford Cotswold villages, the gardens and grounds of Herstmonceux Castle in Hailsham or Pashley Manor Gardens, and the South Down's stretch of land as well as the vineyards of Kent," she mused to herself, knowing no one could hear her. Since both Ron and Harry seemed to be unhelpful in selecting new campsites, even though it was Harry who generally decided when they had to move, Hermione had started a collection of maps, especially ones with topographical features.

But she had to be careful when choosing the outskirts of a village or town she'd been to because on more than one occasion they'd encountered the tell-tale signs of Dementors in the morning mists and rain, adding to their troubles. This also made venturing into town for food and necessities difficult, so Hermione only went in town when she couldn't find any edible fungi or plants in the areas where they camped, something she was becoming quite resourceful at, or Ron's attitude became too much to bear.

Thankfully their protection spells seemed to keep the Dementors away from their campsites. But bickering between them ensued. Hermione noticed that Harry and Ron were letting suspicions arise against each other when they had the locket, and those suspicions were not being addressed once the locket came off. It didn't help that they had no word from anyone on what was going on, and the continuing isolation and lack of news was having an effect on their friendships.

So Hermione relished the times she had watch...like she was doing now. She could sit and think without the influence of the locket's mummings, its continuous insidious suggestions and innuendoes echoing in her head. It was annoying really, those whispers, that quiet, soft, ever present sense of someone hinting disparaging, distressing and deprecating things. But the soft echoes of the high-pitched, cold laugh sent chills down her spine. Thankfully it stopped when she removed the locket, but it sometimes took her hours to dispel the thoughts that lingered in her mind.

The only place we, well, Harry and I agree on as a likely location for a Horcrux is Hogwarts Hermione thought as she sat leaning against a large elm tree contemplating the possible locations for the cup Horcrux. *But we'll have to save that one for last, well, next to last, since we have to kill You-Know-Who's snake* She still thought Gringotts was an option, but had no idea if You-Know-Who ever had an account there. Tom Riddle certainly would have considered it a suitable place to put something as valuable as a part of his soul. But you have to have a reasonable amount of gold or a steady income to have a Gringotts vault, and what the goblins considered a reasonable amount turned out to be quite a sizable fund as Hermione's parents had found out. Hermione's vault still held several thousand Galleons, and only because she had to leave it there in order to maintain her vault. "So... if he didn't have one, surely a follower might. He'd trusted Lucius Malfoy with a Horcrux, so why not one of the other sycophant Death Eaters?"

"Ke-wit hoo."

Hermione looked up and spotted a stocky, medium-sized owl perched in the elm tree above her. She was young, but fully grown. The owl's plumage had greyish-brown upperparts with pale brown-streaked under parts, and her facial ruff was densely flecked and edged dark brown, giving her a sweet, heart-shaped face. "You're a Tawny Owl," she said softly.

The owl made an abrupt and subdued, "Ha."

The intensity of the owl's dark brown eyes as she watched her reminded her of Severus' gaze, and for a brief moment, Hermione's heart ached for the man now missing from her life. "You remind me of someone," she said softly to the owl.

The owl made a long drawn out, "Hooo."

"A friend, someone who was...is there for me," Hermione corrected herself, "I suppose, but who I can't talk to because he is so far away." She couldn't believe she was talking to an owl. It was October, so she supposed the owl had left its parents' territory and was searching for a place of her own, and possibly a mate.

The owl made a prolonged and resonantly wavered, "Huhuhuhooo," which made Hermione smile.

A Tawny's asymmetrically placed ears give the Tawny owl excellent directional hearing she mentally quoted *Owls! Everything You Need To Know About Owls* by Grantham Dickenson, which she'd read for her Care of Magical Creatures lessons. "You know, we keep owls like you as postal carriers," she said, twirling a leaf. "I bet one as smart as yourself would be an excellent carrier."

The owl made a softly wailing, "Hooo," followed by a "Ke-wit hoo hoo," then flew down to a lower branch, regarding Hermione steadily.

"I haven't any owl treats. We're in hiding from some bad wizards," she said, letting the breeze carry away her leaf. "But it would have been great if Hedwig, Harry's owl, were still alive. I miss writing to my friends."

The owl flew down to the lowest branches and made a resonantly wavered "Ke-wit hoo."

"I take it that you'd like the job?" Hermione asked, and the owl made an abrupt, "Ha" in response.

"All right then." She took her purse out of her pocket and pulled out parchment, ink and a quill. She addressed the letter to ~~the~~ *Headmaster Snape*, which felt odd, then wrote, *Thank you*, and paused and considered how discreet she needed to be.

Twice I've had reason to thank you. Even though I have wondered, contemplated on things, I find that I still owe you a large debt. Not only for everything you taught me, but in other ways as well.

Naturally, Ron is doing well, and he should thank you, too, although he doesn't realize how much you've done for him.

After that, her letter flowed more naturally. She read over her letter, realizing she sounded like a former student thanking her Professor than a friend. However, she couldn't bring herself to sign it. In the end she wrote out her initials like they'd appear on a Muggle monogrammed towel or dressing robe.

Yours sincerely

your former student

HGJ

The next letter, one to Ginny, was easier. At the very bottom she added the words, "The thing about growing up with Fred and George is that you sort of start thinking anything's possible if you've ___," quoting Ginny but leaving off the last few words. She then used those last three words as the trigger for the Revealing Charm she cast on the parchment.

She used a piece of hair ribbon to tie up each letter, and the Tawny owl flew down accepting the letters. "Take them to Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry. It's in Scotland. If we're not here when you get back, look for us on the perimeter of Pashley Manor Gardens."

The owl hooted once, and Hermione watched her fly away, wondering if she'd see her little friend again.

Shortly after the bell tolled the hour, indicating that the students should make their way to the Great Hall for breakfast, Severus looked up surprised as a Tawny owl swooped in through his window and landed on his desk. She held out one of the scrolls tied in a red hair ribbon. He untied the missive, and the owl hopped away. "Not expecting treats or a response?" he asked drolly.

The owl turned and made a subdued, "Ke-wit hoo."

"You don't know what owl treats are?" he asked surprised. Owls rarely if ever passed on receiving their treats for their deliveries.

The owl moved closer, her head turning as she surveyed the office. Severus chuffed a laugh and offered her a few treats. She picked one up cautiously, ate it and then quickly ate the other two. "You must be a new post owl," he said.

She made a longed and resonantly wavered, "Hahuhuhuhooo."

"You're welcome," he replied.

She made an abrupt "Hoo" and flew out of his office to make her second delivery.

Polite owl, he mused as he unrolled the missive. His eyes widened as he began reading it *What the...? For crying out loud!* he thought and then quickly turned it over before the inquisitive painted image above his desk could recognize Hermione's penmanship. *For the love of... Is she kidding? What the fuck is she thinking writing to me here!* However despite his disbelief, he felt utterly relieved to hear from her as well as wanting to admonish her for taking such a risk *Owls can be traced! Unless the protective spells are applied on her, she can be followed! Hermione should know that; she is not a stupid witch.*

"Good news, Severus?" Dumbledore asked from his place above his desk.

"Yes, actually," he replied. *She's alive. She's safe for now.* He carried the letter to the window to read it without prying eyes peering over his shoulder. He smiled at the formal tone, like a student thanking her professor for his tutelage...until he read about the Dementors in the town. *'Hard to go shopping for food or supplies.' She's had trouble finding food... fungi and foliage are not sufficient fare. Mr. Weasley is not handling the hardship. He should try being here under the torment of the Carrows, Severus sneered. 'He is unreasonable and irascible when hungry.' Wanker. That boy needs to grow up. This is war, and he was so eager to be out there in it. Well, Mr.*

Weasley should've known...warriors don't get the comforts of warm beds and hearty meals. Suck it up, boy!

He folded the letter. She's had trouble finding food. He considered sending her some, but thought better of it. She is resourceful; she had been the top student in her year in every subject for six years running. The only exception being her second year when she'd spent half the year petrified in the hospital wing, and even then she'd caught up on all her coursework and exams and still got in the top ten scores for the year. She'll be all right.

He placed the letter in his Potions Journal in the top drawer of his desk and headed down to breakfast. The Slytherin and Hufflepuff students filed in in an orderly manner and quietly took their seats. The Ravenclaw students entered next, and lastly, as happened with every meal, the Gryffindor's ambled in and sat down. Severus stood, made his few morning announcements and some pointed admonishments about the continuing graffiti on the school walls, then sat down. Only once the food appeared on the tables did the noise level go up. Severus ate a light but well-rounded breakfast, more to show his comfort in his new role than because he was hungry.

As the post owls arrived, he recognized the same young Tawny fly in and land before Miss Weasley. The girl looked utterly surprised as she untied the missive and gave the owl a piece of bacon. The owl stayed poised waiting for a reply, but whatever Miss Weasley said to the bird, it then flew off with the other owls. *Hopefully it would blend in with the other owls when it flies away from the castle.*

He finished eating as he slyly watched Miss Weasley to see if she'd hurry out, but the girl didn't behave any differently than on any other morning. After the students departed for their lessons, Severus returned to his office.

The owl was waiting patiently on the back of the chair facing his desk. "Don't tell me you're expecting a reply?" he asked incredulously.

The owl made an abrupt and subdued, "Ha."

He tried to shoo her off, but the stubborn owl only flew up to sit on a curtain rod to wait.

By noon, and getting tired of her persistent chatter, he began to pen a curt and abrupt letter to Hermione admonishing her for her carelessness. He was interrupted by a knock on his door. He slid the parchment under his morning trustee report and barked out, "Enter."

Naturally it was Alecko Carrow. Again. With another complaint. "This time they have gone too far!" she sneered. "My desk...the drawers are all stuck closed and not by any magical means, I checked! There is no magical signature to it, and I can't get it undone. I did find this." She handed him a green striped white tube.

He read the label. Instant Krazy Glue All Purpose. It was a Muggle glue that his father used to use. He considered what action to take. He wasn't inclined to help her; she'd tried several times in the past to discredit him with the Dark Lord and would likely do so again. She was a witch. She should deal with this herself; she had a bloody wand and the entire Hogwarts library at her disposal. "And what do you want me to do about it?" he asked, staring her down. "If you hadn't admonished Professor Flitwick over the ridiculous Headless Hats last night, then he might have been inclined to help you. As it is, tell Filch to exchange the desks."

"I like *that* desk," she shouted.

His eyes narrowed dangerously. "Then I suggest you find a way to unstick your drawers or find another desk. I'm busy," he said evenly. "If you ruin the desk in the process of finding a spell to unglue your drawers, it will have to be brought to the attention of the Bursars Office for reimbursement for a new desk. Now if that is all, you're dismissed. As you can see, I have a pile of work to get done by dinner."

He waited until she stormed out of his office. Smirking, he picked up the trustee report, read it thoroughly and then filed it in his cabinet. He picked up the next item that required his attention and glanced down at his unfinished reply to Hermione. *Once again you've found a way to get my attention.* He recalled the times she'd come to his office merely to talk. Oh, she'd had excuses, but they had been just that, excuses. If truth were told, he missed her. But he knew she would have been grabbed the moment she stepped off the train, hauled away and tortured, then killed. *All for the sake of her heritage, intelligence, magical skills and cleverness* he thought with a sigh. *And her choice in friends.*

He picked up his quill and continued writing. He asked her if she were all right. He warned her to be cautious about using their magic in Muggle areas and told her about the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Stolen and Counterfeit Magical Objects that had been assigned to work in conjunction with the Improper Use of Magic Office to regulate and monitor any magic done in any unregistered, non-magical residence or Muggle locations. He cautioned her about preventing Potter from saying the Dark Lord's name due to the trace. He told her that the Ministry was using Dementors to seek out Muggle-borns. He told her to be cautious, constantly vigilant and to trust no one.

He signed it simply:

Your friend

S

He rolled her ribbon up in the parchment and sealed it with his own black wax with green sheen and used a star anise seed pod as his seal. "Okay little one, take this to her and be careful," he said as the owl landed on his desk. "Don't be caught. Fly for the trees, then turn for the direction you intend to go. No one here should see which way you fly."

She made a long and resonantly wavered, "*Hahuhuhuhoo*" and flew out of his window, circling up and toward the west. *Silly bird, couldn't she understand a simple directive?*

~ T. B. .C. ~

Chapter 53

Chapter 53 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun. Keep in mind, most of the actual events in DH happen as they happened in the book unless I have indicated they happened differently or at a slightly different time. I am, however, adding to the drawn out camping stretches a bit, and some interactions that didn't happen in the book. My creative license says I can do that.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Since Hermione was hoping that the Tawny owl would return, she had Apparated them to the Pashley Manor Gardens and found a spot south of the gardens in a copse of trees to make camp that was fairly secluded. Harry hadn't been too sure about being this close to the previous campsite, but Hermione argued that until he learned how to Apparate with all three of them, he'd have to trust her. And she was getting tired of Apparating every few days to another location, especially long distance Apparition with all three of them. So he relented for now. But now he wanted Apparition lessons. The tricky part had been to locate magical places to Apparate from, and they only had about maybe ten small doses of the Polyjuice Potion left.

