Pride of Time

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by AnubisAnkh

Summary

Hermione quite literally crashes her way back through time by roughly twenty years. There is no going back; the only way is to go forward. And when one unwittingly interferes with time, what one expects may not be what time finds...
A/N: This story is complete. All the chapters have been written. It is being reposted from FFnet.

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Hermione Granger had never given up the Time-Turner she acquired in third-year. She'd handed it to Minerva and then gone to see the Headmaster to ask for it back. Her friends and teachers had no idea that she was still in possession of such an artifact. Professor Dumbledore had been more than happy to give it back to her, reminding her once more of the rules regarding its use, and then sent her on her way.

Thus, she'd kept it hidden on her person in fourth year. She'd used it sparingly, usually to get more studying time in, but for all of the school year of 1994, she had probably used less than twenty-four hours of time. When Harry returned from the maze, clutching Cedric Diggory's dead body and the Tri-Wizard Cup, Hermione had been prepared to go back in time to stop him from going into the maze, to alert the past Dumbledore that the cup was a portkey, to do something to prevent Voldemort's return.

It was the Headmaster who stayed her hand, in the middle of all the chaos and confusion, when he saw her slipping away from the crowd.

"You cannot use time to erase all evil," he told her gravely.

"But sir—!"

"We always knew Voldemort would return," Dumbledore told her seriously. He wasn't smiling, with either his expression or his eyes. They were hard, yet there was an edge of resigned sadness to them. "Harry is still alive, Miss Granger. He will need your help and that of Mister Weasley to defeat him, but if you prevent Voldemort's return, he will still find a way to come back— one in which the outcome is less favorable than is now." Seeing the look of disbelief, he reiterated firmly, "Harry is alive, Miss Granger."

It had taken a full minute for Hermione to absorb and accept these words, and then her hand, which had been grasped tightly around the little hourglass around her neck, preparing to fiddle with the dials, slowly lowered.

"I understand, sir," she said dully.

Thus, time was not altered the night of Voldemort's rebirth, and come fifth year, they were dealing with the Terror of the Wizarding World along with one of the most incompetent, foul beings Hermione had yet encountered. The presence of Dolores Umbridge drove Hermione to convince Harry, with Ron's help, to start Dumbledore's Army.

But they had been betrayed, though Hermione didn't know who. Upon receiving Dobby's warning, she had fled down the corridor, escaping the Inquisitorial Squad, but from the racket following her footsteps, she knew Harry had not. She was certain he would be expelled, and given the name of their club, Professor Dumbledore would likely be accused of nothing less than treason. This was one
instance where she was certain she was supposed to use her Time-Turner. Where it was justified to
do so, for the sake of altering the outcome of certain events. Dumbledore had to remain at Hogwarts!

This was why Hermione found herself hurtling down the corridor, intending to reach her dormitory,
where she could go back in time long enough to warn her past self of the impending betrayal. They
could avoid this disaster, if they only put the meeting off another day and managed to weed out the
informant and Obliviate them—

Just as she was descending the stairs leading to the fourth floor, the hands fiddling with the dials of
the Time-Turner got caught in the chain, upsetting her balance. She tripped, hitting the hard stone
stairs with enough force that the knock to her head made her see white-hot stars, and as she heard a
quiet, foreboding crack—

Time shattered around her.

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To Hermione, it was like watching a kaleidoscope of colors. The red-orange-cream of the candlelight
and the candlesticks on the wall mixed with the iron black of the holders; the grayish brown,
illuminated stones of the wall, the faint blur of colors from the few portraits on the wall of this
particular fourth-floor corridor, mixed with the searing pain in her forehead and the faint splotches of
blood she was sure was coming from her nose from where she’d hit the stairs—

And then it thankfully stopped. Dizzy, Hermione brought a hand to her nose, trying to stem the
trickle of blood and see straight, when it hurt her eyes just to look. She closed them and remained
motionless for a moment, sprawled on the stairs as she was, and once she felt the majority of her
dizziness subside, she slowly opened her eyes.

The corridor she was in was deserted. She slowly raised herself up on shaking elbows and brought
her knees up, forcing herself on all fours. She closed her eyes as another wave of pain washed over
her face, trickling through her bruised elbows, her knees, her ribs, and then realized a heavier,
burning pain was searing through her hands and her chest—

She ripped the Time-Turner off her neck and dropped it to the ground before pressing a hand to her
neck. It hurt, and badly. The place where the Time-Turner had rested against her had become
charred, and sticky red blood was soaking through the crispy black skin. It was a small burn, but it
was making breathing difficult, and it was all Hermione could do not to let out a little sob of pain.
She scrambled for her wand, which was still in the pocket of her robes, and pulled it out with
shaking fingers. She cast a trembling Cooling Charm on her chest, her hands, and the burning
sensation slowly subsided, though the pain did not.

Her grip on the wand now sticky with blood that had welled up in her fingers, Hermione carefully
turned it toward the Time-Turner, her expression fearful, as though afraid it might lash out at her. But
the tiny hourglass lay on the ground, a white-hot luminous burn that instantly explained Hermione’s
injuries. The Time-Turner was burning up, and through the glare of its light, Hermione could see a
faint crack along the glass.

Professor Dumbledore had told her that the reason one could not use a Time-Turner to safely go
back in time by months or even years was because the farther in time you went, the more the
hourglass would burn. It would take time for it to cool before it could be used again. As Hermione
stared at the burning object lying on the ground, she realized that from the telltale burn, she must
have gone back much, much farther than two hours. How far had she gone? Days? Weeks? Months?

She dared not even consider the idea that she might have gone back years. It was too
incomprehensible.

She stood up slowly on shaky legs, and then pointed her wand at the burning hourglass on the ground. Focusing made her head throb, but she had to do it nonetheless.

"W-wingardium leviosa!" She gasped, and the Time-Turner slowly floated up off the ground. Staggering forward, Hermione stumbled through the empty, deserted corridors. It must be several hours past curfew, she thought, for there should have been students to run into by now. But thankfully, there were none. She didn't even see a single prefect doing rounds. And judging from the darkness outside, it must be very late indeed. The only risk she had was of running into patrolling teachers—

"Goodness gracious!"

Hermione spun around in time to see a very pale Professor McGonagall rushing toward her, wearing a look of absolute shock; Hermione's shaky concentration finally broke, the throbbing in her head increasing to dizzying proportions, and as she saw the stone floor rush up at her, she heard the distinct sound of the Time-Turner landing on the floor with a faint but audible crack.

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Hermione opened her eyes. Her vision was fuzzy, but she was warm, and she felt safe. Something glinted in the peripheral of her vision, and she slowly lifted her head to look, her eyes widening in surprise as she took in the plain white curtains and sheets of the Hospital Wing. She tried to move, and in response to this tentative request, her body screamed in protest. Yet, Hermione could not help it; she had to sit up. She slowly leaned forward, pulling herself up with help from her elbows, until she was no longer flat on her back. She blinked a bit more as her eyes adjusted to the gentle orange light of the candles lit along the wall, and felt a wash of relief as she realized her head was no longer trying to kill her with sheer pain. Her eyes flickered down at the sheets—soft, but white—and glanced down at her hands.

They were wrapped in bandages, stained by the ointment wrapped underneath them, and as she cautiously flexed her fingers, she realized that they were no longer covered in blood. That prompted her to bring her hand back up to her chest, feeling carefully for the painful burn that had had her struggling to hold back wracking sobs—

Another set of bandages were wrapped around her chest, and Hermione's fingers tentatively ran over the textured fabric, feeling nothing. Her body was extremely sore, and her eyes felt tired, but she otherwise seemed alright. She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, trying to think clearly now that she was no longer covered in blood and dealing with the pain of fresh third-degree burns.

She was in the Hospital Wing. She must have gone back in time, where Professor McGonagall had found her, and brought her here and alerted the Headmaster. She would have to explain herself to them both, but she was certain now that things would be alright.

She was about to lean back and rest some more when Madam Pomfrey exited her office and, seeing that her patient was awake, immediately bustled over.

"Oh, good," she said, sounding relieved. She pressed a hand to Hermione's head, as though checking for temperature, and then summoned some water and a tray of food. "You're awake." She tsked. "We weren't sure whether you would be all right—you looked quite a fright when you appeared out of nowhere, covered in blood—"

"Madam Pomfrey, I was wearing a hourglass-shaped object around my neck when I came here,"
Hermione said, reaching for the cup of water and bringing it to her mouth with shaking fingers. "Do you know what happened to it?"

Madam Pomfrey paused.

"How do you know my name, dear?"

Hermione pulled the cup from her lips to look up at the matron, now wearing the look of a timid animal caught at wandpoint. How far back had she gone?

"Could I…" Good gods, was Professor Dumbledore even still here? She was certain he was, but— "Is… if Professor Dumbledore is still here, could I please see him?"

"Of course," Madam Pomfrey said, stirring the bowl of oatmeal on the tray. "He said he would stop by to check on you regardless, but now that you're awake, there is no point in waiting. Eat up," she said firmly as she turned to leave. "Professor Dumbledore will be along shortly to sort out this mess."

"I would appreciate that," Hermione said politely as she reached to take a bite of the oatmeal. Having had nothing to eat for goodness knows how long, she was positively starved. "Thank you," she added.

Looking rather pleased that Hermione was being so cordial, compared to the usual complaints and grunts the matron usually had to endure from her unruly charges, Madam Pomfrey seemed content to let the mystery surrounding Hermione's knowledge of her name rest. She made to return to her office, no doubt to get some work done, to leave Hermione alone with her thoughts.

"Madam Pomfrey, wait!" she suddenly called. The matron paused. "Could you tell me what year it is?"

Madam Pomfrey turned to give her an odd look, but was kind enough to answer nevertheless.

"The first of April, 1977," the matron answered simply.

Hermione's eyes practically bugged out of her skull. 1977. She had been sent back in time by nearly twenty years! That shouldn't even be possible, unless it had something to do with the crack the Time-Turner had received when she'd fallen. Perhaps a few grains had moved out of place with the dials, a few years had been taken, and instead of going back two hours, two months, or even two years, she'd gone back by nearly two decades.

For a moment, she was hoping someone would jump out and shout, "April Fools!" but the stern, concerned expression on the matron's face remained unchanging. She was serious.

Madam Pomfrey was waiting for an answer, and Hermione managed to swallow down the scream that threatened to rise up in her throat, and merely croaked out, "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey."

Satisfied, the matron left, leaving Hermione to stew in a maelstrom of thoughts.

Was Professor Dumbledore still Headmaster then? She was certain he was— he'd been Headmaster of Hogwarts for at least forty years, if he started teaching in 1956. That was, if her recollection of Hogwarts, A History, was correct. Besides, Madam Pomfrey had already referred to him as the Headmaster…

She needed to find a way to fit into this time period until she had a solution to return to 1996. She needed to speak with Dumbledore, but not reveal the extent of her situation to anyone, not even the Headmaster. Chewing on her oatmeal, she considered the story she would come up with to convince
the Headmaster to allow her to transfer in this late in the year, nevermind how she had arrived.

Decision made, she set aside her food and, wishing she had her wand so that she could summon a
book to read, sat back and waited, fear roiling in her belly.

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The Headmaster arrived two hours later.

He entered quietly, closing the door behind him, and as he turned around to face Hermione, the first
thing she could think of was that he looked no different than she remembered. Madam Pomfrey—
well, in the last two hours, it had finally dawned on Hermione that Madam Pomfrey's hair still had a
great deal more brown to it than her older self did. The lines on her face were softer, too, as was the
shape, and she looked only slightly less careworn now than she did in twenty years. If Hermione had
not been convinced before, she was now.

The Headmaster, however, looked almost unchanged, and Hermione found it to be a surprising
relief; to feel as though she were talking to a familiar face was greatly appreciated right now. Blue
eyes looked at her benignly from half-moon spectacles, and as Hermione opened her mouth to speak,
he raised up a hand to quiet her.

"Have no fear, Miss Granger." Hermione's mouth clicked shut at this, and she stared as he continued,
"I have the Time-Turner you arrived with. Madam Pomfrey told me you were concerned about such
an object earlier. Minerva was the one who brought it to me—I must say you certainly gave her quite
a fright. She was quite concerned about you."

"May I see it, sir?" Hermione asked desperately.

"Unfortunately, it is too hot to be handled as of right now," Dumbledore continued, as he pulled out
a chair for himself and took a seat, crossing one leg and folding his hands into his lap. "I have locked
it away while it cools."

"Too hot…?" Hermione was disturbed by this news. "Sir? You can't cool it?"

"Not by any magical means I know of," Dumbledore responded, now twiddling his thumbs. "I do
not know how long it will take for it to be cool enough to be repaired. And even then," he added
calmly, "I am not certain if there is a way to send someone forward in time. That would take quite a
bit of fiddling, I might add, and knowledge that I do not have."

"But you're Albus Dumbledore," Hermione could not help but hear herself utter, even as she felt a
detached sense of horror at the implication of his words. If she didn't wake up from this nightmare
soon, she was going to have a mental breakdown. She had been thrown back nearly twenty years in
time, and was being told that there was no way to rectify it. "You're the greatest wizard of the
century! There must be something you can do!"

"Am I?" Professor Dumbledore asked, now smiling. But behind the smile, his demeanor was still
quite serious. "I am afraid, Hermione, that I am quite incapable of returning you to your time at this
current point in—well—time. Quick fickle, isn't it?" he added, almost as an afterthought. Seeing the
baffled look, he elaborated, "How fickle time is. You can only hope to get nowhere but backwards
when you play with it, when all we ever do in life is to look forward."

Hermione buried her face in her hands and tried not to let out the strangled sob threatening to burst
unbidden from her throat.

"Oh gods," she moaned. "What am I going to do now?"
"You will create a new life here," Dumbledore said cheerfully, sliding out his wand and flicking it once. A scroll of paper appeared in his hands, and he held it out to her. "I will speak to the teachers here—I'm certain you know them all already?" Hermione nodded, swallowing hard to keep from crying. "If your memory serves the both of us correctly, you were in the middle of your fifth year when you made your unfortunate—or—trip." Hermione gingerly took the scroll from him and unrolled it. It was a schedule, with the name Hermione Granger printed neatly at the top.

Hermione was wiping her eyes now, trying to erase all traces of the tears threatening to spill over. Her voice cracked slightly as she spoke. "Professor, I'll need an alias—I, I can't very well go by my real name—"

"It matters not in the long run, Hermione," Professor Dumbledore interrupted, his voice was firm. He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Twenty years from now, it will make no difference. Either you will have returned to your time, where your name will have been long forgotten by the time you arrive as a first year, or you will have made a life here for yourself."

Hermione nodded, and couldn't help sniffling as she rolled up the scroll and tucked it under her arm. Well, at the very least, she would have the comfort of using her own name. "Thank you, sir," she said in a small voice. Sooner or later, she was going to break down in mass hysteria. This was too unreal. She was normally extremely calm and collected—she prided herself on it, in fact, that she could think rationally when all logic had fled the situation—but right now, very much like the time she'd been confronted with Devil's Snare and had wailed that there was no wood… she felt as though she had lost her tenuous grip on the situation.

"I do, however, recommend you not reveal the true nature of how you came to be here," Professor Dumbledore informed her as he pushed back his chair and stood up. "That would not be wise to bandy about."

"I understand, sir."

"Very well, then," Professor Dumbledore said, clapping his hands together the way he did when things appeared to be final. He reached into the left pocket of his star-spangled purple robes, and pulled out a chocolate frog and set it down on her nightstand. "I find sweets often help in cheering up, no matter how onerous the situation. You certainly look as though you could use it. And on a final note," he mused, "I believe you were sorted into Gryffindor. In that case, I believe this week's password is 'Chocolate Frog.' You know your way to the tower, I presume?"

Hermione nodded and glanced at the chocolate frog, hesitating only for a moment before she reached to unwrap it. She could certainly use something to cheer her up now.

"Thank you, Professor."

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Hermione's first order of business, once she had been discharged by Madam Pomfrey, was to take inventory of herself, and realize that she had nothing. Nothing except for the book bag Professor McGonagall had found at the place where Hermione he first landed—which contained her name and the homework assignments and dated notes, which neatly explained in her mind how Professor Dumbledore had learned her name and origin—and her books. Or rather, she only had her planner, some ink bottles and quills, and the week's notes with her; her books were still on her nightstand in her dorm, left behind in 1996.

Professor McGongall was waiting for her the moment she left the Hospital Wing, and after nervously shaking her hand, found herself being marched down to her office. Once inside, she was invited to
have a seat. The tea which Hermione was so used to being offered by her head of house back in her own time was noticeably absent. Instead, she felt once again like an errant first year, consumed with the feeling that she would somehow have to prove that she had a right to be here.

"Professor Dumbledore has informed me that you will be staying in Gryffindor," she said starchy, stirring herself a cup of tea. "He has also informed me that you are already aware of our point system and house rules—I trust that I need not repeat them for you?"

"No, Professor," Hermione said, trying not to wring her hands in her lap. She felt so out of place, and vaguely nauseous with homesickness. She was in the right place at the wrong time and it was disorienting, to say the least. She was used to a friendly face and an understanding mein from her head of house; yet, this McGonagall did not know her.

She must have looked like she was about to cry, for McGonagall's strict demeanor instantly softened just a fraction. It was enough to put Hermione faintly at ease. "Miss Granger, my understanding is that you will be here for a very long time—if not forever, at least until the Headmaster finds a suitable way to return you to your time. Until then, you will simply have to fit in."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, trying to stem the flow of snot that was threatening to drip from her nose, even though she'd managed to hold back the tears. "It's just—this is a lot to take in."

To her surprise, given how stiff McGonagall had been just moments ago, the Transfiguration Professor's next words were reassuring. "It's quite alright. I imagine you miss home terribly."

Hermione could only nod.

There was a pause, and then a weary sigh as McGonagall took a sip of her tea and then set it aside.

"Miss Granger, I don't know how well you've read up on history," she said briskly, "but we—that is to say, everyone at this school, staff and students alike—are all under an enormous amount of stress. We are on the brink of war, and there is a level of inter-house warfare right now that is eating away at the safety the school would otherwise offer." She looked at Hermione sternly. "I do not know what Hogwarts is like in your time—no, do not tell me!" she said, raising her hand to stop Hermione from speaking. "I do not want to know. But whatever Hogwarts is like in your time, Miss Granger, you must set that aside and be on your guard. Do you understand?"

Hermione nodded slowly.

"The students who are most likely to be targeted are the ones without friends," McGonagall said, stirring her tea slowly, the spoon clinking against the side of the mug. "And as of right now, you are alone and friendless, a new transferal near the end of the year." She looked up at Hermione now, locking eyes with her. "Do you understand what I am telling you, Miss Granger?"

Hermione swallowed; for some reason, she was unable to reply. Somehow, her nod was not sufficient enough for McGonagall, for she continued, "Frankly, Miss Granger, I believe that it will be a long time, if ever, before you are returned to your time. Until that happens, you cannot recluse yourself from the world."

Hermione felt as though she finally understood. "You don't think I'll ever get to go back," she whispered, more to herself than her audience, but McGonagall nodded briskly in reply. She hesitated, and then swallowed: "So I should just... make myself a part of this timeline?"

"That is correct."

Hermione closed her eyes.
I may never see Harry or Ron again.

Resigning herself to this possibility, she sat up straighter and ceased her fidgeting with her hands. "Very well, Professor."

"Good," McGonagall said, looking rather relieved that the conversation had finished with minimum hysteria. "And now, I believe, you are in need of supplies?"

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On Monday morning, Hermione walked into Herbology and took an empty seat at the end of the table next to a girl she didn't know. They were all wearing dragon-hide gloves and warily eyeing the Fanged Geraniums waiting to be transplanted. Hermione tried to resist the urge to flex her gloves, but it was nearly impossible not to; the worn pair McGonagall had collected for her felt so stiff, it was a wonder it didn't classify as petrified. It made her feel clumsy, but there was no taking them off for this class. She would have to buy herself a new pair, next Hogsmeade visit permitting.

Normally, she would have found a seat between Harry and Ron. But as this was not the case, she found herself sitting beside a slight, plain girl with mousy looks and a demeanor that reminded her slightly of Neville Longbottom. The witch next to her was of the subdued sort, but Hermione nevertheless struggled to find the words to introduce herself.

She had finally resigned herself to the fact that she would probably never make it back to her own timeline. Upon coming to this realization, and internalizing McGonagall's words, she understood what she needed to do if she were to ever manage to fit in.

The girl next to her blinked in surprise, eyes widening when Hermione thrust her hand forward. "I'm Hermione Granger," she said, smiling nervously. "I'm your new classmate."

The girl hesitated for all of one moment before grasping Hermione's hand and shaking it, though her grip was gentle. "I'm Mary MacDonald. It's nice to meet you. You're the new fifth-year Professor McGonagall told us about, right?" For the first time since Hermione had arrived, she was treated to a friendly, open smile. "Welcome to Hogwarts."

Professor Sprout's sharp, brisk voice broke through the greenhouse. "Partner up! Two to a plant, let's go!"

"Do you want to partner up with me?" Mary asked, sounding just a bit hopeful.

Hermione gratefully seized the invitation. "Yes, please."

They immediately set to work, Hermione holding the fanged flower's bud still between her fingers—which didn't require as much flexibility—as Mary set to work carefully uprooting it.

"Have you met the Gryffindor prefects yet?" Mary asked, wiping a streak of dirt from her cheek with her arm as she set the geranium down in the pot intended for its transferral. "I think you'd really like one of them—Lily, at least. She's quite kind, and really smart—she tutors the younger years in her free time. If you need any help catching up with classes, I think she'd be happy to help."

"I think I'd like that," Hermione responded honestly, wondering if she could ask the Head Girl for a copy of all her notes from fifth year and below. Her own notes were irretrievably stuck in her own timeline, and they would be starting OWL review soon. She needed those notes. "What did you say her name was?"
"Lily Evans," Mary replied, slicing a bag of soil open and helping Hermione to hoist it over the snarling and snapping flower.

The name was familiar to Hermione, and it took several minutes for it to finally hit her. And when it did, she nearly dropped the half-empty bag in her arms.

She had gone back almost twenty years in time—when Harry's parents were still in school.

Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter One

A/N: All right. This is today's chapter.

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

To Hermione's great relief, she shared nearly every single class with Mary. Professor Dumbledore had put her in the same courses she'd taken in her own timeline, which meant that since Mary was in her year, they shared all five of the same core classes. The only class she was on her own in was Arithmancy and Ancient Runes, and she was quite used to not attending it with her friends; Harry and Ron had never taken Ancient Runes, nor had they ever had the slightest interest in Arithmancy; she was as much on her own here as she had been in her own timeline. In a way, that consistency was comforting.

There were so few students in those two classes that, unlike in Hermione's time where it was sorted by year, the third and fourth years were placed together, as were the fifth and sixth years. The seventh years were on their own, in their own exclusive NEWT-level course. There just weren't enough students to warrant separating each class, and Hermione discovered Professors Vector and Babbling essentially taught two separate lessons in the same classroom and the same period. Even with two years combined across the board, there were roughly a total of fifteen students in each class. It was disconcerting how small it was, given Hermione was used to a class of roughly twice this size.

Mary helped her get settled from class to class, helping her find a seat that was not relegated to the very back of the room nor too far to either side, and introducing her to the people she usually sat with. Mary, Hermione soon discovered, was neither a very powerful witch nor a particularly strong-willed one, but she was friendly and personable enough that she had friends in class who were happy to meet Hermione.

At the end of the day, she brought Hermione to Gryffindor Tower, where they found Lily Evans sitting at one of the tables—in fact, one of the very tables Hermione usually sat at—helping one of the third-years with his Transfiguration assignment. She looked up at Mary and Hermione's approach, and gave a friendly smile.

"Mary! I haven't seen you all day." She sat up straight, and the third year she'd been helping thanked her quickly and left; Hermione had the vague suspicion that the boy would be dashing back down the stairs soon enough, with a broomstick over his shoulder. "How can I help you?"

"Hermione, this is Lily," Mary said, by way of introduction. "She's one of the Gryffindor prefects. Lily, Hermione was wondering if she could have copies of your notes from first through fifth year. She doesn't have any, and we're starting our OWL review soon…"

Hermione wasn't listening, nor paying that much attention, even as Lily stood up and bade them to wait a moment while she went to retrieve the notes. Harry's mother had hair that was brighter than Ginny's and just as long, with sparkling green eyes that reminded Hermione so much of Harry. She watched as Lily's hair was swept back as she disappeared from the room, and didn't realize Mary was talking to her until the girl timidly patted her on the shoulder.

"Lily's the one we all go to when the Slytherins start picking on us," she said, her eyes on the floor. Hermione was instantly struck with the suspicion that Mary had had to go to Lily more than once for such a reason. She hated to think of it, but poor Mary was such a weak and easy target. "Don't be afraid to ask her for help." She scuffed her foot on the rug, at this, and then asked, "Are you any
good at defensive spells?"

Hermione's mind immediately flew to her sessions at the D.A. "Passably," she lied, knowing she was more than just passably good at defense. Harry was the best among them, but Hermione had absorbed all of his lessons—including the last—with her usual lightning-quick talent and studiousness. "Why?"

"We have Potions tomorrow," Mary said by way of explanation. "Would you mind walking down there with me in the morning?"

Hermione's expression instantly softened. Mary was asking for help, and whether or not she was grateful to the girl for making her feel welcome, she felt almost obliged to help a fellow Gryffindor in need. "Of course."

Mary brightened visibly at this, and Lily returned almost a moment later with several years' worth of notes, neatly put together, and held them out to Hermione, who took them gratefully.

A voice interrupted from the other side of the room. "Oi! Why are you giving her notes when you wouldn't even share Binn's History notes from last week?"

Hermione whipped around in time to see a familiar face lounging on one of the couches in front of the fire, as Lily haughtily replied, "That's because you fell asleep! You don't even bother to take notes!"

Sirius gave her a roguish grin. His hair was black and curly, draped around his shoulders, and his face was bright and lively, something Hermione had never seen in him during her time at Grimmauld Place. Where she remembered him as gaunt and pale, he now looked young and healthy, nearing his prime, and if she looked closely, it seemed he was already starting to grow the faintest stubble of a beard.

"Come on, Lily," he weeded, sitting up. "Just this once. I normally manage to stay awake long enough to write down what he's saying."

"You always say that," Lily said, turning away from him with a sigh. "If you want notes so badly, go ask Remus. They're just as good as mine."

"You have nice script."

"You deserve it if you can't read Remus's chicken scratch," Lily countered, flouncing back off to her table, where she straightened out her papers and began putting them back in her bag. "Come on, Mary. Are you coming, Hermione?"

Hermione was nearly astonished by Lily's almost dictatorial tone, but she acquiesced immediately. Dashing up the stairs to put her newly-acquired notes away, she grabbed her bag and followed Lily and Mary out the portrait hole, throwing Sirius one last look over her shoulder as he did.

The boy was scowling, but it quickly slid from his face as he leaned down to pick up his Defense Against the Dark Arts text book, picked up some parchment that had slid off his lap, and propping it on his book, resumed writing.

~o~O~o~

Hermione sat on the couch in the common room that night, scribbling away at her essay due tomorrow while several other students, including Mary, went up to bed. Rain pattered against the window in a steady beat, and it was pitch black outside. The common room was surprisingly quiet,
until Sirius stormed in, soaking wet and tracking mud. Hermione nearly shrieked at this, and scrambled to her feet in time to see two more familiar faces follow suit, their shoes thick with mud and leaving a mess that would likely cause Argus Filch to have an apoplectic fit.

Remembering the crabby old caretaker's aiding and abetting of Umbridge, she actually didn't pity him one bit if he had to clean this up. But his jobs were restricted largely to the halls; he wouldn't be called in for dormitories. It would be the elves who would have to clean those messes.

The boy who could have passed for a slightly-older Harry, minus the scar and hazel eyes, was grinning with amusement at the horrified look on her face. The fair-haired boy standing behind him, however, looked somewhat abashed, and pulled out his wand to try and undo some of the mess.

"You're tracking mud into the common room!" Hermione almost howled. "For Merlin's sake, can't you do a simple Cleaning Charm?"

Sirius shrugged, but pulled out his wand to scourgify his robes clean. "More work for Filch." He eyed Hermione's hair warily, watching as it began to frizz slightly in her agitation. "Please don't have a heart attack. McGonagall will put us in detention for the rest our lives if you die on us first-day in."

James Potter was staring at Hermione curiously, and it was Remus who had to scourgify his mud-soaked Quidditch robes for him, since it seemed he wasn't going to do so himself. "You're the new girl, aren't you?"

Hermione paled. For a moment, she had a sense of extremely disconcerting vertigo, and she closed her eyes for a moment to will it away before she felt steady enough to speak. James Potter was not Harry. She could not pull him into a hug and cry her eyes out with relief at a familiar face. Instead, she took a calming breath, and answered as evenly as she could, "Yes, I am. And for future reference, if you could please keep your mud-tracking activities restricted to the halls, I would be much obliged not to have you sent to detention for the rest of your life."

"Just got back from Quidditch practice," James said by way of explanation, ruffling the back of his head. "We haven't had a chance to clean up."

"Are you a wizard or not?" Hermione snapped. It was the only way she felt she could cope; either she was going to break down crying or she was going to snap at them to get their act together. It was too confusing for her. Right now, she just wanted to storm off and go to sleep and try to prepare herself for the day ahead. "Lily told me at dinner that you're one of the best in your class at Charms." Had bragged almost admiringly, actually. "Surely you could manage that much?"

James's attention immediately snapped to her. "Lily said that?" he asked, looking rather pleased with himself.

"Oh gods. "Yes," Hermione answered, sounding uncertain, but she tried to roll with it. "And—you know—I think the rest of us would appreciate a clean common room. Including her."}

James sighed and shoved his hands into his pockets, though Hermione could tell that inside, he was grinning from ear to ear. "Alright. Can we go now?"

"Yes, go," Hermione snapped, waving them away and sliding back down to the floor, pulling her Transfiguration essay closer and re-inking her quill. "Have a good night."

They tramped past her and up the stairs, and the minute they were gone, Hermione shoved her essay aside, curled up into a ball, and wrapped her arms around her knees, burying her face in them. Gods, she just wanted to go home. She would do anything to be home now. Back home and in the right
timeline. She didn't belong here.

She was surprised when a hand gently patted her shoulder, and her head shot up. Remus was kneeling beside her, looking uncertain, but concerned.

Hermione didn't want to deal with this. "Go away, please," she croaked, turning her head away. Tears were threatening to pour again, but by now, she knew they needed to stop. Crying wouldn't help, and never helped, but she couldn't stop the sense of helplessness threatening to engulf her in salty tears.

"Are you all right?" Remus asked gently.

"I'm fine," Hermione muttered, still refusing to look at him. A dam had finally broken, and the tears were starting to trickle down her cheeks. "Go away."

"No," Hermione turned to look at him, surprised. He amended, "I'm a prefect. It's my job to look after you, and you're obviously not fine." He scooted until he was sitting next to her, and crossed his arms across his chest. "I'm here to listen, if you need me."

Hermione swallowed, feeling both grateful and annoyed beyond all comprehension. She couldn't tell him the truth, but she settled on a vague version of it. "I miss home," she whimpered quietly.

She felt Remus shift, uncrossing his arms, and placed a hand on her shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. Hermione continued, "I miss my friends, and I miss my family. I even miss my teachers. And now I'm here, and it's just..." she shook, her body wracking with barely-contained sobs as she struggled not to let it all out. "I'm alone. I am completely alone."

"No, you're not," Remus responded gently, but his voice was firm. "You have us. Everyone in Gryffindor will be your friend if you let them. And you can always owl your friends back at home."

"I can't," Hermione said with a sobbed hiccup. She buried her face in her arms, and brokenly repeated, "I can't."

Remus seemed to absorb this with a transforming look of horror and then pity and sympathy. "You-Know-Who?" he asked, not daring to be more specific.

Hermione nodded. Because in a way, indirectly, Voldemort had taken everything away from her. His influence at the Ministry had translated to influence at Hogwarts, which had led to this—

Remus wrapped his arms around her shoulders and gave her a friendly squeeze. "We'll be your family, Hermione. Some of us have lost friends and family because of him—you're not alone."

Hermione looked blearily at him, remembering that it was because of Voldemort that he was a werewolf. Of course he would understand loss—for him, he had lost any chance of a normal, unafflicted life. She buried her tear-stained face in his chest and let it all out, crying and shaking uncontrollably. She couldn't go back. She couldn't go home. She was stuck here, probably for the rest of her life, and every time she tried to stop, a new wave of pain crushed her will and wracked another broken moan from her.

Remus—gentle, understanding Remus—simply held her. He held this strange new girl he knew next to nothing about and comforted her as she cried over the loss of her life as she knew it. And when she finally pulled away with a sniffle, trying to wipe her face with her sleeve, he summoned a handkerchief for her and pressed it into her hands.

"Here—blow." Hermione did, and then wiped her face with the part that was not covered with
copious amounts of snot. Her cheeks were still stained, but she had finally stopped crying. Remus took a moment to scourgy the handkerchief, and pocketed it. "I know things won't be the same for you ever again—they never are—but you're surrounded by great people, Hermione. We're happy to have you here." He gave her a small smile. "You're one of us."

She gave a small nod, and hiccuped, unable to speak.

"It will be okay," Remus said, stressing the words. "We'll be here for you. I promise."

Hermione nodded again, and Remus patted her arm. "Do you want to finish up here or go to bed? I'm sure McGonagall will forgive you for turning the essay a bit late—it's due tomorrow, and if I remember right, she assigned it to the fifth years last week. You've only been here a day."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I—I need to get it done," she croaked, reaching for the paper.

"Would you like me to stay here with you?"

Hermione hesitated, and then nodded. "I'd—I'd like that. I'd be grateful for the company."

Remus patted her arm once more, and then re-inked her quill for her and handed it over. Hermione took a deep, shuddering breath, trying to calm herself down enough to write comprehendingly, and then resumed writing.

Remus sat there the entire time, silently watching her fingers become ink-stained as they scribbled across the parchment. And when she finally finished an hour later, he helped her pull her stuff together and sent her off to bed.