"Hermione, you can't trace someone when they Apparate; Remus told us that, remember? Besides, how hard can it be?" Harry asked. "I took Dumbledore on Side-Along Apparition when we returned from the seaside cave, and you did it first time you tried to, right?"

"Harry, don't be so thick. If someone is Apparating over and over in the same place it will be noticed, and if any of us Splinch, it's not as if we can go to St. Mungo's to be sorted out nor do we want the Ministry's Accidental Magical Reversal Squad to find us, do we?" Hermione asked, but he gave her that stubborn I'm-going-to-do-this-anyway look.

"If you can do it, Harry can," Ron stated, trying to be helpful.

Hermione glared at him for a second, then turned to Harry. "If you recall, I Splinched you, Ron," she said, indicating him with her hand, and Ron flinched, his ears turning red. "I did it out of desperation the first time, and I was lucky! I've been going to places I've been, so I can see them clearly in my mind, exactly where I want to be. That way I can concentrate on the determination and deliberation because the destination is firmly set in my mind."

"I can do that," Harry stated firmly.

No matter what she said, he stubbornly wanted to learn it, as did Ron, so she relented in the end. "Fine, but I suggest you try taking only one of us at first, then you can try taking both of us." Which meant choosing destinations she and Harry had been to or knew of well enough so they could both visualize them. "Right, so... we have to pick a place you can see, so we both go to the same place...and we have to keep moving to different locations, the farther away the better...and randomly. We don't want to make any kind of predictable pattern," Hermione reasoned.

"Well," Harry drawled out slowly as he looked around. "We can jump to that hill."

She turned to look at where he pointed. It looked to be reasonable enough. *And from on top of the hill they'd be able to pick a place more easily for their next jump. Someplace significantly distant.*

"Hermione, it's not as if we haven't Apparated before...Harry should be able to do it," Ron said, rolling his eyes.

"It's a good thing, because he's taking *you* with him," she snapped. "And so far you've Splinched yourself twice. Side-Along Apparition is much harder because you have to be especially determined on your destination to take another person with you, and your deliberation cannot waver...it's why I Splinched you, Ron; I was insufficiently determined, and even though I was deliberate in where I wanted to be, I lost my concentration." She turned back to Harry and looked him in the eyes. "Be absolutely determined that you can do it and focus your determination on your intended action, while clearly envisioning your destination, and say the incantation, without losing focus, while being absolutely deliberate to do it as you release your magic..."

"Too many 'D' words," Ron said. "Enough already, let him do it!"

Hermione turned sharply back to face him. "Don't be so cavalier about this, it's serious if you Splinch or Splinch one of us. Splinching is quite common if you're not suitably determined."

"Don't get your wand in a knot. I'll be sufficiently determined," Ron said, still trying to be funny.

"Oi! I think I have it," Harry said, forestalling their argument. "I think I'm ready, Hermione."

Still, Harry did very well taking her and Ron to the hill he'd pointed out and next to the stand of oaks he chose for his second location. Ron managed to take them to the road, but he tripped everyone on their arrival. However Ron's second time, Harry's eyebrow was sliced open. It wasn't really a bad Splinching, but Harry called it quits for the day. After stopping the bleeding and healing his cut with some Dittany and having him take some Blood-Replenishing Potion just in case, Hermione had Harry Apparate them back to the tent, and they all arrived safely. "I see what you mean about longer distances being more difficult," he admitted as she cleaned up his face.

"You did well," she said softly. "I think that with some practice, you could easily do it." She put down the flannel. "I've noticed that if you act on necessity or on impulse, you are able to do remarkable feats of magic, but when you have to concentrate to do something, you hesitate. Get over that, and I don't think there would be a spell you can't do."

Harry smiled up at her. "Thanks." He rose and walked to his room to lie down a bit.

The next day, Harry tried taking them to locations he had to visualize in his head. The first was a park he knew, but within minutes, Dementors swooped in, and Hermione had to Apparate them away since Ron wore the locket, and Harry had cast his Patronus to protect them.

His second attempt went much better. They arrived in the zoo where he'd been before, but Hermione insisted they leave immediately because they attracted far too much attention. His third try took them to Kingston Market, and Ron insisted they stop for lunch. Not that the historic market square wasn't a fun place to eat, but the Polyjuice transformation only lasted for fifty minutes before they had to quickly find a place to hide as it wore off. Harry and Ron then slipped under the cloak as she shopped, but she was constantly on alert for anyone suspicious and was quite glad when it was time to go.

On the third day, she began to wonder if the Tawny owl would come back. She made sandwiches and soup for dinner, but she'd refused to eat inside and took her sandwich outside to eat while keeping watch.

The next morning Harry insisted on moving. Hermione Apparated them to Halley Road not far from the Herstonceux Castle in Hailsham, and they made camp in the trees between the castle and the Observatory Science Centre. While searching for edible fungi and wood for the stove, she stumbled upon a lovely pond covered in red lilies. A heron strode along the edge of the pond with his long, cruel beak, beady eyes and stately walk. She thought of Severus and their excursions when they had been teens and wondered what he'd have thought about the pond. She sat down and enjoyed the moment of solitude. *He'd have asked me to name the use for each part of the water lily.* She concentrated on what she knew about the plant from that perspective. *An Arhizomatous aquatic herb. The vascular bundles in the stems and dried roots are used in potions for swollen limbs, digestive problems, uterine fibroids and menstrual cramps, and... a rinse for mouth sores. The flower buds and the seeds are edible and can be eaten fried or used in potions as well. The seeds are...*

Her attention was broken by a bird flying overhead, and she thought of the Tawny owl, wondering if she'd found Hogwarts' *hope Severus is all right.*

She sighed. Severus Snape was such an enigma. His teenage self was so different than the man she knew as her professor, so much more amiable and relaxed around her, and yet he really hadn't changed all that much. He was more acerbic as an adult, stern and strict, but there had been times when he'd let his guard down that he was like the boy she knew. *But back then he hadn't killed Dumbledore. He hadn't joined the Death Eaters, then turned spy. He hadn't had to stand trial for his crimes against humanity...not just wizardkind...humanity!* She remembered watching him once with his housemates...his friends. Now those friends were Death Eaters and probably more fanatic about Voldemort's ideals than Severus was...if he ever had been. That was something she'd wanted to ask her Professor but never dared...if he'd ever believed in what Voldemort stood for. *But how could he have? We were friends, and he knew about my blood status.*

Shrugging, she trudged back to the tent, dropped off the wood she'd gathered and went to her room. She smiled at the bit of green sleeve on the side of the painting as she sat on her cot. "Hello, Altheda. Being shy today?"

"Avoiding the boys," she replied, moving into view. "How are you, Hermione?"

"I'm all right, everything considered," Hermione replied. "How is Professor Snape? Is he all right? Have you seen my friend Ginny?"

"Severus is fine. He's busy, there is so much to do with all the changes, but he is well," Altheda said. "I don't see your friend much, except when she passes my frame. I don't speak with her at all."

"No, I suppose not," Hermione said sadly. "Altheda, how long have you known Professor Snape?"

"Since he was in his fourth...no, the second half of his third year," she replied. "I got tired of the four Gryffindor bullies always tormenting and attacking him, so I started to give him warnings when I could. We became friends in his fifth year, especially after that heinous trick Sirius Black pulled on him. I was delighted when he returned to teach, although he was not at all happy about the assignment."

"Why?" Hermione asked, curious.

"It was part of his probation, as I understood it. The condition of his receiving a pardon as Dumbledore's spy was to work under Dumbledore's employ, under his supervision," Altheda stated, not that Hermione hadn't learned about it from the articles in the *Daily Prophet*. "I was delighted that he chose to stay on, once his probation was over."

To protect Harry, Hermione assumed. "But what about his dorm mates, did you know them?"

"I knew of them," Altheda said. "I didn't speak to any of those boys."

"But you knew them. Was Severus even like them? I know he befriended them," Hermione said, then quickly added, "he must have," because she didn't want to explain how she knew them. *I remember seeing a few of them, and they were not the type of boys'd have wanted to be around.* "They are Death Eaters now, the wizards he shared a dorm with, and probably more fanatic about You-Know-Who's ideals than Severus was. So, did his dorm mates hate Muggle-borns, even back then?"

"Yes, many of them opposed Muggle-borns," Altheda admitted. "What is bothering you, dear?"

What she really wanted to ask was, *Why did he kill Dumbledore?* "Normal people...smart people...don't kill other people. Most normal people are law-abiding good citizens and don't destroy other people's lives. They don't wake up one day and become zealots and do the atrocities that the Death Eaters are doing...all in You-Know-Who's name!"

"I'm sure at one point he did think like they did, but not for the reasons you think, it was more... complicated. Hermione, you have to realize, Muggles... prejudice." She looked to the side for a moment. "For centuries, we've been persecuted. Many of the old traditions were being challenged by witches and wizards who didn't grow up with our ways, our values. Back in my day, many of the Muggle-borns, and quite a few of the half-bloods, still retained the values and traditions of their Muggle families. The older magical families were afraid the old ways would vanish because of this. The Muggle-borns lacked the social manners, refined deportment or the understanding of the responsibilities and duties of a witch or wizard as it was taught in the magical households. Their lack of censure and responsibility caused many problems and strife. The Muggle-borns, many of them, still held ties to the Muggle world and used their magic to terrorize and dominate in order to gain power and control over Muggle clans and royal houses and to become the right hand of the rulers."

"Some usurpers and rulers used wizards and witches...calling them sorcerers...and used them to gain power, conquer more land, obtain more gold," Hermione pointed out. "Not unlike Merlin did...his dream interpretation for Julius Caesar and in his creation of Camelot."

"Yes, well..." Altheda said. "But there were many Muggle-borns who were not so discreet."

"And just as many power hungry pure-bloods," Hermione stated. "Greyfon the Sorcerer wasn't a Muggle-born, and he used his magic to dominate and control Brittany throughout the third century. Gwydion used his magic in the battle of Dyfed and the Battle of the Trees. Not to mention Mortanus Melgor, Ruairidh the Maul, Uilleam the Deceiver, Mairead the Malicious... I can name quite a few."

"I suppose you can," Altheda said, her tone becoming a bit cool. "But this was why Hogwarts was founded, to teach young people to respect magic, how to use it properly and most of all, not to abuse their power."

"So all Muggle-borns were power hungry irresponsible insurgents. That's like saying all Slytherins were dark, evil and prejudiced," Hermione argued.

"The problems escalated as Christianity began to spread. The Catholic Church grew stronger, spreading throughout Europe. These new Muggle-borns, born under the influence of Christianity, began to think of their magic abilities as a gift from God, but the pure-bloods, many of whom did not follow the new religion, still followed the old traditions," Altheda said. "To them, this Jesus Christ, God, the Holy Virgin Mother and the Spirit were merely reinventions of older deities, and even the holidays and celebrations fell on some of the existing days of celebration or sacred days. The Muggles branded the heathen pure-bloods as the children of the Devil. The Church, unable to control magic and those who had the ability, became frightened, so wizards and witches were condemned and persecution ensued...the witch-burnings of the so-called Dark Ages. You've heard that many witches and wizards managed to escape. There are spells they learned, which you are still taught today, that allowed them to survive. But many Squibs and untrained Muggle-borns and half-bloods did not. Many perished. It was a time of great pain in the magical community. Witches and wizards had to learn to hide their magic, to keep their abilities secret."

"Thus began the Statute of Secrecy and the segregation of our world," Hermione said solemnly.

"Yes, and many pure-bloods resent the suppression. It's hard to live constantly in the shadows," Altheda said, finally calming her tone.

"I think I understand, but Severus didn't think of Muggle-borns as usurpers or troublesome, did he?"

"He, like many, wanted to belong. He wanted to be a great wizard and strove to learn as much as he could while at school...much like yourself," Altheda stated, a small smile playing on her lips. "He didn't make friends easily, seldom allowed any to get close enough to trust them, but still wanted their acknowledgement and respect."

"And if the boys in his house gave him acknowledgement and respect, told him that under You-Know-Who he'd be a respected and valued member, receive his due recognition for his skills..."

"Now you are starting to understand," Altheda said. "The Dark Lord offers what those who follow him crave. He uses them, draws on their strengths, encourages them to stretch out and reach for more. Then as you begin to feel like you can achieve anything if you simply take what you want, do what you want to get it, you are rewarded, praised. If you succeed, even more so. Eventually the lines become blurry and you find yourself wanting more."

"And they become the ones with a lack of censure and responsibility, and they cause problems and strife and use their magic to terrorize and dominate in order to gain power and control over Muggles and royal houses and ultimately to strive to become the right hand of the rulers," Hermione said sadly.

"I suppose so," Altheda said with a lift of her chin. "I must go." She turned and walked out of her frame.

Well that answers some of my questions Hermione thought as she fell back on her bed and hugged her pillow *But why did he leave You-Know-Who? A change of conscience? Did something happen that changed his mind? Why turn to Dumbledore, agree to be his spy, and then, sixteen years later, kill him? Dumbledore kept him out of Azkaban. Gave him a job. Trusted him.* She recalled what she'd read in his bio in a Potions periodical. *Severus left Hogwarts in 1978, and started teaching in 1981. He did an apprenticeship and obtained a Mastery in Potions in only two years.*

But why did Dumbledore make Severus Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor if they knew that the post is cursed? Was it because Dumbledore's hand was cursed, because he knew that he didn't have long to live? I'm missing something here, some part of the puzzle. Unless...

She sat up. *Dumbledore was dying! I remember Madam Pomfrey telling Mr. and Mrs. Weasley that the curse would have killed Dumbledore in a month or two anyway! McGonagall knew it, too! Severus must have known. Malfoy had been trying all year to kill Dumbledore...on You-Know-Who's orders. His task. But Malfoy couldn't do it.* She listed the names of the Death Eaters on the tower that night. *Bellatrix Lestrange, Fenrir Greyback the werewolf, Gibbon was named in the article in the Daily Prophet...Harry recognized him. The Carrows! Alecto and Amycus Carrow were there...the new teachers at Hogwarts! And Draco Malfoy... and Severus Snape.*

She looked at the flap that separated her room from the rest of the tent. The only logical conclusion was that Dumbledore staged his own death *Dumbledore pleaded with Severus, to do what? Kill him. Severus was repulsed. But he didn't hate Dumbledore, he respected him.* "You have to mean it to cast an Unforgivable," she murmured. *He'd have to find enough hate to kill. He'd have to hate...* She covered her mouth.

An image of a young Severus glaring at James Potter and Sirius Black flashed in her mind, the hate he'd felt showing in his dark eyes, was then replaced with a picture of her professor glaring hatefully at Sirius Black at Grimmauld Place. *He'd have to find enough hate within him to kill.*

"Oh, Severus," she exhaled remorsefully. "You *did* find it within yourself. You did what you had to do." She understood now.

She sat on the ground, leaning against a young tree, enjoying the silence when she heard a 'kewick' loudly announcing the Tawny's arrival.

"There you are!" Hermione said, holding up her arm.

The owl swooped down, landing gently, and made another a long drawn out, "hoo."

"What a wonderful owl you are," Hermione said, taking the two letters from her.

The owl preened, then hopped up to her shoulder and nestled down a little, obviously tired after her flight.

Hermione recognized Ginny's seal imprint, so she opened the other one first, and her heart seemed to skip a beat *It's from Severus!* She recognized his handwriting immediately. *He wrote to me! Both of them wrote me!* She gave the bird a corner of her bread and read his letter, at first saddened by his gruff tone. But then the letter became curious, asking about her well-being. She laughed. *First he admonishes me for writing to him, then he shows his concern. That's so like him!* He told her about the new the Office for the Detection and Confiscation of Stolen and Counterfeit Magical Object, and confirmed Ron's statements about the trace on Voldemort's name, then warned her to be cautious, constantly vigilant and to trust no one. She smiled. *He still cares!* Her heart soared at the thought.

She read Ginny's letter. Naturally, Ginny asked about Harry and then Ron, then started to tell her what changes had been made at Hogwarts *Stricter curfews...not surprising. Severus would be a firmer disciplinarian than Dumbledore had been. Everyone has to walk in a quiet and orderly manner between lessons, meals and to and from the dormitories...that is a bit extreme. Why had the library hours had been shortened? That doesn't make sense. And the DA was rebelling!* Hermione's heart nearly stopped upon reading some of the things her friends were pulling on Professors Alecto Carrow and Amycus Carrow, but from what Ginny wrote about them the Carrows sounded awful.

Hermione folded the letters and pulled out her beaded bag, scrounging around for paper, quill and ink. She wrote to Ginny first, telling her that they were all right, still on their mission against Voldemort and not to worry about them. She thought carefully and decided that a slight deception might be a good idea. *We found a,* she cast the Contrary-Inverse Charm, "*Contrārius,*" wandlessly as she wrote, *safe place to hole up. We have plenty of fresh water, and food isn't too hard to come by. Ron has been well and so,* she mumbled, "*Contrārius,*" again and wrote, *pleasant when hungry.* She smirked and continued, being very careful not to give anything away. She used the charm on each word she wanted reversed. At the end she wrote:

Tell everyone to keep the faith, be patient, and above all be careful. The Carrows sound awful but they might be Death Eaters, placed in the school by Voldemort. Be vigilant and don't antagonize Professor Snape or the Carrows too much. Say hello to everyone for us, and let your family know we are all right. Revertere, Ginny, I know you can, and you'll see I'm right.

Take care,

HGJ

She picked up a leaf and turned it into a ribbon to tie her parchment with and smiled at the variegated yellows and brown. She placed the letter aside and started one for Severus, starting it off with, *My Slytherin,* and ending it with: *In the contrary, your little Gryffindor, I revert.* She then cast the Contrary-Inverse Charm on the entire letter, smiling at the nonsense that appeared as each word showed its antonymous equivalent.

Hermione picked a particularly pretty leaf and changed it into a ribbon with her wand, then used it to tie her letter. She angled her head, looking at the sleepy owl on her shoulder and gently stroking its feathers.

She woke and made a soft, coarse, "hoo."

"Will you carry my letters to my friends again?" Hermione asked, then quickly added, "After you've rested...I don't mean right away. Why don't you sleep for a bit, and I'll save you a bit of bologna for when you're ready."

The owl made a hoarse, "huhuhuhoo" and flew up into the tree to roost.

Hermione picked up her plate and walked into the tent. She walked over to where Ron lounged in a comfortable chair. "Here, it's from Ginny," she said and held out Ginny's letter.

Harry jumped up as Ron grabbed the parchment and almost tore it open in his haste. "How'd you get this?" Harry asked as he leaned over Ron's shoulder.

"From an owl, of course," she replied on her way to the kitchen to clean her plate. "And don't worry, she wasn't traced. I'm sure of it."

Harry stood up and turned to face her. "Whose owl is it? How do you know you can trust it?"

"Because I know I can," she stated. "So, we move tomorrow. Any suggestions?" she asked, changing the subject.

Harry's mouth gaped open. "I, er, dunno." After a pause he said, "Wales."

"Wales, great. I'm going to take a kip," Ron said and went to the room he shared with Harry.

"Harry, I was thinking..." she paused, unsure. "Why not practice something. I've been reading up on Animagi transformation."

Harry looked intrigued so she continued, pulling out her purse again. She used a wandless Summoning Charm to pull out her Transfiguration notebook and composition book. "I copied down everything I could on the theory and the technique." They sat down at the table and she started going over her notes. They discussed the theory and the spell. "I think it's like Apparition; if you're properly determined enough, and envision your physical form changing, it should work. Determination, Deliberation and Envision or Acceptance..."

"But we don't know our forms," Harry pointed out.

"No one does the first time," she stated. "I tried asking Sirius about it once, one of the few companionable discussions we had. *The only one*, she thought sarcastically. "And he said it was like letting yourself go, letting your magic flow into the shape. The oddest and most natural feeling... I wrote down everything he said." She turned to the page in her journal and let him read it. "If Peter Pettigrew could do it, we can." She and Harry discussed it at length until Ron came out looking for dinner.

Hermione rose to prepare something, catching an odd look in Ron's eyes, almost a resentful glare. "Soup all right?" she asked him.

"More soup. Can't we have anything normal, like chicken and sprouts or a roast with potatoes or pasta with meat balls?" he grumbled.

"The next time I go shopping I'll see what I can do, but for now, it's soup and cheese sandwiches," she replied, not yet ready to risk shopping. It was hard to watch your back while selecting what to buy, tallying up how much things cost and planning out menus in her head. Hermione sighed. *Mum always made it look so easy!* She sighed heavily. *But then she'd been able to go to the market whenever she needed anything, and I can't. I have to make do the best I can for as long as I can!* sucked being Undesirable number three and having a huge price on her head; whenever she went out she had to constantly worry about having to avoid being seen by anyone in the magical community. And the Dementors seemed to be everywhere, especially on rainy days.

That night she took watch as Ron and Harry cleaned up after dinner. The owl came down to accept her post. She had read somewhere that post owls could sometimes see or sense the places where you wanted them to go, simply by looking into a witch's or wizard's eyes...like a form of Legilimency. She wondered if it were true. She looked at the Tawny's large eyes, once again struck by the bluish-black irises, so similar to Severus' dark eyes. She envisioned the bridge she would be Apparating to in the morning. "Look for us somewhere near Llandeilo Bridge South Wales or fly north, along the River Towy, someplace near the Llyn Brienne."

The owl hooted as if understanding.

Maybe they could do some type of Legilimency. "I should name you," Hermione said as she gave the letters to the Tawny owl.

She made a long drawn out, "huh-huh-hooo-hooo."

"What about Shania? She was a singer my mum and I liked." Hermione said, and the Tawny looked away. "No? Okay. Seanna is pretty." The owl still averted her gaze. "You only like Tawnie."

The owl looked at her and made an abrupt hoot.

"But that's silly; it's like naming a cat, Cat. How about Tansy?" Hermione suggested, but she fluffed her feathers and turned her head again. "Tanya? Teaney?"

The owl stubbornly stared into the trees.

"That's a Tawny!" Ron said, startling Hermione slightly.

The owl hooted in agreement.

"Okay, Tawnie, it is then," Hermione said with a sigh, adding, "But I'd have picked Shania" as Tawnie flew away.

Severus entered his office and was surprised to see the Tawny owl perched on the back of his chair holding a letter tied with a ribbon of variegated yellows and brown. She made a long drawn out hoarse, "kewick."

"Hush, you silly bird," he said as he closed his door. "You could've been heard." He walked over as she preened happily. "Proud of yourself, aren't you?" He took the letter and gave the owl treats, then untied the ribbon. He unrolled the parchment and felt relieved when he saw her handwriting. He started in surprise at her use of, *My Slytherin*, to address him, and one side of his lips pulled back in the slightest smile. *Her Slytherin, indeed.* Not that there was any hope it meant what he thought, but for the briefest flashes, it was a pleasant thought.

He recalled the first time he'd called her his little Gryffindor during her third stay with him *No, that's not right, it was before that, when I wanted to practice a spell on her and she'd agreed too readily without even knowing what I wanted to do to her, silly girl.* It hadn't really been an endearment at the time, but in his mind that was what she had become, *his* little Gryffindor.

He thought back to the first time she'd kissed him when he'd been sixteen. He had leaned down to hug her before sending her off to her own time, and he'd felt her velvety lips softly pressing against his...well the side of his mouth. She had muffled something in his chest...what he was certain had been 'I love you'...then told him she'd miss him. She'd cried, tears rolling down her cheeks, and even though he'd known he'd see her again, his heart had ached when she'd left. The following day...hell, for the rest of the school year, he felt bereft of her presence. And he'd been such an ass when she materialized in that room seventeen years later, carefully defining their relationship as solely teacher and student. He had been so absolutely certain that was all he wanted, when she'd been a true friend and would have remained so if he'd wanted one.

It seemed to have been a lifetime ago, and yet he could still remember how she'd felt in his arms. Twice when she'd had to leave him she'd kissed him. He smiled as he recalled the second time he'd had to send her back to her time. She had turned her head while they hugged and she'd kissed his cheek. He remembered the way her soft, curly hair tickled his nose, his eyes closing as he held her for that brief moment. It had been tender, not at all like his fierce grabbing of her in the corridor the last time they'd said goodbye.

My Slytherin,

Only the rest of her letter was utter gibberish.

I'm bad, well, bad inadequate. We stay around a little. Infrequently ceasing camp and leaving in nearby offices. You be real to cease the none that destroys none the indecisions...

The owl hooted again.

"And noisy," he admonished the bird, trying to decipher her coded message. He scanned down the letter hoping to make some sense of her writing.

Tawnie hasn't wavered to be your owl, it be real not you've doubtfully ungrateful to lose lost him. Dubiously, you disregard he lost you, but that's mending hairs. He isn't a dumb owl...

"So, your name is Tawnie, I gather," he stated and she made a subdued, *ha*."

"Not an original name," he muttered. "I'd have named you Babble." He was about to set the letter aside to work on later when he saw that she ended it with:

Out the agree, my big Gryffindor, You keep the same.

My big...my little Gryffindor. You keep the same... I keep...I reverse! Brilliant girl, he thought smiling at her ingenuity. He picked up his wand, tapping the parchment while saying, "*Retexere Incantatem*," and watched the words all sort themselves out. He read her letter again.