~o~O~o~

Two important things occurred as a result of Hermione's breakdown. For one, Remus was now her friend. Secondly, she no longer felt the urge to break down in tears. She had kept it all bottled up for several days, and having finally let it out, it no longer felt as though it was building up inside, waiting to pour out. She still felt a heavy kind of pain in her chest, where she felt heartsore and homesick, but she no longer felt snappy and explosive.

Remus and Mary were both waiting for her in the common room the next morning, and the three of them walked down to the Great Hall together. James and Sirius had clearly gone ahead, probably with Peter (Hermione's stomach churned at this), leaving Remus to take care of the new fifth-year girl. Hermione was grateful for their companionship, and they made small talk as they walked down for breakfast.

They found seats at the Gryffindor table, where Hermione ended up sitting between Mary and Remus, grouped with the Marauders. James was sitting next to Lily, who seemed to be studiously ignoring him, with Sirius on his left. On the other side of Remus was Peter, who was sloppily trying to eat breakfast and finish last night's Charms homework, which he had apparently neglected to do. Hermione felt bile rise up in her throat when she saw the squat, watery-eyed boy sitting at the table, and tried not to look at him. He wasn't the same person he was now, just as James, Sirius, and Remus had all changed. Right now, he was just a pale, weak boy who hung out with the other three Marauders for protection and friendship.

Mary was shy at the table, and kept to small talk and timid looks. She spoke quietly as a general rule, and in the bustling noise of the Great Hall, nearly everything she said was drowned out. In between answering Peter's questions about locking charms and refusing to give Sirius his history notes, he and Hermione talked. It was clear to Hermione that he was pleasantly surprised at Hermione's
knowledged and interest in academics, and they spent a good portion of the breakfast hour discussing the influence of Alchemy in Transfiguration and Potions. Sirius spent the morning glaring at Remus, which the prefect tried to ignore, but Hermione had an inkling that by the end of the day, Sirius would have his way.

They bade goodbye at the breakfast table, and Hermione and Mary set off down for potions.

~o~O~o–

"Splendid!" Slughorn beamed, as he looked down at Hermione's finished potion. "Absolutely splendid! You have quite some talent at Potions, Miss Granger, some talent indeed! Ten points to Gryffindor." He peered up at her, a sudden spark of interest lighting his eyes. "Granger… are you possible related to Hector Dagworth-Granger?"

Hermione opened her mouth to say no, but then paused. There were Slytherins in this room. Slytherins who didn't know her parentage, but who would make an instant target out of her if she revealed she was Muggle-born. She took a split second to consider it; if she denied any relation, they could still assume she was Muggle-born. It was best to play this opportunity to her advantage to afford her a possible spark of protection.

"It's possible," she said, trying to look modest.

She didn't really pay attention to Slughorn's response; out of the corner of her eye, she saw some of the Slytherins looking at her with renewed interest. One of them sniggered, and turned to his table partner to whisper something behind his hand. Hermione suddenly wondered if she'd made a calculated mistake; she might have just saved herself from automatically being presumed a Muggle-born, but claiming possible relation to a famous wizard, however distant, might have also just made herself an even larger probable target.

Ducking her head, she gathered her stuff and left as quickly as possible, waiting just a moment longer at the door for Mary to catch up, and the two headed down the dungeon corridor for their next class.

"Are you really related to Dagworth-Granger?" Mary asked meekly as they walked quickly through the hall. They reached the stairs leading up, and walked out into the cheery brightness of the Entrance Hall.

Hermione was about to reply when Mary let out a sudden squeal of surprise and tripped, dropping her bag and spilling its contents across the floor. Hermione whipped around in time to see three older boys advancing on them, wands out and wearing near-identical looks of glee.

Hermione's wand was out in an instant. "Protego!" she shouted, slashing her wand in their direction. The next spells thrown promptly bounced off, and one of the slower boys stumbled backwards and fell as his face erupted into a mass of boils. He let out a howl of rage that Hermione thought was completely uncalled for, and she sent a Petrificus Totalus his way before pulling back into a defensive stance, putting herself between Mary and the other two boys.

They weren't done. The taller—and meaner looking of the two—sent a nasty hex in Hermione's direction, which she promptly deflected and returned the favor with a Stunner. Harry had more than just taught them the spells; he had taught them how to really use them, how to attack and defend in one-on-one duels, and when she used those skills in a three-on-one battle, they still served her well. The third boy tried to hit her with a Slicing Hex and a Trip-Jinx in quick succession, dodging her second Stunner. She was about to throw another spell at him when her hair suddenly ruffled as four different spells flew past her head, one missing by nearly an inch, and two of them hit the boy
squarely in the chest. One knocked him out; the other gave him an eight-point rack of antlers.

Hermione whipped around again, in time to see all four of the Marauders standing together, wands out, wearing identical expressions of fury. She saw Peter duck forward to help Mary to her feet, and Remus approached first, clasping a hand on her shoulder.

"Are you alright, Hermione? Did they get you?"

"No, I got them first," Hermione said, glancing back at the three unconscious Slytherins. She was about to elaborate when she was, again, interrupted.

"Hold it right there!" Two more Slytherins had appeared, wands out, and Hermione watched as James and Sirius's hackles raised at their approach. The one on the right had light brown hair and was the shorter of the two. The one on the right was a tall, gangly figure with greasy hair and a hooked nose, whose face Hermione could not quite instantly place—

"Your Slytherins attacked our friends," Sirius growled. Hermione wanted to ask him when she had suddenly been promoted from 'new acquaintance to annoy' to 'friend', but kept silent. "They were coming back from class."

"And what would you have brought your pack of Gryffindor dogs down for, if it wasn't to start trouble?" The brown-haired boy's eyes narrowed calculatingly. "Seems a bit much for a mid-morning stroll, don't you think?"

"We have Potions next, you slimy git," James said.

"So you do. I seem to have forgotten that little detail," the Slytherin responded, mouth curving upwards into a supercilious smile. "After all, we share the same class. And here I was hoping you'd finally been kicked out for Gryffindor incompetence." He gave a long-suffering sigh. "And it was such a nice dream, too."

"Just get out of here before we decide to hex you too, Avery," Sirius snarled. "And take Snivellus with you." He gestured at the greasy black-haired Slytherin, whose black eyes widened with badly-concealed rage. "He looks a little lost."

At that moment, Mary tugged on Hermione's arm. "Let's get out of here," she begged plaintively. Hermione couldn't see how that was going to happen. If she turned her back, she would be an instant target. They were at a standstill, all seven of them with their wands out. Any moment now, they were either going to put their wands away and stomp off, or start hexing each other blindly—the latter of which seemed more likely—

"That's enough!" Hermione turned around in time to see Professor McGonagall striding down the corridor, looking quite furious. Hermione didn't know why she was here, but she was grateful—until McGonagall's next words hit her. "Fighting in the corridors! Ten points apiece and detention, all of you!"

"That's not fair!" James said angrily, turning around to face his Head of House. "They attacked Mary and Hermione first!"

The Slytherin sporting the rather impressive rack of antlers stirred feebly.

McGonagall peered down at Mary, who looked as though she were about to faint. "Miss MacDonald, I can certainly believe. Run along," she snapped, though not unkindly, and Mary took one last look at Hermione, gathered her bags, and fled down the corridor. Minerva turned her
attention back to them. "Avery, take those three up with you to the Hospital Wing, and report to Mr. Filch for detention tonight at eight. You and Pettigrew will be helping him clean up the mud someone—" she sniffed, "tracked in last night."

Without a word, and a meaningful glance at the pale, hook-nosed boy—who now looked as though he wished he were anywhere else but here—Avery helped his antlered classmate to his feet and a moment later, the two of them were each dragging an unconscious body between them down the corridor. McGonagall then turned her very potent fury on the yet unpunished.

"I didn't do anything!" The black-haired boy suddenly snapped, taking a step backwards. "I didn't do a single thing—"

"Be that as it may, Mr. Snape, I have no doubt that had I waited to arrive just a bit longer, you would have done quite a bit worse than simply being here," McGongall said in a tone that could have passed for dryness, but was what Hermione recognized as irate fury. Behind the professor's back, Hermione saw James and Sirius share identical smirks at this. "The same goes for you, Miss Granger." Hermione didn't even try to protest. "Both of you will serve detention with Professor Slughorn on Friday, eight o'clock."

She saw her future Potions professor give her a murderous glare, as though his detention were somehow her fault, and resisted the urge to swallow hard. Right now, she felt as though she'd just fallen down the rabbit hole; her best friends had been replaced with youthened versions of the people Hermione considered mentors and trusted adults. And to top it off, she was now back in school with one of her least favorite professors. At the very least, someone who she was quite certain was not about to take her sudden arrival with a welcome and a smile.

What she wanted to do was curl up right now, take several deep breaths, and find a way to sleep the time lag off. She just needed more time to come to terms with the realities of this timeline. As it was, it seemed the only way she was going to get through everything would be to have it come at her all at once.

Steeling herself, she looked Severus Snape in the eye and returned his glare with equal venom.

"Run along now," McGonagall said sharply, startling Hermione out of her thoughts. She grabbed her bag, which had fallen to the ground, and made to leave. "And don't let me catch you fighting in the corridors again!"

She wondered how it was possible for her to have gotten a detention on her second day of school when it had taken nearly an entire year in her timeline.

She left the dungeons, huffing angrily at the fact that in this instance, it had been entirely the Slytherins' faults. She made it to Ancient Runes five minutes late, and slumped into her seat, still fuming about what rotten, misbegotten gits they were.

She was glad that she'd heeded Professor McGonagall's warning. And she was even more grateful that the Marauders had shown up when they had, though she wished they had not been punished for their intervention. She recalled Sirius admitting that they had been a bunch of arrogant berks back in school, but in this case, their readiness to fight was much appreciated. She would have to thank them later.

~o~O~o~

"I don't believe this!" James fumed, taking a seat on the couch as Hermione got to work on her Charms essay. "We have Quidditch practice on Saturday, and instead of being out there on the pitch
with the team, I'm going to be stuck inside! Writing lines!"

"Bad luck, Prongs," Sirius said moodily, tossing spare bits of parchment into the common room fire, where they disintegrated into flakes of ash on the rug. "I'll be writing lines in Flitwick's classroom." He stopped throwing parchment into the fire long enough to mime writing, pulling his face in a thuggishly confused, brow-scrunched expression. "I… will… not… hex… Slytherins… in… the… corridors…"

"I will not give them a rack of antlers."

"I will not cover their face in tentacles, no matter how much I think it improves their looks."

"I will not hang Sniv—"

"Will you two please quit it?" Remus snapped, lowering his book. "Some of us are trying to work. And I do not appreciate being pulled into detention because of you," he added, glowering at Sirius.

"Look mate, for once, it wasn't my fault!"

"If you would learn to disengage from a fight, we might not have been there long enough for McGonagall to have to come down on us," Remus said, returning to his book.

"If you want to call being hexed in the back by Snivellus 'disengaging', by all means, Moony—"

Hermione had had enough. She looked up from her essay and threw both boys each a dirty look. "As much as I appreciate your intervention earlier today, I would appreciate it even more if you would be quiet long enough for others to get their homework done!"

Sirius elbowed James. "Let's go, Prongs. I can see we're not wanted here."

"Where's Peter?" James wanted to know.

"Still in detention with Avery. C'mon." Sirius stood up and headed for the portrait hole. "We'll be practicing on the Quidditch Pitch if you need us," he called over his shoulder, before he and James shut the portrait behind them. Hermione let out a sigh of relief, and bent back over her essay.

The room was quiet for several minutes, save for the crackling fire, before Remus broke the relative silence. "You know, they're really not so bad, once you get to know them."

"I know," Hermione said, scribbling the last line of her current paragraph. She paused to look up at him, and gave him a small smile. "I can tell."

Before she bent her head again, she happened to glance out the window, where the moon shone brightly across the cloudless sky.

It was waning.

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Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Two

A/N: Whew! Uploading fifty chapters is going to be a pain!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

The rest of the week progressed much better than the first two days had. By Friday, Hermione had become a part of the Marauders' routine, and they waited for her at the bottom of the girls' staircase every morning, where the four of them would then walk down to breakfast. Mary would sometimes be ready in time to join Hermione, and the six of them would trudge down to the Great Hall. Hermione would sit between Mary and Remus, and somehow, some way, James would find a way to cajole Lily into sitting beside him.

Classes went well; it was only when Hermione had taken her seat in Arithmancy that afternoon after lunch that trouble arose once again.

It had to be a cruel joke of Fate, Hermione thought wildly, as she realized that the boy sitting next to her was the same one who she would be serving detention with that night. It wasn't her fault; Hermione had been forced to find a seat near the front that wasn't taken, and this was the closest she could find. She hadn't realized that the empty chair next to it, the last on its row, was already occupied. There was simply no way she could have known. But when Snape had finished explaining his previous absence to the teacher—Professor Vector merely nodded and waved him to his seat—he shot her a glare before he slumped into the seat next to her.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed out of the corner of his mouth as he reached into his bag to pull out some parchment and quills, his eyes locked on Professor Vector as she began writing a complex Arithmantic equation on the board.

Hermione gritted her teeth. "I'm not here for the express purpose of being a thorn in your side. I assure you, I had no idea you were in this class or I might have possibly reconsidered signing up for it."

He slammed his quill onto the desk, shot her a final glare, and began copying down the notes Professor Vector was now explaining on the blackboard. "Just don't bother me," he hissed, and then proceeded to ignore her entirely.

That suited Hermione just fine. Once Professor Vector had finished her explanation, she moved to the other side of the blackboard and began the fifth-year lesson while the sixth-years in the room began copying down the problems she'd written underneath the equation she'd written down at the start of class. Hermione couldn't help noting that Snape was working on the sixth-year problems—which meant that, conclusively, Snape was only one year ahead of her in this timeline.

It was a bizarre revelation.

Hermione did not speak to him throughout class, and she did not bother him. He, in turn, studiously acted as though she did not exist. As soon as Vector had finished the fifth-year lecture and assigned the problems, she bent her head down to work, and didn't stop until the bell rang to signal the end of class.

"See you in detention," she told him as she hoisted her bag over her shoulder.
He snarled something at her under his breath that she pretended not to hear, and left.

~o~O~o~

The common room was rather boistrous that evening. Alice—one of Hermione's new dormmates—managed to convince Hermione and Mary to join her for a game of Gobstones, while the Marauders enjoyed a game of Exploding Snap. Several other students were lounging around, laughing and talking, and Hermione might have felt it was a normal day if it were not for the fact that she knew less than half these people.

And there was a distinct lack of fireworks and Canary Creams. They had become quite commonplace in Hogwarts as of late, as far as Hermione's timeline was concerned. The Weasley twins had seen to that.

Hermione was in the middle of her third game of gobstones when she checked her watch, and apologized to her friends, explaining she had a detention to keep.

"Detention?" Alice asked, bewildered. "Whatever for?"

Hermione winced. "Mary and I were ambushed in the dungeons by a couple of Slytherins, and we all wound up in detention."

"Shoot. Go on, then. I'll get Frank to take your stones." Alice leaned back in the direction of a boy with short, curly brown hair was sitting on the couch and called, "Frank!" The boy's head whipped around in her direction. "You're up!"

Frank Longbottom immediately threw the book he'd been reading to the ground and was in Hermione's seat in an instant, flashing her an apologetic grin as she stood up to leave.

Hermione grabbed her bag and departed.

She arrived at the Potions classroom and was bid to enter by Professor Slughorn, who happily invited her in.

"Good evening, Miss Granger," he said genially, bustling over to one of the tables where he had set an array of ingredients out. "You'll be brewing some potions for Madam Pomfrey this evening. Severus should be here any moment now—ah, speak of the devil!" Slughorn said, laughing and wagging his finger as the hook-nosed sixth-year slipped inside, shutting the door behind him. He clapped his hands together as Snape slipped into one of the seats at the table, and Hermione had no choice but to take the one next to him, though she scooted it away from him as far as possible without it being blatantly obvious. "Now that you're both here, we can get right down to work. Which one of you has ever successfully brewed a draught of Dreamless Sleep?"

Snape sighed and half-heartedly raised a hand. Hermione did the same.

"Excellent! That is what you will be doing tonight." Slughorn gestured at the ingredients laid out. "I've set up everything you will need. I just need a set of talented hands and watchful eyes to do the job. I trust you two will work together just fine?" Hermione and Snape gave him identical looks of disbelief which Slughorn mistakenly interpreted for acquiscence, for he clapped his hands together and exclaimed, "Splendid! Well then, I shall be in my office if you need anything."

As soon as the door shut behind him, Hermione glanced down at the table, and then at Snape.

"He doesn't supervise detentions personally?" She had to ask. She was just about ready to explode with curiosity. She had never met a teacher who left the students to their own devices in such a
"If he doesn't think they'll destroy the classroom," Snape replied shortly, standing up and reaching for the silver knife at his end of the table. He summoned his copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* in one hand and began chopping up dandelion roots with the other in precise, quick strokes.

Hermione hesitated, watching him work, and then asked timidly, "Do you mind sharing your book while we work? I haven't got a copy of the instructions in front of me."

Snape turned to glare at her. "Why not?"

"Because even though I've made Dreamless Sleep before, I don't have the instructions in front of me, and I don't have it memorized," Hermione responded, just a bit testily.

Snape shoved the book in her direction, and Hermione skimmed the first sentence over quickly before she pulled out her wand. She filled her cauldron with water and lit a fire underneath it and then set to work chopping dandelion roots in silence. She poured them in, and then returned to the instructions, only to find that they were barely legible; the margins were almost completely filled with ink. It was her turn to glare at him.

"What's this stuff you've written in here?" she said, trying to make out the printed text amidst the spiky black scrawl doing it's damndest to obscure it. "I can't even read it."

"If you don't want it, give it back," Snape said nastily.

"Why are you so difficult?" Hermione snapped back, slamming her hand down on the table. "I haven't done a single thing to you, and the first time I laid my eyes on you, you had your wand drawn on me. You're so bloody damn difficult—hell, even your bloody potions book is damned difficult! I can't even read it!"

She must have looked on the verge of emotional breakdown, for Snape seemed to take enough pity on her to answer.

"Seven drops of foxglove extract," Snape said tersely, his eyes focused solely on his cauldron. He didn't look at her. "Stir until the potion turns milk-white, and then add crushed aconite petals."

Hermione eyed him suspiciously, but vaguely remembered the instructions he had just rattled off, and moved to do as he had said. She highly doubted he would trick her into exploding or ruining her potion; he was right next to her, which meant any explosion would likely reach him, and any retaliation could be done the instant the manipulation was realized. She added the crushed aconite petals, and then threw him a dirty look before she squinted at the instructions in the book, trying to make sense of them.

Snape sighed; it was one of long-suffering, and it irritated Hermione to no end. "You add the fluxweed next, and then bank the fire to let it cool—stir counter-clockwise while you wait for it to stop simmering."

"That's not what's written here," Hermione said slowly.

Snape grunted. "If you have a problem with the way I do things, you can try to follow the instructions of that grossly-outdated textbook and see where that gets you."

He sounded so much like Professor Snape, it was alarming. The dictatorial tone was unmistakable. Nevertheless, Hermione’s gut feeling told her to listen to him, and she did as he instructed.
It continued on that vein for quite some time; Snape would recite the instructions for her, and Hermione would follow them to the letter. Little else passed between them. Hermione was not inclined to poke a sleeping dragon more than was strictly necessary while she was fussed with something else. It was only when she finally took a step back to let her potion cool down before being decanted that she found an opportunity for actual conversation.

She could have said any number of things. She could have made a crack about his nose, commented on his greasy hair, or an unwelcome observation about his personality.

Instead, in an attempt to extend an olive branch to him, she said, "You're really good at potions."

He gave her a disdainful sneer. "I'm not going to do your homework for you."

There was little else he could have said that would have had Hermione so outraged. She gaped at him for a moment, before her hands fisted themselves at her sides, clenching so tightly that her knuckles had turned white. "That's something I would never ask," she gritted.

He looked at her through narrowed eyes. "Everyone wants something, Granger."

"I would never allow anyone else to do my work for me!" Hermione cried, slamming her hands on the desk. "Everything I do is solely by my own effort!"

"Doubtful," Snape said, twirling his wand between his fingers. "As I said, everyone wants something—power, prestige, or adulation. You are no exception."

Hermione's hands gripped the jar of leeches sitting on the table.

"For Merlin's sake!" Hermione was ready to explode. This was just too much to take. "All I did was compliment you! I told you that you were good at potions, because it's true! Not because I wanted you to start doing my Potions homework for me!"

"Naturally, you'd say that—"

Hermione at once considered chucking the jar of leeches at him, irritated beyond measure by the sneering drawl in his voice, but before she could convince herself to rethink such thoughts, her hand had left the jar and in a moment of anger and impulse, she hit him.

There was a moment of stunned silence; Snape brought a hand up to feel his cheek, which had been left with a reddened imprint of Hermione's hand, and then his gaze turned murderous. He opened his mouth to speak, possibly even to retaliate in kind, but Hermione beat him to it.

"You are an utter git." Hermione pulled her bag onto her shoulder, not even bothering to decant her potion first. "An utter, slimy git, and I wonder why I even tried."

She was out the door before he could issue a response. Which was probably a good thing; as soon as the door shut behind her, the jar of leeches hurtled through the air and shattered; the remains of pickled leeches dribbled down the wood, and was summarily scourged before it reached the floor.

~o~O~o~

Hermione commiserated over the results of her detention with Remus the next day, who was rather sympathetic. His detention, which involved the boring and unproductive task of writing lines, was much more uneventful, and he was much more interested in listening to Hermione's complaints about her detention. James and Sirius were sniggering over breakfast about the auto-writing charms they had applied to their chalk so that they could sneak notes to each other through the Floo, and
Hermione could only wonder how long it would take for the teachers to figure out this bit of mischief and they would be forced to come up with another.

She privately wondered just how badly she was going to pay for hitting Snape. Was he going to have his revenge now, possibly even enlist the help of his housemates, or was he going to enact his revenge when her eleven-year-old self showed up in his classroom for the first time? She actually felt guilty for doing it, but at the same time, it had been oddly satisfying. But now there was the real possibility that she might have just painted a red target on herself.

Harry and Ron would have been proud, she was sorry to say.

The next Monday, teachers finally began to assign review work, and Hermione could be found in the library at a table with her notes and several books spread out. A table for four was completely taken up by the sheer mass of papers Hermione was trying to study at once. Neither the Marauders nor any of her newfound friends were capable of dislodging her, and Sirius snuck food into the library for her. She took bites of ham sandwich when Madam Pince wasn’t lurking about, and cleaned up the crumbs before she left.

She had Arithmancy again that evening, and it was with an air of resignation that she took her seat and pulled out parchment for note-taking. Snape passed by her without a word, and Hermione might have thought he was planning on ignoring her entirely if it weren’t for the odd looks he sent her way when he thought she wasn’t paying attention.

Hermione found his behavior entirely unnerving. She’d been expecting to be hit in the back with a jinx over the weekend, or to be called in by one of the professors for striking another student, and neither had happened. When class was over and she began packing up her bags, she wondered if Snape was planning on ambushing her. They were usually the last ones out, and there would be nothing to stop him from hexing her on the way to dinner.

She waited for him to leave first, and then followed him. She made the trip down to the Great Hall rather uneventfully, and once again took her seat between Mary and Remus. She was halfway through dinner when Sirius, sitting across from Hermione, set down his forkful of shepherd pie to glare at the space above her shoulder.

"Greasy git," he said, before stuffing the food into his mouth. Hermione was distinctly reminded of Ron as he spoke without swallowing first. "What's Snivellus staring at you for, Hermione?"

James, Remus, and Peter all lifted their heads to look up at her.

Hermione slowly turned around and scanned the Slytherin table. It took a moment for her to identify Snape among the crowd of green and black-clad students, but sure enough, when her eyes landed on him, it was clear he was watching her. When their eyes locked, though, he glared at her just a moment longer and then quickly looked away.

"Detention went badly," she replied honestly. "He was being a git. Don't worry about it."

Sirius was pointing his fork at the Slytherin table. "Want us to hex him for you?"

"Please don't," Hermione said, turning back to her food. "I'd rather you didn't. It won't help anything, and it was partly my fault to begin with."

"I can get him tomorrow, we have Potions together and I can hex him while his back is turned—"

"No, Sirius."
"You are no fun," Sirius said, giving her a dirty look that Hermione knew was only in jest. He elbowed James and pointed at Remus. "Look at the goody-two shoes here. See what happens when you leave them alone for too long? They multiply like rabbit slippers left under the bed."

James nearly choked on his pumpkin juice.

Hermione and Remus rolled their eyes, exchanged glances of amusement and mild annoyance, and resumed eating. As soon as Hermione was done, she excused herself, begging off to the library for more review.

"Don't stay there for too long," Sirius called to her retreating back. "You'll rot your brains."

The table erupted with laughter, and finding something oddly funny about Sirius's remark—perhaps because it was something that sounded so very much like Ron, which seemed to ease the pain in her chest—Hermione left the Great Hall smiling.

~o~O~o~

For the rest of the week, she could be found studying herself into a stupor in the library after dinner. There would be a trip to Hogsmeade that weekend, which Hermione had manage to procure permission to visit on the basis that she was an orphan and therefore had no guardians to speak of to sign a permission slip—followed by the argument that she had already been given permission in her own timeline. McGonagall relented, signing the permission slip herself, and Hermione now had plans to join the Marauders on the trip to Hogsmeade. It was possibly the only time in living memory that Professor McGonagall would have bent the rules for a student.

Until then, she was hunched over the notes she had borrowed, studying in the library until Madam Pince informed her that it was time to leave.

By now, Hermione was started to get irritated with fate. Fate had been playing quite a few cruel jokes on her over the last two weeks, and by the end of her second Friday in this new timeline, she was getting quite fed up with it. She was not the only student who used the library, by far. She was not even the only student who sat in this area of the library to do work. And she was not the only student who made use of the library after dinner.

Why, then, was Snape always sitting in one of the chairs in her line of sight? He appeared to be studying, and perhaps he was, but Hermione felt like a mouse waiting to be swooped upon by a hawk. She was still waiting for him to enact some form of revenge, and as none had come her way quite yet, she was on her guard. He had not said a single word to her all week. Not even in Arithmancy; though Hermione had done her best to appear as though she were ignoring him, it was impossible not to pay attention to someone you were expecting payback from. It followed then that it was also impossible to not notice the covert, sullen looks in your direction.

Bending her head back down over her book, she didn't look up again until a shadow cast itself over her book, and she turned around and looked up. Snape was towering over her, something that Hermione found both intimidating and annoying, and they stared at each other for a single long moment before Snape broke the silence.

"Are you ever going to return any of those books before exams start?" he asked stiffly, gesturing at the library books Hermione had stacked at one corner of the table.

Hermione opened her mouth, and then shut it, unsure of what to say. She had been on edge all week, thinking he was waiting for an opportunity for an ambush, and all he wanted were her books?
She found her voice a moment later.

"I don't plan to," she replied honestly. "Which one do you need?"

"Advanced Transfiguration of Transition Metals," he said, glancing over at the book in question. "I haven't a clue why you'd have it out to begin with; you're not in the class for that."

"It's much more thorough about the theories behind why certain objects are comparatively more easily transfigured than any year-assigned alternatives I can find," Hermione replied, pulling the book in question out of the stack and thumbing through it. She stopped flipping the pages, and looked up at him, her expression wary. "I need it."

It was odd how little difference there seemed to be between Snape as a teenager and a Snape as an adult, despite a roughly twenty-year age difference. His nostrils flared at this, a sure sign of brewing anger, and Hermione recognized the curling of his lip as an additional omen of ill-ease.

"Why do you need it?" Hermione pressed, setting the book back down. "McGonagall tells you everything you need in class. Why don't you have your notes?"

Snape visibly stiffened, and he gave her a glare that Hermione felt was rather undeserved, and she told him so. "Don't look at me like that! I haven't done anything!"

"Your friend," Snape sneered, "saw fit to steal my Transfiguration notes last week. I haven't found anyone willing to let me copy their notes for free."

"Sirius?" Hermione asked, a sinking feeling in her stomach as she realized she might have an idea of exactly what had happened to Snape's Transfiguration notes. A trip into the common room fire on a moody Tuesday night was her best guess.

"Right in one."

Hermione glanced down at the book in her hands. "Give me until tomorrow to see if I can dig up the notes you need. Otherwise, we'll have to share it."

"Where do you expect to find a complete set of last week's advanced Transfiguration notes?"

"I'll ask one of my housemates," Hermione said, instantly thinking of Lily. "They might be willing to give me a copy."

"Fine." It was a sullen concession. "Until then, let me borrow it so that I can actually get my homework done."

"You'll give it back to me by tomorrow?" Hermione pressed, standing up with the book held closely to her chest.

He glared at her, and then looked away and sighed. "Yes."

"Here." Hermione thrust the book at him. He looked at her in surprise and took it. "And next time you need to borrow a book, don't spend a week stalking me to see if I return it on my own. Chances are I probably won't."

He gave her an odd look, glanced down at the mess of notes taking over her table, and then silently left with his prize.

When Hermione sat back down in her seat, it was accompanied with a sigh of relief.
"Advanced Transfiguration notes from last week?" Lily repeated, looking surprised. "Whatever do you need them for?"

"A friend of mine lost his," Hermione replied vaguely, trying to scourgify the ink off her fingers. She looked up at the Head Girl, trying to ignore the fact that her eyes were green—the exact same shade of green as Harry's. "Please, Lily. I just need a copy."

To her surprise, Lily laughed and simply pulled out her Transfiguration notes from her bag. "Alright, Hermione. If you insist." A tap of her wand, and a double was made. She held them out to Hermione, who took them, flashing her a thankful smile before sticking them into her bag.

"By the way," Lily said, stopping Hermione before she could leave. "I notice you've been hanging out quite a bit with James and his friends."

Hermione paused. Was Lily jealous? James hardly ever paid any attention to her; he only ever had eyes for Lily. Even a blind fool could see that.

But Lily was smiling. "I know I'm not around often enough, but does James ever talk about me?"

Hermione almost burst into laughter. "Lily, you're all James ever talks about." Seeing the gratified look on Lily's face, she elaborated, "When it's not Quidditch, it's you, and you're the subject of conversation more often than not. He is utterly besotted with you."

Lily was practically preening. "Thank you, Hermione." Hermione was about to leave, when she heard Lily sigh. "You know," she mused, setting down her quill. "I could take him up on his offer if he would just stop hexing people at random in the corridors. He's a handsome boy, but he is such an arrogant toerag! I can't understand it." She glanced sideways at Hermione. "I know he's your friend, but honestly, you wouldn't believe just how trigger-happy he is with that wand."

"Oh, I know," Hermione agreed with a nod, recalling just how quick James and Sirius had been at pulling their wands out in the dungeon, when Hermione and Mary had been ambushed. "Self-defense is one thing, but just hexing people for the fun of it…"

"Exactly!"

Hermione left, feeling much lighter on her feet. It was only once she had left the common room that she realized she had absolutely no idea where Snape was. She checked the library first, and then trudged down to the Great Hall to see if he was still at lunch. Finding him absent still, she let out a sigh and grudgingly began making her way down to the dungeons.

She passed the Potions classroom, poking her head in for just a moment to see if he was perhaps using the classroom, and then wavered for a moment, torn between going down to the dungeons to knock on the Slytherin common room door or find the Head of House, before making the decision to tread safely and knocked on Slughorn's office door.

There was a moment of silence, and then Slughorn called, "Come in!"

Hermione stepped in and closed the door behind her. She took a moment to take Slughorn's office in; this was the same office Snape himself would preside over one day, but it was much more colorful than she remembered. It was almost cozy, with the touches Slughorn had put in. It was clear to Hermione that the wizard enjoyed luxury, for the walls were covered in purple and silver hangings, and he had fashioned a rug to the floor that Hermione suspected he either took with him when he retired or Snape later removed. On the shelf that Hermione had last seen stacked with bottles of
preserved and pickled creatures, it was instead decorated with picture frames. On the corner of one self, she saw several boxes of crystalized pineapple.

"Good afternoon, Professor," she said, setting her bag down on his desk. "I was wondering if I could ask a favor?"

"Of course, of course..." Slughorn set aside the grading he'd been doing to give her his full attention. "How can I help you, Miss Granger?"

"I have some notes for Severus Snape," Hermione explained, pulling out the notes Lily had copied for her. She set it down on Slughorn's desk. "I haven't been able to find him, and until I could get him the notes, he was borrowing one of my library books. Could you give this to him the next time you see him and tell him I want my book back?"

"Of course," Slughorn beamed, taking a look at the notes. He scanned them. "Ah, this is Miss Evans' handwriting, if I'm not mistaken. Severus told me Sirius Black had stolen his notes, but alas, as I could not prove it, there was nothing to be done for it. Miss Evans takes excellent notes. I'm sure Severus will be quite pleased to return your book."

Hermione considered confessing to him that she had seen what had happened to the notes, but decided against it. Snape had the notes he needed, and putting Sirius in detention, while she would most certainly deserve it, would probably just antagonize him into having another go at the Slytherin. Not to mention that she was not all that sympathetic toward Snape to begin with; he was a complete and utter git, in her opinion, and she had no intention of risking her friendship with the Marauders for him any more than she would have risked her friendship with Harry and Ron for Draco Malfoy.

"Thank you, sir," she replied graciously.

"On another note, Miss Granger," Slughorn said genially, "I have been meaning to ask you if you are free this evening. I hold little informal suppers for my star students every now and then, and we're having another tonight at six o'clock. It would please me very much if you were to attend."

Hermione blinked in surprise at this, but smiled nonetheless. An opportunity to meet Slughorn's best students was a good one to make friends with people who shared common academic interests with her. She actually thought it was quite a brilliant idea, really.

She had discovered quickly enough that Slughorn was a teacher she could genuinely grow to like. He was the Head of Slytherin, that was true, but Hermione suspected he was in Slytherin because he was ambitious and had a burning desire to be well-connected, rather than because he was a power-hungry toerag. He was the kind of person Hermione thought could organize an entire community into action without having to do the manual labor himself. She had pegged him as the kind of person who liked to give others leg-ups in life and then reap small rewards in return.

The boxes of crystalized pineapple on his shelf suggested this rather strongly.

"I'd love to, sir."