She has been helping Potter learn to do Side-Along Apparition. He wondered if Darius' office had been noting the Apparation points, and hoped Hermione knew to space the locations wide enough to avoid being caught.

Bloody hell, woman, why try hiding in the zoo of all places? And Kingston Market...are you completely daft? You could have landed on someone! Lunch in Kingston Market? It had to have been Potter to try a stunt like that, but why Hermione allowed it was beyond him. He'd have to set her straight on that.

She described a pond with red lilies, and for a moment he scowled before realizing it was safe enough if she's already moved on to another location *Besides, the description doesn't really give away its location, only that it reminded her of me. Oddly. Possibly the time we were in the meadow...or the lake.* He dismissed the thought, but scowled at the mention of a heron.

He'd been teased once in Transfiguration about his Animagus form being a heron because of his nose. He had grown tall by that year, nearly six foot, having shot up a good six inches or so over the summer holiday. But Hermione mentioned the heron's stately walk, which wasn't as bad as having one's nose compared to the bird's pointy beak or his gaze compared to its beady eyes.

As he'd deduced, her owl's name is Tawnie, and she told him of how she acquired the bird.

He finished the letter and folded it carefully, placing it in his drawer under his journal.

Tawnie jumped down from her perch on the curtain rod as if to peer into his drawer, and he closed it sharply. "Nothing in there will interest you. Go take a nap in the owlery, and I'll have a response after dinner.

She made a resonant, "*huhuhuhooo*," and flew away.

She is alive and safe. Taking far too many chances in her locations, but she's all right he thought, returning to the paperwork that required his attention.

Hermione sat on a fallen tree with her left foot tucked under her right leg as she wrote a letter to Severus. It had seemed like ages since she'd heard from him, but it had only been two weeks. *Harry's scar keeps bothering him, and he keeps having flashes of emotions and visions from Voldemort* she wrote.

Epecially when Harry had on the locket not that she added that in her letter. Additionally Hermione had observed that Harry seemed to sense the locket's presence even when he wasn't wearing it, although Harry's attitude didn't fluctuate as much as Ron's did from the locket's influence. She hated wearing the locket, it was horrible. It wasn't just the odd sensation of the locket pressing on her chest through her shirt, it never felt right. When either Harry or Ron handed it over to her, she knew they'd had it against their skin, but the locket would be ice cold when she'd put it on, not warm. And it would turn cold then warm, sometimes even hot while she wore it, and it seemed to hum. Not a vibration of sorts, but a constant thrum, and sometimes that thrumming pulsed, almost as if to match her heart beat. And the whispers; the continuous disconcerting, insidious suggestions and damning innuendoes echoing in her head and that horrible high-pitched, cold laugh that sent chills down her spine.

We camped on the River Towy for a few days, so that we could have fish with our mushrooms she continued. *We had an encounter with some other people yesterday* she wrote.

Namely two goblins, one Harry recognized, and Ted Tonks and Dean Thomas she thought to herself. She remembered their comments. *The goblins had left the bank because, how did he phrase it? Oh, yes, 'Duties ill-befitting the dignity of his race', which could be anything. But that Gringotts was not under the goblins' control could only mean one thing...Voldemort has control of the wizarding bank.* A Horcrux could have been hidden there if that were true. *Would Ginny know if Tom Riddle ever has had an account with the bank? Probably not.*

We were not seen or heard. We left the next morning she wrote down.

Phineas had told them that Ginny, Neville and Luna had tried to steal the Sword of Gryffindor from Severus' office. She wondered why Severus hadn't told her. She considered telling him that the one he had was a fake. When Phineas had told them Goblins' silver imbibes only that which strengthens it, she'd immediately thought of the basilisk Harry had killed with the sword. Turned out that was true. *And if it is true, the sword itself could destroy the locket. Except that, according the Phineas, Dumbledore had used it to destroy the Horcrux in the ring and look at what that had done to him.* Not that they had the sword. *And neither does Severus, apparently. But the sword was the best possible means of destroying the locket. She'd do it...for Harry's sake. So how does one get the sword? Harry said it fell out of the Sorting Hat. Could I ask Severus for the hat?*

Thank you for what you did for Ginny, Neville and Luna. I'm sorry they went after the sword. I hope you were able to put things to right She wanted to ask if he still had the original or knew where it might be.

The fact that Dirk thought Harry had run off, gone into hiding to save his own arse, had irritated them, but better that belief than knowing the truth.

Ron is utterly impossible. No matter what I cook he complains she wrote and kicked the leaves on the ground with the toe of her boot. And he still refuses to even try cooking anything...not that he could do any better, the spoiled git. He doesn't help clean up either. He sits around moping, complaining and being a toe-rag! Harry eats whatever I prepare, even the stewed mushrooms, gracefully, but Ron simply pushes it away and tells me that his mum could do better.

Of course she does better...she has a whole bloody kitchen, herb garden and a fully stocked pantry to work with. I can't even go get groceries without Harry's bloody permission! she thought ruefully. No that isn't fair, he simply doesn't want me going too often not that she blamed him. It was risky and she could get caught one of these times.

She really shouldn't have been so angry with Ron over the remark he'd made on her cooking...again. He had been wearing the locket. But even that was not an excuse anymore in her opinion. However, Ron seemed most affected by the locket's influence...whenever he had it on he was absolutely horrible.

Okay, I admit, my first attempt at cooking a pike fish had been deplorable, but then I've never tried cooking pike before. I've only ever had it at other people's houses or at restaurants, she wrote Severus. And since then, her preparation of the fish hadn't really improved any. She simply had no idea how to prepare it and neither did Harry. Not that he'd allowed me to go to the library to find out how. No, we have to be careful of Dementors and Death Eaters, she wrote. She kicked at the thick layer of leaves on the ground around her again.

Harry found some fishing gear when he'd gone shopping for food, with my money...and without asking me if he could, and Ron, who'd apparently gone fishing many times with his brothers, had told Harry how easy it was, she wrote.

They had moved four times since last time she'd sent him a letter; Hermione and Ron had picked places where he and Harry could fish. They moved from the bare, silent moorlands of Llyn Aled to the secluded spots along the River Wye, to the River Dee and the River Teifi so that her friends could fish. And they'd caught plenty of fish. At least trout and salmon were easier to cook. She knew they wanted to go to Bala Lake and Llangorse Lake next so they could keep fishing.

Oh, and apparently Ron has never cleaned a fish before, shockingly enough. He expected me to do it. That sounded like sour-grapes, but she decided to leave it in Severus' letter. It might amuse him.

But Ron's constant bickering about her cooking, his scrunched faces and snide remarks even when he wasn't wearing the locket, had grated on her nerves. Moreover, Mrs. Weasley cannot produce food out of thin air...no one can! It's bloody impossible and he should know that! The Five Principle Exceptions to Gamp's Laws of Elemental Transfiguration had been on four of Professor McGonagall's quizzes last year and it had been on our final exam! How could he not know them?

She wanted chocolate.

I admit I crave chocolate.

Anything chocolate!

Even chocolate covered cockroaches sound good right now, not that I'd ever brought myself to try one. They sound disgusting. I prefer the Malt Balls and Flossing Mints...but for now Muggle sweets will have to suffice when I can get them.

Should I tell him about the fight? she thought. It had been horrible.

She looked up at the depressingly grey sky and thought about the fight between Harry and Ron. She'd had to erect a magical barrier between them to keep them from drawing their wands on each other. The things Ron said, the accusations Ron had shouted at Harry still reverberated in her mind, especially when it was her turn to wear the locket. It seemed to feed on her sense of loss, her guilt that she hadn't been more understanding, more supportive of Ron's feelings. It had been right, she hadn't been a friend to him, only self-absorbed in her own thoughts, her own misery and her own needs. She just didn't voice them as much as Ron had. She kept her distressing, self-deprecating thoughts to herself and did the best with what they had and provided as best she could. She had to be frugal with her money. They were on the run. They were wanted criminals, according to the magical world, with a huge price on their heads. And no she couldn't cook as well as Mrs. Weasley could; her parents didn't prepare meals like Ron was used to, and she didn't have the resources to make the piles of food Ron felt he needed to have. They had to economize and make things stretch.

Hermione sighed heavily and forced the guilt away. She was doing the best she could, doing everything she could to keep them alive and together and to keep Harry and Ron from fighting. She just wished Ron would try harder.

Ron had almost walked out on them, but once Harry demanded he remove the locket, Ron had seemed to calm down. Well, enough for Hermione to talk to him. But that evening, when she'd been talking things over with Harry while Ron napped before his watch, Ron had gotten mad at them again...at her, accusing them of conspiring behind his back. They'd only been talking quietly out of courtesy to let him sleep, the ungrateful git.

It was true that they now had to find the sword. If Dumbledore knew that it could destroy Horcruxes, he'd have left it in a safe place for them to find. 'Find' being the problematic word. Hermione was certain that either Dumbledore had left a clue on where to find it in the book he'd bequeathed her or that Severus would know where the real sword was. If we can't find the sword, then what? The book, *Secrets of the Darkest Art*, she'd summoned from the Headmaster's tower before Dumbledore's funeral gave explicit instructions on how to make one, but was rather vague on how to destroy it...it only listed two possibilities, both impossible for her to use. *Blimey, we don't know much do we?*

She decided to think about something else. She finished the letter and signed it, *Sincerely, your little Gryffindor, I revert.*

Tapping her letter she said, "Contrarius," softly and tied it with the strip of red ribbon he'd carefully rolled up in his last letter.

A long drawn out, "hooo," came from the tree above her.

"Yes, it's ready," she replied, and Tawnie landed on the tree in front of her to accept the letter. She put the Notice-Me-Not spell on her and Disillusioned her owl, receiving an abrupt and subdued, "ha," in return.

"Fly safe and be careful," she told the bird.

Tawnie made a wailing, "hooo," as she flapped her wings, indicated by the soft swoosh and the air disturbance ghosting across Hermione's hand.

Tawnie had swooped down on her the last time she'd returned, making her 'kew-wick,' sound, announcing her arrival, startling Hermione because she couldn't see her. Tawnie had made several abrupt vocals interspaced with some subdued, "ha," sounds as Hermione had tried to locate her owl as if the owl thought it funny. But Hermione had finally managed spot the tell-tale Disillusionment shimmer on a branch in a bush beside her and removed the charms, receiving a coarse, "hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo," back, from the owl.

'Severus did this to you, didn't he?' she had asked her highly amused owl, who had simply ruffled her thick plumage, the remnants of her adolescent downy plumage making her look puffy, as she rearranged her wings.

Hermione now used the same spells on Tawnie before each flight to ensure her safety, thanking Severus for his insight.

"What are you doing out here?" Ron asked.

"Thinking," she replied, wondering if he'd seen Tawnie leave.

"It's bloody cold," he said, his hands deep in his coat pockets. "I hate being cold, freezing every night. It's bloody miserable. My arm hurts all the time, and my shoulder..."

She looked around as he complained, drowning out most of it, and just let him talk. It was late autumn now: the ground was covered with a thick blanket of leaves, the deciduous trees were almost completely bare and the wind had a crisp, chilly nip to it, but it thankfully was not raining presently. He'd stopped talking. She turned to him and smiled. "Yes, I know it's really hard, but we'll manage. I hope winter comes late," she said.

"I wish Ginny would send another letter," he said. "You haven't heard from her, have you?"

"If I had, I'd have shown you her letter," she replied, dropping her left leg and turning to sit properly on the tree. "I did write to her, and I had to charm the letter so only she'd understand it, but I don't know if she's had time to write back. It's her sixth year, they heap on a lot of schoolwork, and she's learning nonverbal spells like we did."

He sat down next to her. "I didn't know he didn't know where they all were," he said, looking at the ground.

She had to do a mental double take to realize what he meant. "I know. But really, I think it's like the other stuff we've done...the mysteries we've solved. Like working out who the heir of Slytherin was and that there was a basilisk moving about in the castle our second year, or that Sirius Black was really after your rat, Pettigrew. We won't know until we figure it out. We just have to keep at it until something clicks or we find the clue we're overlooking," she said patiently. "Solving mysteries takes time and research."

"But we're not researching anything, are we? We're camping," he whinged. "We gave *up* trying to find anything. We don't go anywhere anymore in search of information or places or anything. We hide, and it's fucking miserable."

"Not so, well, yes, we're living in a tent because it's mobile and easy to conceal. You have to have faith that we'll work it out...we always do," she said calmly, getting tired of his whining but not wanting to set him off again.

He looked up, staring ahead. "And in the meantime my family is out there...fighting. My dad, brothers and my mum are all fighting You-Know-Who, and all we're doing is all this bloody camping. Even Ginny is doing something...she tried to get the sword. Probably to send it to us! And we're doing nothing but running around for weeks fishing."

"I'm sure your family is fine. Your parents are resourceful, and your brothers are grown wizards, capable of taking care of themselves, and Ginny is safe at school," she said, then thought about her own parents and hoped they were all right.

"Safe?!" he snapped as he turned his head to stare at her. "She's being tortured!"

"Yeah, detention with Hagrid is torturous," she said sarcastically with a roll of her eyes. She flinched at his hardened glare. "We've had detentions with him before, and actually it wasn't all that bad. Well, it wasn't. And Hagrid would protect her from anything dangerous. Besides, Ginny is really a capable witch in her own right, you know that. She's survived the fight in the Department of Mysteries and the battle we had at the castle. Even Fred and George don't push your sister too far, they're afraid of her Bat-Bogey Hex."

"But we're never going to find these bloody things," he reiterated.

"You don't know that," she said with an exasperated sigh.

"We've gone over it a hundred times," he whinged. "I thought Dumbledore knew where these things were. I thought he'd told Harry. All those bloody lessons, and he has nothing to go by."

"Dumbledore was dying. He told Harry everything he knew about Tom Riddle, and I'm sure that if he'd had the time, he'd gotten around to telling Harry how to destroy the Horcruxes or how to summon the sword or something." She looked at him with a small smile. "Since no one wants to cook, I'll go someplace in Aberaeron or Cardigan Bay to buy food, *if* you'll clean up the mess in the tent," Hermione offered. She'd been there with her parents and had a reasonable idea where to go. She had enough time before it would get dark. Besides, she wanted dish soap and toilet paper.

"Oh, so I'm a slob," he said, affronted.

"What? No! Well, it is mostly your stuff, Ron," she said as gently as she could. "Look, I'm hungry. I'll see about getting something and bringing it back. You'll feel better after eating something hardy."

"You're right." He stood up and offered her his hand. To appease him, she accepted it, even though she didn't need it. But he didn't back up when she straightened. "You're something else, Hermione. An incredible witch," he said softly, then leaned down to kiss her.

She placed her hand on his chest as she leaned back. "No, Ron."

"What is it Harry? Is that who you're after?" he asked. "If you are, you can tell me. I know; it knows."

"Harry? No, it's not like that," she said emphatically. "I'm not interested in Harry like that; we're only friends."

"No? Then why are you always whispering to each other, talking behind my back?" he asked accusingly. "Can't wait to be rid of me so you two can be alone, are you?"

She couldn't believe this was happening. "No, Ron, no... Where did...?" She wondered if perhaps he was wearing the locket. "Harry and I are only friends; there is nothing going on between us, I swear. He's like a brother to me," she said trying to make him realize he was nutters.

"You used to like me, I know you did. It's right, isn't it?" he said, his hands resting on her hips.

It said...? It... the locket? she thought as she placed her hands on his to remove them.

"I know you were jealous of Lavender." He tried to kiss her again. "Come on, we'd be good together."

"No, Ron, don't," she said, turning her head and pushing him away, but he only tried harder to pull her to him.

She shoved at him with all her strength, making him stumble back a step. "Ron. Stop!"

He glared at her, his fury evident in his hard expression. "It's another bloke, isn't it? The whispers, they are right, aren't they? Who is it?" he barked at her. "McLaggen? Anthony Goldstein?"

She couldn't believe what he was saying. The hushed whispers of the locket were telling him...of course! He hears them too...he must! It has to be the locket. "Anthony? He's in the DA...we're friends...we had some of the same classes," she shrieked.

"What's going on?" Harry asked coming out of the tent.

"Ask your girlfriend," Ron spat and stormed away.

"Ron, wait!" she called out but he had Disapparated. "Harry, who's got the locket?" she asked, feeling a sense of dread.

"I do. Why?" Harry asked.

"Just asking," she said with a heavy sigh, hoping it had been the locket making him act so weird. "I'm going to go get something to eat. He'll be back, you'll see." She turned for the tent to find something decent to wear to Cardigan Bay. "Our next stop has to be a place with laundry facilities. I really need to get my stuff properly washed, and I want to use real laundry soap and water. Refreshment charms only do so much," she said to him, then stopped realizing Harry wasn't following her.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Harry asked, staring at the place where Ron had disappeared.

"He'll be back," she said, trying to sound optimistic.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

One point of difference from canon, Ron was sullen and irritable after overhearing the conversation with Headmaster Black where they learn about the sword. There is a single day lapse before he argues with Harry again and his attempt to kiss Hermione, which led to his storming out.

Chapter 54

Chapter 54 of 54

Variety Challenge first runner up. Hermione Granger is given a Time-Turner and instructions to use it. Only, using a Time-Turner can be a little tricky if not used correctly: a mistake made in counting or a slip of fingers can make the user jump irregularly and thus she could accidentally alter her time line. And when such an accident happens, Severus Snape uses Hermione's Time-Turner in order to fix a horrific wrong. However, it's his younger self that becomes the one who must ensure that history is not altered.

Disclaimer: Not mine. I just borrowed them for a while. I promise to put them back when I'm done. Also, no money made either...just for fun. Keep in mind, most of the actual events in DH happen as they happened in the book unless I have indicated they happened differently or at a slightly different time. I am, however adding to the drawn out camping stretches a bit. Oh, and the snippets of dialogue that I have at the end are borrowed without permission from Mrs. Rowling's book. I truly hope she doesn't mind.

I want to give a great big thank you hug to my alpha reader, Arabellabloodgood, Proulxes for the bit of Brit-picking, and to DuchessOfArcadia for combing through this and helping me clean up my many mistakes. I really appreciate it more than you can possibly know.

Thank you, Jay, for the beautiful banner. I absolutely love it!



Hermione woke up the next morning and looked about her room. It was silent in the tent, much too quiet. She stretched and eased from her cot and started dressing, pulling on her jeans and a T-shirt, then paused when she pulled out a sweater from her bag...a maroon one with a Peruvian Vipertooth pattern on the front. Mrs. Weasley had knitted it for Ron in his fifth year, supposedly to match Harry's green one with the Hungarian Horntail dragon on it. Ron had given it to her because she liked it, because it no longer fitted him, and he hated the color maroon. Her eyes welled up with tears, which rolled heavily down her cheeks. Ron hadn't returned last night, and she'd remained on watch until three in the morning, waiting for him. She exited her room to make breakfast, but even the act of cooking eggs made her cry. *How could he leave us like that?* she kept asking herself, over and over until the question became, *How could he just abandon us?*

Hermione refused to talk to Harry about Ron over the next two days and refused to move the tent in case Ron returned. She buried herself in something productive, mostly so she could block out the memories of the insidious innuendos and condescending whispers of the locket, but also to have something constructive to do rather than sit around moping. So she focused on working out where the Horcruxes or the sword might be with Harry. She hadn't meant to, but she'd battered Harry these last two days for any detail Dumbledore may have given him in those sessions that he may have withheld or forgotten to tell her. But try as he might, Harry couldn't offer any new bits of information. When Harry decided to take watch, she turned her attentions to reading everything she had on Animagi transformation, determined to keep her mind too busy to think about Ron's abandonment.

On the third day, Harry insisted that they move. Hermione had to concede that Harry was right; Ron was not coming back. Harry looked at her with sad puppy eyes as he took her hand for Side-Along-Apparition. She pondered on where to go; she wanted to be alone, somewhere she could fume and cry in peace. She recalled a picture she'd seen of Blanchland Moor in County Durham to use as her destination and Apparated. When her feet landed on the grass, she released Harry's hand and sat slumped on a rock, feeling dejected and weary as Harry started to set up camp. *He's gone. He's really gone. The stupid bloody wanker left and now we have to do this without him? Severus would never abandon his friends,* she thought angrily then paused, remembering who his friends had been. *Well, he wouldn't have abandoned me if he'd been here.*

She sat curled up on the rock until the cold wind started to make her shiver, then went inside and lay down on her *cott is so like him*, she growled angrily to herself. *Things get hard, it doesn't go how Ron thinks it has to, or he doesn't like how something is going and he walks out? Turns his back on Harry when Harry needs him? It's*

just like our fourth year all over again. She cried herself to a restless, dream-haunted sleep, repeating his accusations and complaints over and over in her mind.

She and Harry ate lunch in near silence. At dinner time, Hermione still didn't know what to say so she didn't say anything. It was the same the next day. And when it was her turn to wear the locket, it only made her treacherous mind drudge up her argument with Ron and his attempt to kiss her all over again. Needing something to occupy her mind, Hermione pored over her books and journals endlessly, trying out some of the new spells in her books.

The next morning, Hermione moved their camp to the ruins of a milecastle on the Hadrian Wall she'd seen a picture of once. After that, they moved every other day to places like the high fells of Scafell Pike, or the Grittone Edge in the Peak District in Derbyshire, the Mendip Hills south of Bristol, and the Limestone Pavement above Malham Cove in the Yorkshire Dales. If Harry noticed Hermione's propensity for choosing the most remote places she could think of, he never commented on it, but then he didn't complain when Hermione refused to venture out anywhere for food or supplies either.

Hermione had hoped to speak to Altheda, wanted at least one friendly person to talk to, even if she were only a painted image. But Phineas appeared each time she looked into the portrait frame instead. So, she started bringing Phineas' portrait out on the table at night since Harry wanted to speak to the ex-headmaster. However, Hermione didn't trust the acerbic and rude ex-headmaster, so she insisted on blindfolding him. Nevertheless, both she and Harry relished any news he'd impart regarding the happenings at Hogwarts, even the bad news, although to Harry's dismay; Phineas mostly venerated Professor Snape and extolled the efforts he made in the face of the spoiled students' mutiny to his stricter policies. But with each mention of Severus, Hermione's heart ached to speak to him. Hermione felt sorry for Severus and the troubles her friends gave him, wondering if Voldemort was aware, and if so, how long Severus could keep the evil wizard out of the school.

The weather was growing colder, too. Hermione bundled up in a warm sweater, thick scarf and her coat when she went on her watch. Frequently she'd stare up at the stars and wished she could see Severus, to talk to him in person. She could see Jupiter standing stationary in the constellation of Gemini and wondered if Severus ever looked at the stars. *If he was on the Astronomy Tower he would see it* she thought, then wondered if it was Wednesday when the students would be up there. It was odd; she wasn't sure what the date was. *Oh how I miss being able to talk to him* she thought with a smile that faded when the thought struck her, *Why would he want to see me, he's probably busy. He has important things to do, like running the school.*

But he always took time out for me, always. Maybe only bits here and there, but he did. She just needed to be able to talk to him, tell him...*What? How badly things are going?* She shook off the notion.

She missed getting his letters, missed seeing him. She missed their training sessions and brewing with him or being able to watch him work. She really missed being able to talk to him.

'Anything is possible if you've only got the nerve,' Ginny's voice sounded in her head. It was reckless, but did she dare? She felt a heady sense that she should go, she should try.

But how would I get him to meet me? I can't just appear at the school She wondered if he still ventured out into the forest or hiked up to the spot that overlooked the vale Hogwarts sat in. She could still picture the place and the view of the castle, lake and Hogsmead. *Maybe, if I can figure out how to make my voice speak through my Patronus like the Order members could,* she considered, then dismissed the idea. She didn't know how they did it because no one had shown her how to *Why didn't I ask Severus to show me when I had the chance?*

Merlin, but I wish I could go and see him she thought and watched a shooting star streak across the sky.

"Hermione."

She looked up surprised. She'd become so used to seeing Phineas' scowling face in the frame, sneering at her and calling her an impertinent Mudblood, that the kind voice startled her. However, seeing the hair and shoulders of her painted friend behind the blindfold, if a portrait of a woman could be considered a friend, filled her with delight.

"Hermione, are you all right, dear?" Altheda asked. "What is this thing across my face?"

"Oh, sorry, it's a precaution," Hermione said, removing the blindfold, relieved to see Altheda smiling at her, her eyes showing her deep concern. "We're not too sure about Phineas, he's..."

"Yes, he can be difficult," Altheda said for her. "Hermione, dear, Severus has been so concerned. Your owl keeps coming back to him."

Hermione jumped up when Altheda said Severus' name. "Shhh. Harry." She picked up the frame and carried it to her room carefully so as not to jar the kind woman too much.

"He has tried to write to you, several times, but your owl can't find you. In a way that pleases him, it means no one else can either, but I can tell it worries him as well. So, I have been asked to check in on you since Severus can't get a thing from Phineas," Altheda said as Hermione propped the portrait up at the foot of her cot and cast the Muffliato on the canvas walls.

Hermione turned to sit crossed-legged on her cot to face her and pulled her blanket over her knees to keep warm as Altheda continued, "You know, Phineas, he prattles on about how young people love to bemoan their problems. But even when pressed, he doesn't have anything to say except to complain about your rudeness and insolence, and he says that he can't see you. Now I know why, but really, why blindfold him? He can't see anything but the wall of this... It's a tent, I presume."

"Yes," Hermione sighed in relief, not that she didn't trust Severus, but Phineas could tell someone in Grimmauld Place...Yaxley or another painted relative who had a portrait in Malfoy Manor...about anything he saw or overheard and that could be a problem. "I read that the portraits are bound by some magical oath to keep the secrets of Hogwarts' headmasters or headmistresses and the secrets of the school, but that wouldn't extend to my secrets, would it? He is only bound to keep Severus' secrets."