"Excellent!" Slughorn beamed. "In that case, Miss Granger, I look forward to seeing you next Saturday." He patted the notes Hermione had given him. "And I'll be sure to give these to Severus with special note of your book."

"Thank you, Professor," Hermione said, smiling happily now as she picked up her bag to leave.

~o~O~o~
Hermione walked down to Hogsmeade with Mary and the Marauders, determined to get some new clothes and supplies. She had asked James if he would be willing to loan her some money, intending to pay him back by getting a summer job, only to have him wave it off and tell her to keep it.

"Look, you need some new robes," he said, glancing at Hermione's, which she had been forced to clean every other day because she didn't have a spare set. She looked rather shabby, not unlike the way Remus had as a professor in her third year. "And some new school stuff. Weren't you telling Moony earlier that you were almost out of quills?"

Hermione nodded.

"Then what are friends for?" he asked, giving Hermione a look that reminded her so much of Harry. He held out a bag of galleons that he had previously kept stashed under his bed. "Take it."

Peter and Mary begged off from the group to go to Madam Puddifoots, and James and Sirius made an immediate beeline to Zonko's, waving at Remus and Hermione to catch up with them at the Three Broomsticks later. Remus offered to accompany her, and the two set off down the street, chattering amiably.

Hermione stopped by Madam Malkin's, and Remus helped her pick out two new sets of robes for school. He laughed as Hermione twirled about in one of them, relishing in the comfort the new robes afforded, and Hermione also bought a pair of jeans and a red jumper that she could wear on the weekends while her robes were being cleaned. It was a rather Mugglish thing to do, since most of the students in this time period preferred to simply wear an extra set of robes, but Hermione wanted to go with what was familiar. She was actually quite lucky that the clothing store in Hogsmeade even catered to Muggle-borns. She was used to wearing Muggle clothes on the weekend, and old habits died hard. She bought an extra pair of undergarments to go along with it, stuffing them at the bottom of her bag, and the two stopped by Scrivenshafts for additional parchment, ink, and quills before heading off to the Three Broomsticks.

Hermione felt radiant and lighthearted. The fresh air and a few hours outside of the castle was doing her a world of good. She was surrounded by people who included her in a circle of close friends, and school would soon be over for the summer, giving Hermione time to scratch out a position in this new world that she could fit in.

Her joyous excitement seemed to be contagious; Remus looked carefree and had a new spring in his step. When she asked about what was making him so happy, he pointedly replied, "You." Seeing the look on her face—caught unawares and unsure of what to say—he elaborated quickly, and with sincerity, "You were so unhappy when you first arrived, and it's nice to see that you know how to smile."

Hermione flashed a brilliant smile at him, as she inwardly agreed with his sentiments. It was difficult to forget her breakdown, and she now felt rather distantly removed from the conditions that had caused it. She was still stuck in this timeline—and truth to be told, she probably would be for a good, long while. But she no longer felt completely lost; she had a better understanding of this strange new world she was in now, and seeing people from her future no longer caused her to feel hopelessly confused. There was still that place in her heart that made her nauseous with homesickness, but the pain was beginning to fade.

Hermione and Remus joined everyone else at The Three Broomsticks, where she discovered that while Madam Rosmerta had been quite pretty in Hermione's time, she was a dashingly beautiful barmaid in the Marauders'; young and with intelligent eyes on a handsome face. Judging her to be in her mid-twenties, Hermione nevertheless placed an order of butterbeer with the rest and sat back to listen to the chatter.
"I saw Snivellus in the corridors earlier today," Sirius said in between sips of his firewhiskey. "I tried to hex him while his back was turn, but the git must have known I was there—"

Hermione couldn't take it any longer. She slammed her butterbeer down on the table.

"For gods' sake, Sirius!" she exclaimed. "Can't you go one day without trying to hex someone?"

"No," Sirius said, utterly unapologetic.

"Snivellus's a special case," James said with a sagely nod, taking another sip of his drink.

"About that," Hermione said with a frown, "I have reason to believe one of you stole his Transfiguration notes."

Remus, who had been listening quietly, turned to give his two best friends a pointed stare. James and Sirius both instantly looked guilty, and the fact that they tried not to show it only made it more blatantly obvious. Sirius rallied first.

"Are you going to turn us in to McGonagall?"

"No," Hermione said, swirling her butterbeer around in her cup. Truth to be told, she didn't want either of them to end up in detention because of her. They both had so little time left that the thought of forcing them to waste precious hours in a classroom writing lines seemed horribly cruel to her. In twenty years, James and his wife would be long dead, their son an unwanted orphan, and Sirius would be stuck in a moldering old house, left to rot until the Ministry saw fit to exonerate him. "But I had to ask Lily for a copy of the notes you destroyed."

"Why'd you do that?" James demanded. "After we went through the trouble—"

"Because you shouldn't ruin others' academic futures with stupid pranks?" Hermione responded testily. "Possibly because if he didn't have those notes, I'd have to give him some of my library books."

"He could have gotten them somewhere else," Sirius said disgustedly.

"Not Advanced Transfiguration of Transition Metals," Hermione told him dryly. "There's only one copy in the Hogwarts Library, and up until yesterday, it was checked out in my name."

James and Sirius both looked mildly ashamed of themselves.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd stop antagonizing him so that he doesn't take it out on me, given that he knows you're my friends," Hermione said, taking a sip of her butterbeer. "But at the very least, please stop destroying his school things."

"Wait," James said, setting his butterbeer down. "Where did you say you got a copy of last week's NEWT Transfiguration notes?"

Hermione gave him a pointed look. "From Lily."

James' jaw dropped in horror. "No!"

"And that," Hermione said, leaning back in her chair, "is why it's to your advantage not to destroy his notes."

"No, no," James said, pulling his glasses off and rubbing his eyes with the heel of his palm. "You don't understand."
Sirius's face twisted into one of deep-seated disgust. "Snivellus and Lily were friends even before the got on the train, and they were best friends until last year, when she finally realized what an arse he was."

Hermione paused mid-way through her drink. Something about the information Sirius was telling her wasn't making sense. Professor Snape had been Lily Evan's best friend? The idea was grossly absurd. She tried to imagine what that would be like, and went further to try and imagine what Harry would say if someone told him that. The images her mind conjured were so ridiculous, she snorted, and sloshed her drink on herself. Coughing, she pulled out her wand to rid herself of the mess, and pushed her butterbeer aside.

"You're joking."

"I wish I were," James said, glaring down at his butterbeer as though it were somehow responsible for this mess. "I also happen to know he liked her."


Hermione was staring at the both of them, gaping. In a way, this completely explained it. No wonder Harry's father and godfather hated Snape so much; if he had been close to Lily, who was admittedly a very beautiful and vivacious girl, there was no question about how jealous a boy like James would have gotten. And Sirius would have jumped right in. And given what she knew of James Potter—that other than the fact that he was good to people he considered friends, he was nothing but a bully—it would have explained why Snape hated them—and by extension, Harry—so much. And yet, the whole notion was completely absurd. She could not imagine Lily, gentle, strong, considerate Lily, putting up with someone as snarky and ill-tempered as Snape. It all sounded completely absurd.

Goodness gracious, Hermione thought, still trying to wrap her mind around what her friends had just said. What on earth have I run into?

If what they were telling her was true, it rather did give Hermione a much better perspective on Snape. It also made Hermione feel just a twinge of compassion and pity for him. If she was right, if James had not been the least bit interested in Lily, he might have gone through his school years with only the occasional hexing from the Marauders rather than dealing with their almost compulsive need to make him suffer.

It also made her understand James' motives, even though it only made her angrier at him than she already was. She was more grateful to James and Sirius than she would ever be able to express, given how kind and welcoming they had been to her, but it didn't stop her from thinking that at the age of seventeen, they were both a pair of pillocks.

She took a deep breath. Losing her temper here would do very little good. But she needed them to see things as they were.

"James, if Lily isn't Snape's friend anymore, then why do you care?" Hermione pressed, taking a tiny sip of what was left of her drink. "It's not like he's any threat to you if she doesn't like him."

"It doesn't matter," James said fiercely. "You can see it in his eyes—he still likes her. I hate the idea that he thinks of her that way, that he even—that he even—" he seemed almost at loss for words.

"James, if I went around hexing anyone and everyone every time I thought they were staring at my chest, I'm pretty sure you'd tell me to lay off," Hermione told him dryly. "You can't keep hexing someone just because they like Lily. Even if it's Snape."
James sat up straight. "If it was me, I could handle it. But Lily—"

"Lily is a wicked smart, talented, and sensible girl," Hermione reminded him, "who isn't interested in Snape. She likes you, James. But if you keep hexing people in the corridors, she's going to keep turning you down."

"How do you know?" Sirius demanded.

Hermione turned to look at him, but her answer was directed at James. "She told me," she said simply.

James sighed and ruffled his hair, looking rather put out, but Hermione could see the spark of hope in his eyes. "D'you think she'd go out with me if I promised her I'd stop hexing people for the fun of it?"

"I don't know."

"I don't know."

"I don't know."

"I don't know."

Hermione said honestly, draining the last of her butterbeer, "but all I can say is that actions speak louder than words."

Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Three

A/N: I have no new author's notes, at this point. I'm just uploading every chapter back up.

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Hermione got dressed that evening in her new Muggle jeans and jumper, tugging her new robes over it before skimming down the stairs into the common room. She grabbed a hairclip that she had left on one of the tables earlier that day, pulled her hair back so that it was swept out of her face, and then exited through the portrait hole.

"Going out for a bit, dearie?" The Fat Lady asked, swinging shut behind her. Hermione turned to smile at her, and gave a nod in reply. "Well! Have a lovely evening."

Hermione flew down the stairs in the direction of the dungeons, feeling inexplicably light-hearted. Perhaps it was because she'd been looking forward to this supper all evening, but in truth, since Hogsmeade, she had been feeling rather refreshed. For the first time in nearly a year, she wasn't being forced to walk around Hogwarts like a criminal under house arrest, under the beady eyes of Umbridge.

She entered the dungeons with her wand tucked up her sleeve, double-checked to make sure it was secure, and then trotted off in the direction of Slughorn's office. When she arrived, it was to find that the door to his office was propped open and, sometime between the hours Hermione had last been there, the office had been magically enlarged to hold a table big enough for at least twenty, and three large couches around the fireplace. Slughorn, who had been sitting near the door, immediately stood up and clapped his hands.

"Ah, Miss Granger! So good to see you're finally here! Please," he said, gesturing at the table, "do have a seat!"

Hermione scanned the table quickly, and her first thought was that there were was a disconcerting number of people wearing red and gold ties, here in this office belonging to the Head of Slytherin. But that thought was instantly banished as she recognized Lily—and then Alice, Frank, James, Sirius, and a sixth-year named Adrian who reminded Hermione of Colin Creevy due to his tendency to carry a camera about him. A sixth-year Gryffindor named Marlene McKinnon sat next to Sirius.

The next person to fall under her gaze was Severus Snape, who was sitting as far away from the cluster of Gryffindors as was possible. He sat next to another Slytherin Hermione recognized immediately as Avery, on whose right was a straw-haired fifth-year who Hermione shared Potions, Arithmancy, Ancient Runes, and Transfiguration with, but had never had a conversation. She thought him oddly familiar, but had not yet been able to place exactly who he was or where she might have seen him before. He had an odd habit of licking the side of his lips, which, combined with his overall insufferable and arrogant behavior in class, was sufficient to make Hermione avoid him where she could. Between the straw-haired boy and Avery was a handsome youth who Hermione immediately recognized, from the Black tapestry in Grimmauld Place, as Sirius's younger brother Regulus.

There were other students there, too. A fifth-year Ravenclaw named Dirk Cresswell, who was friendly and was in Hermione's Charms and Herbology class. A Hufflepuff named Dahlia Flemming, who Hermione recognized as a member of the Hogwarts Frog Choir, was seated next a seventh-year Ravenclaw Hermione immediately recognized as Hestia Jones. There were five other
students whose faces Hermione knew from the halls, but whose names she either did not know or whose faces were completely unfamiliar to her.

Despite representatives from each house being present, the table was boisterous and full of chatter. Sirius and James were the life of the party at the Gryffindor end, where they had both the Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws giggling with raucous laughter over their drinks. Regulus whispering excitedly to the straw-haired Slytherin next to him, who almost choked on his pumpkin juice at something the younger Black had said for his ears alone. Avery was leaning back in his chair and smugly surveying the entertainment of the room.

Snape was the only one who sat back in his chair, sulking. It looked as though he didn't want to be there, though Hermione could not figure out for the life of her why. He wasn't required to be here. Nevertheless, the only empty seat seemed to be the ones on either side of the Slytherin gang, who had apparently taken pains to put at least one seat between themselves and the others. This was probably one of the last suppers of the year, given how close they were to exams, and Hermione was a new arrival; it made sense that they were not expecting her, much less forewarned about putting out an extra chair between themselves and the undesirables cavorting at the other end of the table. Given the choices, Hermione rather decided it was best to sit between Snape and Hestia Jones, rather than between the straw-haired lip-licker and Dirk Cresswell. She pulled out her chair and sat down.

Snape's scowl, unsurprisingly, did not abate at this. His arms were crossed together as he leaned back in his seat, and he looked for all the world like petulant child forced to attend a dinner party. Hermione, however, chose to ignore him and instead turned to Hestia, introducing herself to her. The two immediately hit it right off with discussion of the upcoming exams, and Hermione—remembering that Hestia had been a part of Harry's Advance Guard—asked her what she was planning to do for her career.

"An Auror, definitely," Hestia said without preamble.

Slughorn presided over the many conversations taking place, popping in on one to ask or prod, to give advice or make suggestions about connections he might have, only to pop into the next conversation. Hermione was astounded at his ability to carry on and participate in so many different combinations at once; it was nearly ridiculous. She had a vivid image of a large spider sitting in the middle of a finely-spun web, tending to each fly and plucking at a strand or two here and there, or a jewel collector who took to polishing and cutting a gem and then moving on to another gem before returning to finish the product.

Dinner arrived roughly ten minutes after Hermione had, and she eagerly tucked into the steak and kidney pudding that appeared on the table. She chatted with Hestia in between bites, and soon learned that the girl was an enormous fan of Quidditch, who was promptly horrified upon learning that Hermione neither had any aptitude for flying nor any interest in the game. It was almost embarrassing for Hermione to admit it, and she was rescued when Sirius made a wisecrack about Hermione not belonging on a broom because she was "too grounded" with books.

To her surprise, the dour companion on her right snorted in amusement.

"Speaking of which," Hermione said, turning to him, "I'm waiting for my book back."

She had not anticipated the reaction this would cause. Avery, Lip-licker, and Regulus' heads all snapped to attention in the direction of their housemate. James and Sirius didn't stop laughing at their own jokes, but Hermione could see that their eyes were now locked on Snape with ill-disguised hostility. Hestia looked on with curiosity, and Lily slowly set her glass down, her eyes traveling quickly between Hermione and the hook-nosed Slytherin, as though searching for something. Snape glared at his housemates, in a silent demand for them to bugger off, and reached one hand under his
chair for his bookbag. He sat up a moment later, the book clutched firmly in his hands, and held it out to her.

Hermione didn't make a production of checking it over to make sure he hadn't damaged the book or cursed it to attack her. She gave him a quick, "Thank you," and then slipped it under her seat. Slughorn, sensing a break in the cadence of the conversation, immediately jumped in.

"Advanced Transfiguration, Miss Granger?" he queried jovially.

Hermione grinned sheepishly as she returned to her pudding, actually quite grateful for his intervention and interest. "Transfiguration was one of my favorite subjects back home," she said, recalling her superb grades in Professor McGonagall's class. Her grades were similarly high-end now, but in her own timeline, her good relationship with her Head of House as well as the extra time she was able to devote to asking questions and delving deeper into the subject had made it a favorite. Boasting just a little, she added, "I was the best in my class."

"You might consider going to Albus or Minerva for some book recommendations," Slughorn said, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "The Headmaster used to teach Transfiguration, you know—this was a lifetime ago when his beard was still red and I wasn't quite so bald," he added, wagging a finger for emphasis. Several of the students, including Hermione, laughed good-naturedly at this. "Have you ever done experimentation with Transfiguration, Miss Granger?"

"A little," Hermione admitted, warming up to the subject. Now that they were talking academics again, the other students' interest had waned and the buoyancy of the table conversation started up again. "Although I mostly prefer to work with charms—I did a little experiment with objects under the Protean Charm."

"You can do a Protean Charm?" Hestia interjected, looking impressed. "That's NEWT-level work!"

Before Hermione could respond, Snape, who had been irritatingly silent throughout the evening, interjected sullenly, "What were you using it for?"

"Communication," Hermione responded briskly, picking at the remains of her pudding now. She had little compunction about telling him; he either would not remember this, or he would not make the connection between Dumbledore's Army and a bunch of students carrying around illicit Galleons. And after the remark he had made to her in detention, where he had called her sincerity and devotion to her work into question, she had no trouble throwing this in his face. "I charmed coins so that they would all change if someone altered one of them. It made arranging times and places easy." Seeing the look on his face, she added, "It was for a club. We all had so many different schedules to work around and this was the easiest way to arrange our meetings."

"That would have taken more work than just a Protean Charm," Lily interjected, looking straight at Hermione. "You would have had to arrange it so that more than one coin could be used to effect change in the other coins."

"That was the tricky part," Hermione agreed.

"I don't believe it," Snape muttered.

"I do," Slughorn beamed, looking at her appraisingly. "Why, Professor Flitwick told me that you are already amazingly proficient at casting Refilling Charms, and those aren't even taught until your sixth year!"

Snape turned to look at Hermione with something akin to curiosity now, though his demeanor was
still rather brooding and subdued. "You already knew the Aguamenti Charm, when we were in detention," he said, his eyes flickering in Slughorn's direction. "That isn't taught until sixth year, either."

"There you have it!" Slughorn said, beaming at the two of them before helping himself to a rather large serving of black pudding.

Hermione looked rather satisfied with herself now, and helped herself to some more steak and kidney pudding. Her mind instantly returned to that moment in detention where she had hit him, and in an attempt to extend a tiny olive branch a second time, she responded, "But you're a good deal better at Potions than I am." He raised a single eyebrow at her, in a move that reminded her so much of his older self, and she elaborated, "You're very intuitive about what does and doesn't work."

"Indeed he is, Miss Granger," Slughorn said happily, leaning back in his chair. "Do you know, the first time I had him brew me a Draught of Living Death, it came out absolutely perfect. Not even a shade off what the book asked for. In all my years of teaching, I've never had another student else brew it so remarkably well."

Snape looked rather uncomfortable now, but he didn't contest the claim.

"As for you, Miss Evans…” and just like that, Slughorn had switched from Hermione, to Snape, and then to Lily. Hermione turned, first to Hestia, and then to Snape, both of whom were looking at her.

"What?" she asked.

Hestia was giggling, doing her best to hide it behind her hand, and failing spectacularly. "You got a detention? You haven't been here for more than two weeks!"

"I got put into detention on my second day here, actually," Hermione said, grinning sheepishly.

"That must be some kind of record—actually, no," she said, rethinking it. "I actually think James and Sirius over there already beat you to that. They had detention for a month after the Welcoming Feast in their third year."

"What did they do?" Hermione demanded, looking horrified. Behind her, Snape smirked.

"They bribed Peeves into causing mayhem in the kitchens," Hestia said with a conspiratorial grin. "According to Nearly-Headless Nick, the place was swimming in soup, and the house elves haven't been the same since."

"You weren't there?"

"I was in the Hospital Wing," she said. "Got knocked over by one of the carriages. Didn't even see it coming." She actually looked disappointed. "I missed the whole thing."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief as she recalled the very same thing happening in her fourth year.

'Oh the usual,' said Nearly Headless Nick, shrugging. 'Wreaked havoc and mayhem. Pots and pans everywhere. Place swimming in soup. Terrified the house-elves out of their wits –'

It rather made Hermione wonder if Peeves made a tradition of following the suggestions of the more talented student pranksters. The Gryffindor House Ghost had been so nonchalant about it, she had to suspect it so.
Hermione had, naturally, never been to one of Slughorn's suppers. Thus, she had no idea how they normally went. But an hour into the meal, after everyone was leaning back in their seat with a full stomach, the food disappeared, and people started to stand up. Slughorn moved comfortably to one of the armchairs closest to the fire, and Hermione, watching the other students find comfortable seats on the couch, followed suit. Some students didn't sit at all, but rather stood around or leaned against the wall. Given that the couches went rather quickly, Hermione ended up leaning on one of the couch arms.

New topics were brought up. Conversation resumed. Slughorn was in his element, on his velvet armchair of a throne.

Snape was one of ones standing, and he did so near the mantel. In the firelight, he was both shadowed and thrown into relief, and Hermione found it oddly intriguing. He towered over everyone else, easily the tallest person in the room, and with his hands stuffed in his pockets, he looked as though he were brooding. He stood as far away from the Gryffindors as possible, but now that they were all sitting in a semi-circle, Hermione was able to observe and see if she could confirm at least some of what James and Sirius had said.

She was shocked to find that was she saw verified their statements. Snapes eyes were locked on Lily, who was sitting on the edge of the couch closest to Slughorn, and debating the latest potion assignment Slughorn had given her in an animated manner. James had managed to grab the seat right next to her, and though Lily occasionally turned to him to argue a point the clever, bespectacled boy brought up, it was blatantly obvious that Lily made sure her eyes didn't fall anywhere near the hook-nosed Slytherin. She was avoiding him. But Snape's gaze never left her.

To Hermione, it was like falling into Wonderland and then being told that the rabbit hole was the real world, and everything else was the actual fantasy—and finding it to be true. Snape's focus never left Lily, and Lily was doing her absolute best to pretend as though she didn't know he was there—although Hermione knew she certainly must.

The longer she watched, the more it was confirmed in her mind that James and Sirius had been telling the truth.

As the night wore on, everyone else had divided themselves into their own little groups, to engage in private conversation, and Hermione found herself desiring something that was akin to poking a sleeping dragon; she walked over to him, where he had not moved an inch from where he had been standing all night, and sat down on the edge of the ottoman placed in front of the fire. If she could not stand even with him on her own, there was no point in not making use of a comfortable seat.

His eyes flickered from Lily, to her, and then back to Lily before he reluctantly pulled his eyes away from her and looked down at Hermione.

"You got the notes you needed?" It was a poor conversation starter by Hermione's estimate, but she threw it out nonetheless.

He sneered at her. "Obviously." A pause, and then he turned away to stare at the fire and then back at Lily before muttering, "Thank you."

Hermione stared up at her former and future Potions professor, trying to see if she could understand the enigma presented before her. As a teacher, she'd merely looked up to him as an authority figure, and then more recently, a trusted member of the Order. But her impression of him was so cold, so removed, and in this new here and now, she was finally beginning to understand some parts of him that had been as incomprehensible as a riddle. In fact, it was not unlike the riddle he had presented to guard the Philosopher's Stone in her first year; while it had stumped and frustrated Harry at first
glance, had become clear to Hermione after she'd taken the time to try and figure it out.

She was about to open her mouth to speak, when he cut in.

"You're wearing Muggle clothes."

It was such a random topic of conversation that it momentely threw Hermione for a loop, but she rallied at once. "Yes."

He looked her over once, his lips curling into a sneer, and then said, "You're a Muggle-born."

Hermione lifted her chin up to look at him squarely. "And you've come to this brilliant conclusion based on the fact that I wear jeans and a jumper underneath my robes?"

She wasn't offended all that much, really. Compared to how capricious and nasty he'd been to her as a professor, this was rather tame in comparison.

"Why else would you prefer to wear Muggle clothes?"

"Perhaps I grew up in a culture that was largely Muggle," Hermione said casually, crossing her legs. "It could be that I just find Muggle clothes more comfortable—personal preference. Or perhaps you're right and I am Muggle-born. Not that it makes any difference," Hermione added, looking up at him squarely. "My merits as a witch are contingent upon my own efforts, not my heritage."

Snape was smirking down at her now, wearing a vindictive sneer.

"Yes," he said, his tone snide. "Definitely Muggle-born, I think."

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Hermione chewed on the end of her quill, stealing glances up at the board every now and then before staring back down at the review work Professor Flitwick had assigned. She was already familiar with Cheering Charms—she, like everyone else, had learned them in third year. She sighed, and began scribbling down the answer to the question concerning its wand movements.

She had returned from Slughorn's supper both refreshed and intrigued—but also with a heavy feeling of disturbance.

She had spent her entire life judging people. She had judged Harry and Ron to be trustworthy friends, only faulted through vices such as rashness, temper, and typical boy oblivousness. She had judged Professor Lupin to be trustworthy enough that, in her third year, she kept his secret—though she had feared, for a long, wild moment that night in the shack, that she might have been mistaken.

And she had made mistakes. She'd been mistaken about Lockhart—he had become Hermione's first learning example that one should never be so blinded by a shiny cover that they forget to scrutinize the substance underneath. She'd been mistaken about Moody in her fourth year— who she had trusted and allowed to slip under her radar because Dumbledore clearly trusted him. But Dumbledore had made a mistake, too, and because Hermione had not thought to be suspicious, she had made the exact same error.

Professor Snape had been the one constant under her gaze throughout her school years. He was an inexplicably nasty piece of work, yet he had gone out of his way on more than one occasion to save Harry—and, when applicable, other students. The bucking broomstick incident in her first year—which she had mistaken Snape for jinxing Harry rather than trying to save him, admittedly, stood out in her mind. In her second year, Snape was the one who had brewed the Restoration Draught for the
petrified students. And in her third year, he had deliberately put himself between the three of them, a man he believed to be a murderer, and a werewolf out of control. And in her fourth year, he had gone with Dumbledore and McGonagall to rescue Harry, who had been a hair's breath away from being killed by the imposter. He had supplied the Veritaserum, according to Harry. He had revealed his Dark Mark in an attempt to sway the idiot Minister.

All of those things had served to reinforce in her mind that Snape, who not only had Dumbledore's trust to credit him, was trustworthy. She sincerely believed that he was working for the Order. And she had finally pieced together exactly what his reasons for agreeing to work with Dumbledore were: Lily. His interest in Lily now, followed by her inevitable and untimely death, would give him more reason to work with the side that would destroy her killer rather than willingly serve the madman who murdered her. There was probably more to it than she was aware of now, but she had put enough of it together that she felt she had the larger picture.

But here, last Saturday night, she had met a boy of seventeen who didn't have any such motivations. Her impression of him was that he was motivated by self-interest—and it both frightened and served to pique her interest further.

She turned her musings over in her head, trying to unearth the clues that had been liberally handed to her. She had intended to stay away from him as much as possible, but now she found she wasn't really as inclined to do so. He was a snarky, capricious and caustic git; but he was also unbelievably intelligent and cunning. Hermione was fascinated by the former and wary of the latter, and in this new time where she was his equal, she struggled to understand him.

But he was such a git!

The bell rang, and she packed her stuff up and prepared to head off to Arithmancy. She passed several students in the halls on her way up, students who were now familiar to her. Dirk Cresswell waved at her in greeting just before ducking down another corridor to get to Muggle Studies. Hestia Jones walked with her part-way, and they talked excitedly until she had to take a different staircase to reach her DADA class.

When Hermione reached the Arithmancy classroom, it was to discover that the desks had all been banished to the corner of the room, stacked atop one another, and Professor Vector was standing between the two boards she used for her separate-but-together lessons, arms crossed.

She waited until everyone had arrived, where the early arrivals either milled about the room or leaned against the wall, before she began.

"We're going to do some pairing-off today for exam revision," she told them loudly, making sure she had their attention. "Find someone you sit next to and partner up." Everyone in the room hurried to comply. Hermione found Snape and, ignoring the glare he threw her way, moved to stand next to him. "I will write the problems on the board for you. The pair that finishes them all first—correctly, mind you," she added, glaring at a pair whom Hermione recalled hearing had written gibberish on their assignment and turned it in. They sniggered. "—will leave class with fifty points to their house."

Hermione and Snape looked at each other, and then back at Vector.

"Find a seat on the floor away from everybody else and get out some spare parchment—" There was audible rustling and scraping as everyone sat down and began pulling out some scrap to work on. Hermione pulled out her Arithmancy book to use as a flat surface, and pulled out her quill, poised to begin. Vector tapped the Arithmancy book to use as a flat surface, and pulled out her quill, poised to begin. Vector tapped the board, and ten different problems instantly began writing themselves on the board. "Begin."
"Okay, look," Hermione said, jotting down the first problem, which asked to identify the magical numerical value of dragon heartstring and how that could be used to predict its efficiency as a magical conduit when combined with other elements. "We know that dragon heartstring is assigned a value between three and four, depending on its quality, making it one of the most commonly used wand cores, so if we—"

"I've already got it," Snape snapped at her, jotting down his answer on a separate sheet. "If you find a corresponding element with a number that, when added, gives it a total value of seven, you'd want to find a dragon heartstring with a value that compliments the value of the other element—such as wood."

"Yes, that's right…"

They went through the next four problems in a similar fashion. Problem five, however, Snape was unable to give an immediate answer. It was a question concerning the added numerical value of transfigured objects, snake specifically, and it took them a few extra moments to chart down the possible combination. And when they moved to reference it to the problem at hand, they came up with two distinctly different answers.

"Look, the problem is dealing with the added value of a transfigured snake as opposed to that of a real snake," Snape hissed at her, endeavoring to keep his voice down. "We don't care about the actual value of the real snake!"

"Yes we do!" Hermione hissed back. "You add the transfiguration value to the real one to get the combined and total value—in this case, it's a subtracted value, so a transfigured snake is arithmantically three less than a real one, which is why it goes from being seven to four!"

"It's eleven, Granger, not four! There are no negatives in this arithmantic equation!"

"And I'm telling you you're wrong!"

Snape lost his patience, or rather whatever tenuous grip he'd had on it, and slammed his hand down on the parchment Hermione had been working out the arithmantic values on. "You are an insufferable know-it-all!"

"And you are a stubborn, incomprehensible git!" Hermione cried, sitting up. "I'm telling you that I know I'm right, and I refuse to get this wrong just because you're an obstinate arse!"

"If we keep arguing over this, we're going to run out of time, you stupid girl—"

"I hardly see how I qualify as stupid when you're the one who nearly mixed up the values for maple and birch on the last problem!"

Snape's face turned purple with anger. Hermione's hair had begun to frizz around her face as her own frustration grew. They were pressed nose to nose now, and it was difficult to predict who would snap first. They were both so immovably determined that they were right that bickering alone would not allow one to win over the other.

Hermione was the first one to withdraw. Gritting her teeth, she stated as calmly as she could muster, "Snape, a transfigured snake has the original value of seven subtracted by three—and when you add it to the original value, which is seven…" she suddenly broke off. "Oh, shite."

Snape stared at her, his face contorted between incomprehension and bubbling fury. She continued, "We were both wrong. I got it mixed up. The snake's new value would be four, so when you subtract four from the original seven… I mixed it up. It's three, not four. That makes it a total of ten."
He leaned back, and stared down at the equation, and then up at her, before quickly moving to write down the correct number on the parchment they were using as their answer sheet.

She suddenly started laughing. It was near-hysterical, and she was surprised the rest of the class didn't stop to stare at her for it. Seeing the look on her partner's face, she choked out, "This is ridiculous. We almost got this wrong because of a little subtraction error, and we were both so bloody convinced we were right."

Snape wrote down the next problem and began lining up the required values. "If there's anything I've learned from this, it's that you are an insufferable know-it-all."

"Be grateful for it," Hermione snapped, reading the numbers he'd written upside-down and double-checking it. "At least half of being an insufferable know-it-all makes me useful. Being a stubborn arse is not."

"Granger, do you ever shut up?" Snape wrote down the answer, and then pulled out the final question.

"Do you ever wash your hair?" Hermione countered, eyeing his greasy black locks. Snape looked up at her with a glare. "Yes. Not that it's any of your business." In a bid to distract her from replying, he turned his sheet around and shoved it under her nose. "Do those numbers look correct to you, or do you have a swotty complaint to add to it?"

Hermione's eyes skimmed through the numbers. "Albino animals are always given negative values. The porcupine should be a negative ten—"

"—so if you were to use an albino instead of a brown porcupine's quills in a Boil Cure Potion, you can count on either running for your life or ending up as a stain on the wall when it finally reacts to the crushed snake fangs. Thank you, Granger." Snape sat back on his haunches to write the answer down, and then stood up. "I believe we're finished."

"Hold on, I need to check them—" Hermione stood up with him and reached for the sheet, but he lifted it up out of her reach. "Granger, we're almost out of time—"

"There is no way anyone else in the room is past problem eight by now, just let me double-check!" Hermione was struggling to grab the parchment from him, but he was simply too tall. "Granger, no—get off me!"

"But if we've made a careless mistake like the one we almost did with problem five—!" Hermione had one hand on his shoulder and was straining to grab the answer sheet from him. She jumped, trying to reach it, and nearly choked him when she pulled down on his tie in an effort to bring him closer to her height.

"You are insane!"

"Give me—"

"That is quite enough!" Hermione and Snape turned around in time for Professor Vector to reach up and yank the answer sheet out of Snape's hand, and Snape had to grab Hermione by the elbow to keep her from launching herself at the Arithmancy teacher. "Miss Granger, control yourself! Mr. Snape, stop tormenting your partner! If you've made a mistake, it's not the end of the world." Judging
by the look on Hermione's face, however, it was clear she didn't believer her. Vector quickly skimed down the sheet, flipped it over to the other side where the last two problems had been worked out, and then handed it back to Snape.

"Excellent work. You both just made one mistake," she said, smiling grimly at the pair.

"No!" Hermione wailed.

"What was it?" Snape demanded, glaring down at the near-hysterical Gryffindor.

"You forgot to put your name on your work." Hermione's jaw dropped. Snape glared at the Arithmancy professor, who merely grinned back at him. "Fifty points to Slytherin and Gryffindor."

She returned to her desk, and Snape glanced down at Hermione again, who looked as though she were about to faint. He sighed. Bending down to pick up the parchment they'd used to work their problems out on, he glanced up at Hermione, who had still not moved a muscle.

"Breathe, Granger." Hermione obeyed and took in a huge gulp of air, gasping. Exasperated, he snapped, "And for Merlin's sake, stop hyperventilating!"

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In the final week leading up to exams, Hermione could be found sequestered in the library. Snape had taken up residence at her table, and the two mostly ignored each other unless they needed to borrow materials. Hermione was forever wheedling for him to let her look at his potions book to cross-reference something or explain, in his own terms, the reasons for certain quantities and qualities in potions; she, in return, helped him understand some of the finer, more subtle points of Transfiguration that were not explicitly taught in class. Arithmancy was a point of contention between them; they shared their review work and argued over the answers loudly enough that the first time it happened they had had to be shushed by Madam Pince.

The second time, Snape cast a spell that seemed to do rather well at preventing others from overhearing their conversation. When he refused to share it with her, they ended up getting into another shouting match until Snape grudgingly taught her *Muffliato* with the caveat that she would teach him how to cast a Protean Charm. When they both left the library that night, they both felt rather satisfied with their new gains, and felt that they had gotten the better deal than the other.

In the course of that week, Hermione was set upon—twice—on her way to Potions. Getting to class required going through the dungeons, which was inarguably Slytherin territory, and it was clear that as friendly and well-liked she was in the other three houses, the Slytherins seemed to hold a particular antipathy toward her. Perhaps it was because they thought she was a Muggleborn who needed to be taken down a peg. Perhaps it was simply because she was a Gryffindor. And perhaps it was because they felt she was encroaching upon their territory by associating with Snape.

They might have been especially incensed at the latter. Tension between the Slytherins and Gryffindors were at an all-time high with the onslaught of exams, and it was a well-known fact that Severus Snape was mercilessly targeted by the Marauders. Indeed, it was difficult not to see; whenever Hermione turned around, it seemed they were always fighting. They fought in the corridors, and they fought in the courtyards. They fought on the lawn on the way from Care of Magical Creatures, and they fought between the Herbology greenhouses. It was always two to one, much to Hermione's disgust, and sometimes three if Peter jumped in. The Marauders would catch him when his back was turned if they could, and now Hermione understood why Snape was occasionally absent from Arithmancy. She went to visit him one afternoon in the Hospital Wing, where he was boasting a spectacular pair of bright-red devil horns, thanks to James.
"Why on earth can't you three just call a truce?" She'd all but yanked on her hair as she said this.

Snape had merely crossed his arms across his chest and scowled at her, which only served to make him look more mephistophelian with the added effects of the horns.

The next day, Sirius missed Charms, because he spent the entire period in the Hospital Wing as a penguin while Madam Pomfrey tried to undo Snape's handiwork. Hermione had the impression that the Marauders and Snape were rather familiar sights at the ward, and Madam Pomfrey had long since lost the will to try and chastise them each and every time they arrived with some new jinx for her to take care of.

From Hermione's perspective, it wasn't that Snape enjoyed the war he was waging against the Marauders. He certainly enjoyed hexing them in revenge, but he rarely seemed to be the instigator; the Marauders, on the other hand, went out of their way to seek him out and gleefully give him hell. Hermione rather suspected that if James and Sirius were to back off, Snape would eventually pretend they simply didn't exist. He wasn't interested in their quarrel, and he twitched with paranoia every time she saw him, but there was little he could do to stop it.

And the Marauders never seemed to let him go about peacefully unless he was with Hermione, seemingly as a favor to her, which only served to make him try to find routes between classes where he could walk part of the way with her.

When Hermione complained to Lily about it one night, while the Head Girl played chess with Alice, she didn't give Snape one lick of sympathy.

"They do it to each other," she said, capturing Alice's queen. There were boos and a hiss from the black pieces as Lily's white knight bodily dragged the kicking and struggling piece off the board. "James and Sirius never lay off him, but Severus gives just as good as he gets."

Nevertheless, Slytherin house was not happy, and they went out of their way to make it known.

The first time, her two would-be attackers ended up unconscious on the floor of the dungeons as two ducks. To add insult to injury, they had been charmed bright purple. The second time, three disorientated sixth-year Slytherins stumbled into the Hospital Wing wearing pumpkins for heads. James and Sirius roared with laughter at this, having passed by Hermione's handiwork on the way to class; Peter was visibly delighted at the humiliation dealt out, and even Remus cracked a broad smile when he heard about what James and Sirius dubbed, "The Pumpkinheads."

Remus had started growing paler as the month went on. Circles appeared under his eyes, and his face looked drawn. Hermione recognized these as signs of the impending full moon, and couldn't help but look on with pity and concern. He wasn't in the best condition to take his exams, yet he was studying and slogging through it anyway. He didn't have a choice. Hermione wished there were something she could do for him, something that would help alleviate his pain, but it was out of her hands.

At meal times, he would pick at his food, and Hermione would try to encourage him to eat.

"You need to keep up your strength for exams," she told him on Thursday, after he turned to her with weary, disinterested eyes. "I know you're working hard, but you can't run on an empty stomach."

Remus's condition had not gone unnoticed by Snape, and though he didn't say a word about it to her, Hermione could see his eyes following Remus with stubborn dislike.

Hermione went into her exams brimming to burst with nerves, and throughout the entire week, she
was an utter wreck. Every single waking moment available to her was devoted to studying and review. Even Snape, who stayed late hours at night with her in the library, left one night with a snide remark about how she should have been put into Hufflepuff, given that the bags under her eyes made her look like a bushy-haired badger.

Hermione had whacked him on the arm with her planner. When he returned the next morning to get some more review done before his first exam, he found her passed out at the table, using her arms as a pillow. Snape was normally not inclined to be selfless, but he cornered Remus after their morning exam and after making a requisite remark about Remus's state of sleep deprivation, sneered at him to do something about Hermione's.

"Either recruit your cronies and make her get some sleep, or watch her self-destruct and start randomly hexing people," he told the werewolf, his voice snide. "I personally wouldn't mind witnessing the latter, but there's always the risk that she could go after me instead of you. And I must say, she's quite good with a wand."

James and Sirius forced Hermione to get to bed before ten o'clock that night. She went kicking, screaming, and cursing at them every step of the way. They stripped her of her wand and frog-marched her up to Gryffindor Tower, where they recruited Mary and Lily to make sure she didn't try to stay up later to study.

Hermione was nearly furious enough to hex them until she woke up the next morning for the first time in two weeks without feeling like she was going to fall dead asleep at the breakfast table. Nevertheless, they gave her wand back only after they'd fled the Great Hall and gotten a head-start.

When she found out it had been Snape's idea, she confronted him at lunchtime in the library.

"I don't recruit your housemates to bodily drag you away and forcefully shampoo your hair!" she fumed at him.

"No, but I wish I'd been there," Snape had smirked, unrepentant. "That would have been worth seeing."

"You," Hermione ground at him, "are a git!"

"And you are a bushy-haired, insufferable know-it-all," he jeered, and then drawled, "Now, are you going to rant and rage for the next hour or do you have a Transfiguration practical to study for?"

Hermione was diving for her book, notes flying around her head in a flurry of panic before he'd even finished speaking.

~o~O~o~

The second week of exams finally came and passed, and when she was faced with her final practical on Thursday morning, she was quite relieved. She left, and upon receiving commentary from her Marauder friends about the unholy mating of Medusa and a bird's nest that was her hair, she promptly departed from lunch to shower and take a nap.

She slept through the afternoon and late into the evening. She didn't wake up until someone was frantically shaking her awake, muttering, "Hermione, Hermione!"

Hermione's eyes opened, and she turned around to find herself staring into the worried hazel eyes of James Potter.

"How did you get in here?" she asked, sitting up quickly.
"Nevermind that!" James said quickly, grabbing her arm and dragging her out of bed. He looked frantic, and Hermione stumbled for a moment, landing on the floor before she got to her feet. "I need your help, and you're the only one here who can probably convince him—"

"Who—?"

"Snape!" James hissed, eyes wild with panic. "Sirius told him how to get into the Whomping Willow—I can't explain it all now, but there's a werewolf under there, and if Snape goes there—!"

Hermione's blood ran cold.

"It was just a prank, a stupid prank, Sirius swore it was a prank—!" James was pleading, trying to keep his voice down to stop Hermione's dormmates from waking up to their conversation. "Please, Hermione, you have to go out and stop him. If he manages to get into the Shrieking Shack, he'll be killed, and I can't stop him!"

Hermione was already moving, grabbing her wand and pulling one of her robes on over her sleepwear, not even bothering to button it, and was rushing to pull her sneakers on.

"James, go get the Headmaster!" she ordered, rushing for the door. "I'll go find Snape!"

She heard James's footsteps follow her down the stairs, and she ran for the portrait hole, not even stopping to answer the Fat Lady's startled cry of, "Wait! Where are you going at this time of night?"

She flew down the stairs, her robe flapping wildly behind her, and shoved open the doors to the Entrance Hall. She dashed out into the courtyard, where the light of the full moon hung overhead, reflecting clearly in the water fountain, and she ran toward the direction of the Whomping Willow.

Please let me be there on time… please let me get there on time… Snape, you idiot!

She watched the long, sweeping, club-like branches of the Whomping Willow come into view. Panting, she realized that Snape wasn't there—and that given how much longer it would have taken for James to find and alert her, Snape was probably already inside—

She pointed her wand at the knot at the base of the tree, and shouted, "Stupefy!"

A bolt of red light shot out toward it, and the tree shook in surprise and then grew still. Hermione ran out underneath the lightly-swaying branches, and without a second thought, ducked inside. It was dark, pitch black, and she didn't even take a moment to light her wand, shuffling through as quickly as her hands and knees would let her scoot. Time passed, though Hermione could not have judged how much, but what felt like an eventuality to her later, she saw a faint glow up ahead, and a little bit farther, the dim moon-lit entrance.

The bright light bobbed slowly, and Hermione quickened her pace. The light was nearing the end of the tunnel, which seemed to be disturbingly peaceful, but Hermione knew that at the end, there would be a werewolf, waiting, waiting…

There wasn't any way for her to reach the bobbing light on time. Pulling out her wand from her mouth, where she'd kept it while she crawled, she pointed it at the wandlight ahead of her.

"Accio Snape!"

There was a startled yelp, the audible sound of something scraping painfully against the claustrophobic tunnels of the wall, and a pair of legs kicked Hermione's arms out from underneath her, causing her to hit the ground in an undignified heap on top of Snape. His wand, still lit, lay
twenty feet ahead and he rubbed the side of his head painfully.
"Ow—what the—who's there?" he demanded, trying to turn around, but unable to do so.

"Shh!" Hermione hissed. "It's me, you bloody idiot!"

"What the hell are you doing here, Gra—ow!"

"I've come to save your miserable arse!" Hermione snapped, reaching forward and grabbing his hair. He let out another yelp of pain as she yanked his head back. "There's a werewolf in there, you sod! This path leads directly to the Shrieking Shack—that's where Remus goes once a month for his werewolf transformations!"

"Let go of my hair—how do you know—ow!"

"Ask me later," Hermione growled. She smacked his shoulder, and pointed toward his lit wand. "Go grab your wand, and come back—be careful!"

Snape didn't protest. He crawled forward slowly, his movements awkward given the size of the tunnel, and reached for his wand. He was about to start crawling backwards when the moon-lit glow at the end of the tunnel suddenly disappeared; there was a whine, followed by a scratching noise, and Hermione's eyes widened as Snape scrambled backwards in time for a pair of yellow eyes to appear, glaring down at them from the gloom above.

A moment later, Hermione was backing away quickly as Snape let out a scream of terror that made her hair stand on end; there was a sudden snarl, and Hermione watched in horror as Remus began clawing his way in, too big to fit, but able to reach in half-way, scratching and snarling. He was able to scrape the spot Snape had been kneeling in just moments before, and Hermione gulped at the realization that had she not arrived when she did—no, had she not pulled Snape backwards with her spell—he would have been within reach of the werewolf. And he would have been dragged out like a dog pulling a rabbit from its warren and mauled to within an inch of his life.

She began backing away, scooting as quickly as she could, trying to silently drown out the terrible growling and snarling coming from the entrance ahead of them. She was able to move much more quickly than her companion, given her size, and she reached a junction where the tunnel allowed enough room for her to turn around. She twisted herself sideways, and pointed her wand at the ground.

"Glisseo!" The ground underneath Snape suddenly became slippery, and she snapped her wand in his direction and said, "Accio!"

He let out a stream of startled swearwords as he was dragged backwards across the now-slippery tunnel, and Hermione backed away so that he wouldn't collide with her as he had before. They were safe now, though she still saw the werewolf up ahead, scratching uselessly at the walls of the tunnel. She turned around, struggling to do so in the cramped space she was allowed, and began crawling toward the exit. Snape did the same, though she heard him utter a grunt of pain as his head scraped against the side of the tunnel.

"Let's get out of here," Hermione told him shakily, trying to calm the beating of her heart as Remus's enraged snarls echoed through the tunnel. The hair on the back of her neck—probably all over her body, in fact—was standing on end. Snape didn't say a word, but she heard him shuffling on his knees behind her as he followed.

The light at the end of the tunnel, this time at the base of the Whomping Willow, appeared.
Gratefully, Hermione pulled herself out and quickly pressed the knot at the base of the tree to stop it from trying to club them to death upon their exit. She helped Snape out, pulling him up by his shoulders, and was surprised when he didn't protest. She chanced a look into his eyes, and saw that they were wide and dilated with terror. He didn't say a word, just sat there kneeling in the grass, staring at the ground, clutching it with bone-white fingers.

Hermione sat there, panting and trying to regather her wits. The tree shook in warning now, and she tugged at his sleeve to grab his attention.

"Come on," she said weakly, getting to her feet and helping him do the same. "We need to get out of here."

He opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was a whimper; instead of trying to fix his voice, he merely nodded instead, and she draped his arms over her shoulder and helped him stumbled back in the direction of the castle, the both of them badly scraped and covered with dirt and grass stains.

They staggered across the grounds until they reached the stone circle, where Hermione saw Professor Dumbledore standing. Squinting in the light afforded by the moon still shining hauntingly up in the sky, she saw that he was accompanied by Professor McGonagall, James Potter, and Sirius Black. They stumbled up the steps, and then Hermione helped Snape sink to the ground on his knees.

Then she rose and strode over to Sirius Black, who, for the first time since Hermione had arrived, was wearing a look of uncertainty on his face. He finally seemed to have realized the magnitude of his actions a bit too late for Hermione's liking, for when she was within range, she struck him. He fell backwards onto the ground, clutching the side of his face.

"You idiot!" she shrieked. James leaped forward to grab her arm to stop her from hitting him again, though his efforts were only half-hearted. "You utter and complete, total idiot!" Sirius looked at her, eyes widening in fear at her wild and bedraggled appearance. "He could have been killed! And all because of a stupid, stupid prank!"

"Hermione, that is quite enough!" The Headmaster said firmly. He had come to stand next to Snape, who looked quite unresponsive, staring at the ground in wide-eyed shock. Dumbledore leaned down and gently tilted Snape's chin up, taking in the contracted pupils and the drained color of his ghostly pale face.

"Minerva, please help Miss Granger and Mr. Snape up to the Hospital Wing," he said, straightening. "Messers Potter and Black, I would like to see you in my office first thing tomorrow morning. In the meantime, you will return to your common room." He glanced at them through his half-moon spectacles, and both boys nodded quickly. James helped Sirius to his feet, and Professor McGonagall, who had been staring at Hermione and Snape with an expression akin to horror, helped Hermione bring Snape back up to his feet. Hermione draped his arm across her shoulder, and silently followed her Head of House back up to the castle, where they were followed close behind by the two Marauders.

"I cannot believe you went off like that!" Minerva told her sternly as soon as they had made it inside. Her face was pale, and she looked as though she, too, were in shock. "I expected better sense from you! You should have come and gotten me first!"

"I had to," Hermione squeaked, her throat dry. Her voice didn't seem to be working properly anymore. "I was almost too late. I sent James to find Professor Dumbledore while I went to stop him." She looked up at Professor McGonagall beseechingly. "This isn't Remus's fault, Professor. Whatever happens, please don't expel him."
McGonagall gave her a startled look, and then seemed to regather her wits. "Of course not," she agreed, opening the door to the first floor corridor. Looking audibly shaken, she said, "He probably won't even remember tonight."

She heard Snape mumble something under his breath. She craned her neck to look at him.

"What did you say?"

She heard Snape swallow, and then he croaked, "This is Black's fault."

"Oh no you don't!" Hermione growled at him, readjusting her grip on his arm. "He might have set you up, but you took the bait! And if you have anyone to thank for still being alive, it's James Potter, so don't start blaming him, either!"

"Both of you, hush," McGonagall ordered sternly as they approached the Hospital Wing door. Hermione complied, ducking her head, and the Headmistress rapped twice, loudly on the door. "Poppy! I have two students here. Open up!"

The door opened, and Madam Pomfrey peered out. Her gaze went from Minerva to Snape to Hermione, and then she gave a long sigh at their rather scrapped-up appearance and opened the door further to allow them entrance.

"What on earth have you two been up to at this hour?" she demanded, as Hermione set Snape down at the edge of the nearest bed and then collapsed next to him.

McGonagall gave her a weary look.

"It's a long story, Poppy."

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Four

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Please review.

Madam Pomfrey had them both cleaned and patched up quickly, shaking her head at the multitude of scrapes and bruises made apparent once a Cleaning Charm had been cast. She frowned at the gashes on the side of Snape's head, from where he had hit and scraped it against the tunnel, but nevertheless had him fixed up in a trice. She did not insist on putting them in hospital gowns, but instead called for an elf to bring them both a spare change of clothes. Hermione took off her scrapped and torn sleepwear, which would need a Repairing Charm to be made wearable again, as well as her robes, and changed behind the curtain around another bed. She climbed in and slid under the covers, and found herself unable to sleep. She still had too much adrenaline pumping through her blood, and her heart was still fluttering in a panic at the memory of snapping and snarling jaws.

Instead, she watched Snape as the matron, having managed to spell new clothes onto him since he seemed to be in no condition to do it himself, examined his eyes, his pulse, his heartbeat, and alertness.

Hermione heard her sigh. "What have you gotten yourself into this time, Mr. Snape?"

The Slytherin's response was barely audible, but he only managed one croaked word: "Werewolf."

With another sigh, Madam Pomfrey left, only to return moments later with two gobletfuls of purple potion that Hermione recognized immediately. She set it down at Hermione's nightstand, and then went over to Snape to make sure he drank his. Hermione gulped down her potion without a second thought, set the goblet aside, and snuggled down under the covers.

Her last thought before she drifted off was that she was sure Snape was going to need it more than her.

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Hermione was awoken the next morning, not from the sunlight streaming into the room, but by Snape's loud, insistent voice breaking into the rather pleasant thoughts that had been floating through her head that morning. It was followed by a female, but equally familiar voice.

"—I can't believe you did something so stupid, Sev!" Hermione's eyes flew open at this. "Sev? "What Sirius did was petty and wrong, and it could have gotten you killed, but you should have known better!"

Snape's voice was bitter. "You haven't spoken to me for an entire year. You wouldn't forgive me for that slip up, wouldn't even listen to what I have to say, yet you come storming down here, ready to defend Potter's honor?"

Lily was indignant. "You should be grateful to James! From what I heard—"

"From his own mouth, no doubt," Snape sneered.

"—if it hadn't been for him, Hermione would never have known! She wouldn't have gone after you
to save your miserable arse from becoming—becoming—" Lily couldn't seem to quite bring herself to admit what they all knew by now to be truth. "—Werewolf food! You could have been killed!"

Hermione slid the curtain back and threw her legs over the side of her bed, where she saw the entire scene unfolding in front of her in time to hear Snape's quite, barely-audible response.

"Why do you care?" He whispered.

Lily drew herself up, as though she'd been slapped.

"Because—because—" she said, rubbing her face. She seemed unable to formulate the right words to express herself. "Oh, damn it all."

Hermione heard the slightest edge of hope in Snape's voice. "Are you… can we… I know I completely bollocked things up last time, but can we be friends again?" Hermione was in a state of disbelief. He almost sounded pleading.

"No." Hermione watched Snape recoil, as though struck. "What you did was unforgivable. I don't wish you dead, Sev, never that—" Hermione could tell Snape wasn't listening. She'd lost him at the word 'unforgivable'. He was hunched over, knees drawn up, and his face hidden by a curtain of greasy black hair. "—but you and Avery and Mulciber… I can't, Sev. You made a choice to be a part of their gang of wannabe Death Eaters, you made the decision to lash out at me in the most hurtful way you knew possible, and I just…" she shook her head. "You're not the boy I remember any more. I can't do it."

Snape sounded almost desperate when he spoke. Hermione had never heard anything like it in his voice before. "I can change."

Lily gave him a sad, almost bitter smile. "I'm afraid that's the problem."

She saw Lily bend down to pick up her book bag, slinging it over her arm. She began striding toward the doors, stopping just as she placed her hand on the doorknob to look back at Snape.

"I just want you to remember, Severus, that it might have been Hermione who stopped you from getting yourself turned into a werewolf yourself, but it was James who sent her." She turned the handle and pulled the door open. "Remember that the next time you think about trying to hex him."

The door closed behind her. Hermione watched it click shut, and then turned her attention to Snape, who was doubled-over on the bed as though in pain. She was about to open her mouth to speak when he suddenly unfurled, throwing his legs over the side of the bed, and stood up, grabbing his wand and his robes. He tugged them on, jerkily pulling on his socks and shoes, and then stumbled toward the door.

Hermione was out of her bed in a flash. "Snape—!"

The door had already closed shut behind him. Hermione hedged, torn between staying and following him to stop him from doing something stupid, before she grabbed her own robes, dressed quickly, and went after his tail.

"Idiot," she muttered under her breath, as she ran out into the corridor, looking both ways to see where he'd gone. She made a wild guess and veered straight to the left, in the direction of library. It would be deserted now, with no more studying to be done, and it was the only place she could think of. She jogged down the halls, coming to a halt at the library doors, and slipped inside.

It appeared to be empty, at first glance.
She slowly wove through the bookcases. Sunlight streamed in through the stained glass windows, causing the room to dance with gentle colors. Madam Pince was nowhere to be found; she was likely still at breakfast. Hermione was about to leave, thinking she might have better luck trying to intercept him on the way to the Slytherin common room, when she heard a muffled sob. Her ears pricked, and she halted, trying to discern where it came from. It came again—quiet and strangled. She followed it, and slowed to a stop in front of the Reference Section, where she found him curled up against the far wall, his cheek pressed against the window.

Hermione hesitated, and then gathered up her courage and came over to kneel beside him. He didn't turn to look at her, but Hermione saw the surprise in his eyes mirror off the glass.

"Go away, Granger," he choked.

Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I should never have done it, never..." he turned to look at her now, and she saw tears rolling down his cheeks. Remembering how Remus had comforted her when she had broken down crying in the middle of the common room for all and sundry to see, Hermione took out her wand and summoned a handkerchief, passing it to him. He stared at her uncomprehendingly for a moment, and then hesitantly took it. He blew his nose.

"What shouldn't you have done?" Hermione asked gently, sitting down next to him.

"It was an accident, I swore it was an accident..." His words came out choked, and Hermione felt as though she were watching his heart break right before her eyes. "Potter—it was fifth year, and Potter ambushed me by the lake, just after our exams—he hung me upside down in the air, humiliated me..." He blew on the handkerchief again, and then croaked, "Lily confronted him, told him to put me down—Potter started goading me, and I told Lily—I told Lily I didn't need help from a mu—a mudblood like her."

Hermione stared at him. "You called her a mudblood?"

He nodded miserably, and buried his face between his arms. He looked so desolate.

Hermione pursed her lips together, and then sidled up next to him and placed an arm around his shoulder, albeit with the hesitancy of a bowtruckle trying to comfort a smoking dragon.

"Severus, do you really believe that rubbish about Purebloods being better than Muggleborns?"

He didn't answer immediately, but Hermione waited patiently for a response. When it came, it was a barely audible, "No."

Hermione did not leave. She sat with him, one arm around his shoulder, and waited in silence while he cried. Her gut twisted in pity and concern for him, but she also felt strangely detached; she was comforting someone who would one day do his absolute best to torture her as a student. She stuck by her decision to stay with him. No matter how nasty he had been, and no matter how cruel he would be, right now, he needed a friend.

He eventually stopped shaking; his sobs ceased. When all Hermione could hear from him was the steady rise and fall of his breath, and his slightly stuttered heartbeat, she queried, "Severus?"

"Is it true that Potter sent you?" His face was still buried in his arms, but his tone was both choked with emotion and cold.
"Yes."

The sneer in his voice was audible. It seemed that now that he was back in control of himself, his immediate instinct was to lash out at the nearest person. "So, you only came after me because Gryffindor's golden boy told you to."

Hermione grabbed his shoulders and shook him, forcing him to look up at her.

"James alerted me," she told him angrily, "but I could have refused. I could have told him to bugger off, to go after you himself, or to go find the headmaster and let me sleep."

He glared at her.

"But instead, I rushed out to find you—without even bothering to put on anything more than a robe and sneakers, mind you!" Hermione added fiercely. Her eyes narrowed at him. "I went into the tunnel under the Whomping Willow without knowing if you were there for sure, or even if you were still alive or human at that point. I went alone! And I went knowing that I could get bitten trying to save your miserable arse!"

He looked uncertain now.

"And when you left the Hospital Wing, I came after you to see if you were alright," Hermione continued. "I came because I care, Severus. Not because James Potter begged me to."

He stared at her for one, long moment, and then buried his head back in his arms. Hermione sat by him quietly as he curled up there on the floor, next to the library window, and tried to hide himself from the world. She sat there in silence for a long time, until she eventually broke it by gently pulling a lock of lanky hair behind his ear so that she could see the side of his face and then placed her hand on his shoulder.

"Is there anything I can do to help you?" she asked, her voice gentle.

For half a moment, she was certain he would send her away. After a long moment of hesitation, he said quietly, "Stay here. And… and don't tell anyone."

Hermione squeezed his shoulders, and pulled another lock of hair out of his face so that she could see his eyes.

"I won't," she told him. She meant it. "I promise."

~o~O~o~

When Hermione returned to Gryffindor Tower that night, she found the common room deserted except for James, Remus, and Sirius. Remus was sitting in front of the fire, wearing a stark and pained expression; he refused to look at Hermione, and she thought she detected shame in his eyes. She frowned. He was the last person in the room who should be feeling guilty. She turned her eyes on Sirius, who was twisting a scrap of parchment between his fingers and looking restless.

He looked up at her the minute she entered. "Hermione—"

"You deserve more than another slap for what you did," Hermione bit out, sitting down on one of the armchairs. "Honestly, Sirius! I know you hate him, but I didn't think you hated him enough to kill!"

"I wasn't trying to kill him!" Sirius protested, jumping out of his seat. "I just wanted him to get a
good scare—I swear," he said, his expression both hurt and serious. "I never intended to kill him. It
didn't even cross my mind!"

Hermione turned to look at James, who was nodding, his face white. She turned to look back at
Sirius.

"You need to learn to think," she bit out. "Think about what the consequences of your actions might
be. Had James not gone and fetched me last night, the best thing that might have happened would
have been Severus bitten and turned into a werewolf himself. At worst, he would have been killed,
and Remus exposed! This is the thing I least understand," she continued, her voice rising in fury. "I
don't know how you could have done this to Remus!" She pointed her finger at the crouching
werewolf—now human— in question, who was looking up at her with an expression of shock.
"You used him! He would have had no control, no say in on it whatsoever! And if he had bitten or
killed Severus, he would have not only been expelled, but probably locked up in Azkaban! What
you did, Sirius, was not only selfish and petty, but you could have ended up ruining more than one
life last night. You are goddamned lucky that James came and got me, because by the time I went out
to stop Severus, he was a hair's breadth away from becoming a werewolf chew-toy!"

Her voice had risen to a shriek. Sirius had collapsed back down on the couch, his head buried in his
hands. James got to his feet with his hands in the air, in an attempt to placate her.

"Hermione, I think Sirius has learned his lesson," he said, swallowing. "You've rather driven it
home."

Hermione turned to glare at him. "In all honesty, I think he needs the point driven home a bit more,"
she said, drawing herself up, her voice shaking. "Do you know what it was like, crawling inside that
tunnel and realizing Severus was just feet away from being within reach of a werewolf? I had to use
a summoning spell to get him out of the way in time—and we were both terrified out of our wits
when he realized that we were in the tunnel and started trying to claw his way in after us!" She did
not see the look of horror on Remus's face as she spoke. Nevertheless, she took a deep breath and
tried to calm herself. Biting the inside of her cheek, she continued, "How do you think Remus would
have felt, had he woken up the next morning to find one, possibly two bodies bloody and mangled
on the floor of the Shrieking Shack—with no recollection whatsoever?"

James and Sirius turned to look at each other, dawning looks of utter horror finally making it across
their face.

Remus swallowed and finally spoke. "Hermione—"

"I don't need an explanation from you, Remus." Hermione's voice came out terse, and seeing Remus
flinch from her, she instantly gentled it. "I've known from the start that you were a werewolf. The
signs were unmistakable—you became ill and drawn the closer it came to the full moon, and when I
first arrived, the moon had only just begun to wane. You grew healthier and happier the longer I was
here, and then it began to reverse." Seeing the look on his face, she continued, "I'm not angry that
you didn't tell me, either." She gave him a wry smile. "I guess I was just observant enough to notice,
and James had the good luck of thinking to ask me to help him rather than someone else."

Remus let out a sigh of relief, and leaned back against the couch. He closed his eyes. "Thank
Merlin."

Hermione now turned to James and Sirius, who were staring at her with wide-eyed disbelief.

"The two of you have got to stop baiting Severus," she snapped. "If he hexes you, by all means, hex
him back. But next time you pull something as stupid as this, I might not be able to help you fix it."
They were both nodding quickly.

She straightened up. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm rather tired from last night. I'm going to go take a nap." She gave James a direct look. "Unless it's another emergency, please don't disturb me."

James coughed, looking as though he would rather be anyone else right now. "Actually, the thing is—Professor Dumbledore wants you in his office." Hermione blinked at him owlishly. "Now, actually."

She sighed. She should have expected this. "Lovely."

~o~O~o~

Hermione leaned back in the cozy armchair in the Headmaster's circular office. His desk was as cluttered and full of whirling and spindly eccentricities as Hermione remembered in her time. She couldn't help staring at the dish under Fawkes' perch; right now, he sat in a pile of sooty ashes, looking rather ridiculous with black and pale pink and orange fluff on his body.

* Burning Day must've just come and gone, * Hermione thought, as the Phoenix let out a faint, chirping trill.

Severus was sitting in the armchair next to her, staring rather disinterestedly at an odd, three-legged contraption that was making faint whirring noises on the Headmaster's desk. The door quietly closed behind them, and they both turned around in time to see Professor Dumbledore appear.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting," he said pleasantly, circling around to his desk. "I had to reassure Madam Pomfrey that the two of you were quite all right—you both apparently took off without so much as a by-your-leave, according to her." He looked at them sternly over his half-moon glasses. Hermione had a sneaking suspicion he somehow knew exactly what had gone on in the library. He gave a heavy sigh, and sat down in his chair. "I wish to discuss the events of last night with you."

Hermione swallowed and glanced at Severus. She remembered last night only too well; it was still fresh in her mind. The darkness of the tunnel closing in on her; the gut-clenching fear she felt as Remus tried to claw his way inside, snapping and snarling savagely in a manner that was so polarly opposed to the gentle soul he was as a person; the shocked, wide-eyed terror that had overtaken Severus so completely that she had to practically half-drag half-carry him back to the castle because his legs couldn't do it for him. Last night was an experience that would affect him for the rest of his life—and her, too, come to that.

Severus shifted uncomfortably in his chair at this, and Dumbledore continued; "What happened last night cannot be allowed to be discussed with anyone who was not directly involved in it." Seeing Severus's outraged look at this, Dumbledore continued; "Remus's position at this school is precarious. If word got out that a student was placed at risk of being bitten by him, I would have no choice but to expel him."

"Surely you're not going to let Black get away with this…!"

"All detentions are recorded in detail at this school," Dumbledore said heavily. "There can be no trace of what happened last night. My concern for Remus's position, as well as the fact that you are quite luckily still here in one piece, means that I cannot justify putting him at further risk of exposure." Hermione swallowed at this. She understood the Headmaster's logic, but she still felt that Sirius should have faced some rather serious consequences for his actions. "I have spoken to the three of them. Sirius understands that if he ever pulls off another prank of this magnitude, I will have
no recourse but to expel him, and he will have put one of his best friends at risk of being expelled as well. I rather think he has become quite subdued."

"Pardon me, Headmaster," Severus bit out. "You're telling me that out of concern for the werewolf, Sirius Black gets off nearly killing me scot free?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily, and Hermione felt inclined to speak up in his defense.

"This isn't Remus's fault, but if Sirius is punished, he's the one who will suffer the most," Hermione pointed out. "Sirius won't be expelled for this, and giving him detentions this late in the year—or even into next year—doesn't fix what happened, and it will only hurt Remus. He doesn't deserve that."

She saw Severus's nails dig into the arms of his chair. He looked ready to tear the fabric off. A moment of indecision, and he stood up.

"I can see where your priorities are, Headmaster," he sneered.

"You will not speak of this to anyone who has not already been made privy to it," Dumbledore said, eyeing him sternly.

"You have my word, Headmaster," Severus replied, giving him a sardonic half-bow. He cast one final glare at Dumbledore, and then left. Hermione waited until the door had closed behind him before she stood up.

"You have my word on that as well, sir," she said, giving Fawkes one final glance before she prepared to leave. "Although I would think, with a man of your intellect and skills, that assigning one boy a much-deserved detention without anyone else finding out wouldn't be entirely beyond your ability."

Dumbledore looked weary. "Miss Granger, what I am about to tell you, should you choose to listen, is in the strictest confidence."

Hermione nodded.

"The Wizarding World is on the cusp of war," Dumbledore told her. "The world is not safe right now, Miss Granger, and it is not kind. It is particularly difficult for those who are like Remus Lupin; afflicted, feared, and more often than not, alone and friendless. They are alienated and ostracized by society, and this is the unfortunate existence in which Remus will find himself when he graduates."

He looked weary as he continued, "I do not wish to end what little happiness and security he has found here prematurely by putting him at risk of being sent away or having Sirius expelled. He has a future if he can remain here and complete his education, a future that relies heavily on his friends."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Dumbledore cut her short. "I will, however, take your words into account. I agree; Sirius should not walk away from this unpunished, although I quite feel he has learned his lesson. But it will not happen right now."