Altheda blushed slightly, "Well, yes, that's true," she said with a nod.

"But I can trust you, can't I?" Hermione asked, and Altheda confirmed it, warmly, "Of course, sweetie."

"Is Severus all right? Has anything happened to him?" Hermione asked, hoping for good news. "You-Know-Who hasn't done anything to him, has he?"

"No, Severus is fine. He's had a lot to deal with, though. Some of the students are causing problems for him, writing slogans on the wall and causing unrest among the student body. He's had a hard time keeping the Carrows from taking their fury out on the more rakish miscreants. And the governors are demanding he maintain order... Parents are writing; naturally they are concerned for their children. Poor thing doesn't get enough rest," Altheda said sadly. "But you, what's happened? Why haven't you allowed your owl to find you?"

"I-I...I've been busy...we move a lot," Hermione replied lamely. Her shoulders slumped and tears formed in her eyes. "Ron left. He abandoned us. Things are not going well, and he was always complaining. Complaining about the way I cook...what I cooked. His shoulder hurt. He was cold. He was tired of the rain. We live in bloody England...it rains here all the time!" she ranted. "I'm cold. I'm hungry...do you hear me complaining? No! Harry doesn't complain. But the whining wanker did all the time. And he tried to kiss me!"

"Did he?" Altheda asked. She appeared to lean forward slightly. "He didn't try anything else, did he?"

"No!" Hermione screeched. "Of course not!"

Altheda nodded and appeared to relax, touching the brooch pinned below her collar. "That is a relief. I've been concerned for you, a lovely young lady alone with two hormonal teenage boys. In my day it would be unheard of, and the young lady's reputation would've been ruined."

"There is nothing like that at all! Harry is like a brother to me, and Ron is...was a friend...only a friend," Hermione said emphatically.

She regarded Hermione thoughtfully. "Aren't you eating, dear? You look thin," the painted lady asked.

Hermione shook her head, "Yes, a little. Depends on what I can find." She inhaled deeply and looked at her hands. "I really miss him."

"Well, if he was that problematic, you're probably better off without him," Altheda said kindly.

"Not Ronald bloody Weasley...Severus!"

Altheda smiled and nodded, then, surprisingly, she slipped from her frame. Hermione stared in shock, then fell back on her bed and let the tears fall. "I want to see him," she said softly.

You should; you should go the voice encouraged.

She sat up, but all she could see was the murky background in the gilded frame. Hermione picked up her book *Beedle the Bard*, and started to scan through the pages for anything that could be a clue from Dumbledore, although whatever he'd meant for her to see completely eluded her. The thought, *Severus would know, you could ask him* startled her and made her heart race. *I can't ask Severus! This is our mission, Harry's, and it...it is supposed to be confidential.* She put down the book on her cot. *Altheda's right.* She and Harry were not eating all that much, nor as frequently. Food had been harder to come by. They'd also discovered that they had better luck avoiding the Dementors if they stayed in remote places, and with the weather getting colder, those people hunting her and Harry would expect them to be in the southern parts of the country where it was warmer, rather than in the north. So she and Harry braved the cold, doing the best they could.

After what seemed like ages, Altheda's face slipped back in view. "He says it's too dangerous to meet with you. But he asked me to tell you to be careful. Do you need anything?"

"Food," Hermione replied. It was cold now and most of the plants that she knew were edible were much harder to find now that winter seemed to have descended on them in full force. "I have to go shopping soon."

You should go. See Severus. Harry will be all right flittered in her thoughts. "Tell him not to worry, I'll..." *Go. You want to. It will be all right.* "Oh, heck. No. Tell him I want to see him."

"No, Hermione, it's too dangerous," Altheda said, her voice now raising an octave. "There are Death Eaters in the school! You can't."

"He took me hiking once; there was a place on top of a steep climb. You could see the castle and the lake from there," she said, grabbing her duffle coat and beaded bag. "He'll know where."

"Hermione, no!" she heard, but she was already heading out of the tent.

"I'm going shopping, Harry. I'll be back as soon as I can," she called out.

"All right," Harry said. "Be careful."

Hermione arrived on the top of the cliff face and had to immediately jump back from the edge. The castle looked the same, magnificent, welcoming, even though she knew it wasn't...not for her at any rate. She could see the squid floating lazily on the lake and smoke rising from the chimneys in Hogsmeade. There was a crisp chill to the air, and she wished she'd thought to wear a warm scarf, thankful she had worn her sturdy boots. She dug her hands into her pockets to keep them warm. Spotting Hagrid's hut, she wondered what he was doing and gazed at the forest as a Thestral soared in the air and disappeared in the trees.

She saw something small flying at her and smiled as Tawny came into view. The young Tawny owl swooped down on her, hooting happily and started making course, *tu-whit*, followed by a long, *"hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo,"* sound as if admonishing her.

"I'm sorry you couldn't find me, really I am, but I have to move around a lot to keep from being captured," she told her owl as she landed on a rock.

Tawny continued to make *"hoo-hoo"* and *"ha-hoo"* sounds as if talking to her.

"So, I get it you missed me as much as I missed you?"

As much as he'd been relieved to finally have news that Hermione was all right, he'd been infuriated with Altheda when she'd told him that Hermione would be arriving on the same ledge that the Dark Lord used to meet with him. He'd grabbed his cloak, made himself invisible with a very strongly cast Disillusionment Charm and fled the castle stealthily. He couldn't be seen leaving, but then if the Carrows knew he was not in the castle that too would cause problems. But he had to tell her to leave...immediately. Coming here was an impossibly insane idea, and her ruddy owl had flown out of the window the moment Altheda had said Hermione was coming...to see him!...hooting happily, causing a racket that would alert anyone standing near a window!

He hurried to the nearest part of the magical boundary, slipping through it easily enough and Apparated to the spot.

There she was, her hair plaited, and wearing Muggle clothes. His traitorous heart pounded in recognition, even as he scanned the area quickly to make sure she was alone and hadn't attracted notice from anyone. Her declaration 'you missed me as much as I missed you' surprised him, considering that she shouldn't have been able sense his presence.

"Yes, but that does not negate your recklessness in coming here," Severus answered her in a cool velvety voice.

"Severus!" she exclaimed as she turned, and he felt a twinge in his chest upon seeing the elation in her expression.

The very moment he ended the Disillusionment Charm, she rushed forward and hugged him tightly, making his heart quicken even more.

His arms seemed to hang unresponsively at his sides for a second as his mind registered the fact she was hugging him before he wrapped them around her. He inhaled deeply, relishing the feel of her body against his in her thick coat, only too aware of just how precarious their situation was. He could smell her perfume, Shalimar, and the subtle hint of peppermint, lavender and lemon verbena he associated with her. Her soft, curly hair tickled his nose, and he could feel her breath on his neck as he hugged her back, awkwardly. But rather than closing his eyes and truly savoring the moment, he looked out over her head, watching the surrounding sky cautiously.

"Hermione," he said softly. "We can't remain here."

She looked up at him, her eyes bright and moist. "I had to see you," she said and rose up on her toes. Her lips met his quickly, jolting his already stress-tautened nerves, sending sensations through him he wasn't ready to accept.

He set her back on her feet. "Come with me," he said, taking her hand and leading her. With a flick of his wand, the two large bushes that concealed the trail divided,

allowing them to pass, and settled back in place. He led her down the trail they'd used years before.

"Where are we going?" she asked quietly.

"Where we won't be seen," he said. He stopped where the trail turned downward toward the Shrieking Shack and Hogsmeade and led her back under the tall trees instead. He faced her, letting his eyes feast on her, taking in every detail. She'd matured somewhat; it showed in her eyes. Her face was thinner, her cheek bones more prominent than he remembered, and she looked weary. She stared back, and he fought the urge to make his hair obscure his face, wondering why she'd be so mesmerized by his looks. He was not a handsome man; he knew it. "Why did you risk coming here?" he asked, unable to stop himself and relaxed his hand to let go of hers.

"I had to see you," she replied, her fingers reaching out to clasp onto his hand again. "I...there is so much to say, so many things I've wanted to ask."

"I will not talk about Dumbledore," he said curtly, hoping that was not the reason for her coming to see him.

She surprised him for a second time by shaking her head and saying, "I don't really have to...I worked out why weeks ago."

"Have you," he scoffed, withdrawing his hand from hers.

"Yes, you told me you had to. The last thing you said to me that night: you asked me not to hate you, to forgive you if I could and that you were going to do what you must. Dumbledore was dying. I saw his cursed hand," she stated, looking at his hand, then back up at him. "I saw how he'd held his arm; it had been stiff as if he couldn't use his arm anymore. I overheard Professor McGonagall telling Professors Flitwick and Sprout in the hospital that the curse had reached past his shoulder, and Madam Pomfrey confirm it to Mr. and Mrs. Weasley; he was dying. Did you know Harry had made him drink an unknown potion? That couldn't have helped." She leaned against the tree behind her. "So, the way I see it, you saved him from being captured...giving him a quick and painless death. Not to mention, but there had been *five* other Death Eaters on the tower that night...if you count Greyback as a Death Eater...anyone of them would have loved capturing and torturing him."

He listened to her with a sense of disbelief. Her expression told him what he'd known to be impossible...she had forgiven him. She still looked up at him with complete unconditional trust in her soft, doe-like amber eyes. She spouted utter nonsense, Dumbledore had used his vow to Lily to force his hand, but that didn't matter. Even if he told her about the vow, it wouldn't change her opinion of him.

"And now?" he asked.

"And now, what? You're trying to protect the students...to keep Hogwarts safe. Phineas told us about what you did for my friends. They broke into your office, smashed the case to take the sword, and you gave them detention with Hagrid," she stated with a crooked smile. "You could have dealt out far worse punishment...but you didn't." She looked up at the branches overhead, then back at him. "That's not why I'm here."

"Why are you here then?" he asked.

She smiled shyly. "I wanted to see you. To be able to...I missed you." She put her foot against the base of the tree, and her hands in her pockets, a gesture that if anyone else had made would have piqued his defensive reflexes.

He stepped closer to her and saw her pupils dilate and her breath deepen. Her reaction startled him. She licked her lips as she stared back unabashedly. He wanted to touch her, to move the wayward curl off her cheek, to kiss her again. "To be able to do what?" he asked. He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "What is it you want?"

"Want...?" she gasped. "Severus, why...? Aren't you glad to see me?" She pushed off the tree, her body now so close that the soft scent of her perfume complimented by the lavender and lemon verbena filled his senses.

"Yes," he breathed, capturing her mouth with his, accidentally bumping his nose on her cheek. She angled her head, her mouth claiming his as he adjusted, and their teeth clashed. Her hands grasped his robes, pulling him closer to her, mashing their lips together, and he leaned down, wrapping his arms about her, crushing her to him. She stumbled, losing her footing, and she dragged him with her as she fell back against the tree trunk. He pressed his hand on the trunk to steady himself and kissed her again. It was insane, giving into the moment, but every sensory impulse he had was now focused solely on her: the scent of her perfume, the feel of her body in the bulky coat, the feel of her soft lips against his and the tickle of a curl on his face. He drank her in, relishing in the intoxicating sensation of kissing her...really kissing her...and the fact she was kissing him back while clutching onto his robes with both fists.

He had to stop. This was insanity. He couldn't be away from the school for so long. But damn it all...this woman clouded his better judgement and confounded his brain. He broke the kiss with great effort, leaning his forehead on hers as he tried to catch his equilibrium. "We...I have to stop," he said, standing up. "I can't be gone for long. If anyone realizes I've gone..." He let the thought drop as he caught his breath.

He was pleased to see her flushed face and kiss swollen lips, and noted that she was breathing as hard as he. "I...do you have to?" she asked breathlessly.

He inhaled deeply to steady his resolve. "Yes, I must," he said softly. "As enjoyable as this is, I do have to return to the school."

"What if I need you?" she asked, moving to stand closer to him...much too close, as her proximity was weakening his resolve. "How can I reach you if I have to ask you something, or if I need anything?"

"You shouldn't," he said and watched her face fall. "I have to maintain the pretence. There are over four hundred students and my staff to consider." He turned his gaze away after watching the expression on her face, first disbelief then admiration. It was too much. She was much too open and trusting with him. He didn't deserve her trust.

He heard the sound of the ground crunching under her boots. "Show me one thing before you go?" she asked of him.

He looked up, surprised that she'd moved so close; he could almost kiss her again. His body reacted to the thought of her once more in his arms. "What is it you want to know?"

"How do you infuse your voice with your Patronus?" she asked.