Hermione bowed her head. "I understand, sir."

Dumbledore stood up and came around his desk, stopping by the large window that allowed him to peer out over the grounds of Hogwarts. "There is another topic of concern that I must discuss with you. Do you have plans for this summer?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not specifically, no. I thought I might find a job in Hogsmeade and stay there, but I haven't worked out anything solid."
"The Board of Governors have finally reviewed your transfer papers and registered your status as an orphan," Dumbledore informed her, gazing out the window. "You are now officially a ward of the school, and are free to stay here if you wish."

Hermione had not realized she'd been holding her breath until she let it all out in a sigh of relief. "I would appreciate that very much, sir, although I would still like to get a job in Hogsmeade to earn a little money."

"That sounds like an excellent idea," Dumbledore said, "although I have something else to add to that. You are aware of the existence of the Order of the Phoenix, I presume?"

"Of course," Hermione said, thinking of the hours she, Harry, and Ron had spent waging war against the age-old clutter and dust at Grimmauld Place, all in the name of cleaning.

"I had planned to send you to visit some of our members for training," Dumbledore told her seriously. "You are in possession of a great many secrets, Miss Granger, and you must learn to guard them."

Hermione simply stared at him.

"Tell me, Miss Granger, what do you know about Occlumency and Unforgivables?"

~o~O~o~

Hermione watched as everyone else boarded the Hogwarts Express, while she stood off to the side of the platform with Professor McGonagall, who was supervising their departure. She had already said good bye to the Marauders, promising that she'd see them at the start of term. The train gave a warning whistle, and at that moment, James leaned out of the compartment window and waved her over.

"Hey," he said with a grin, when she came to stand next to the window. "Look, I know you're going to be busy this summer, but when the owls come by with our school lists, what do you say we meet up at the Leaky Cauldron and we all get our stuff together?"

Hermione smiled. "I'd like that," she agreed. Behind him, she saw Remus and Peter peering over his shoulder, trying to listen in on their conversation. Sirius was with them, but Hermione could not see him through the window.

"Excellent," James said, leaning back into the compartment as the train gave a warning lurch before it started to move. "Have a good summer, Hermione!"

Hermione waved at them until the train disappeared around the corner, and then joined McGonagall in walking back to the castle.

She had not seen Severus since their meeting with the Headmaster in his office until the very last day. Hermione had predicted he was rather upset on many different levels right now, and she simply had not seen head nor hide of him for the remainder of their stay at Hogwarts until the Leaving Feast, when he intercepted her on her way out.

"I'm heading for a walk around the lake," he told her cordially, his tone neutral and expression disinterested. "Would you care to join me?"

Hermione had only glanced back into the Great Hall for a moment, where the Marauders were still eating and chattering away quite happily. Lily was with them, laughing with James over something he'd said while Sirius entertained the table by balancing a fork across his nose. She saw Remus's
eyes lift up from his plate to look at her, his eyebrows raised in question. Hermione shook her head at him and smiled, and his eyes lowered again to his plate, satisfied. Hermione turned back to Severus.

"Let's go," she agreed.

They had walked down to the lake together, Hermione breathing in the fresh summer air that still had a slight taste of spring to it. Severus waited until they were quite a distance away from the castle before he spoke.

"Are you planning on coming back next year?" he asked casually, kicking a pebble out of his way.

"I plan to," Hermione responded honestly, picking up the pebble he'd kicked and tossing it over the water. It skipped once, twice, and then sank. She picked up another, flatter one and turned it over in her palm. "Do you realize we won't be sharing any classes anymore? You being a seventh year and all, I mean."

Severus sneered at her. "I should be relieved. I won't have you trying to climb me like a frightened monkey."

Hermione turned red. "I wasn't— I just wanted to double-check our answers!"

"I pity whoever has you for a partner next year."

"Oh, shut up." Hermione chucked her stone into the lake, where it skipped three times and sank with a ripple. She waited until it disappeared from view, before she reached down to search out another stone. "Severus, why do you hang out with Avery and Mulciber? I'm sorry to bring this up, but Lily had a point when she said that they're a part of a gang of Slytherins who are budding Death Eaters. It just doesn't make sense." She threw the rock into the water, where it sank instantly like the stone it was. "You're too good for that."

She turned around in time to see Severus draw himself up. His face was contorted into a sneer.

"The Dark Lord is powerful, Hermione." His eyes glittered strangely at this. "Intelligence isn't everything. There are some things you can only get when you have the ear of the most powerful wizard in the world."

Hermione couldn't help the mixture of horror and defiance that took up residence on her face. "Albus Dumbledore is the most powerful wizard in the world," she said, the stone she had been about to throw dropping heavily out of her hand. "What is it that Vol—You-know-who can offer you don't have?"

She saw him purse his lips, as though debating whether he should tell her, and then he turned away.

"It doesn't matter," he said sulkily.

"It does matter," Hermione said, following him. She grabbed his sleeve, and he whipped around, expression furious, and she spoke angrily, "You-Know-Who is a sick, twisted, sadistic bastard. He doesn't understand what's really important to people—love, family, friendship. Those are things he does not have, and cannot offer, and since material wealth can be amassed without having to sell your soul short to the devil, then tell me— try to make me understand—why do you want to serve him? What do you want so badly?"

Severus bared his teeth at her and pulled away. "I cannot tell you."

Hermione felt as though she had just found the person underneath the cold, hard exterior he...
presented to the world, just in time to see him start slipping away. She wanted to understand—gods, he was sixteen, no, seventeen now, and about to make the biggest mistake of his life and she wanted to know why.

"Cannot tell me or will not tell me?" she countered.

He glared balefully at her, and then turned away. Hermione sighed, and stared at the ground miserably, and then looked up at his retreating back.

"I don't understand how someone like you can be so eager to shackle yourself," she said quietly.

"I have my reasons," Severus responded, walking away from her. "You may understand them one day, but for now—they are my own."

"Then you should know," Hermione said bitterly, "that I am a Muggle-born, and if you follow Lord Voldemort—" she saw him flinch at the use of the Dark Lord's name. "—you consign yourself to helping him try to kill me—and Lily." She found herself choking on a near-hysterical laugh that was threatening to escape. "Is this some twisted idea of revenge?"

"This has nothing to do with revenge!" Severus bit out, stalking over to her now. He grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "This has absolutely nothing—nothing!—to do with getting any kind of payback on Lily. Not even close." Hermione looked up at him, eyes wide, and his expression grew thoughtful. "I'm doing this for Lily. For her. Everything I've ever done—whether it was when we were children and I nicked my mother's spellbooks for us to read or now, while I'm contemplating joining the Dark Lord—has always been for her. Always!"

"If you think Lily will be impressed by—"

"She doesn't—she won't know," Severus ground out. "She will never know. I'm doing this to protect her! I will ask the Dark Lord to spare her in return for my loyalty. He will not target her. That," he said, laughing bitterly, "is what only power can buy."

Hermione stared up at him, eyes wide in disbelief. His grip on her shoulder suddenly tightened painfully.

"And you will not tell her. Or anyone else, for that matter."

Hermione swallowed. "No," she said, "I won't. But I still think you're making the wrong choice."

"But you understand," he said, loosening his grip.

"Unfortunately, I do," Hermione said, looking up at him squarely. "There are some people in this world for whom I would do anything within my power to save them, help them, raise them. I know where you're coming from. But I also know you're going about it the wrong way."

"We both simply have different methodology," he sneered, releasing her shoulders entirely. "Besides, given that you are an orphan, I rather imagine your tactics, whatever they were, failed spectacularly."

Hermione closed her eyes and ground down on her back teeth, resisting the urge to lash out at him. When she opened her eyes, he was still standing there, wearing an infernal, offensive smirk that she wanted nothing more than to wipe off his face. He thought he had won. Only she knew what a horrible mistake he was making.

"Fine," she said bitterly. "Do it your way."
She saw a flicker of indecision in Severus's eyes, and his tone became bitter to match hers. "Would you turn your back on me if I became a Death Eater?"

Hermione gazed into his eyes, trying to find any trace of the man she remembered in her timeline and tried to reconcile it to the seventeen-year-old she had come to know over the last two months. A desperate, lonely boy who was now a legal adult by the Wizarding World's standards, and being pulled into making big choices before he was ready to by his peers and wizards he considered his superiors. She sighed.

"No," she said softly. She forced herself to remember that he was good enough that deep down, once he realized the Dark Lord could not—would not—give him what he wanted, that Lily would still be in danger, he would switch sides in order to protect her. "Not for the reasons you gave me."

Severus paused, and then said quietly, "You're the only person I know outside Slytherin who would have ever said such a thing to me."

"I don't agree with your choices," Hermione told him sadly, "but I don't hate you, and I don't condemn you for what you're doing, since I know I might very well have done the same if I were ever in your shoes."

Severus snorted. "Gryffindor is wasted on you, Hermione. You should have been sorted into Hufflepuff."

"I ought to slap you for that," Hermione sniffed at him, but she was smiling.

Severus gave her a tight smile. "On a completely different subject, what are you planning on doing this summer?"

"A job," Hermione told him shortly.

"No need to sound as though you're about to face a firing squad," he responded snidely. "Last I heard, a little hard work never killed anyone."

Hermione sighed and looked away, trying not to let her emotions get the best of her. "It's not that. I just... I miss my family and friends. I usually spent half my summers with my parents and then I'd stay with one of my friends and his family. Now that they're not here, and summer's literally just around the corner, I feel the loss a bit more keenly."

"You were an only child?"

"Well," Hermione said slowly, "my two best friends were like brothers to me. I suppose that must count for something."

Severus placed a cautious hand on her shoulder, and when she didn't pull away, he turned her around to face him.

"I'm sorry."

Hermione nodded, feeling a familiar, painful tightness in her throat, and tried to push it back. She wiped at her eyes with her sleeve, and then said, "Thank you." She took a moment to collect herself, and then nodded toward the castle. "We should probably head back now. The train leaves soon. You don't want to miss it."

Smiling fondly, as though lost in a memory, she said, "That happened to my two best friends when they were twelve. They solved it by stealing—excuse me, borrowing—their parents' flying car and flew it to school." She laughed, and wiped at her eyes one last time. "They got into so much trouble!"
Severus snorted at this, and then, unable to contain himself, he let out a bark of laughter.

They headed back up to the castle in good spirits, and Hermione tried not to think about how different things would be when he returned. Professor Dumbledore had arranged for her to take on training with several Order members in addition to the job she was planning on taking in Hogsmeade. Just before they'd reached the doors leading to the Entrance Hall, however, Hermione grabbed Severus's sleeve and turned him around to face her.

"Promise me just one thing," she said, almost desperately. "Promise me you'll hold off on taking the Dark Mark as long as possible."

He looked down at her for one long, eternal moment, and then inclined his head.

"Fine."

Hermione quickly pulled him into a hug and whispered her goodbye, in the face of unconvincingly spluttered protests of her treatment of his person, and then stood back to let him go. She did not—could not speak to him after that. She did not see him face-to-face again that day. He had his stuff delivered to the train just like every other student, and when he left, he did so in the company of the very same housemates who set Hermione's hair on end with the sadism and cruelty they exuded. It set her teeth on edge just to see him in their company.

Bellatrix, Avery, Mulciber. And, she'd only realized recently, the boy she'd previously dubbed lip-licker was Barty Crouch, Jr. He was in the company of students who not only went out of their way to taunt and attempt to hex her in the halls between classes when Severus was not around, but would also one day cause everyone she knew much grief. Neville's poor parents—who she knew now as Alice and Frank—stuck in St. Mungo's immediately cropped up horribly in Hermione's mind.

She could not help that she'd grown so terribly fond of Severus. He was a caustic and capricious git, but he had let her in just enough that she'd begun to see the beauty underneath. As soon as they had gotten past that awkward, volatile stage where they'd fought over every little thing, she felt as though she'd finally met someone with whom she was on equal terms in regards to intelligence and ability. It was both refreshing and exhilarating.

She would be spending her summer being trained on how to defend her mind from Legilimency and on how to defend and resist against Unforgivables. The Avada Kedavra excluded, of course. She simply knew far too many secrets to justify having such training to be held off any longer.

How different would things be when she saw him again?

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Five

A/N: This was posted in my author's notes the first time I posted it, and I thought it was sufficiently amusing enough to restate: "I would also like to unnecessarily state for the record that Severus Snape is not a bundle of cuddly joy."

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Hermione walked down to The Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade the very next day to see Madam Rosmerta and ask for a part-time job. The barmaid was quite surprised, but nevertheless, she gave her the job.

"I'm afraid you'll be rather bored here," she said, pouring a glass of single-malt whisky and setting it on a tray with several other drinks. "But if you do the work and get here on time, you're on."

Hermione asked to work during the evening on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays—it was the schedule she had worked out with Professor Dumbledore, and though he was more than happy for her to take on a part-time job in Hogsmeade, he was adamant about the schedule. The Order members she would be working with only had so much time available, and their time was valuable. She presented Madam Rosmerta with a letter from the Headmaster, explaining her situation as an orphan and with limited hours available to work, and the barmaid graciously agreed to her request for the odd hours.

Rosmerta gave her a tour of the counter and the backroom, showed her the menu and a list of what went into each order, and where the keys for private rooms were stored. Since Hermione had offered to work the evening shifts three days a week, she was shown where Rosmerta kept the key, and what time she was expected to kick everyone out and close up shop.

"You job is to make and serve drinks," Rosmerta told her, "but if someone looks like they've had too much, refuse and suggest something non-alcoholic. I try to keep this place friendly and open to all customers, and the last thing I need is someone getting into a drunken barfight." She pointed to the door. "The regulars all know what time to leave. They shouldn't be a problem. If someone gives you any trouble, feel free to threaten to jinx their bollocks off. This rarely happens, but if someone starts stirring up trouble and they won't leave, you're allowed to hex them out the door."

This sounded both harsh and reasonable to Hermione, and she nodded in acceptance without protest.

"You're free to go," Rosmerta told her with a smile. "You start tomorrow. Be here at 6pm sharp."

The Order members were an entirely different matter.

Hermione had met Alastor Moody before, first as an imposter, then as himself at Grimmauld Place. The man looked very different than she remembered. He still had both his eyes and a whole nose. His face was lined and he had a grizzled look. But other than the fact that he not had parts of his face cut off in chunks yet, he looked remarkably the same.

The second was Kingsley Shacklebolt, who Hermione recognized from Grimmauld Place. He was still bald, with a gleaming white smile, and a friendly but serious demeanor. He was the epitome of steadiness and reliability, in Hermione's mind, and she considered him a fine Head of Magical Law Enforcement when he finally did get the job.
The third and final member was tiny Professor Flitwick, who had once been quite the dueler in his youth, and Hermione was quite certain that despite his diminutive, almost laughably short stature, he would be difficult opponent, if not a spectacular teacher. She was looking forward to her lessons with him; she got on very well with him as student and professor. More than once, he had suggested to her that she should have been sorted into Ravenclaw.

When Professor Dumbledore had set aside a pensieve for her, and after demonstrating how to use it, Hermione pulled out the memories that were of the most importance for her to hide. The Headmaster had given her a book on Occlumency to read the last time she left his office, and had a good solid understanding of it in theory as well as what she knew from Harry. Professor Dumbledore began her training in Occlumency in his office every morning, and Hermione took to it like a duck to water; organization and discipline came naturally to her, and it was simply a matter of time and practice for her to get the gist of it. She was soon able to collect her memories and smoothly push them away, hiding them behind a wall of irrelevant and inane thoughts that would quickly bore the looker into searching elsewhere.

Dumbledore praised her progress, and daily, after lunch in her dorm, she would go to the Great Hall, where the tables had been removed since the Leaving Feast, and wait for the Aurors to arrive. More often than not, no matter how early she arrived, they were there before she was, and Hermione suspected that they spent time in meeting with the Headmaster in conjunction to her training. There was simply no other explanation for them to be at the Great Hall half an hour early for her lesson.

The first lesson Hermione learned was that some things simply didn't change.

"Constant vigilance!" Moody had barked at her, not three minutes into her first session with him. Hermione had nearly jumped back a foot, and mentally berated herself for it, given that she should have seen it coming. He began pacing back and forth in front of her, his claw foot adding a clunk to each step he took. "You must never let your guard down. This," he said, pulling out a rolled up copy of The Daily Prophet and handing it to her, "is what happens to those caught unawares. And even to those who aren't. The world out there isn't pretty, girl, and there are Dark Wizards who want to kill you just because they can."

Hermione unfurled the paper and looked at the headlines, feeling her stomach drop sharply as it gruesomely described the murder of Donna Blythe-Williams, who had been a secretary for the Department of Magical Games and Sports at the Ministry of Magic. The newspaper was less than a day old.

"But you're a special case," Moody growled, watching her closely. "You've got secrets in your head that you can't allow anyone else to touch, and according to Dumbledore, you've gotten pretty good at keeping it that way. I've also heard from your teachers that you're a fair hand with a wand, and that you've put a couple of students in the Hospital Wing for trying to get the drop on you. Good, since it means you're not afraid to defend yourself. But you can't kid yourself into thinking that just because you can send a few clumsy Slytherins to see Madam Pomfrey, you're off the hook. That kind of thinking is what will get you killed—or worse, captured."

Hermione nodded stiffly and held the paper back to him. He waved it away.

"Keep it as a reminder of what's at stake," he said gruffly. "Don't ever forget it for a moment—constant vigilance!" He thundered, and this time, Hermione didn't startle. He resumed pacing. "I'm going to teach you how to defend yourself. I'm going to teach you how to go on the offensive, and I'm going to teach you how to resist the Imperius and Crucius. The former can be fought off—the latter can only be endured, but endure it you will. Constant vigilance," he repeated, stopping in front of her. "Constant vigilance and hard work is key."
"I understand," Hermione told him.

"Good." And without warning, Moody had his wand pointed straight between her eyes. "Imperio!"

And that was how Hermione's first lesson had begun.

By the middle of July, she had made many milestones of progress. If nothing else, Moody was an effective teacher, and his training methods were harsh and pushed limits. As soon as she was able to hold her own against the grizzled Auror without being blasted unconscious five minutes in, she was forced to duel Moody and Kingsley simultaneously, keeping her attention on both targets and trying to effectively defend and attack without leaving openings in between. The disparity between the levels of training Moody put her through on forced her to become more adaptable.

Kingsley attempted to attack her mind with legilimency throughout the entire duel, and when they had her trapped on either side, she was simultaneously hit with a Crucius and Imperius.

It was the single most difficult thing Hermione felt she had ever done in her life up to that point. Her entire body screamed in pain, while she forced herself to ignore the pain and instead focus on resisting the urge to obey Moody's command to drop her wand. To top it all off, she was attempting to defend her mind from Kingsley's intrusion, which was difficult enough to begin with. Dealing with the shattering pain of the Crucius shuddering throughout her body and Moody's Imperius-laden commands bearing down on her mind in addition to that made it near-impossible.

Hermione gritted her teeth, and broke away from Moody's Imperius with a hard, mental shove. Her knees shook as she tried to remain standing despite the pain threatening to make her buckle, but despite this, she was able to slash her wand at them.

"Protego!" she shouted.

Moody and Kingsley were both thrown back by the force of her spell. She attempted a Disarming Spell on them both, but Moody was quick enough to defend himself, already back on his feet. She did, however, get Kingsley's wand, and as soon as it smacked into her hand, she stunned him. In her opinion, this was pure luck on her part, but she was pleased nevertheless. Whirling around on the spot, she threw up another Shield Charm to block Moody's Choking Spell, and resumed dueling, now able to focus one-on-one. Her fingers twitched in pain as an after-effect of the Crucius, and she swore that she would not let them hit it with her again. She needed to improve her dodging reflexes.

"Very good, Granger!" Moody roared approvingly as he sent a Stupefying Hex her way.

Flitwick taught her a number of good dueling spells, many of which Hermione was certain were never taught in the normal course of academics, and had her practice against him when she first tried them out. Some spells were meant to attack and defend; others were good to have up her sleeve if she ever needed to try and escape. He essentially gave her a more extensive repertoire of spells to choose from, while Moody and Kingsley made her work to stay on her feet.

With that kind of rigorous training on a daily basis, with not even Sunday off, it was no wonder that Hermione was relieved to spend three evenings a week serving drinks. Either she spent all day practicing and stumbled off to bed after a hasty dinner, or she was let off a five and came back to the castle at ten after working her shift at The Three Broomsticks. Rosmerta paid her ten galleons and seven sickles a week, and given that her job was to serve, mix drinks, keep the peace, and then kick everyone out at a quarter to ten, Hermione was rather content.

As Rosmerta had predicted, she got little to no trouble at all. Rosmerta would leave off her shift
when Hermione arrived, and Hermione would take over with no trouble. The patrons, all of whom ranged from students Hermione knew and lived close by to travelers passing through, all got used to seeing her face in the evenings three times a week. One rising sixth-year tried to wheedle Hermione into giving him a free drink, and Hermione told him she would charge him double for it, which effectively caused the boy to desist immediately. One witch came in with foreign currency one Friday night, which had been a bit of a nightmare for Hermione to figure out. The owner of Honeydukes, who was sitting at a table with his wife and celebrating the end of the week, was kind enough to exchange currency with the witch so that she could buy her drink.

And when Hagrid came in one evening, Hermione's jaw dropped before she managed to gather her wits. She had not spoken to the half-giant even once while she was at Hogwarts, in this time period. Truth to be told, as much as she loved Hagrid, she knew that he was notoriously poor at keeping secrets—and seeing her now and in the future could jeopardize everything if he let his tongue slip. She served him quickly and with a friendly smile, praying that he wouldn't make the connection when 1991 rolled around.

Overall, there was next to no trouble for her at The Three Broomsticks. She got to listen in on everyone's conversation, which kept things interesting enough, and it was not particularly difficult work. But it was one evening, at the beginning of August, that trouble pushed its way through the door just moments before Hermione was about to close shop.

"We're closed for the night," she said without looking up from where she was wiping down the counter with a clean rag. "Come back tomorrow."

"Please," the man whispered hoarsely, and Hermione looked up. He was tall and emaciated, with dark hair that hung around his face in ragged clumps. He looked like a corpse, and when Hermione saw his eyes, she dropped the rag and immediately whipped out her wand. The vampire held up his hands to show he was unarmed, and immediately slunk behind one of the tables. "No—please—help me…"

"Get out!" Hermione thundered, her wand pointed straight at him. "I will not tell you again!"

"Please!" The vampire's voice was raspy and dry. "Hide me— I'm not here to harm you—I need help!" He had a frantic, hunted look in his eyes. "Please!"

Hermione saw a dark shape through the window, moving toward the door, and in a split-second, had made her decision. She pulled open the door to the back room, her wand still pointed at the vampire as he moved toward her.

"In here!" she hissed. "Now!"

The vampire slipped inside without another word or even so much as a second glance in her direction, and Hermione shut the door and locked it. She was back out at the counter, cleaning rag in hand, when the door to the establishment opened and another man entered, wand raised.

"A vampire just came through here," the man growled, kicking the door shut behind him with his boot. He looked young, perhaps in his late twenties. He was a huge man, with close-cropped blond hair, and a cocky, swaggering attitude that Hermione did not like. She was instantly on the defensive, the rag once again dropped from her hands and with her wand out and pointed at him. "Where did he go?"

"He ran," Hermione said, jerking her head in the direction of the stairs. "He's probably gone through one of the windows. We're closed now," she added angrily. "Leave!"
The man gave her a heavy-set glare, and then lowered his wand a fraction of an inch.

"If I find out you're lying, girl—" he pulled up the sleeve of his left arm. Hermione stared dumbly at the grotesque, entwined skull-and-snake figure on his arm, and then up at him. "This is who you'll have to answer to, so I'll give you one last chance to fix your story, if it needs fixing. Where did the son of a bitch go?"

Hermione affected fear in her voice, even as she seethed and silently debated whether or not she should try and get the drop on him. Only one thought went through her mind, repeating itself over and over like a mantra, interfering with her thought process: *He's a Death Eater, he's a Death Eater, he's a Death Eater…*

Her job right now wasn't to apprehend him. If she tried to take him on, and found out he was stronger, she could be killed, or worse—captured. She had confidence in her abilities, and even more faith in Alastor Moody's training, but she had absolutely no backup. That was one of the first things Moody had drilled into her head: *Don't jump into a fight without a partner if you can help it.* She didn't even have any kind of system set up to alert the castle if she was in trouble.

*Idiot!* Her mind screamed.

"I already told you, he ran upstairs," Hermione said, pretending to be cowed. She swallowed visibly. "I swear, he just ran through here… upstairs… like I said, probably the window…"

The Death Eater gave her a nasty grin, and then barreled up the stairs. Hermione heard his feet thudding against the wooden floorboards, and stood perfectly still, waiting for him to leave. She had her wand ready and her attention on the stairwell. If he came back down, she would attack him. But if she could get out of here without a confrontation that she wasn't sure she could win, she would do it.

The upstairs suddenly became quiet. Hermione heard a quiet *thwump*, and realized that the man must have gone out one of the second-floor windows. Hermione slowly, ever so slowly, lowered her wand and made her way toward the stairs. She cautiously climbed them, until she was faced with the empty hall, with doors on either side leading to private meeting rooms, and the window at the far end.

It was open. With a sigh of relief, trying not to focus too much on the pounding of her heart, Hermione pointed her wand at it, sliding it shut and magically locking it. She went back downstairs, locked the door to *The Three Broomsticks* to prevent any other unwanted patrons from coming in, and then went to the back room.

She rapped on the door, and unlocked it. Holding her wand steady, she backed away.

"It's all right, he's gone," she said, swallowing thickly. "Come on out."

There was a pause, and then the door slowly squeaked open, and the pale figure glided out, slinking over and pressing against the wall when he realized Hermione's wand was trained on him.

"Thank you," he breathed, slumping against the wall in relief. His dark, violet eyes were locked onto Hermione, both in fear and gratitude. He repeated, "Thank you."

"You're a vampire," Hermione said uncertainly.

"Do you think I would harm you after you so graciously saved my hide?" the vampire inquired hoarsely, straightening up.
"I don't know," Hermione said, lowering her wand just a fraction of an inch. "Do vampires bite the hands that feed them? Metaphorically speaking, of course."

"Not me," he rasped with a tight smile. Hermione saw his fangs poking out from beneath his upper lip. Slowly, ever so slowly, she lowered her wand, backing away as she did so. She waited tensely for him to attack, but when he did nothing more than shift uncomfortably against the wall and then scoot over to take a seat on a wooden crate full of Ogden's, she relaxed, but remained alert.

"What's your name?" Hermione asked, picking up the cleaning rag and moving to the other side of the counter to finish cleaning. Her compulsive need to question began to rise to the fore, even as she began to relax in the face of danger averted. "And why was that man after you? Because last time I looked, according to Paragraph Twelve of the Guidelines for the Treatment of Non-Wizard Part-Humans, vampire hunting is illegal." She paused. "Not that Death Eaters care about what the Ministry says in the first place."

"Sanguini." He paused to look down at his fingers, which here bony, white, and stick thin, before he answered the other half of her question. "As for why… I believe I had something he wanted. I wouldn't give it. He gave into temper."

"What did he want?" Hermione asked, her voice casual as she set the rag aside.

"The location of a friend," Sanguini replied unhelpfully, still examining his fingers. His face, which had been taut with terror just minutes ago, was now one of deathly boredom, although he was starting to get edgy. It was clear he wanted to move, but was afraid to stand up for fear of being blasted into bits.

"Sanguini," Hermione mused, testing the name out loud. "The name rings a bell. You wouldn't happen to know Eldred Worple, would you? Author of Blood Brothers?"

Sanguini's lips curled into a corpulent smile. "That is my friend."

"Well," Hermione said, straightening up. Sanguini's actions made a bit more sense to her, and she was no longer truly afraid of him. "If you want to leave now, by all means, you're free to go. I rather imagine its safe now, since the man who was after you hasn't come back to knock down the door."

Sanguini slowly stood up. "I would appreciate that. Thank you."

Hermione walked him to the door and unlocked it, holding it open for him.

"I am grateful for your kindness," Sanguini told her before he left. "If I can repay you, I will."

"Let's work on keeping you alive long enough for that to happen, shall we?" Hermione asked, offering him a smile.

Sanguini gave her a pointy, thin-lipped grin, and then silently disappeared into the night.

As soon as Hermione shut the door behind her, making sure it was securely locked, she slumped against the nearest wall, slid down to the ground, and took in several deep gulps of air.

She'd looked a Death Eater in the eyes tonight. Alone, without Harry or Ron at her back. She had been alone with a Death Eater who might have very well tried to capture, kill, or rape her if it weren't for the fact that he had higher priorities at hand at the moment. He had certainly looked capable of it, and now that Hermione was alone and safe, she finally realized how shaken down to the core she was.
A moment later, she started laughing hysterically.

~o~O~o~

Dumbledore gravely absorbed Hermione's recounting of the night's events. When Hermione had finished, he leaned back in his chair, his hands folded on his desk, deep in thought. Hermione sat there in silence, tired and more than ready to crawl off to bed, but felt that she had not yet been dismissed, and that it would be quite rude to simply stand up and leave.

"What happened tonight night is certainly great cause for concern," Dumbledore finally said, steepling his fingertips together. "But there is little that can be done about it now. I will send Alastor to investigate, but I have little hope of him coming up with something that may change the nature of my suspicions."

"What do you think this is, sir?" Hermione asked wearily.

"Voldemort has been building himself an army," Dumbledore said, his expression somber. "He has already recruited the giants, and Fenrir Greyback is his most valuable asset in keeping control over the werewolves he has enlisted. It would appear that the vampire community is his next target. Fortunately," he added, giving Hermione a faint smile behind his snow-white beard, "vampires tend to keep mostly to themselves, and the largest community known to wizardkind is well-hidden. Their location is unknown, though there is much speculation that it is somewhere in Transylvania. It would make sense that Eldred Worple would know about their location, or at least have a good idea of where they could be found. That would explain why he has been in hiding," Dumbledore mused. "Horace has not heard a word from him in nearly a year."

"Voldemort is recruiting vampires, sir?" Hermione asked, her tired mind trying to make sense of this.

"That's what it looks like, yes," Dumbledore said with a sigh. "It is understandably quite difficult to recruit someone without negotiating with them first, and Sanguini and Worple are certainly a good place to start if one is interested in finding the vampire community." He gazed at Hermione thoughtfully for a moment. "In the natural order of things, in regards to your timeline, did Voldemort ever employ vampires?"

Hermione took a moment to think through all of the history she'd read on the subject.

"No," she said at last, shaking her head. "Not in large numbers."

Dumbledore smiled, and for the first time since she'd seen him tonight, he looked relaxed, even relieved.

"It is quite possible your actions tonight were significant in affecting the outcome of the coming war, but that they were equally instrumental in keeping consistencies in your own timeline," he mused.

"Or maybe Sanguini got away without my help in my time," Hermione responded with a weary sigh. "I also don't see how I can return to The Three Broomsticks now. The Death Eater—"

"What did he look like?"

"Big build, short blond hair, blue eyes…"

"Most likely Thorfinn Rowle," Dumbledore said with a nod.

"Well, Headmaster, it seems quite likely to me that Rowle could return when he realizes Sanguini got away, and decide to use me as his consolation prize," Hermione said, getting to her feet. "I don't
much fancy another encounter with him."

"Naturally, and you are also probably quite right. I will speak to Rosmerta myself tomorrow to explain the situation."

"Thank you." Hermione turned to leave. "Good night, sir."

Fawkes let out a musical trill behind her as she closed the door behind her, and she felt the tension that had been building up in her veins slowly evaporate. With a sigh of something akin to boneless relief, she ambled off to Gryffindor Tower.

~o~O~o~

When Moody and Kingsley were briefed on the events that had occurred at Rosmerta's, their reactions were quite mixed. Kingsley congratulated Hermione on keeping a clear head and praised her for not attempting to take on a full-grown Death Eater when she had the preferable option of letting him get away.

"You made a good decision," he told her. "You're not an Auror; your job isn't to hunt down Death Eaters. There was no guarantee you would have gotten away from that fight alive, and made the smart choice to let him go off on a wild goose chase."

Moody, on the other hand, was berating Hermione, himself, and anyone else he could think of.

"We should have thought of an alert system!" he snarled, pacing in circles as he absorbed the situation. "You were alone and could have been abducted or killed right under our noses! That will have to be fixed."

"I've quit my job," Hermione told him, fiddling with her wand.

"Yes, but what about when you go down to Hogsmeade to do your shopping?" Moody snapped. "You could be attacked at any time, girl, and not just at your job! And that's another problem," he growled, whipping around to face her. "You're still too trusting."

"What?" Hermione screeched.

"You let a fucking vampire inside and hid him," Moody sneered. "What if he had attacked you?"

"I had my wand trained on him at all times!" Hermione snapped, fed up with the entire situation. "I locked the door behind me while dealing with Rowle. Rosmerta's lock is made to keep out anything that tries to get in, Magical or not, Moody—you know that! I would have heard him if he'd tried to get out. And what's more," she cried, "he was trying to hide! If he'd tried to get out to have a go at me, he knew the Death Eater would have immediately turned his attention onto him!"

"He could have been working with that very same Death Eater he claimed he was trying to hide from!" Moody snarled.

Hermione raised her chin up to him and looked at him squarely. "A man enters The Three Broomsticks just before closing time, looking for sanctuary. I have three seconds to make a decision. He looks absolutely desperate. I hide him in the back room, and then send the Death Eater off on a wild goose chase. And according to Dumbledore, I made a bloody good decision not to blast the first person I see into bits, because he is apparently an ally!"

"That was after the fact," the grizzled old auror growled. "But think, girl! What if he hadn't been? What if he was working for You-Know-Who? What if he had been too hungry to resist attacking
"Then I would have blown up the room with a spell and gotten the hell out of there," Hermione snarled back. "But that didn't happen, and I had my wand trained on Sanguini the entire time he was not locked up until I had ascertained he was not a threat—and I had my wand pointed at Rowle, too, so I was prepared to defend myself at all times. I was in danger, Moody, but I wasn't careless!"