He laughed. "It's never something simple with you, is it?" She cocked her head, and he drew his wand. It was bad enough that his Patronus was still a doe, but that that doe now seemed to represent her as much as it had Lily was too telling for his comfort. Then he remembered that Filius had bragged that she and her DA friends could all produce fully formed Patronuses. "I heard that you can produce a corporeal Patronus. Is that true?" If she could, that would make things much easier.

"Yes, I can," she said, drawing her own wand. *Expecto Patronum*," she said, making a large silver otter burst forth.

That is most convenient. This will not be hard at all. "And the spell to infuse your words is *'ad verbum*,'" he said, not wanting to show her his Patronus yet, if he could help it. "While still maintaining the connection between your wand and your Patronus, think it nonverbally before you begin to speak, and if your otter has wave undulations, like vibrations through water, then it's working."

She kept her wand angled at the waiting otter. *'Ad verbum*,'" she repeated softly, then added, "Thank you," and smiled at the shimmer that rolled through the form. Her simple 'Thank you,' emanated from her otter.

Her ability to grasp such magic so quickly had always amazed and pleased him, even if he couldn't show it. "Try to keep your messages brief; they are easier that way and more coherent when delivered. Now if that's all, I must be going," he said, turning to leave.

"How can I control Fiendfyre?"

"You cannot!" he snapped as he spun back to face her, making his robes swirl dramatically. He was flabbergasted that she'd had the temerity to even consider something so dark and dangerous, and her eyes became round at his sharp tone. *What could she be thinking, asking such a thing?* "Hermione," he said, his voice still taut, and she looked up at him unabashedly as if to debate this inane idea. He had to convince her and quickly fell into his teaching voice, one she'd always responded to predictably. "Hermione, Fiendfyre is a Dark Art, and one only the foolish try to utilize. The Great Fire of London in 1666 is one such example of how the Fyre can get out of control; the great fire of Moscow in 1547 is another, and so was the Great Chicago Fire in 1871. Two significant signs of the Fyre are that it spreads rapidly, and the heat of the Fyre tends to cremate its victims leaving no recognizable remains. Either the wizards thought they could handle Fiendfyre or they set it for some sort of revenge, but for whatever reason, the Fyre, which becomes alive upon creation, can grow in strength rapidly. It will suck all the oxygen from the surrounding area and grow, consuming anything in its wake. The more combustible material it touches, the larger it becomes as well. It will fight to survive, and is, by its Dark nature, an evil in and of itself. Why do you ask me?"

"If cast or created in a jar, will it be contained?" she asked, not heeding his question.

"No, if provided enough air, even through a small opening, it can and will consume glass, melting it and freeing itself. Do not even attempt to cast it," he warned, his voice now dangerously low. "Promise me!" he barked.

"I promise! It was only a thought," she answered back, startled by his tone.

"Why would you even consider creating it?" he asked.

"It was just a thought," she said, hanging her head. She looked up at him. "I won't, I promise."

It has to be because of these objects Dumbledore has her looking for He wanted to tell her that if she found anything she couldn't handle, anything Dark that she need help destroying, that she could always turn to him, but knew that would be impossible. "If you have need, send your owl. Don't use your Patronus. You don't know whom I'll be with or where I'll be. I'll try and send word, but meeting is not advisable. It's too risky," he said, and she nodded in assent.

He stepped forward and cupped her face with his hand, and she leaned her cheek into his palm, her eyes fluttering closed. His heart ached at the sight, realizing how much he wanted it to mean she truly loved him, but knowing it was utterly impossible to hope. She was merely taking comfort from his touch. "Now, I really must go." He kissed her softly and turned, Apparating for the trail in the forest near the Quidditch pitch.

He walked the few feet to the boundary, his thoughts in turmoil. *Why ask about Fiendfyre of all things? What does she have that she needs to use the Fyre?* There was very little in the world that Fiendfyre couldn't destroy: it could consume rock and soil as easily as it burned wood. It melted all forms of metal and glass and turned sand into glass. Only the purest of goblin diamond graphite casks could possibly contain it, but even that was questionable, although there had been rumor of Fiendfyre having been trapped in a vault once to kill it. He hoped that whatever had spurred her to ask about Fiendfyre, his response was sufficient enough to prevent her from trying it.

He entered through the boundary and flew up to the castle and entered his office through his window.

He looked at Dumbledore watching him from his frame. "Don't even say it," he warned the painted wizard. "It was nothing."

"You should not be involved with her, Severus," Dumbledore said.

"And I am not," he said as he crossed his office. "It's handled. It's over." He looked at the books on the walls wondering if the answer she needed was among them. But there was no way of knowing until she confided in him. *The old man trusted me with all his Dark Arts needs, potions, cures to the darkest curses and help with all the Dark Artifacts that entered his school, but he sends Hermione, Potter and Weasley on a hunt to locate...I have no idea how many...five? Six, cursed objects? And I'm not even allowed to know what they are to help her.*

He'd read through every page of every book she'd read in her sixth year when he'd given her permission to search through the Restricted Section but found nothing, no commonality that he could determine. The last books she'd read were *Darkest Magick of the Ages*, *Ye Horrific Enchantments and Beguilements* and *Magick Moste Evile*, but the only book she'd checked out was *Magick Moste Evile*, which provided him no clue at all. And she'd been very interested in the Founders, most notably Rowena Ravenclaw and Godric Gryffindor. Again he had no idea why.

Unless she was looking for Ravenclaw's lost diadem or information on Gryffindor's sword or hat. But she hardly needs Ravenclaw's lost diadem; Hermione is a brilliant intellect and usually quite logical, and the Hat was irascible when misused in any fashion. Not to mention that the hat and sword were in his office: Godric's hat, now the Sorting Hat, sat on the top of his shelf and the sword was tucked away behind Dumbledore's portrait, safe and sound. 'For when Harry has need of it,' the painted old man kept saying. *How the bloody hell I'm to know when that is? Some divine intervention or apparition perhaps? Maybe Sybill will spout off some new prophetic nonsense, that batty hag.*

He sat down at his desk to try and finish his mounting parchmentwork.

Determined that if they couldn't figure out where the sword could be, Hermione decided she would learn something useful like being an Animagi, even though Harry still spent his time guessing where the sword or cup could be. She had copied down everything from *Physical Shapeshifting Through Transformation* by Phaedrus Goldschlager into her notebook for Transfiguration, since she remembered Severus' younger self telling her that Black had it for months. Not that she'd been able to concentrate all that well.

The weather became harsher. Some of the locations Hermione chose for their camps hadn't turned out to be very wise decisions, but then most of the pictures she was using had been taken in the spring or summer months. Sleet pounded on the tent when they camped on Ben Nevis, and camping on Aonach Mòr hadn't been very hospitable either. Marshchapel, Lincolnshire and near Nether Abington had been all right, but choosing to go to the marshland in North Lancashire had been a disaster when the marsh flooded, flooding the tent as well. They'd moved to Ilkley Moor in West Yorkshire and had to dry the tent and all their belongings the best they could. Thank Merlin for the Drying Charms in their spell books, but Hermione ended up having to take everything to a laundromat in the town of Keighley to clean all their clothes and blankets and that had taken all day. But the worst had been trying to spend the night on an island in Loch Maree; they woke up only to find their tent half buried in snow.

Even though she and Harry had moved their cots into the main room of the tent to sleep as close as possible to the stove, it was still bloody cold at night. She and Harry had been used to living in a magically warmed castle with stoves in their dorms and large wall scones helping to keep the corridors warm and large fireplaces. She wanted a brazier for her room, a warmer jumper and warmer clothes. And their food had once again dwindled down to the point where Hermione absolutely had to go shopping again.

After telling Harry where she planned on going and what for, she went to Scarborough library and looked up the store Trusspass in a phone directory, one of the sports and outdoors shops her parents liked, and sighed, wondering how her parents fared. She found the address listed at the Brunswick Shopping Centre, not far from the library. Using Harry's cloak, she walked quickly to the shopping center, humming the song, Scarborough Fair, to herself, but the line of the chorus, 'she was once a true love of mine,' reminding her of Severus. She smiled, remembering their kiss under the tall pines. It had been so romantic, so tender. Sure it had been a little awkward at first, bumping noses and clashing teeth, but really all in all it had been a wonderful kiss.

She found Trusspass easily enough and bought her and Harry thick fleece coats, thermal underwear, warm ski socks and warm gloves, not caring about the colors. She also decided to splurge on two season three/four down sleeping bags to fend off the cold. She paid for her items and left the store, shoving everything into her bag, wondering where to go next.

Thing was, the only place she wanted to go was the ledge above Hogwarts, wishing she could see Severus again. The ideas warred in her mind *Yes, no, yes, I shouldn't, I really shouldn't.*

She stopped at Wackers for a cup of tea and some fish and chips, so she could make out a grocery list, but ended up writing out the lyrics to the chorus of Scarborough Fair after pasta, ham and bread. Her favorite version of the Scarborough Fair was by Simon and Garfunkel, and she always sang the chorus and counterpoint to it, 'Canticle,' even though it had always made her sad. She wrote out the words, tweaking the last line of the chorus a bit, she smiled. She crossed out and changed a few more words and added the line, *A dark knight came from the northlands*, from in a poem she'd read somewhere. The thought of going to him again had been plaguing her mind for days, as if whispered in her ear.

She tapped her quill. *Why not? What would it hurt? If I sent the words to the counterpoint in my Patronus, would he be mad?* She knew she could give her Patronus directions. She'd seen Professor Lupin send a message through his Patronus, and she'd seen Mrs. Weasley sending her Patronus a few times, both of them giving their Patronuses the directions that if the person wasn't alone to simply come back. She just hadn't heard how Mrs. Weasley had infused her voice into the silvery duck. Now she knew.

She looked out of the window. She really wanted to see Severus again. *It is afternoon, lunch should be over. He should be in his office now. Unless he isn't in the castle.* She banished the thought. *He said he would be noticed if he left the school, but it's not impossible. Would it work? Would he know it was her? More importantly, would he come?*

She slipped into the restaurant loo and cast the Muffliato on the room. *Expecto Patronum,*" she said, making a silver otter burst forth and quickly added, *Ad verbum,* nonverbally and began to sing. Her voice resonated in the room, making the vibrations in her otter. She loved to sing and normally had a nice voice, but she hadn't sung for a long time. Still, it sounded all right to her own ears. Before her otter left she said, "Only if he's alone, don't give the message if he's not alone. And if he is, lead him back to me."

The otter nodded and flew out of the window.

Breathing deeply she ended the spell on the loo and went to pay for her meal.

She bought two more fish and chips dinners to take away, carrying the bag outside. With a flick of her wand, she said, *Transportare tent,* clearly, hoping that they would go where she wanted them to. She walked out onto the street, cast the Notice-Me-Not spell on herself, then Disillusionment Charm and Apparated to the castle on the hill.

Severus set the report he'd finished on the pile he'd have to send out that evening. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, trying to fend off the headache that threatened to turn into a migraine. At least he no longer had to mark inane, poorly spelled and punctuated, plagiarized parchments with horrible grammar that the students passed off as their essays any more. Not that cost estimate reports, end of term notices, exam schedules and all the other duties he'd had to do in running a magical school were any easier.

He was about to fill out the request form for the Bursar's Office regarding the number of ticket vouchers he'd need from the Magical Transportation Office when Hermione's silver otter leaped into his office and began to serenade him in Hermione's clear voice to the tune of Scarborough Fair.

Are you going to Scarborough Keep,

Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.

Remember one who awaits you there,

She once was a true friend of thine.

Are you coming to Scarborough Keep?

Holy shite is she kidding me? he snarled to himself. *Keep? Not fair?* he mused captiously.

But instead of the lyrics he was expecting, Hermione's voice continued in a more somber tone.

My dark knight come from the northlands,

To the top of a hill in the deep forest green,

Following an owl on snow-crested ground.

Except for the line about the dark knight, it was the lyrics of 'Canticle' the counterpoint of Simon and Garfunkel's 'Scarborough Fair', one of his mother's favorite songs. He'd heard her sing it so many times he could almost hear her singing along with Hermione's Patronus. Even as he mentally hummed the song's counterpoint lyrics, he noted the variations. Owl not sparrow. He looked up at Tawnee, who persisted in roosting on the curtain rod in his office no matter how many times he'd told her to go to the owlery as the serenade continued.

Blankets and bedclothes a child of the mountains,

She sleeps unaware of the clarion call.

I'll await you on a hill among a sprinkling of leaves.

Washed is the ground with so many tears.

A soldier cleans and polishes her wand.

He smirked at her use of wand instead of gun. *How appropriate.*

War bellows, blazing in scarlet battalions

Generals order their soldiers to kill

And to fight for a cause they've long ago forgotten

Hardly forgotten, he scoffed.

Come to me at Scarborough Keep.

Parsley, sage, rosemary and thyme.

Remember one who awaits you there,

She once was a true friend of thine.