Moody stepped back and gave her an appraising look behind his glare. He looked about to speak, but Kingsley interrupted him.

"Let it go, Alastor. Hermione did the best she could in the situation she was in, and she handled herself admirably well," Kingsley said, his voice soothing. Moody relaxed a fraction of an inch; Hermione let out a complete sigh of relief. The auror went on, "Let's just review how the situation could have gone awry if things had turned out differently. Hermione," he said kindly, "what would you have done if you knew Sanguini was an ally, had hidden him, and the Death Eater refused to leave or tried to attack you?"

"I would have ducked behind the counter, because there's no protecting against Unforgivables, and you never know the measure of the person until they cast their first spell," Hermione replied calmly. "I would have blasted him backwards, quickly unlocked the door to the back room, and gotten the hell out of there—with or without Sanguini."

"Good. Let's practice that scenario, then." Kingsley gestured toward Moody. "I'll be Sanguini in the back room. Alastor, you're Rowle."

And with that, Hermione was off the hook from Moody's ranting and raving, though she was certainly not off the hook on the whole. If anything, her training grew more intense—Moody made sure of that. In addition to that, she no longer had her job at The Three Broomsticks, which meant that all her time during the day was spent ducking and hexing and trying not to get hit. Moody, it seemed, was never satisfied with her best, and Hermione frankly was not surprised. She used Moody as a measure of what was humanly possible, but turned to Kingsley for a better idea of how well she was actually doing.

Her training stopped abruptly a week later. It was one final training session, and then she was done, with three weeks before school.

"Keep improving, girl," Moody told her, giving her a grizzled smile. His sudden bark of, "Constant vigilance!" didn't startle Hermione, and he laughed before clunking away on his claw foot.

Kingsley praised her progress, and then reached into the pockets of his robes and, smiling, pulled out a watch. It had an amber tortoiseshell-patterned band with a gold rim and three delicate, spindle-like hands, a date face, and three tiny knobs on the side. It was quite a lovely piece. Kingsley handed it to her.

"Your seventeenth birthday is approaching soon, am I right?" he asked, as Hermione fixed the watch onto her right wrist.

"September the nineteenth," Hermione agreed.

"In the wizarding world, it is traditional to give young wizards a watch when they come of age," Kingsley told her, smiling. "I bought this at a Muggle shop, and with the help of a friend in the Order, we managed to place a few charms on it. You will recall our concern that you had no apparent way of discretely alerting Dumbledore if you were in danger after the near-fiasco of last week?"
Hermione nodded. "See the little knobs on the side of the watch?" Hermione turned her wrist over to look at them. "The first two allow you to change the time and date, like any other timepiece. The third will activate the watch as a portkey. You will be taken to the Headmaster's office." He gave Hermione a stern look. "Need I tell you that this aspect of the watch should not be use to sneak into Professor Dumbledore's office?"

"I think you know me a bit better than that," Hermione said, but she was smiling sheepishly Kingsley's deep voice reverberated with a chuckle. "There's also an Unbreakable and Anti-Theft Charm on it. The watch is a gift from us all for your hard work over the past few weeks, and even if Moody is being a grouchy old tosser about it, you've made impressive progress. I take my hat off to you."

Hermione was now out-and-out grinning. "Thank you, sir."

~o~O~o~

Hermione received several owls first thing the next morning. The first was a brown owl bearing a letter with the Hogwarts Crest on it. Hermione's knife and fork slipped from her hand as the owl landed on the table next to her bed, and she shoved her plate aside and tried to detach the owl's letter with shaking hands. The owl gave a sigh in resignation as he waited for Hermione to get her letter off his leg, and then with a hoot, he disappeared out the window.

The letter contained the list of school supplies she would need for the coming year, as well as her OWL scores. She unfolded that letter first with shaking hands, and stared down at it. Moments later, a smile flickered faintly across her face, and then she began grinning in earnest. She had passed all of her courses with an 'Outstanding' in every one—except for an 'Exceeds Expectations' in Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Well, Hermione thought, throwing the parchment down on her bed. If they tested me now, I'm fairly certain I would have gotten an 'Outstanding' in that, too. But at least I passed…

She examined the list of supplies she would need for school, tried to total it up as best she could, and was relieved to find that, more or less, she had earned enough money over the summer that she could buy her stuff for school and still have some left over.

A letter arrived from a tawny owl an hour later, sent by James Potter, but signed by all of the Marauders, suggesting she meet them at the Leaky Cauldron tomorrow at ten.

Hermione got off her bed, dressed, and headed down to see if she could find Dumbledore before he disappeared off on Order business to request permission to go to Diagon Alley.

~o~O~o~

"Hermione!" Hermione was pulled into a hug, first by James, then Sirius, and lastly Remus. Peter stood off to the side, watching but not participating. He didn't know Hermione all that well, and Hermione did her best to keep her distance from him. The other three, however, were on her like a litter of puppies. "How are you?"

"Good," Hermione gasped. "Except I can't—can't breathe."

They released her quickly, eyes shining brightly with amusement.
"We're going to get our books first," James told her, as they headed for the door. "Do you need any money?"

Hermione patted her pocket, glad she had taken on a summer job. She didn't like taking money from James, given that it would one day be Harry's, and she felt that it belonged to her bespectacled friend first before any of it went to her. "I got a job over the summer. I think I made enough. Shall we go?"

"We're meeting Lily at Flourish and Blotts," James told her as Remus and Sirius gentlemanly offered Hermione an arm each. Sirius was behaving surprisingly well, and Hermione wondered if something had happened over the summer. Perhaps James and Remus had simply given him a good talking-to, and he was trying to repair the gap between them. Grinning, she took them in each arm, and they headed off down the street. James gave her a playful grin. "I'm taking her to Fortescue's afterwards for ice cream, so you'll be the one making sure Sirius and Remus stay out of trouble."

"Hey!" Sirius complained half-heartedly. "Don't I get a say in this?"

"Nope," Hermione and James said in unison.

"So, Hermione," Remus said, changing the subject. "How was your summer?"

Hermione took a moment to recall the gist of it, and then let out a sigh.

"It was long," she said, smiling even though part of her didn't feel all that cheerful about it. "Very long."

Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
A/N: Big thanks to my beta, Severus Snape's Beloved, for her brilliant idea of "rock-cake, parchment, wand" in lieu of "rocks, paper, scissors".

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please be sure to review! ;)

Hermione and the boys met up with Lily at Flourish and Blotts, just as James had said they would, and after they paid for their things, the happy couple walked off together for some of Florean Fortescue's ice cream, leaving Hermione in the company of Sirius and Remus. Peter begged off, since he was planning on meeting Mary at The Magical Menagerie. They were all perfectly content with this, and they did a quick match of rock-cake, parchment, and wand to decide what to get next first. Remus won, and they strode off to Madam Malkin's for some new robes.

"You know," Sirius said loftily, turning around in front of the mirror to admire his reflection. His new robes now hung at the right height, which had not been the case toward the end of last year, when he had apparently gone through a growth spurt and not had the opportunity to take care of it in regards to his wardrobe. "I dare say I actually look quite handsome."

Hermione and Remus both made an enormous production of gagging at this.

Hermione, who had to spread her money thin, was prepared to buy second-hand robes when Sirius placed a hand on her shoulder.

"I thought you said you had enough money?"

"I earned enough over the summer to pay for everything," Hermione said, looking down at the price tag of the robes she was trying on. Now she had a distinct feeling of what it was like to be Ron. "But I have to conserve what I have, because it's all I've got."

Sirius folded his arms, his expression turned both serious and concerned. "Why are you so determined to do everything yourself?"

Hermione winced. "I don't want you guys to feel like you have to help me."

"Hermione, we don't have to help, we want to help," Sirius told her, taking the robes out of her hand and waving them away, where they floated themselves back on their rack. He took her arm and led her to the other side of the store, where Hermione had shopped often with her parents and two best friends for her robes in previous years. "D'you know that I live at James's place now? Ran away from home last year. I have enough money from my Uncle Alphard to buy a house, but James insists I live with him instead until we leave school and get a job."

Hermione bit her lower lip in indecision as Sirius waved Madam Malkin over to help her try on a fresh set of robes. The woman bustled over in their direction, and he continued;

"Just let us do nice stuff for you," he insisted, as Madam Malkin spelled the new robes onto Hermione's body and began magically adjusting them. "That's what friends do. Save the money you earned over the summer for emergencies and when you want to buy yourself something pretty. Or
new quills," he added, laughing at the look on Hermione's face. "You're always running out of quills."

"You're sure?" Hermione asked, as Madam Malkin spelled the robes back off, replacing them with Hermione's old pair, and receiving a nod from Sirius, collected two sets and carried them off to the front to total them up.

"If it makes you feel better, you can pay us back later," Sirius said, holding a straight face. "We'll charge you interest, and ask for your arm, leg, and first born child."

Hermione grinned sheepishly, and unable to hold it back any further, broke into laughter. "Thank you, Sirius."

They paid for their things, and were about to leave when the door opened. Hermione stiffened when she saw two very familiar faces enter, one more a more welcome sight than the other. She had only ever seen Lucius Malfoy once, but even at the age of twenty-six, his appearance had changed little. The only noticeable difference, other than the fact that he was missing a great deal of lines on his face, was the fact that he did not carry a cane. Hermione supposed that would come later.

Severus stood next to him, and he took in the scene in front of him, with Hermione preparing to leave with two of the Marauders at her side. His eyes flitted about the room, as though looking for a third, and then rested on Hermione.

Sirius and Remus both growled low in their throats, and Hermione was afraid that they were going to start fighting right here in the shop. Remus had little trouble with Severus, but even she had a hard time not whipping out her wand and hexing Malfoy's supercilious sneer off his pale, pointy face.

"Well, well," Malfoy drawled, "if it isn't Potter's dogs. Did he pick up a stray Mudblood cat, too?"

Hermione held her arms out on either side, lightly touching her companions on the arm to ask them to please keep their temper in check. No wands were pulled out, but the hostile glares remained in place. She stood up straight, nose in the air, and stepped up to Severus until she was almost nose to nose with him.

"How was your summer?" she asked, ignoring Malfoy entirely. She saw the blond man twitch at this, clearly incensed at the snub.

"Eventful," Severus responded, his tone neutral, perhaps even dismissive, but his eyes demanded to know what she thought she was doing. He was sneering at her, as though repulsed by her proximity to him, but nevertheless engaged in what could have passed for politeness. "Yours?"

Hermione suddenly felt a strange sort of proding against her consciousness, and it took only a split second for her to realize that it was Severus—attempting Legilimency on her. He slipped through for only a moment, because Hermione slammed her defenses down on him like a guillotine. Returning to the present, she saw the surprise and recoil in his eyes.

"Eventful," Hermione echoed in a similarly calm and uninflective tone, tilting her head to one side as she looked at him. "You've grown another inch. Lovely. That would explain why you'd need new robes, I think," she said, taking a step to the side. "Please, don't let my presence here stop you. I'll be a thorn in your side soon enough. Enjoy yourself," she added lightly, gesturing to Remus and Sirius to follow her as she slipped right past him. He stiffened as their shoulders brushed. "See you at the Welcoming Feast."

Remus and Sirius were out of the shop with her in a flash, and they turned around to watch the door
close behind them. Malfoy was wearing an ugly sneer, and Severus looked oddly puzzled and bored. With a smug smile, Hermione grabbed Remus and Sirius by the arm and began dragging them off in the direction of the apothecary.

"Well, Hermione," Sirius said, once they were out of eavesdropping range of the shop, his tone faintly impressed, even admiring. "You sure know how to get under Malfoy's skin."

"It's a talent," Hermione said, now distracted as she consulted her list to see what ingredients they needed to stock up on.

"That was crazy, but brilliant," Sirius said, and he lowered his voice as they entered the shop. "And the look on Snape's face—the greasy git! You caught them both completely off-guard!"

"I thought Snape was your friend," Remus said, eyeing the aconite on the shelf with a wary eye before picking up a jar and reluctantly sniffing it.

"He is," Hermione said sardonically, double-checking her list before pulling a jar of lionfish spines off a shelf. "But you really can't expect us to go off and chat amiably when we've got you two and Lucius Malfoy to contend with. I rather imagine it would turn into a massacre."

Remus shrugged. "It's just that one would sort of expect the two of you to be—well—friendlier toward each other."

"The way Snivellus acted back there?" Sirius quipped. "That almost passed as gentlemanly for him."

Hermione shook her head, smiling, but didn't respond. She was too busy going over what had happened at Madam Malkin's in her head. Severus had used Legilimency on her—or had at least tried. She was certain that he had never done so before, and knew that he had seen absolutely nothing of any import. Hermione had already shoved all her thoughts and memories of her past life into the back of her mind; it would take some significant digging to come upon it.

But the look on his face when she had thrown him out had been one of complete shock—and possibly pain. Hermione had not been gentle. Her training with Moody and Kingsley had taught her not to be gentle. In truth, Hermione was not really angry at him for trying. He had probably wanted to know what she was doing, what her intentions were when she was putting him in such a precarious position in front of his friend, and he had decided to use a silent and—so he thought—undetectable and efficient way to do it.

That was another thing. Where had he learned that spell?

The answer that came was a sobering one for Hermione as she carried her stuff up to the front of the apothecary to pay for her things. She had always assumed that Professor Snape had learned Occlumency either on his own or had tutored under Professor Dumbledore. It had not occurred—no, she hadn't wanted to even think about it—but she hadn't truly given much thought to the idea that Voldemort would have taught him. She would have laughed it off; why would Voldemort teach his servants such complicated, delicate, disciplined magic when he considered them all expendable pawns? But the truth was that Voldemort was more than capable of differentiating between thug-like pawns and versatile knights. They were all expendable to him, but some were more useful than others, and were thus more worthy of the time and energy it took into maximizing their potential for his benefit.

Severus was disciplined. He was cunning and sharp. He excelled in dark magic in a way that made Hermione think he was practically born to do it. In a manner of speaking, this made him as much of a threat to Voldemort as he was useful, which was why Hermione would have thought that teaching
Severus—or having a fellow Death Eater teach him—would have been something the Dark Lord would have had the brains to avoid for the sake of keeping Severus vulnerable enough to be kept under his thumb.

But Voldemort was clearly too prideful, too confident, too secure in his own prowess to think that Severus would ever become skilled enough at Occlumency to surpass his own Legilimency skills.

Hermione shook her head and sighed. She had no doubt that Severus would confront her about this incident when they met again at Hogwarts.

How would this continuing division of sides affect their fledgling friendship?

~o~O~o~

When Hermione said good-bye to her friends later that evening, after all seven of them—the four Marauders plus Mary, Hermione, and Lily—had eaten out at the Leaky Cauldron for dinner, she Flooed back to Hogwarts, directly into Professor McGonagall's office. The professor in question was in there, enjoying a book and a biscuit. She paid Hermione little attention as she swept in, only looking up to give her a tight smile in greeting before returning to her book.

Hermione promptly went to bed after setting her new purchases aside, and woke up the next morning to find that the house elves had put them all away. Only slightly annoyed with this, Hermione nevertheless summoned breakfast and then went down to the library with her new schoolbooks to get a head-start on reading.

Professor Dumbledore found her curled up between two bookcases in the corner of the library, next to a stained-glass window, that was so secluded that students rarely ever went there. It was the same place Hermione had gone to comfort Severus that morning after the incident with the Shrieking Shack. This spot was a quiet comfort to Hermione, and it was no surprise that she decided to do her reading there.

"I see you're getting ahead on your reading already," Dumbledore told her cheerfully as he summoned a chair for himself and sat down.

Hermione looked up, lowering The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6 only slightly. "It's a good way to pass the time," she supplied.

"Have you been practicing your Occlumency lately?" Dumbledore inquired calmly. For all Hermione knew, he could have been talking about the weather or the latest news on Quidditch. Her eyebrows rose slightly at this, and then her eyes narrowed.

"Yes," she answered honestly, sitting up a little straighter and setting her book face down on her lap. "I had a run-in with Severus yesterday."

"I see," Dumbledore waited patiently for her to go on.

Hermione sighed, and let it all out in one breath. "Over the summer, someone's taught him Legilimency. He… he tried to use it on me when I ran into him at Madam Malkin's, in Diagon Alley."

Dumbledore steepled his fingers together, his expression thoughtful. "How did that make you feel?"

Hermione gave the headmaster a wry smile. "Annoyed."

"You won't be sharing very many of your classes with Severus this year," Dumbledore observed.
"I won't be sharing any of them with him," Hermione corrected. "He's in seventh-year Arithmancy now. I'm stuck with the fifth and sixth years, I suppose," she finished, sounding rather unhappy at this prospect.

"That's quite a disappointment," the Headmaster mused. "The two of you worked so well together, and I rather think you helped ease the pain of his loneliness during those last two months." His eyes twinkled with merriment as he added, "Septima had quite a bit to say about your collaborative skills."

Hermione grinned sheepishly at this, but her smile subsided quickly. "I feel like I just found a friend in him—someone who's my intellectual equal, you see—and I feel as though I'm already losing him."

"We don't know what we have until it's gone," Dumbledore said simply, with a sad half-smile. "I'm certain, however, that Severus has come to value your friendship more than he lets on."

Hermione smiled faintly, not at all convinced. "I hope you're right, sir."

Dumbledore left shortly after, leaving Hermione to her thoughts and her book. She spent the next two weeks coming back to the library and reading, and then on the night of September 1st, she was startled by the sound of footsteps. She was still waiting for the train to arrive, and it seemed quite late already, but—

Severus Snape rounded the corner and stopped just outside the cozy cave of literature Hermione had esconced herself in for the last couple of days. His eyebrows rose when he saw her books stacked around her, and he frowned.

"You weren't at the Welcoming Feast," he said coolly. He picked his way through the mess until he was less than a foot away, towering over her in a manner that intimidatingly reminiscent of Professor Snape. "I wondered why—I should have guessed it would be books."

"I didn't hear the students come in," Hermione said, standing up slowly, her book sliding from her lap. "I take that to mean I missed the sorting?"

"I'm afraid so," Severus drawled.

"Oh, well," Hermione said with a sigh, pointing her wands at her books. A flick, and they all returned themselves neatly into her bookbag, which Hermione reached down to hoist over her shoulder. "I was rather hoping to hear the Sorting Hat's song."

"It was rubbish," Severus said dismissively, stepping back to allow Hermione to pass before following her. "It's the same stuff as always. I wouldn't be surprised if the hat sits atop a thesaurus all year, looking up new ways to say the same thing twice."

Hermione giggled at this, and they set off through the library.

"Regardless of the hat's feeble attempts at creativity, you missed dinner," Severus noted, sounding bored. "Are you going to starve for the rest of the night?"

"No, I'll summon some leftovers to my room," Hermione said with a shrug. "The elves are always willing to help."

"I'll walk you to Gryffindor Tower," Severus offered.

"Don't you need to head down to bed?" Hermione asked.
He gave a derisive snort. "We need to talk."

Hermione pursed her lips. "Do we?"

"I don't see how it can be avoided, Hermione," Severus said, grabbing her shoulder and turning her around on the spot. His demeanor was completely serious. "There are some things that need to be answered, in regards to your… actions."

"What about your own actions?" Hermione whispered, leaning forward until her face was less than an inch from his, her voice low so as to keep eavesdropping portraits from gathering fodder for gossip. "You had no right to probe into my mind. I was only defending myself."

"You were treading on thin ice," Severus said sharply, his voice lowered to match hers. "Provoking Lucius like that only makes things worse for you."

"Worse how?" Hermione demanded quietly.

She saw Severus's eyes flicker uncertainly over her face, and then he replied in as dispassionate a tone as he could muster, "You have caught the Dark Lord's attention."

"I don't believe I know what you're talking about." Hermione made to draw away, but Severus grabbed the neck of her robes and pulled her forward, until his mouth was level with her ear.

"Think, Hermione!" Severus hissed. "You're a Muggle-born, which instantly makes you a target. Furthermore, you are extremely talented, which makes you a threat. To top it off, you have drawn attention to yourself by your sudden appearance last April, as well as your orphan status. As if that was not enough, you have defied him twice—first, with that stunt you pulled at The Three Broomsticks, the second time with Lucius back in Diagon Alley."

"You heard about what happened in The Three Broomsticks?" Hermione repeated.

"Rowle was howling with fury," Severus said, releasing her. "After he realized he'd been tricked, he tried to find you again, but word was that you quit your job the next day."

"I did," Hermione told him archly. "I didn't fancy another run-in with him."

"You should have been sorted into Slytherin," Severus said, giving her a thin-lipped smile. "You know when to run and hide and when to stand your ground."

"You mistake common sense for cunning," Hermione told him, but she was smiling and relaxed now. Switching subjects, she added, "I've missed you, you know. I was quite bored without you to talk to. Are we still on for studying in the library in the evening?"

"Yes. It's a shame I won't have you in my Arithmancy class, though."

They had resumed walking again, and left the library, heading down the corridor closest to the hall of staircases. "How many OWLs did you get?"

"Nine 'Outstandings' and one 'Exceeds Expectations,'" Hermione said, scowling.

"Merlin, you actually sound disappointed," he drawled.

Hermione glared at him, and then her expression softened with tiredness and she sighed. "I expected to do better in Defense Against the Dark Arts," she admitted, "but I guess it's always been my weakness. When I was fourteen, I failed the final part of my end-of-year exam when I ended up facing a boggart."
"Don't tell me you ran away screaming," Severus snorted.

Hermione's face turned red. "I did."

"What was it?"

"My… my Transfiguration teacher." Severus arched an eyebrow at her, and she elaborated resignedly, "She told me that I'd failed everything."

Severus stared at her for a moment in utter disbelief, and then crossed his arms over his chest, threw back his head, and laughed.

~o~O~o~

Hermione had already had her schedule taken care of, so while Professor McGonagall went down the Gryffindor Table to clear up everyone's schedules in conjunction to the NEWTs they wanted to take, Hermione ate her breakfast, bid good-bye to her friends, and trotted off to her first class.

Severus caught up with her, and the two began walked toward the third floor, where Hermione had Defense Against the Dark Arts first.

"I've been meaning to speak to you about this," he said in a low voice, not wanting to be overheard despite the fact that the corridors were nearly deserted, save for the portraits. But the portraits had open ears and working tongues, which Hermione supposed was reason enough. "I saw Lily with Potter back in Diagon Alley, at Fortescue's."

His tone demanded an answer. Hermione sighed, not wanting to be made the bearer of bad news, but knowing she was going to have to be the one to break it to him regardless. "They're together, yes."

Severus swore. "Damn him."

"You shouldn't worry about that right now," Hermione told him, stopping in front of the door to the classroom. "Focus on your classes. Worry about Lily later."

She saw Severus's face contort bitterly, and then he turned away to leave for his own classroom, which was on the next floor. Hermione shook her head, wishing there was something she could do for him to get his mind off of Lily. But there was really very little she could do for him; this was something he was going to have to work out on his own. She watched him disappear around the corner and then entered the classroom.

Last year's Defense teacher was absent, Hermione noted as she took her seat. Rumors in the Gryffindor Common Room last night claimed he had gone on a trip to Africa when term ended, and had been eaten by a nundu. Hermione winced at the thought, wondering if the Defense job was still jinxed, and looked over at the new teacher, who was sitting at his desk scribbling on a piece of parchment.

Class began, and he promptly stood up, flicking his wand toward the board. The name 'Gerard Faulkner' began to write itself on the board in a sharp, pointed scrawl. He appeared to be middle-aged, with dark hair and light grey eyes. He spoke softly, but authoritatively.

"My name is Professor Faulkner," he said, coming around to lean against the front of his desk to face the class. "I will be your new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. I do not expect to return next year." His voice was calm and matter-of-fact about this. "What you get out of this class depends entirely on how much you put into it. I will give you no quarter." He tapped his wand against the desk. "You have been warned."
It was a rather sobering statement to hear on the first day of class.

"You are now sixth-year students," Faulkner said steadily. "You will be expected to practice using non-verbal spells. Points will be given for success. They will be taken away for attempts to cheat. There is no negotiation with me on this. I have one year to teach you all to be proficient at defending yourself, and then I will be moving on to a new job in the Mariana Islands." He smiled faintly at this. "Part of defending yourself is knowing how to do it silently. It provides you a split-second of advantage over your opponent if they cannot discern what spell you are about to cast from verbalization alone, and every second counts."

The class shifted uneasily at this, some looking interested, others looking as though they wished they had dropped this class first chance they got.

"You will now divide yourself," Faulkner said evenly, "into pairs. One will be on the offensive, the other on the defensive. Both will participate in complete silence." He gestured at the class. "Begin."

_I'll take him over Umbridge any day_, Hermione thought as she got to her feet. The students in the class quickly divided themselves up into pairs, and Hermione found herself facing Barty Crouch. He gave her a nasty smirk, positioned himself several feet away from her, and leisurely aimed his wand.

Hermione had her wand up and at the ready. She stood there, waiting patiently for nearly twenty minutes for a spell that didn't seem as though it would be materializing. Crouch's face turned red with unrewarded effort. All around the room, some students were cheating by muttering the spell under their breath. Faulkner deducted points from the guilty pairs, gave them a few suggestions, and then moved on.

A flash of orange suddenly burst from the tip of Crouch's wand, and Hermione flicked her wand at him, silently repelling it with a Shield Charm.

"Excellent," Faulkner said, passing by them. "Fifteen points to Slytherin and Gryffindor, each. Carry on."

Incensed by the ease with which Hermione had silently repelled his jinx, Crouch began shooting at her rapidly, occasionally fumbling the spell, but otherwise managing to do admirably well for a first time. It was remarkable that as soon as he figured out how to do it once, he was now doing it with rapidly-climbing ease. He had apparently gotten the gist of it now, and was practicing in earnest. Hermione flicked his spells away with lazy, repetitive flicks of her wand. Eventually, tired of being nothing but the target, Hermione ducked his last spell and shot a Confundus Charm at him.

Crouch was woefully unprepared for this, and ended up being thrown back into the desks behind him. He struggled to stand, wearing a bemused and dizzy look, scrambling at the desks around him for purchase. Faulkner clapped appreciatively at this.

"Excellent," he repeated as before. "You caught your opponent unawares, and furthermore, silently. Another fifteen points to Gryffindor."

Crouch bared his teeth at her, and looked as though he were about to attempt to exact revenge when the bell rang, signalling that class was dismissed.

_Saved by the bell_, Hermione thought smugly as she packed her bags up and headed out.

~o~O~o~

Hermione's classes went smoothly, or as smoothly as could be expected. The workload had increased near-exponentially. The other teachers started off the year by reminding them that they
were now NEWT students, and then assigning them a load of homework that Hermione overheard many students swearing was an inhumane and punishable amount. She ignored them. When she left dinner later that evening, she headed straight for the library, after James and Sirius had bid good-bye and gone off to the Quidditch Pitch for one-on-one practice.

She found her usual table, spread her stuff out, and began chipping away.

Severus joined her an hour later. Hermione greeted him with a smile—which he did not return—and returned to her work. They sat in utter and complete, somewhat sullen, silence until Hermione finally set her thirteen-inch Charms essay aside and leaned back in her chair to look at him.

"How much work do you have?" she asked, eyeing the papers scattered over at his end of the table. He snorted. "A lot."

"Can you give me an estimate for when you'll be finished with it?"

"Some of it is due later this week," he said tightly. "I'm finishing it all now."

"Alright, then," Hermione said, standing up to gather her stuff. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Severus's head shot up. "No—wait," he said, setting his quill down. "Why are you leaving?"

"Because I've finished, and I have better things I can do with my time than sit here and watch you work and sulk," Hermione said stiffly.

Severus glared at her, and then subsided with a sigh and looked back down at his work. He brought a finger to his lips, tracing them the way he did when he was deep in thought.

"Give me fifteen minutes to finish this, and then we'll go down to the lake," he said, picking up his quill and resuming the paragraph he'd left off.

Hermione gathered her stuff up, and then wandered over to the closest bookshelf to find something to read. She browsed through for several minutes, before she heard the sound of shuffling papers, and turned around to find Severus putting his stuff away. He slung his book bag over his shoulder, indicated that Hermione should grab hers, and strode away.

Hermione followed him, jogging to catch up, and they walked through the corridors and down the stairs in complete silence until they reached the Entrance Hall. They pushed through the doors, and Severus began stiffly, "There's a lot you've been keeping to yourself since your arrival."

The door ground shut behind them, as they descended the steps into the courtyard. "We both have our fair share of secrets, Severus," Hermione responded calmly, adjusting her bag over her shoulder.

"No one knows a single thing about you," Severus said, his lips curling into a sneer. "You at first appear unremarkable, and then you pull off a stunt like the one in Diagon Alley."

Hermione whipped around to look at him. "What is your problem?" she demanded, starting to get fed up with his erratic, caustic behavior. She knew he was a temperamental git, but damn it, she didn't need this right now. "If you don't want to get burned, don't play with fire. It's that simple."

"My problem is that I don't know a single thing about you!" his voice was laced with pent-up frustration. "I've come to realize that even what I observe from you isn't the truth in its entirety—you claim Defense Against the Dark Arts to be your worst subject, yet you manage to knock Barty Crouch flat without breaking sweat!"
"Oh, he complained about that to you, did he?" Hermione asked, narrowing her eyes at him.

"He was just like Rowle," Severus snapped. "He complained to anyone who would listen. You just keep pulling this stuff from out of nowhere, and other than the fact that it's eventually going to get you killed, I am thoroughly fed up with being caught off guard."

Hermione stiffened, shored up her defenses, and gave him a look of icy calm.

"Anyone who tries to pull something over me is going to be caught off guard," she told him quietly. She turned away, looking out at the lake's glittering shore in the distance. "I don't want to lose you as a friend, Severus, particularly since I already feel like its happening. But if I have secrets of my own, I'll share them if and when I feel like it. Much like you, I suppose." She turned around again to face him. "Can't we just have what we had before?"

Severus was examining her face quietly, as though looking for something, but Hermione didn't feel him probing or poking at her mind with his. He was still keeping his distance on that one, though he looked like he desperately wanted to know what was going on inside her head. Finally, he relented with a sullen nod.

Hermione smiled faintly for a moment, and then it vanished as she brought up yet another unpleasant topic. "I know you have your own troubles to contend with. I don't doubt that your housemates in Slytherin are putting you in a difficult position, and I know that I probably only exacerbate the problem. And then there's Lily…" she trailed off.

Severus pursed his lips and moved to lean against one of the columns supporting the overhanging roof of the steps. "I know I will never get Lily back," he said finally, "but that doesn't make me care for her any less— and I can't help being infuriated by the fact that Potter never ceases to gloat at every chance he gets."

"James doesn't gloat," Hermione said, with a frown.

"Not in front of you, he doesn't," Severus sneered.

"Just ignore it, then," Hermione said with a sigh. She pressed her fingers against her forehead, willing the part of her brain that wanted to go out and just start hexing everyone silly until they learned to behave to subside. Unfortunately, the other side of her brain seemed to think that it had a valid point. "You're disciplined enough to perform Legilimency, Severus. Surely you also possess the self-control to look as though you couldn't care less about James Potter."

Severus gave her a sullen glare.

"I know what's happened between the two of you," Hermione said tiredly. Glancing over at the lake, she could see that the tip of the sun was beginning to dip into the water, setting the lake alight with reddish-orange hues. The sun was starting to go down. "I know that the Marauders have made your life a living hell since they first laid eyes on you. It's also not difficult to see just how much you're still hurting from what happened with Lily. But Lily's made her own choices too," Hermione added softly. "She likes James, and my impression is that you broke her trust in you when you lost your temper. It's just how things happen sometimes. You can't control other peoples' actions just by your will alone."

"What would you have done?" Severus snapped.

"Well," Hermione said dryly, "I would have slapped you and then demanded an apology."

"I threatened to sleep outside Gryffindor Tower until she gave me a chance to apologize," Severus
responded dully. "She wouldn't forgive me."

"Then that's just Lily," Hermione said firmly, and then sighed. "It's not what I would have done, mind, but…"

"I just want her to be safe," Severus said quietly, refusing to look at her. "She used to be my only friend, and even if she isn't now, I still want the best for her. Even if it's not me."

"I hate to tell you this, but James Potter is a strong wizard," Hermione pointed out, her voice gentle. "He's quite clever, and good with spells. He may be about as mature as his shoe size, but if anyone can protect Lily and make her happy at the same time, I think it's him."

"You would know," Severus responded bitterly.

Sadly enough, Hermione had to agree with him. Glancing back at the lake, where the sun was now drowning in the waters on the horizon, she gestured at it.

"Shall we go?"
~o~O~o~

Hermione took James aside that evening, after they'd returned to Gryffindor Tower from dinner. Hermione relayed her concerns to him, and James sighed and ruffled his hair, looking rather put-out.

"I don't mean to shove it in his face, I really don't," he said. "But Lily and I sit next to each other in nearly every class now, and I thought—what's the harm with being friendly?"

Hermione's lips twitched. She saw both sides of the issue rather clearly, but there was simply no real resolution. She sighed and ran a hand through her wild curls, trying to think of the most tactful way to say this.

"Severus," she began, "accepts that you and Lily are together. He's not happy with it, but he accepts it. But the breakup of their friendship still hurts, you know, and seeing her with you— well, let's face it, James. That's just pouring some very thick salt solution into the wound. You and Sirius go out of your way to make his life miserable, and now that you've won Lily's hand, I think it's fair to ask that you stop trying to jinx him every chance you get."

"I still don't get what you see in that git," James said, cracking a smile, "but I suppose that is a fair request, especially if it'll make things easier on you."

"Thank you, James," Hermione said, genuinely gratified.

"But I can't promise I won't hex him if he does first," James bargained.

"I'll pass on the message," Hermione promised. "And Sirius?"

"I'll make sure he behaves, too." James ruffled his hair once more, and then admitted, "not that he really needs me to, now. I think he's learned his lesson."

"He has?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Well, he hasn't been hexing Snape, has he?" James pointed out. Hermione had to concede this was true; she had witnessed nothing, and there had been no complaints from Severus. "I promised Lily I'd stop hexing people for fun, and… well…"

He trailed off, but Hermione understood implicitly what he was saying. James and Sirius were no
longer successfully egging each other on to have a go at Severus. Without that kind of motivation, and the disaster from the end of last year, there really was not much reason to continue picking on Severus Snape at all.