Come to you? Is she... Come to me at Scarborough Keep...? Scarborough Castle in North Yorkshire? Is she in Scarborough?" he asked and was surprised when the silvery otter nodded and turned for the window. *Follow the owl on snow-covered ground.* He was insane to be listening to this...he'd told her not to send her Patronus to him. *Unless she is in trouble?* He rose to his feet.

The Order used Patronuses because they were faster than owls, almost the speed of light, and could not be replicated. If you knew the person's Patronus' identifying marks, the receiver could be absolutely sure the message was genuine. But he didn't really know Hermione's otter Patronus' marks, except it had been her voice singing to him.

The otter made an impatient loop in front of his window. Against his better judgement, he nodded, Disillusioned himself and made his way out of the castle. The otter flew alongside him as he shot across the snow-covered grounds on his broom to the closest part of the magical boundary. Once there, he Apparated to Scarborough Castle. He stood on the hill beside the trees wondering where she'd be. He mounted his broom and took to the sky, circling one end of the ruins of the former medieval fortress, flying up to the keep situated high on a rocky promontory.

He saw her Patronus swoop in on the keep, and he landed close to where he'd last seen it. He heard Hermione's voice asking, "Did he come? Did he follow you?" and he walked over to the area her voice came from.

"Hermione?" he asked softly and cast a revealing charm over the area.

A shimmer to his right wavered and slowly, from her head downward, she came into view, the clear sign she'd reversed a Disillusionment Charm. He did the same, and as soon as the trickling warm sensation reached his shoulders, he heard her cry out his name and saw her rushing toward him. He caught her in an embrace the moment her arms wrapped around his neck. Their lips met. She kissed him as if starved, and he answered back, trying to mold his lips to hers. She angled her head, crushing her lips to his, as they greeted each other like long lost lovers. Her hands found their way under his cloak and slid along his body over his coat, sending fire to surge through him. He grasped her head gently as he could to keep her still, clutching her to him with his other arm. Merlin, but all thought seemed to leave his brain, every thought but of her, in his arms, passionate and hungrily grasping to hold onto him as tightly as she could. His world seemed to have stopped. If anyone was around, he didn't care; if they were seen, he wouldn't have noticed. She slowed her ardor and pulled back slowly, just enough to look up at him, staring at him with eyes dark with desire, her lips swollen and her cheeks flushed pink.

"Are you all right?" he asked as he breathed in her scent, sadden to note that the lemon verbena was overpowered by the scent of vanilla and peppermint that hung to her.

"I'm fine," she said, her breath warm on his skin. "I'm so glad to see you."

He looked up and realized how precariously insane their location was. "Do you trust me?" he asked, emboldened by the predictable nod of her assent. "This is not the place for this," he said and pictured a croft house he'd been to on a raid and knew to be abandoned. "Hold on tight." He Apparated, taking her with him.

The home had been used by a wizard. Half of one wall was gone, part of the roof had caved in, and most all the furnishings and belongings had been removed, but the house was registered as a magical residence, and their being there would go unnoticed at the Ministry. "Now why did you send me your Patronus after I specifically told you not to?"

Her face fell. "I wanted to see you," she said lamely.

"Merlin, woman, but you could have caused me such trouble if anyone had seen...had heard your song. Not that I didn't enjoy the serenade," he added the last sarcastically.

"I told my Patronus to only give you the message if you were alone," she stated. Her arms tightened around him, somehow finding a way under his cloak again. "I knew you'd work it out."

"It was pretty obvious, anyone could have worked it out. Hermione, it's too dangerous. I can't be coming to see you like this," he said and pulled her to him again. "Merlin, what you do to me."

She kissed the side of his face. He turned his head and claimed her mouth again. Their kiss was much more leisurely now, soft caresses and gentle as they clung to each other. He sucked on her bottom lip, and she smiled, making him lose hold, then she kissed him firmly, easing back slightly. It became a dance, give and take, gentle sweeps, soft playful nips and sensual caresses. He'd remembered the boys in his school years talk about making out. This had to be what they were referring to. His hand seemed to find its way under her coat, and his fog-addled brain registered skin, warm, smooth, silky skin under his cold hand. Instead of pulling away, he clutched her tighter, kissing her more ardently, escalating under the release of his pent up passions and awakening his desire for her even more. She pressed forward, holding him tighter, her body fitting snugly to his, and his lower parts responded, throbbing with want. He tried to pull back, to keep the erection in his trousers from feeling too much friction between their bodies before this got out of hand. He wanted her; Merlin he wanted to rip her clothes off and take her...but not here and not on an old dirty floor. She moaned, a deep throaty moan that almost set his blood on fire. "Hermione," he said, trying to disengage the eager witch in his arms. "Stop, not here."

"Why?"

"Merlin, woman, if you don't stop I'm going to fuck you here on the floor," he growled and thrust her away from him at arm's length. He had to clear his head *What was I thinking bringing her here?* "This is utter insanity."

Her heels dropped lightly to the floor, and she stood there regarding him, the uncertainty showing in her eyes.

Unsure, he chose the noble thing and held her arms so she'd have to look at him. "Look. It's not you. But if I'm found out, if he sees you in my mind...and right now, this instant he'd be able to see everything...he'd demand I bring you to him. This...us...it has to stop."

"No," she said, shaking her head. "I'm not giving you up. Know this *I want you.* I have for a long time now."

He couldn't believe what she was saying could possibly be true, but even as she continued, he could see she thought she meant every word. "It's not a schoolgirl crush; it's not an infatuation...it's you. You are what I am attracted to most...it's you. I know it sounds ridiculous, but there, you know now. I love you."

His heart pounded uncontrollably in his chest. What he'd never dared to believe had been spoken and at the worst possible time *There is no future for us to be anus! We are in the midst of a war, and she loves me?* Her timing couldn't be worse, and yet, he felt like taking her in his arms and never letting go *She loves me?! She said so.* "Hermione, you think you do but it's..."

"No," she said, the fiery determination in her amber eyes made them glow warmly. "I love you. You are the one I am always thinking about, the one I dream about, and when I smell Amortentia...it's you! Your scent! You are what I am most attracted to. I've known this for over a year. Maybe even longer."

He inhaled sharply. "But you have to realize, we are both caught up in the midst of a war. Either of us could die in this fight." He dropped his hands from her shoulders and stood taller. "I have a duty as do you."

"Yes, I know," she said with a sigh. She looked away, and he watched her, wondering what she was thinking. "You asked me once if I needed anything," she said, and he nodded once, apprehensive to her forthcoming request. "Would you send me what you can on becoming an Animagi? I'm close," she held up her hand with her fingers barely an inch apart, "so close. But I need to know how to turn back once in my form."

Her request took him by surprise. "You're close?" he asked, amazed. *Was there any magical spell this woman wouldn't try...that she couldn't do?* "How close?"

"I can almost do it, but I think being afraid of getting stuck is hindering me. If you can, send whatever you can on the subject to me, please."

But Professor McGonagall is the one you should've asked, not me. "I will do what I can."

She paused, her eyes becoming unfocused as she stared at a wall for a moment. She licked her lips, an action that made him stare at her lush lips until she turned her focus on him again. "In six days I'll be at Kilmar Toron the eastern side of Bodmin Moor," she stated.

"You should not tell me where you'll be," he said, fighting back the conflicting emotions her trust brought out in him. She was too naïve where he was concerned, but it would be nice to get letters from her again instead of these surprises of hers. He nodded. "I will keep your secret," he vowed, feeling the magic pulse in his wand hand, sealing the promise. *A magical bond...shite, an oath. At least it's not another bloody vow* he thought before he left her and returned to the magical boundary of the school.

She'd failed. No matter how hard she tried she couldn't transform.

'You're a failure of a witch...you shouldn't even consider yourself entitled to be called a witch, the scratchy voice in her head said.

I'm just insufficiently determined, she chastised herself, arguing against the voice, and tried again. She felt her magic swell and thought the incantation with determined will, but nothing happened.

'Completely inept. A coward, the voice said, and she shook her head, trying to dispel its presence.

No, I was only... Inadequately focused on my intent, that's all she thought determinedly.

'You were completely heedless...totally negligent. You'll never accomplish this; you're not smart enough, the voice berated her.

This is just like when I failed at Apparition! she thought as she removed the Horcrux from around her neck. She immediately felt somewhat better. At least she felt more clear-headed. Hermione remembered what Severus had said to her on top of the Astronomy Tower the first day of Apparition lessons. "Professor Twycross gives the same speech, the same directions every year. But he forgets one very important aspect every time," he'd told her while they'd stood in the rain. She could picture him, his hair soaked as was his frockcoat. "You are the most determined witch I have ever taught. I know you were sufficiently focused on your destination. I'm quite sure you were deliberate in your action, but you forgot one very vital aspect..."

I have to focus my determination on my intended action and think the incantation...without losing focus...then release my magic... That was the most important thing Severus taught me when I was learning to do wandless magic...to control my magic and how to draw on my magical strength. I have to trust myself; I can't focus too much on the change, I have to allow it to happen. Let myself blend with my magic, and it will happen. "I focused too much on my intention and determination and being deliberate, I forgot my magical ability." She tried again and felt a shifting, an awareness, but when she opened her eyes, she was still facing herself in the mirror. *Damn.*

"Hermione, are you ready to go?" Harry asked.

She looked around. Everything was packed. "Yeah, I'll be right out." She picked up her bag and joined him outside. In no time they had the tent folded into a small packet. Magic still amazed her.

Hermione was shoving the tent into her beaded bag when Tawnie swooped down on her, announcing her arrival happily. "Oh my gosh, you clever owl! You found me!"

"Whose owl is that?" Harry asked, watching Tawnie flutter around Hermione looking for a place to land.

"Mine, I suppose," she stated, allowing Tawnie to land on her arm. "Hold on tight, Tawnie, I'm going to take you with us."

"Hermione?"

"It's fine, Harry, she's not traceable," Hermione said and held out her hand to him. As soon as her feet touched solid ground, Harry stepped back, but Tawnie shot up into the air, flapping her wings wildly in agitation. "I'm sorry!" Hermione called out to her as Tawnie circled her head wildly, making piercing "coo-wik" cries and coarse short "ha-ha" sounds, frantically expressing her agitation.

"Tawnie, you're all right; it's okay, really," Hermione kept saying as Harry suppressed his mirth.

"It's not funny, Harry," she admonished him.

Tawnie landed with a huff on a rock, but refused to let Hermione approach her. "Fine," Hermione finally said, pulling the tent from her bag and setting it up as Harry tried applying all the protective charms and enchantments.

Tawnie spent the evening sitting on the chandelier ring that hung from the ceiling of the tent, chatting nosily, refusing to come down and let Hermione take the parcel in her talons. By morning, Hermione was able to coax the owl to her with a bit of toast. "Tawnie, it's called Apparition. I can jump long distances in seconds, but you're right; the sensation is off putting," she explained as she fed the owl bits of her ham slice.

"You're explaining Apparition...to an owl?" Harry asked between bites.

"Tawnie's a clever owl; she just didn't like the squeezing sensation," she said as she untied the string. *It isn't a parcel! It's multiple sheets of parchment!* Pages and pages of information on Animagi transformation, some in his handwriting and several were pages copied from various books. *He sent me what I'd asked for!*

"I don't either," Harry admitted to Tawnie, then juttled his chin at Hermione. "Who's it from?"

Hermione froze. *I can't tell him it's from Severus...he hates Severus* She shrugged as she tried to appear nonchalant. "Just someone at school."

His eyes narrowed suspiciously, so she cast a quick nonverbal wandless Confundus Charm, feeling guilty for deceiving Harry. Tawnie flew up to the chandelier to roost as Hermione folded the sheet of parchment and put it in her pocket before she released the charm on Harry. She pulled the composition book she'd used to write down all of the things Harry said he'd learned in his sessions with Dumbledore and placed it in front of him and started reading her *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*. She saw the odd eye symbol on the top of one page, wondering if it was a symbol and not an eye as she'd assumed, and reached for her *Spellman's Syllabary*.

Harry's eyes slowly began to focus. "We should go over this," he said, looking at the page in her journal.

"Hm?" she asked turning the page in her *Syllabary*. He was going to get them involved in another seemingly fruitless endeavor to work out where Dumbledore might have hidden the sword.

"Hermione, I've been thinking, and... I...I want to go to Godric's Hollow," he said.

She looked up at him. She'd been thinking the same thing. "Harry, could you help me with something?" she asked and showed him the symbol in her book. "Look at that symbol."

He leaned over to look at the symbol. "What about it?" he asked.

She, however, wanted to know what it meant.

~ T. B. .C. ~

Author's Notes:

The last three sentences of dialogue were borrowed from the book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, when Hermione and Harry discuss the deathly hallows symbol Dumbledore had put in his book, *The Tales of Beedle the Bard*, on the first page of the story of the three brothers. You know what happens after that.

Wackers is a real restaurant establishment in the town of Scarborough, and it is on the same street as the Brunswick Shopping Centre. However, for the sake of the story, I invented the idea of the mural on the wall.