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The first week of school came and went, and Hermione had settled into a comfortable routine, which was more than could be said for her fellow classmates, who were still struggling heavily with their new coursework. Many of them went to the Head Girl to get a copy of her old notes when their teachers' lessons had flown right over their heads, and Lily was forced to divide her time between walking around the Quidditch Pitch with James and supplying the younger students with notes and tutorial help.

For once in her life, Hermione was not inclined to take up the slack. She had her own heavy workload to contend with, along with Severus, who was quite enough to deal with on her own without adding moaning classmates who did not bother to go to their teachers for help into the mix. Eventually, Hermione thought, they were going to learn to actually make use of the teachers' office hours and stop relying on Lily Evans as a safety net.

True to James's word, he and Sirius stopped hexing Severus in the corridors on the way to class. Not that they had been hexing him much at all to begin with, just a few retaliatory scuffles in the first week between themselves and a few Slytherins Severus happened to keep company with. But now they actively avoided getting into direct conflict with them. Severus continued to walk with a jumpy twitch in his leg, as though expecting an attack, but James and Sirius simply began to ignore him. Hermione had explained her little agreement with James to her Slytherin companion, but it didn't erase the suspicion and paranoia from his demeanor. Hermione felt as through she were trying to re-train two fighting dogs: Sirius and Severus both looked as though they were itching for a fight, one because he enjoyed hexing, the other because he was convinced that a hex was already set to come his way. It was a tense situation for Hermione to be in, and she was just waiting for one of them to snap. The best that could be said was that it seemed that, as far as hexing went, James had retired from the ring.

Hermione and Severus continued to retreat in the library directly after dinner to get their work done. Sometimes she was done before curfew, and Hermione would pull out Severus's copy of Advanced Potion-Making for a bit of light reading. She was horrified at the degraded state of the book, but found his annotations and comments written in the margins interesting and helpful nonetheless. It took quite a bit of work to interpret his tiny, spiky scrawl, but the results were worth it. At this point, Severus no longer cared if she went through his books; as far as he was concerned, she was welcome to it, so long as she didn't disseminate her gleanings to her Gryffindor friends.

Hermione had no intention of doing so, and thus, spent some of her evenings perusing his book. She found the title at the front denoting the owner as 'The Half-Blood Prince', and she chewed on the question for quite awhile before asking him.

"I'm a half-blood," Severus had replied shortly, not looking up from the essay he was working on. "My mother was a pureblood witch whose maiden surname was 'Prince'. That makes me a half-blooded Prince."

"Your father was a Muggle?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Not a very pleasant one." Severus turned the parchment over and continued writing on the back. His fingers were smudged black with ink, and the base of his quill was completely soaked. He used the opportunity to turn the question around on her. "What about your parents?"
"Both Muggles, as you very well know," Hermione said, chewing on the tip of her quill. "They were good parents. Sometimes, they didn't really seem to understand my passion for the magical world—it was all very foreign to them, you understand—but they were very supportive of me."

A half-smirk curled at the corner of Severus's lips, but he held his silence.

The weeks crawled by. Hermione excelled in all of her classes, though they became increasingly difficult. She even had to ask her teachers to repeat themselves more than once for the meaning of their words to start making sense. Nevertheless, she powered through, and became very popular in Gryffindor when it was clear that the daily amount of points earned were climbing at a quicker rate than the ones from Slytherin house.

She was invited to another Slug Club supper, which she declined due to her heavy workload. The first Quidditch match of the season was fast approaching, however, and it was all James and Sirius would ever talk about. When too much broomstick jargon entered the conversation, Hermione would retreat to talking to Remus about classes. After dinner, she always made a beeline for the library. When October 31st rolled around, it was no different; Hermione ate and left in a hurry, giving herself no time to spare to truly savor the good food.

James and Sirius claimed she was suffering from a bad case of "Overwork-itis," and joked that it was probably terminal, and that if that turned out to be the case, could they have all her stuff?

Hermione whacked them both over the head with her planner, which she had out for reference at that moment, and informed them that if their diagnosis was correct, she would come back to haunt them for all eternity.

"I don't think you'd want that," she said, smiling mischievously at James, who was rubbing the back of his head. "You'd never get shagged again in your life."

"Oi!" Sirius called, as she turned away to leave. "That was way below the belt! Literally!"

But when the Saturday Quidditch match arrived, Hermione poured out with all the other faculty and students, decked out in house colors in support of her team. The year had begun with a match between Gryffindor and Slytherin, as usual, and the game was as dirty as any other Slytherin-Gryffindor match Hermione had ever seen. Sirius was a beater for Gryffindor, and he had a tendency to stick by James for the sole purpose of hitting a Bludger away from the Gryffindor seeker. In the air or on the ground, it was clear just how close the two Marauders were. Like brothers, in fact, and it was a wonder to Hermione how anyone could have ever believed Sirius capable of betraying his friend; it would be comparable to Fred selling George out. Inconceivable was not sufficient to cover it. It was simply beyond the realm of all possibility.

She had looked over at Peter Pettigrew, who was sitting between Mary and Remus, clapping when Gryffindor scored, and felt momentarily ill.

The match concluded with a celebration in the Gryffindor Common Room. Someone had brought an old record player and charmed it so that it played popular disco music. Hermione was certain the room was loud enough that all of Hogwarts castle could hear them partying. Someone had spelled all the furniture away, probably somewhere upstairs, and Sirius had commandeered the center of the room with Marlene McKinnon, who was one of Gryffindor's chasers, and they were square dancing. All around them, people were laughing and cheering.

Hermione shook her head, unable to resist smiling. Gryffindor had never celebrated in any way remotely like this in her time. They had absolutely nothing on the organized, celebratory chaos taking place in this room.
She watched James take Lily's hand and lead her onto the floor with a happy grin on his face; a moment later, they were dancing and twirling with wild, juvenile steps. The cheering in the room grew louder at this by several octaves, and Hermione actually had to place her hands over her ears for fear that her eardrums would burst and bleed.

A few moments later, the volume died down to barely acceptable levels, and everyone had started clapping and cheering together as the rest of the Gryffindor Quidditch team hauled themselves and a dance partner in the center of the room. Hermione began clapping along with them in earnest, grinning broadly now as she watched them all dance, drunk with glory, adrenaline, and the loud, energetic beat of the music.

Tango music began to play, and Hermione covered her face with her hands as the entire Gryffindor team, complete with their dance partners, began to massacre the dance moves.

She wormed her way through the crowd over to where food and drinks had been imported from the kitchen, and got herself a butterbeer. She took a sip, and turned around in time to see James Potter grasp Lily Evans and lift her up, twirling her and causing her dark red hair to fly around them like a halo. She was laughing and smiling, eyes sparkling brightly, and when James set her down, she kissed him.

There was another roaring cheer as the music changed back to disco, with everyone jumping and clapping, screaming and wolf-whistling as the victorious lions had their victory celebration. Hermione found it almost unbelievable how revered Quidditch players were in this time; in Gryffindor, they were being treated like heroes and celebrities. They hadn't even won the Quidditch Cup, and they had everything. Nothing, absolutely nothing in Hermione's time could even remotely compare to this. Not even the celebration in Hermione's third year, which had been followed by Sirius sneaking into Gryffindor Tower to look for Scabbers, had reached anything of this magnitude. Neither had any of the celebrations during the Tri-Wizard tournament. This was simply an entirely different level of partying.

Professor McGonagall showed up around midnight to send them all off to bed. This required the daunting task of silencing the music, then silencing the crowd, and then struggling to be heard over the noise of people still clapping and stomping, untouched by the Silencing Spell, which required a third spell to be cast. Then it required ordering them all off to bed which, once the charms were removed, resulted in a series of loud groans, protests, and the music being turned back on.

It was not an easy task for the Gryffindor Head-of-House, but she managed it in the end. The room was cleaned up, people were sent up to bed, and the remaining food and drinks were fetched by the house elves.

Hermione saw several couples kissing each other good-night before they parted, James and Lily included.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
"What the bloody hell do you Gryffindors do up there?" Severus growled tiredly at her, slumping against the wall. They were hanging out in one of the corridors that gave them a nice view of the lake, rather than going to the lake themselves, because it was raining extremely hard. "We could hear you all the way down in our common room!"

Hermione grinned unrepentantly. "Sorry."

"What do you do up there? Transfigure yourselves into trolls and have at it?"

"We turn on music," Hermione said, smiling broadly now, still drunk with giddiness from last night's memory. "It all goes downhill from there."

"Fuck you." Severus turned away to lean out the window, resting his chin on his arms, looking both tired and sullen. "Fuck you Gryffindors and your loud parties."

"Did we keep you guys up all night?" Hermione asked, giggling both at his frustration and slip of ineloquency.

"Yes," Severus growled.

"Silencing Spells didn't occur to you?"

"Silencing Spells didn't work. They only held for all of five minutes before they broke."

Hermione whistled. "Wow."

Rain pattered down against the roof, and Severus drew away and shut the window as the wind redirected the rain, causing it to pound against the panes. He sighed, and then let out a groan.

"How much sleep did you guys get?" Hermione asked, leaning against the window, where she looked into Severus's tired face. He almost looked like a regular sleep-deprived teen, from this angle.

"I honestly don't know. The music stopped at around twelve, but a little bit before then, some of the upperclassmen got into an argument with their wands. We couldn't sleep while they were fighting, and it took Slughorn a ridiculous amount of time to get down here to break them up—and then we all had to pitch in to repair the damage." Severus rubbed his face tiredly. "We probably didn't get to sleep until around four in the morning."

Hermione winced. "Do you mind if I ask what you lot were fighting about?"

"Quidditch."

"Unbelievable."

"I thought so, too."
Classes were steadily getting more and more difficult. They were becoming more advanced, more complex, and with heavier homework assignments in addition to difficult classwork. Potions was a near-disaster for Hermione at one point; Golpalott's third law of potions was easy to understand, but difficult to put into action.

She went to Severus for help. He listened patiently as she described the assignment with much frustration and rambling, and then cut her short with his response: "Just shove a bezoar down their throat."

Hermione was outraged. "That is the singularly most unhelpful thing I've ever heard!"

"Really? Even a dunderhead could follow those instructions." Severus was smirking at her now. "Sounds rather helpful to me, if you've been poisoned and are trying communicate to the idiot next to you that you need assistance."

"Yes, but what about when bezoars don't work?" Hermione demanded.

"You die," he responded simply.

"Severus!"

"Fine," the Slytherin grumbled, leaning back in his chair with a sigh. "Sit down and I'll show you."

Defense Against the Dark Arts, which had come quite easily at the beginning of the year, was now well on its way to becoming harrowingly difficult. There was an uneven ratio of Slytherins to all other houses in the class, which meant that more often than not, Hermione was paired up with a Slytherin who wanted to hex her brains out. They played dirty with spells Hermione thought were rather inappropriate for a classroom—such as the Entrail-Expelling Curse—and had begun paying them back in equal measure, not with dangerous spells, but in humiliation. This was usually in the form of jinxing them bald or transfiguring them.

Barty Crouch, Jr. spent a good five minutes of one lesson flapping around the classroom frantically as a yellow budgie while Hermione tried to hit him with a De-feathering Charm. Hermione was smugly satisfied with her work by the end of class, and had an additional thirty points added to the Gryffindor hourglass to show for it. In fact, Transfiguring the lip-licking Slytherin into a canary had become such a commonplace trick for Hermione that it had become her nickname for him.

But it wasn't all entertainment and amusement to Hermione. Faulkner brought in pictures of inferi, and assigned them a two-foot essay to be turned in the next day. That had honestly been a bit of a nightmare, especially given the speedy and gruesome research that had had to be done that evening. Looking up dead and reanimated corpses was not a pleasant activity to do before going to sleep. Then there were difficult spells they had to learn, ones that focused mostly on identifying already-existing dark magic within objects, with spells that were more complicated and less intrusive than a simple 'specialis revelio' would provide. They had to practice on crystal balls Faulkner had borrowed from the current divination teacher and imbued with a hex that would cause the ball to lash out at someone if the spell was done incorrectly. Hermione was not the only student who ended up with a gash on her face for her troubles.

All in all, it was not a picnic. Not by a long shot. But there were enjoyable moments to be had, whether it was Hermione playing Gobstones or Exploding Snap with her housemates, or spending time with Severus.
By early December, however, more disturbing reports had begun to leak into the papers. The Daily Prophet was reporting at least one death or disappearance a week, and Hermione was getting edgy and worried. Severus swore he didn't know a thing about it, but Hermione honestly was not sure if she could—or should—believe him. Professor Dumbledore was also missing from the High Table fairly often, which put Hermione into a state of unease. Hogwarts, at least, felt safe as long as the Headmaster was there. Without him, it felt vulnerable.

The day before Christmas break, she stopped Severus on the way to lunch and pulled him aside, shoving a copy of the Daily Prophet into his chest. Tears were rolling down her cheeks as Severus slowly opened the paper to the headlines, where it described the most gruesome and disturbing news yet: an entire wizarding family had been found dead in their home, two parents with four children. The bodies all showed signs of torture that had occurred before death and post-mortem desecration. The father had been a Ministry worker, and the mother a Muggle.

The article had disturbed Hermione enough that she finally broke.

"Is this really the madman you want to serve?" she cried.

Severus's face had been impassive, but his eyes were frightened. Knowing that there was no possible way the chasm-like divide between them could be resolved now, Hermione left Severus clutching the article and stormed off to Gryffindor Tower to be alone.

Hermione stayed at Hogwarts over the Yule holidays; Severus did not. She holed herself up in Gryffindor Tower or the library, and declined to attend the Slughorn's Christmas supper, telling the Potions Professor that she was feeling unwell. Slughorn, naturally, was very sympathetic and suggested she might see Madam Pomfrey if her bout of flu continued. It was probably for the best that Severus was not there, since Hermione was not feeling too charitable toward him at the moment. It was not that she was truly angry with him; it was the fact that she knew he was selfish enough to join the Death Eaters if it meant gaining protection for one person. Even if she knew he would come to regret and repent it later, right now, he apparently did not. At least not enough to back out. There was a part of Hermione's mind that recognized that despite the lack of a Dark Mark on his arm, Severus was already a part of the fold.

Well, you don't just hand in your resignation to Voldemort. It's a lifetime of service or death. That was part of a conversation between Harry and his godfather that her bespectacled friend had later relayed to her. Severus could not simply tell Voldemort or whoever was sponsoring him that he wanted to back out. He would be killed.

Thus, Hermione's main frustration was not truly at Severus, but the man he would soon work for who was behind this senseless cruelty and madness.

Hermione had bought several gifts for her friends over the holidays. Alice got a new chess set. Frank received a package of chocolate cauldrons, which Hermione saw him sharing with Alice in front of the Gryffindor fire later. Mary received an Appleby Arrow's poster, since she was so fond of the team. She got Lily a pair of lion-shaped earrings that really roared, and gave James a copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages*. Sirius received a pair of thick, woolen mittens Hermione had knitted herself that were charmed to keep snow from seeping through, and Remus received a newspaper clipping from *Potions Monthly* that described a miraculous and promising new potion called Wolfsbane attached to a copy of *Dracula*. Remus had grinned broadly at the irony, and given her an enormous bear hug before presenting her with her gift.

When Severus returned over the holidays, he seemed wary of approaching her. Hermione was feeling rather depressed at the moment and had thrown herself back into her books; Severus didn't seem to dare approach her until later that evening, after dinner, when she headed back to their usual
spot at the library. He had watched her the entire time during meals, trying to gauge whether or not it
was safe to talk to her, and had apparently made up his mind and decided to show up for their usual
evening study session.

When Hermione looked up from her work at the sound of footsteps, she didn't get up and leave, nor
did she tell him to. She didn't even glare at him. Instead, she merely looked resigned and tired as he
came to stand beside her.

"How was your Christmas?" she asked dully.

"Hermione," Severus said quietly.

Hermione shook her head. "Look, just forget it," she said, indicating he should sit. "It's fine. I mean,
it's not fine, but it's not your fault, and I—"

He placed a finger over her lips, effectively silencing her in a manner of surprise. He paused, and
then withdrew his hand and spoke.

"I've known for a long time that you were right," he said softly, his voice barely audible even in the
tangible silence of the library. "I've known for a long time that the Dark Lord is evil and mad, but
there is very little I can do about it at this point. I have so much to lose if I try to run and hide."

Hermione nodded miserably.

"Hermione, I'm sorry."

Hermione stood up and swallowed thickly, trying to make her voice work, so that she could tell him
she understood.

Instead, to her horror, she burst into tears. She tried to wipe them away with the back of her hand,
miserable and upset at the weakness she was displaying, the fact that he probably thought her
ridiculous for crying, that this shite was evening happening in the first place and why couldn't
Voldemort just do them all a favor and choke on a piece of Christmas turkey and drop dead, and
why couldn't she just return to her own time with Harry and Ron—

She was surprised when strong arms wrapped around her, holding her tight. She stiffened for a
moment, and then capitulated and buried her face in his chest, registering his warm, comforting
presence, and cried quietly.

"I want to go home," she choked, her voice reduced to a whimper.

She half-expected him to tell her that she was being silly and childish, or for him to push her away as
soon as he had brought her close, but nothing of the sort came. As Hermione cried quietly, she
couldn't help coming to the realization that she was being neither childish nor silly; she was nearing
adulthood in a world where darkness was rising, and nothing about their situation was the least bit
funny or frivolous. She was under an exorbitant amount of academic stress, afraid of the strange new
world she had been thrust in, and Severus was a significant part of the terror she felt. She trusted him
as a person, but feared the position he had trapped himself in. He could be killed. He could kill her.
He could kill or be complicit in the murders of any number of people she knew, not because he
wished them dead, but simply because there was one person who he did not feel he could afford to
lose.

Severus spoke quietly. "There's always something we wish we had after we've lost it, and we never
appreciated it until after it was gone."
"I always thought I'd have my friends with me," Hermione hiccuped, her voice bitter. "I was so sure that no matter what we faced, I'd always have them to count on—and just like that, one day, they're gone. Not even a chance to say goodbye." Harry and Ron were technically not dead, but they might as well have been to her; Hermione had little hope of ever seeing them again. "How long until that happens to someone else I know? To James? To Sirius or Remus? To you?"

Severus didn't respond. Hermione didn't blame him. No words were adequate.

~o~O~o~

After that, Hermione kept her back straight and her head high. The pain, guilt, and heaviness that had taken residence in her heart once more continued to weigh her down, but she masked it on the outside and bottled everything else up inside. Whenever she turned to Sirius, she couldn't help seeing him, gaunt and stir-crazy, as he would be in Hermione's time. It would be a momentary flash of memory overlapping the person she was seeing in front of her, but it was there. She saw Remus, careworn and tired. She saw Alice and Frank in St. Mungo's, unable to recognize their son. And she saw Harry whenever she turned to talk to James or Lily, and with a sinking feeling in her gut, realized that they had less than three years left to live.

She forced herself to come to terms with this. She could not save James and Lily. She could not stop Sirius from spending twelve long years in Azkaban. She had a chance of helping Remus, but really, what was there to be done? And Alice and Frank…

She was only able to turn to Severus for comfort. He was a bitter, caustic man in her time, but she rarely saw that in him anymore. Perhaps it was because she already saw traces of bitterness and anger in him as a teenager, but he was nearing manhood—though he was already eighteen, an adult by wizarding standards—and the separation between the two distinct impressions she had of him were less stark. He was as snarky, dictatorial, and exasperating as Hermione ever remembered him, but it was toned down around her. He had fewer of his defenses up around her. With Hermione, he was actually quite reasonable.

Hermione did not realize it was Severus's birthday until he did not arrive at the library at the usual time on Monday, in early January. Twenty minutes later than his usual arrival time, Bellatrix Black made an appearance, giving her a smug, twisted smile as she placed both hands on Hermione's desk, ensuring she had the Gryffindor's full attention.

"Snape won't be taking care of you this evening," she said, gesturing dismissively at the papers scattered around the table. "Pack up and crawl back to your tower where you belong, Mudblood."

Hermione gave her a glare worthy of Medusa. "Why not?"

"We're having a bit of a birthday celebration for him, you know," Bellatrix said, tracing her nails on the table, leaving faint scratches in the wood. Seeing the look of surprise on Hermione's face, her own lit up in delight. "Oh, I'm so sorry. Did he forget to tell you that?"

"It slipped my mind," Hermione lied coolly.

Bellatrix gave her a cruel little smile, and she leaned over until her mouth was level with Hermione’s ear:

"Snape is one of the Dark Lord's most promising recruits, you see," she whispered. Hermione gave no indication that she had heard, and Bellatrix continued, "It's only fitting that his eighteenth birthday be celebrated properly with his brothers-in-arms. You know what that means, don’t you?"
Hermione made no response. Her wand was up her sleeve, and she was more than prepared to hex Bellatrix if she gave any indication of being ready to harm her. But otherwise, she had nothing to say to the witch. Bellatrix answered her silence:

"It means that next summer, he'll take the Dark Mark," she whispered viciously, displeased with the lack of reaction she was getting out of Hermione. "There's only one thing he wants in exchange for his loyalty, and I'm afraid that as his pet Mudblood, you simply don't qualify."

"I have nothing to say to you," Hermione responded evenly, her fingernails digging into the table.

"You uppity—"

_Bang!_

Hermione flew out of her seat and was on her feet in a flash, wand out, and directed between the two bookcases where the spell had originated from. Bellatrix had been thrown off the table and crashed into the side of the bookcase behind her. She stood up a moment later, wand ready and raised, and Severus Snape stepped out of the gloom.

"You shouldn't be here, Bellatrix." His voice was dangerous and silky.

"You should be in the common room!" Bellatrix hissed. "I agreed to deliver your message to the Mudblood—" she spat the word at Hermione with as much disgust as she could muster, "—that you wouldn't be here this evening!"

"I changed my mind," Severus drawled. He looked bored with the proceedings and utterly unphased, but his wand was clenched tightly at his side. "I arrived at the common room and decided I had better things to do with my night than the debauchery that would surely occur in my honor."

"But—"

"It's Monday, Bellatrix. I know you haven't learned the inherent meaning of the word, but it implies that the following day is a working one," Severus snapped. "I have two tests tomorrow which need studying for and are, I think, a better use of my time."

Bellatrix threw Hermione a murderous glare, and then turned back to Severus.

"Have the night with your Gryffindor pet," she spat, adjusting her robes before turning away. "I will inform Avery of your insubordination."

"By all means," Severus said with false courtesy, gesturing at the library exit. "Complain to Avery. I have already made my excuses to him."

"Excuses, excuses," Bellatrix repeated, her voice pitched into a mocking coo. She cast them both a final glare, and then left. "You can't get away with making them forever, Snape."

Hermione waited until she was absolutely certain that the Slytherin witch was gone, and then turned to Severus.

"You didn't tell me that today was your birthday," she said.

"It slipped my mind."

"That's exactly the same thing I told her," Hermione said, cracking a faint smile. "You don't really have two tests tomorrow, do you?"
"I do, actually, but I am well prepared for them," Severus replied coolly, but he was smirking faintly. "What are you working on?"

"Homework due Friday," Hermione said decisively, flicking her wand at the mess on the table and sending everything back into her bag. She stood up. "It's your birthday. What do you want to do?"

Severus's smirk suddenly turned mischievous and cunning. "Hogsmeade."

"Hogsmeade?" Hermione nearly shrieked, but given that she was trying to keep her voice down in the library, it came out as a kind of strangled squeak. "Now? At this time of night? It's not even a Hogsmeade Weekend—we'll be caught—you're mad!"

"I know how to sneak into Hogsmeade," Severus said, grinning broadly now. He was wearing a sneaky, self-satisfied look. "We won't get caught."

"But it's not safe!" Hermione said, feeling slightly frantic. "Death Eaters—"

"There are no Death Eaters in Hogsmeade tonight."

Well. He would know.

"Don't tell me you've never put a toe out of line," Severus said silkily.

Hermione couldn't help being reminded of when Harry had decided to sneak down into Hogsmeade in third year. The whole idea had the words bad idea scrawled all over it. And yet, Hermione couldn't help wondering if it was actually possible…

"Come on," he said, grabbing her wrist and leading her toward the library exit. Hermione dug her feet in, still undecided, and he sighed in exasperation and turned around to face her.

"Look, it's my birthday," he said. He was practically begging her except for the fact that he was using a soft, authoritative tone intermixed with one of boyish excitement, rather than the pleading one Hermione had heard him use with Lily. "I don't want to spend it studying, and there's no way I'm going down to the Slytherin Common Room to celebrate. I want to do something different than we usually do, so the lake is out."

"Go alone," Hermione said, swallowing. "You don't need me for this."

"I don't want to do it alone," Severus said. "Come on, Hermione. Indulge me."

Hermione wibbled for a moment, unsure, but Severus tugged on her arm once more—and made up her mind.

"Alright," she said, swayed but still rather unconvinced. "Let's go."

Severus led her out of the library, up two flights of stairs, through several corridors, until they halted at the third floor corridor; realization dawned on Hermione as he stopped them in front of the statue of the One-Eyed Witch. She knew this passageway, thanks to Harry, but she had no idea that Severus had known about it—or Professor Snape, for that matter. She had known that he had caught Harry after he was seen sneaking into Hogsmeade by Malfoy, but she had no idea that he was actually aware that the statue was a secret entrance.

He tapped it once with his wand, and muttered, "Dissendium."

The One-Eyed Witch's hump slowly slid to the side, and Severus prodded Hermione in the back.
"You first," he declared, looking as though he were getting far too much enjoyment out of this.

Without another word until she had gotten her footing, Hermione climbed into the hole and slid herself half-way in, feet first. "Severus, if this kills me, I'll—"

She never got a chance to finish her sentence. He pushed her, and Hermione let out a squeal of surprise as she lost her grip and started the long slide down. Severus gave her a full minute's head start, and then climbed in himself.

Hermione reached the end of the slide and hit the ground with an uncomfortable thump. She scrambled out of the way quickly, readjusting her robes, and her Slytherin partner-in-crime appeared a moment later. He had the good fortune to land on his feet and stood up nonchalantly, lighting his wand with a careless flick. He took in her disheveled appearance, grinned unrepentantly, and began walking. Hermione scrambled to catch up.

"I can't believe you pushed me!"

"You had it coming," he said, looking not the least bit sorry.

"You prat!"

"I've been called worse," Severus responded with a smirk.

Hermione huffed at him, but merely pulled out her wand to add an extra light to the tunnel and then followed without another word.

She simply could not understand how he had managed to talk her into doing this. This was absolutely insane. She could not believe she was being talked into juvenile delinquency by her Potions professor. This was something along the lines of what Harry and Ron would have done, or Fred and George. Probably even the Marauders. But she had never thought that the one person who would be capable of convincing her to sneak out into Hogsmeade in the dead of night for anything less than an emergency would be Severus.

Hermione had no idea how long they were in the tunnel, but when they reached the end, she checked her watch and saw that it was a quarter to eight. Curfew would be in effect in roughly an hour. There was no way she was going to get back to school without breaking curfew. Resigned to this fact, Hermione wordlessly followed Severus up the ladder leading to the cellar of Honeydukes. They left their school bags underneath the trap door, and Hermione fetched her gloves, winter cloak, and hat from her bag, and was ready to offer to spell a temporary duplicate for her companion, only to turn around and discover that he had done the exact same thing. He clearly had this planned out before ever leaving the Slytherin common room.

They slipped into the front of the store, and Hermione—thankful that the shop didn't close until midnight—followed Severus out into the night.

"This is great," he breathed, wearing an unsuppressed grin on his face. He looked boyish again, despite the fact that he already had adult features that would have begged to differ. He turned to give Hermione a smug, considering look. "Have you ever done anything as wicked as this?"

"Of course!" Hermione said, trying to look offended.

"Name it," he challenged as they walked up the high street.

Hermione was indignant. "I'm not going to name all my—my academic transgressions just to prove to you that I'm capable of breaking rules!"
"Clearly, if you were not capable of breaking rules, we wouldn't be having this discussion out here—I probably wouldn't be here either, for that matter."

"Why not?"

Severus glanced up at the sky, where the full moon sailed overhead, casting the street with a pale, shadowy glow.

"I expect I'd be with Lupin right now."

"Oh," Hermione said. For some reason, her cheeks turned red at this. "Right. I saved your arse."

"You broke curfew for that."

"I have a habit of breaking rules for emergencies," Hermione amended. "Otherwise, I try not to."

Severus smirked at her, and then led her down the alley between Scrivenshaft's and Gladrags.

"Severus, what—?"

"We're going somewhere where no one knows us," Severus told her decisively. "We can't go to the Hogs Head or the Three Broomsticks, and we've already been to every store here before. I can Apparate."

"But—"

"We'll be fine in Diagon Alley," Severus persisted, determined to squeeze the most out of tonight's occasion that he could. "We can come to Hogsmeade any old time—but I'll bet you've never been to the London Underground at night."

"No," Hermione admitted. "But Severus, Hogsmeade is one thing—Diagon Alley is an Apparation away! I'm not—the farther away we are from school, the less safe we are. I'm not sure if we should take this chance."

Severus gave her a searching look. "You always have a backup plan, don't you?"

"I—what?"

"Every time you've told me about when you and your friends got in trouble, you were always the one who got them out of it," Severus recalled confidently. "Don't you have any ideas about how we'd get out of trouble in London?"

Hermione took a second to think. She didn't really consider Portkeying to the Headmaster's office at night a suitable backup plan, but it was true that she knew a number of useful spells that would get them out of harm's way, if it came to such. "I—well, yes. Yes, I do."

"So do I. Let's go."

Hermione stood up to her full height and looked him squarely in the eye, thinking. He waited impatiently, though he did not rush her into a decision as he had before, and watched the indecision flicker across her face.

And then, quite at once, her mind was made. "Yes, let's go." Then for the first time that night, she gave him a broad smile. "I want to see what the London Underground is like at night."

With a victorious, near-jubilant smirk, Severus grasped hold of her arm tightly and with a loud crack,
Apparated the two of them away.

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They Apparated just outside of Knockturn Alley. The ground was knee-deep in snow, and although it had been mostly cleared off to the side, Hermione and Severus had the misfortune of landing directly on top of a snow drift. They’d pulled themselves free, laughing as they kicked snow off their boots and shook it out of their clothes, and then walked to Fortescue’s Ice Cream parlor, where Hermione insisted on being the one to pay for both their orders. Ice cream in the middle of winter was a wild, rather pointless idea in some respects, but Hermione couldn't help loving it.

Instead of finding a bench to sit on, Severus led her over to one of the buildings, took her around, and then began to climb. Hermione followed, and the two sat on the railing over one of the bricked-in balconies atop Flourish and Blott's. They got comfortable, and then began to eat. He braced his legs against the railing and leaned back slightly, wearing a wry smile as he glanced upwards at the sky, his demeanor relaxed and carefree.

The ice cream was decadently delicious, and despite the shivers it sent down Hermione's spine, she enjoyed it immensely.

They had not been there for more than ten minutes when Severus pointed at the sky. Hermione looked up in time to see an owl swoop down from one roof to another—and then almost as though it had been cued, a flurry of owls began to appear, and when Hermione leaned over and squinted into the distance, she realized that they were all coming from Eyelopes Owl Emporium.

"The owner lets them all out at night," Severus explained, smirking at the look of wonder on her face before he took another bite of his ice cream sundae. "If you stay here long enough, eventually, it looks like its raining feathers."

"That's amazing," Hermione breathed, as she watched two snowy owls take flight before her eyes, circling each other playfully, diving and swooping as they rode the night wind, underneath the cloudless sky and the shimmering night stars, all haloed distinctly by the full moon. More owls took flight, gliding along the buildings and around each other in a lively and spirited manner. Two tawny owls came to perch on the windowsill above where Hermione and Severus were sitting, their round, black eyes peering at them, their heads cocking curiously to the side.

Hermione and Severus watched the owls dancing in the air, grins of genuine delight spreading across their faces as they finished up their ice cream. Hermione collected the last bit of her double chocolate scoop on a spoon, and in a fit of impulse, held it out to Severus.

"Happy Birthday, Severus," she said, her eyes shining with laughter. He gave her a grin, and then leaned forward and took the proffered scoop, his eyes lighting up as the new flavor spread over his tongue.

"I'd sing 'Happy Birthday' for you, but I'm afraid you'll hex me if I do," Hermione added, smiling broadly.

"I could do without the song," Severus agreed, tapping his empty cup to vanish it. Hermione held hers out to him, and he did the same. He tried to read her watch, but upside down and in the dark, it simply wasn't possible. "Hermione, what time is it?"

She checked her watch. "A quarter past ten. Think we'd better go?"

"Honeydukes closes at eleven, and it'll take us an hour to walk back up to the castle," Severus said,
swinging his legs to the side and sliding off the railing and onto the balcony. He held out a hand to her. "We should go, yes."

Hermione took his hand, and with a loud crack amidst the snow that was just starting to fall, mixed in with few owl feathers that were swirling down to the ground, they whirled away.

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"That was one of the most amazing experiences in my life," Hermione said, unable to quash the grin on her face as they made their way through the secret passageway leading back to the school.

"That was one of the best birthdays I've ever had," Severus declared, raising his wand up so that he could see the ceiling and duck down when it got too low. "Although next time, I'd much rather eat ice cream in July, when it's not snowing."

"What, did it give your digestive tract frostbite?" Hermione teased.

"Very funny," Severus said, standing up to his full height once again as they neared the end of the tunnel. A few more steps, and they reached the end of the slide. "Ah, we're here."

"We should Disillusion ourselves before we go up," Hermione reminded him. "Just in case there are any teachers patrolling about."

"Naturally. Hold on." She watched Severus turn his wand on himself, and a moment later, his form melted away. He moved toward her, and Hermione had the distinct impression of a six-foot human chameleon before she felt him rap his wand atop her head, sending a cold tricking sensation down her body. When she looked down, she realized her feet were now nearly invisible to her.

"Brilliant. Alright, here we go." Hermione stepped into the foot of the slide, and then tapped her leg. "Ascendare!"

She shot up, gliding against the walls of the tunnel as the force of her spell propelled her skyward. When she reached the top, she braced herself against the side of the slide and tapped the ceiling above her, muttering the password. The hump slid open, and she pulled herself out. A moment later, Severus followed, hauling himself out, and the hump slid shut once they were clear of it.

They began making their way down to the first floor, and when they reached the door leading to the staircases, they quietly slipped it open and shut it as noiselessly as possible behind them. They walked soundlessly down the stairs, and they were about to split up when something grey and furry rubbed against their legs. They looked down, and a pair of large, lamp-like eyes looked up at them pitilessly.

"Shite!" Severus hissed. "It's Mrs. Norris— Run!"

Hermione did run. They split up, Hermione dashing up the stairs to Gryffindor Tower, not caring how much noise she made, knowing that she could be seen in the darkness despite her disillusionment, and she was about to wake the Fat Lady when a gnarled hand grabbed her shoulder, yanking her back.

There was a nasty chuckle.

"Well, well, well," said Argus Filch. "We are in trouble now, aren't we?"

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Please Review!
~Anubis Ankh
Detention. That was the first thing that registered in Hermione's mind when Filch brought her down to Professor McGonagall's office where, she discovered, Severus was waiting for her. Their Disillusionment charms were removed, and they both stared at the floor—one sullen, one shamefaced—while they waited for judgement to be pronounced. One excuse after another flitted through Hermione's mind, but all of them sounded pitifully transparent. They had been caught sneaking around the castle over three hours after curfew, while still wearing their winter cloaks, though they had the notion to stash their hats and gloves in their bags before heading off towards their common rooms. There was no talking their way out of this one.

Professor McGonagall left the moment Hermione entered, no doubt to double-check the halls for any other co-conspirators, during which time Severus had nudged her to grab her attention.

"How did you get caught?" he hissed under his breath.

"Filch," she muttered. "You?"

His face contorted into a sneer. "Our dear Head Boy was out patrolling the dungeons."

Hermione grimaced as she realized exactly who he was talking about.

"I would never have believed any of this from either of you. Mr. Potter and Mr. Filch both say they caught you running back to your dormitories. It is twelve o'clock in the morning, and you are still wearing winter cloaks and warming charms! Where have you been?"

Hermione swallowed, unsure of how to reply, but Severus's reply was prompt. "The library. We were reading outside on one of the balconies—"

"I received a Floo call from Ambrosius Flume earlier this evening, informing me that he thought he saw two students in Hogsmeade earlier," McGonagall interrupted tightly. "Do not insult my intelligence, Mr. Snape. We checked the dormitories to see who was unaccounted for, and when we realized it was you two, the library was the first place we checked. Neither of you were anywhere to be found. What were you two doing in Hogsmeade?"

Severus's mouth clicked shut, and he fell silent, though his expression turned stony and unyielding.

"I think I've got a fairly good idea of what happened here," McGonagall said, her voice laced with cold fury. Hermione had only ever seen her in such a state twice in her life—the first time was when they had nearly been killed taking down a mountain troll. The second time was after they had been caught sneaking Norbert up to the Astronomy tower and lacked a satisfactory explanation for their
Neither of you returned to your common rooms, but instead decided to sneak out of the school and pay Hogsmeade an unsupervised visit. I fail to understand how two perfectly capable and intelligent young people could do something so decisively foolhardy!

Hermione gulped, and stared down at the ground, unable to look her professor in the eye. Severus was stone still, unmoving, as though he had been petrified into place.

"There is no excuse for this sort of behavior—you two may be of age, but while you are at Hogwarts, you will abide by the rules of this school just like every other student." Her lips pressed into a tight, white line and she took a moment to gather herself, before she continued icily, "A hundred points will be taken away from Slytherin and Gryffindor. And you will serve a month's detention, the both of you."

Hermione and Severus both stiffened, their backs ramrod straight. Hermione tried to quickly do the calculations in her head. Professor McGonagall had taken fifty points away from each Gryffindor involved in her first year due to the Astronomy incident, but they had still been on the grounds. Hermione and Severus had been caught sneaking out after curfew and, furthermore, had left the school grounds. An extra fifty points for that additional infraction was a horrific one when she considered the impact it would have on the House Cup, but she could see how Professor McGonagall would find it a reasonable calculation. She knew better than to argue on this one. In fact, if McGonagall ever found out that they had not only gone to Hogsmeade, but to Diagon Alley, she wouldn't need to wonder if it would be another fifty points off just for that.

She felt her stomach drop at this. Severus didn't say a word. He, too, seemed to realize that arguing right now would garner no gain. They were both silent.

"Off to bed, both of you. Mr. Snape, I will inform Professor Slughorn of tonight's events, make no mistake. Miss Granger, a word before you go."

Severus gave Professor McGonagall a sardonic bow, working out a tic in his jaw before turning around to leave, Filch straight at his heels. The door opened and shut behind them, and Professor McGonagall took several deep breaths, her nostrils flaring angrily, before she spoke again.

"Miss Granger, I expected far better behavior from you. Albus always speaks highly of you, and I have watched your short academic career here at Hogwarts with interest. You are an exceptionally bright student, and I have only ever seen you break the rules either in self-defense or in the defense of another student. Your behavior and callous disregard for the rules could have cost you your lives tonight, if you had run into trouble. You-Know-Who is out there, Miss Granger—you are one of the few students at Hogwarts that are more keenly aware of this fact. Yet, you chose to ignore that tonight. The question I must ask is why?"

Hermione swallowed again, working her throat before she croaked, "I—I don't have a good answer for that, Professor."

"I can hardly conceive that this little escapade may have been your idea."

Hermione's throat tightened. Now was the moment when she either took the blame, remained silent and let McGonagall draw her own conclusions, or revealed Severus as the guilty party.

"It was my idea, Professor," she mumbled. Seeing the disbelieving look on Professor McGonagall's face, she added a bit more defiance into her tone. "It was entirely my idea. All of it. I take full responsibility."

Professor McGonagall gave her a piercing stare, and then stood up and opened the door for her.
Hermione saw James standing against the wall, dozing off on his feet, and he jerked upright upon hearing the creaking of the door. His eyes met Hermione's, and she in turn stared at the ground.

"I have nothing more to say to you, Miss Granger, other than to tell you how entirely disappointed I am by your behavior," she said coldly. "You may go. Take Mr. Potter with you."

Without another word, she shut the door behind her. Hermione began walking back to Gryffindor Tower, with James in tow.

"Blimey, Hermione!" James said, adjusting his glasses. "What were you doing in there?"

"Got caught by Filch," Hermione mumbled, shamefaced.

"You've been missing from Gryffindor all night! You weren't even in the library—rumor has it that you snuck out to Hogsmeade—where were you?"

Hermione's mind immediately flew back to tonight's visit to Diagon Alley. The memory of cold snowflakes melting on her cheeks, ice cream melting on her tongue, owl feathers fluttering around them like soft down, and her taking the last scrape of her ice cream and holding it out to Severus…

"Hogsmeade," she confessed dully.

James stared at her. "You're joking." Seeing that the look on Hermione's face didn't change one whit, it suddenly dawned on him. "Merlin's saggy undershorts, you're serious."

Hermione nodded miserably.

"With that greasy git?" she didn't even have the energy to tell him off for insulting Severus, she just nodded. "Holy mother of Merlin. How many points did you guys lose?"


James was gobsmacked. They had just about reached the portrait of the Fat Lady now, and James took hold of Hermione's shoulder and turned her around to get her full attention.

"What were you two doing in Hogsmeade?"

Hermione swallowed, trying to get rid of the vicious frog that seemed to have taken up residence in her throat.

"Celebrating," she said tightly. Seeing the blank look on James's face, she finished, "Today's his birthday."

She woke up the Fat Lady, gave the disgruntled portrait the password, and then ambled off to bed. She no longer felt carefree and alive, simply tired and miserable as she climbed the stairs to the girls' dormitory and resigned herself to what was certain to be a rather disgruntled reaction from her housemates in the morning.

As it turned out, 'disgruntled' did not cover it. Not by a long shot.

"You lost a hundred points from Gryffindor?" Sirius bellowed, preventing her from leaving the common room for breakfast. James had clearly filled him in on last night, for there was simply no way he could have already seen the hourglass that morning. "What'd you do, murder someone?"

Hermione had been dreading this moment, but she knew she had to own up to it. "I—I snuck off the grounds and into Hogsmeade," she said, staring down at the carpet. "Filch caught me just as I was
The jaws of Sirius, Remus, Lily, Mary, and pretty much every Gryffindor in the vicinity dropped open at this. After a moment, Sirius shut his mouth, after managing to stutter out, "You snuck off the grounds? You? No way. That's not possible. You'd never do it, for one thing, and even if you were the type, you wouldn't know how—"

"Well, I did," Hermione said dully.

"I don't know whether to be impressed or angry," Sirius said, amazed. He looked dumbstruck. "It would have been worth the hundred point loss just to see you doing something worthy of it."

"Look at it this way," James said, clapping a hand on his friend's back. "Slytherin's down by about a hundred points, too. I took an extra fifteen when I caught him."

Remus was shaking his head, speechless. The other Gryffindors in the room demonstrated mixed reactions; the ones who knew Hermione well were flat-out shocked. The ones who didn't were either upset at the point loss or gleeful that Slytherin had suffered too. Others still looked as though they were not quite sure what to think.

"Well," Mary said, trying to break the tension. "I guess—I guess we had all better get down to breakfast?"

There was a sudden clamoring as the students rushed to be the first into the Great Hall. Hermione made to follow, her expression stony and shame-faced, but Sirius and James both grabbed hold of her arms.

"Don't worry about it," Sirius told her, giving her a slap on the back. "James and I've lost more points than that in a single night. And this time, Slytherin's lost points too. We'll build the points back up again—we're not even halfway through the year. We've got plenty of time."

Hermione gave him a weak smile. "Thanks, you guys."

"Just tell me this—was it worth it?"

Hermione was baffled by the question. "What?"

"Whatever your reason for sneaking out was—was it worth it?"

Hermione was once again recalled to the near-magical experience of last night. The release of pent-up tension, the moment when they'd managed to get out from under the house-rivalry that so choked the social situation at Hogwarts and simply enjoy being two teenagers out for a night. The ice cream, the owls, the snow, the laughing and joking they'd shared, the careless, free feeling that had enveloped her senses…

She must have gotten a faraway look in her eyes, for Sirius grinned at her and before she could speak, placed a fingertip on her mouth to silence her.

"If it was worth it, then that's all that matters," he said sagely.

Hermione took in a deep breath, gave them both a nervous smile, and confessed to the only four people still left in the room, "It was Severus's birthday."

Remus finally cracked a smile, and shook his head. Sirius's jaw dropped open for a moment, and then he shut his mouth. James was grinning, ruffling the back of his hair as he did so. Lily's face was
a cortortion of surprise mixed with sudden rememberance and then stony realization.

"Well, as long as it was worth it to you, and you work to earn back the points, no one should have a problem with it," Remus said, patting her back and giving her a friendly smile. "We're all used to it by now." He cast his friends a half-hearted, scolding look. "That's what happens when you've lived with James and Sirius as your housemates for seven years."

The two boys had the grace to at least look slightly abashed.

Later, as she took her place next to the Marauders at the breakfast table, an owl fluttered down to her seat, bearing a note. It looked as though it had been waiting for quite awhile, as it wore an annoyed expression on her face. It kicked over her pumpkin juice before leaving, for good measure. Hermione cleaned up the mess with a sigh, and then unfolded the parchment. Glancing over at the Slytherin table, she saw that Severus was also opening up a similar slip of parchment under the watchful glares of his housemates, though he gave off the very convincing appearance of ignoring them.

It was from Professor McGonagall: 
You will serve your first week of detention with Mr. Filch. Meet him at the Entrance Hall at ten o'clock, starting this evening.

Hermione finished her breakfast quickly, and hurried off to her first class. Despite the Marauders' reassurances, she was feeling rather subdued, and only raised her hand to answer a question she knew would earn points for correctness. In class that day, she worked like an automaton; put in a set amount of energy, achieve result, earn points. By the end of the day, she'd received her usual thirty points from Faulkner, managed to squeeze ten from Sprout and Flitwick each, impressed a full fifteen from Slughorn, and somehow won five from Vector. No matter how hard she worked, however, she only managed to earn a terse 'Five points to Gryffindor' from McGonagall. It was still not enough to make up for the hundred-point deficit, but it was an excellent start, and when she looked up at the hourglass, it seemed that her housemates had all pitched in to do some extra work, too, for they had jumped from third place in the running for the house cup and up to second, almost tied with Ravenclaw. It was heartening to see that her housemates were not particularly outraged by the point loss, as they had been in her first year. Instead, they were rather simply amazed that it had even happened and were willing to forgive her so long as she worked to make up for it. It was a distinct, notable difference; rather than being ostracized for her wrongdoing, she was instead being told that as long as she pulled her weight, all would be forgiven.

It was such a drastically different outlook than the one Hermione was used to in her time. It seemed that in the Marauders' era, Gryffindor House stuck together through thick and thin, uncaring of whether one of them blundered horribly. The message was clear: work hard to make up for it, and even if you fall short of making it up in the first day, everyone will still support and be happy to have you in Gryffindor. Hermione was certain that if she'd lost those hundred points and had slacked off or acted as though she couldn't care less about the points, her housemates would have been less forgiving. And yet, since Hermione was a hard worker by nature, and generally not prone to trouble, it seemed as though she had been fully forgiven not ten minutes into breakfast. She gratefully took advantage of this outlook, and did her absolute best to make up for the point loss she had caused.

She didn't know how Severus was faring. She somewhat doubted that Slytherin house had a similarly forgiving outlook. Or perhaps, at this juncture in time, the upperclassmen didn't care about points so much as they cared about their servitude to Voldemort. She didn't know, and while classes were in session, she didn't get a chance to ask him; everywhere she saw him, he was flanked by several Slytherins whose faces Hermione was disturbingly familiar with. Bellatrix Black, it seemed, took particular pleasure out of jeering something into his ear, and then turning to look at Hermione with a nasty, cruel smile.
Once classes were over, and after Hermione retired to Gryffindor Tower to get some work done before detention—she knew there was no way Severus would be in the Library tonight—Lily took Hermione aside.

"Did I hear you right? You went to Hogsmeade with Sev?"

Hermione could not help but feel a pang of anger at this. Lily had ended her friendship with Severus, made it clear that she would never forgive him for his slip-up, nor would she ever be willing to come to agreeable terms with him again, and yet she still called him by that childhood nickname as though they were best friends. It seemed insultingly incongruous.

"Yes," Hermione replied, her tone somewhat sullen.

"You shouldn't have done that, Hermione," Lily told her softly. "I know you and Sev are friends, but you shouldn't have let him talk you into going. He's a bad influence on you."

Hermione felt her blood boil ever so slightly at this. "How do you know it was his idea and not mine?"

Lily threw back her hair with a sigh. "Because yesterday was his birthday, and you've never been much inclined to rulebreaking. It's not difficult for me to put two and two together. What you did last night was dangerous and foolish."

"So I've been told," Hermione responded dryly. "I've already learned my lesson. I don't plan on doing something so risky without a very good reason again."

"I just don't think you should be spending so much time with him," Lily said uncertainly. "He's a part of a gang of Slytherins who go out of their way to attack Muggle-borns, and he can be quite nasty when things don't go his way. I'm just worried about you—you spend so much time with him, I'm afraid that when he leaves that you'll be... I'm afraid that you'll get hurt."

Hermione took a deep breath, and when she spoke, her voice came out gentle but firm. "I can take care of myself, Lily."

Lily closed her eyes for a moment, as though remembering something, and then opened them.

"Sev isn't the same person I knew when we were children," she said quietly. "He used to be sweet. Those boys in Slytherin House ruined him."

Hermione looked Lily squarely in the eyes. "You let it happen, Lily. You can't control what house Severus is in, but you can control how you treat him and how you choose to shape him outside of his house's influence. And my understanding is that when you decided you couldn't handle him anymore, you ended the friendship. And Lily, I do respect that you've ended things with him," she continued, her voice quiet, "but I can handle him. Perhaps you decided there was no point in hanging onto him because you thought he was too far gone, but deep down, he is a good person. Not always pleasant, not by a long shot, but his heart is in the right place. We understand each other well enough, and I value his friendship."

Lily was silent for one long, stony moment, and then she responded:

"When we were fifteen," she said softly, "Severus convinced me to sneak up to the Astronomy Tower to watch a meteor shower with him. We almost got caught. Sirius, James, Remus, and Peter—they all told me he was no good for me, but like the fool I was, I didn't listen to them. I was barely on speaking terms with them. A month and a half later, he called me a Mudblood, and I finally saw in him what everyone else did—and I ended the friendship. James was the one who came in to pick
up the pieces. I was blind to Severus's faults, and I think you are too."

"He can be nasty, sarcastic, acerbic, caustic, and a git," Hermione said, enunciating each word carefully. "I'm not blind to his faults, Lily. I know very well that he has a temper, and that he can let it get away from him. But that doesn't stop me from seeing the good in him, too. That," she said firmly, "is why he's my friend."

Lily pursed her lips, and Hermione saw the anger rise in her cheeks, and she abruptly turned away.

"On your own head be it, Hermione, but I am certain that you will regret the day you ever laid your eyes on that boy."

As Lily left, Hermione couldn't help thinking that at this point, Severus really was not a boy anymore. She rather had the idea that Lily was still stuck seeing Severus as her childhood friend who got pulled along the wrong path, and was therefore unable to see past the prejudice clouding her opinion of him. She also suspected that, in a way, Lily would always see Severus as she saw him when they were children. In her eyes, Severus would never grow up.

And in some ways, Hermione was just the opposite. In her eyes, she already saw Severus grown up, aged beyond his years, aged far more than time had any right to make him.

She would also like to think that somewhere in her time, when Professor Snape sat at his desk grading papers and brooding sullenly, that he would have that memory of them in Diagon Alley at night eating Fortescue's Ice Cream and watching owls for his birthday to momentarily distract him.

Hermione left Gryffindor Tower an hour later to meet Filch in the Entrance Hall.

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Hermione and Severus found themselves in the Trophy Room, with a rag and cleaning solution, polishing the plaques and plates and every other form awarded metals came in. Filch sat in the corner on a chair, petting Mrs. Norris and keeping his eyes locked suspiciously on the pair.

Despite the no-magic caveat, Severus still managed to cast a discrete *Muffliato* so that he and Hermione could talk undisturbed. They had absolutely nothing else to do but the mind-numbing work of polishing cups and shields, and when they had tried talking without the charm, Filch had snarled at them to be quiet.

"This isn't social hour!" the old caretaker had growled.

Severus had rolled his eyes and cast the charm regardless.

"So," he said coolly, "how did Gryffindor take the point loss?"

"Surprisingly well, actually," Hermione said, her rag making squeaking noises as she wiped it over a small cup. "They're apparently so used to James and Sirius losing points that they don't really mind it now."

Severus snorted. "It figures."

"What about your housemates in Slytherin?"

A small, wry smirk flitted across his face. "They were absolutely furious."

"That doesn't sound like laughing matter to me," Hermione said uncertainly.
"Oh, but it is. They wanted to know exactly what I was doing in Hogsmeade—and with you, no less—and I refused to tell them. It drove them mad," Severus added, a nasty glint in his eyes. "And there is absolutely nothing they can do about it. They all know I'm stronger than the lot of them put together."

"Really?" Hermione said, raising an eyebrow. "You?"

"You don't believe me?"

"You're a strong wizard, yes, but to boast about being capable of taking them all on at once when the Marauders have been able to send you to the Hospital Wing with just two or three of them…"

At this, Severus sneered. "That has only ever happened after they hexed me when my back was turned. But I can take them on in a fair fight." He set the cup he'd been polishing down with a little more force than necessary, and picked up the next one. "If you were to line them up against me in a duel, I'd have them cursed into writhing pieces on the floor."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully, her lip twitching at the description he used, but agreeing nevertheless. His assertion seemed accurate enough. "Yes, that sounds about right, I suppose."

Severus looked somewhat mollified at her capitulation.

"So your housemates daren't challenge you to a fight, because they know you'd mop the floor with them?" Hermione ventured, returning to the previous topic at hand. "I'm a little surprised—I would have thought they'd at least give it a try."

"They have before," Severus responded smugly. "I sent them all up to the Hospital Wing."

Hermione's eyebrows rose dangerously. "How did they react to that?"

"Avery made it clear I was welcome to join his group," Severus responded coolly. "None of them bothered me after that, much."

Hermione felt as though she had suddenly garnered a little more insight on how things worked in Slytherin—and how Severus fit into all of this. At this moment in time, her understanding had crystalized into clarity. He would have been ostracized and picked on for his friendship with a Muggleborn like Lily, as well as his poor background—and when confronted by his housemates, he would have wiped the floor with them in an attempt to discourage further attempts. After that, the Slytherins' attention would have turned from trying to keep their distance from him to trying to control him. It was startlingly clear and disturbing at the same time. He had gone from being looked down upon to being respected with his display of power—which came with a heavy price. A display of strength like the one she knew Severus was capable of would have caught the Dark Lord's attention.

"You know," Severus mused, dragging Hermione out of her thoughts, "I have never seen you duel."

"You saw me the day we met, remember?" Hermione reminded him, as she set her plaque aside and plucked up another.

"I saw what you'd done, not how you fought," Severus replied coolly.

"True enough," Hermione conceded.

"And I've seen what you've done to my other housemates subsequently. And you know Occlumency," he continued, as though she needed reminding. He gave her a curious glance, and
Hermione could tell he was just dying to see what was going on in her head. "Just how strong are you?"

Hermione gave him a mysterious smile. "I'm just an insufferable, bushy-haired know-it-all," she said, grinning. "What do you expect?"

"I expect you're just like me," Severus responded, cocking his head at her. "Neither of us are the most handsome nor the most pecuniary people around, but we more than make up for it with raw magical talent."

"I can look nice when I want to," Hermione protested half-jokingly, running her fingers through her hair and then throwing it back over her shoulders. Her hair was neither sleek nor shiny, but it was all right. It had gotten somewhat more manageable as she grew older, but it had not lost its inherent bushiness. It still tended to frizz rather frighteningly when she was angry.

He raised his eyebrows at her, his voice teasing. "Really? You could have fooled me."

Hermione raised her chin up at him in mock-offense. "I'll have you know—"

Whatever she was about to say was suddenly interrupted by the craggy old caretaker's voice cutting through the room.

"Don't think I can't see your lips moving, you little buggers! Get back to work!"

With a sigh, Hermione bent her head back down over her work. Severus did the same. They continued to make conversation, moving their lips as little as possible, until Filch again threatened to extend their detention if they continued talking. With a sigh of resignation, they eventually fell into silence.

They were finally dismissed two hours later, their backs and necks terribly sore, and not one bit sorry.

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Hermione and Severus's month-long detention varied in venue from week to week. The first week was spent cleaning up places in the castle, starting with the Trophy Room and ending with the dusting of the library shelves. The second week involved them helping Madam Pince organize and return books to their proper places; this had been a particularly trying week, as the librarian resembled nothing so much as a vulture waiting to swoop down and smack them over the head for a misplaced book or for getting distracted by reading. By the third week, Hermione and Severus were quite fed up with detention, but their punishment was not yet over—they spent the third portion of their detention scrubbing the underside of the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom's desks, which had been a rather unpleasant task, given the nasty sort of things that had ended up stuck in the nooks and crevices of the wood. Hermione had found the dried and gutted remains of a toad stuck underneath one desk, and had been forced to extract it by hand.

It was not a total loss, though; Severus found several knuts, two sickles, and a single Galleon stuck in one desk, which he eagerly pocketed. Hermione found an old copy of Jane Eyre, and managed to hide behind the desk she was supposed to be cleaning to read. Half-way through the book, she was forced to hastily put it away before Faulkner, who was supervising this detention, caught her. The man had eyes like an eagle, and when Hermione quickly stood up to turn the desk over to the other side, he gave a tiny jerk of his head, as though he knew what she had been doing. In all likelyhood, he probably did. They found a myriad of odd trinkets, and after each detention that week, they would meet up a few corridors down to trade and switch the stuff they didn't want. Anything they didn't
care for and couldn't trade away was promptly thrown away—as was the case with a pair of screaming socks and a piece of gum that bubbled noxiously.

Their last week of detention was spent brewing potions for Slughorn, which was probably their best detention yet, as it was quite easy and even somewhat relaxing. They set up ten cauldrons on the same table, and took turns doing steps. Hermione spent a surprising amount of time with Severus standing over her shoulder, giving her instructions differing from the text and showing her better methods for preparing ingredients. He was rather pleased with how quickly she grasped onto a new technique, although she occasionally took a little longer to do so. Once or twice, he would grow impatient, and take her hand in his and demonstrate the movements using her fingers, which Hermione found extremely helpful—even if it made her slightly uneasy.

No. Uneasy was the wrong word. But she was at a loss as to what to call it: he would stand just behind her, towering over her by sheer height, and she would feel his warm breath crossing along the nape of her neck as he watched her work. It did not make her feel uneasy at all—rather, it made her feel safe. It set off a tingling sensation wherever he touched her. In this timeline, Severus was one of the people she trusted the most, and his presence was a comfort to her. It soothed her, put her at ease—and yet, it somehow made her even more aware of his presence, if that were possible.

Wednesday evening, a notice had gone up on all of the notice boards informing students that there would be a Valentine's Day celebration to be held on the fourteenth in Slughorn's office, courtesy of The Slug Club. Attendance by invitation only. There was no question about who James was going with, but Sirius finally worked up the courage during breakfast to saunter over to where Marlene McKinnon was sitting to ask her out.

The notice incited a flurry of excitement among the students. Members of the Slug Club who were not already taken had offers and requests to be taken along by the end of the day. To Hermione, it was like primary school all over again; the ones who were yet untaken were being passed chocolates, sweets, homework answers, and other sorts of bribes. She received no less than five chocolate frogs, two boxes of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, a packet of Fizzing Whizbees, some Chocoballs, and even a box of Sugar Quills from a shy third-year Gryffindor that Hermione felt incumbent to turn down. All before lunchtime.

Later, as she and Severus were in detention, he laughed near-uproariously when Hermione recounted the events of the day.

"You should have taken the quills, Hermione!" he said, smirking with amusement. "Then maybe you'd stop chewing on yours."

It was true; Hermione did chew on her quills. She chewed them down to stumps before she even realized what she had done.

"If I took it, I felt like I'd be obliged to at least consider the offer," Hermione said, pulling her hair back as she got to work on their brewing. "And I refuse to go just because someone had to bribe me into taking them. With sweets, no less."

"You're not going?" Severus inquired, looking mildly surprised.

"Of course not," Hermione huffed. "I haven't got anyone to go with, and I don't fancy standing around all night watching other people snogging."

Severus gave a non-committal grunt, and returned his focus back to his potions before pulling away and allowing Hermione to do the next few steps. She worked concentratedly for several minutes, moving from potion to potion to repeat each instruction, and then backed away and slumped in one
of the stools. The potions all simmered peacefully, and would continue to do so for the next fifteen minutes. The two teens leaned back and waited.

"Well, I'm not going either, I suppose," Severus finally said, pulling out his copy of Advanced Potion-Making and pulling out a quill to make some additional annotations to it. "I haven't had a free evening for a month. My time could be better spent." He turned to look at Hermione thoughtfully. "You know, we could find an empty classroom and duel. I'd like to see how well you'd fare against me."

"That's not happening and you know it," Hermione told him sternly, peering over his shoulder as he flipped through the pages of his book.

"We'll see," he responded smugly, stopping at an undefiled page to pull out a quill and begin scribbling.

~o~O~o~

"I can't believe you're not going!" Alice exclaimed on Friday afternoon, after she had roped Hermione into a secretive girls-only discussion about the upcoming Valentine's Day Slug-Club supper with Mary, Marlene, and Lily. "This is a perfect chance to dress up!"

"I haven't got anyone to go with," Hermione replied reasonably. "What's the point?"

"The point? Hermione, the whole point is to make every wizard in the room's eyes bug out of their skull—regardless of whether you've got a damn date or not!"

"Well, I haven't got anything to wear," Hermione protested, her mouth twitching into a half-smile. "So even if I could go—what would be the point?"

"We have a Hogsmeade Weekend tomorrow," Mary suggested mildly.

"I'm banned from Hogsmeade for the rest of the year," Hermione said with a sigh. "Like Severus."

She saw Lily's lips twitch slightly at this, and Alice overrode her protests once again: "We can pick out something for you to wear!"

"You should try something in red," Marlene said, leaning back and looking at her thoughtfully. "Something tasteful and red. And you could put your hair up."

"Look," Lily said, interrupting Hermione's next protest. She gave Hermione a certain look that said 'don't argue with me.' "It doesn't matter whether you have a date or not. We can get you something to wear if you can give us a budget, and half the wizards going had to bribe their dates to take them. They're not taken."

Mary, Marlene, and Alice were all nodding in agreement at this.

Hermione could see quite plainly that she was horribly outnumbered on this.

"Oh, you know what?" Marlene added, leaning forward to pick out a lock of Hermione's hair. "We can show you some new charms. You pick up new spells like a toadstool does water—let's see if we can't do something about your hair."

She tried one more line of defense. "I don't want to go alone—"

"You can go with Remus," Lily interrupted, giving her a smile that Hermione thought was simply
unforgivable in regards to the amount of smugness that laced it. "I'm sure he'll take you."

*I'm doomed*, Hermione thought inwardly as the four girls began to eagerly exchange ideas and spells to use on themselves, each other, and their bushy-haired victim.

When she saw Severus later that evening for their last detention and informed her that she was being forcefully dragged along to the supper, he couldn't help smirking in amusement at this.

"In that case, perhaps I should come," he drawled.

"I can't believe this," Hermione said, glaring at him. "I swear, I think Lily just tried to set me up with Remus."

Severus's mouth gave an unpleasant twitch. "Please tell me you said no."

Hermione stared up at the ceiling. "They made me ask. He said yes."

"Bloody hell."

"He's not a part of the Slug Club," Hermione pointed out reasonably. "I'm just bringing him along so that he can attend with his friends."

"Lovely. Well, I at least hope seeing what sort of disaster your housemates can turn you into will be worth it," Severus responded snarkily.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "If you can't stand being in the same room with them for a few hours, you're free to make your escape."

"Slughorn doesn't allow escapes," Severus responded sourly.

"I'll help you," Hermione said, giving him a conspiratorial smile.

"Deal."

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**Please Review!**

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Nine

A/N: Big thanks to my amazing beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review.

When Hermione saw the robes her friends—a term she now used in the loosest sense of the word—had bought back from Hogsmeade, she was nearly ready to try to escape out the window. They had hidden the robes the entire week after they bought them, and it was only when they all gathered upstairs to get ready that Hermione finally got to see what she would be wearing.

"You have got to be kidding me!"

"Nope!" Alice said cheerfully, laying out the deep, wine-red robes out.

It was nothing like what Hermione had worn in her fourth year. What she had worn then was what she (and, she was sure, every other sane person on the planet) would have considered a nice, tasteful, and appropriate set for a girl who had not quite yet reached her full maturity. The dress robes she was being helped into now were quite possibly the most provocative set Hermione had ever seen. It did not show a lot of skin, necessarily—quite the opposite, in fact—but it was clearly designed to hug her body in the right places. The sleeves were long and loose, but the back was laced up tightly in a way that made her curves stand out to their best advantage.

She did not feel entirely comfortable wearing this. It was just too adult for her. It made her feel like she was twenty, not seventeen. This was the stuff that young adult witches wore to fancy parties—and while this Slug Club supper certainly qualified, Hermione still quailed at the thought of what kind of impression she would be giving off. She was nearly eighteen in mind and body, given how much use she had put the time-turner through in her third year, and she was certainly an adult by both Wizarding and Muggle standards—but inside, deep down, she did not feel that way. She wanted to retain that sense of child-like security, and these robes completely destroyed that.

In the time Hermione had taken to register the horror in her mind, Alice and Marlene had gotten similarly undressed and were putting on their robes. The minute Hermione saw what they'd bought, she instantly felt better. Relieved, even. If she thought she stood out terribly, she was sadly—or, in this case, happily—mistaken. Marlene was wearing dark violet robes with black lace that made her look like a dark, graceful enchantress. Alice was wearing a luminous set of lacy gold, and she sat down on a chair in front of a mirror to allow Marlene to weave a shiny gold ribbon through her hair in a braid down her back.

If this was the way most of the girls were planning to dress up tonight, then by comparison, if Hermione had decided to wear something like her fourth-year periwinkle robes, she would have stood out by looking too plain, too childish, too incomplete. Juvenile, even. She would have been more embarrassed in that getup than in these robes. This way, she actually fit in—and now that she was getting used to the robes on her body, she began to feel more comfortable, more at ease wearing them. A sense of deep calm and relief settled through her—visions of a flashing nightmare no longer coursing through her mind, she glided over to help with Alice's hair and then assisted in holding Marlene's as Alice braided it back into an expertly-woven bun.

Then both girls had Hermione sit between them on a chair in front of the mirror, where she watched
as they debated for a moment over what to do with her hair, before unanimously deciding to use a Curling Charm.

"Isn't that counterproductive?" Hermione asked as they divided her hair into sections and began curling it.

"Your hair is naturally curly," Alice explained, as Marlene tapped her hair with her wand. "You need to go with the flow, Hermione. You keep trying to straighten it, and it'll just come out bushy. And using a little bit of conditioner to keep it shiny wouldn't go amiss, but for now, a bit of Sleek-eazy's will do."

Hermione watched them work, and with nothing else to do, she couldn't help watching in fascination as the change took place before her eyes. Nor could she keep her eyes from locking onto her robes, fascinated by the shimmer it produced whenever she moved, and she felt a bit of nervousness mixed in with newfound confidence as she realized how she looked. The front was perfectly fitted in a way that highlighted her cleavage as well as her neck. She was wary, since the woman wearing it was her, but she was also gratified that it was her—that she actually looked this nice. That she was, dare she say it, capable of looking this alluring.

Alice and Marlene let go of her hair after a moment of rubbing some of the potion into it, and it fell in shiny, curled ringlets around her face. They gathered up her hair again, putting it up high in a ponytail, and let it waterfall around her neck and shoulders. They tied it back with a dark red thong, and stepped back to admire their handiwork.

"You two are really good at this," Hermione said, amazed. She craned her head up to look at Marlene. "Can you teach me that charm you used to make it curl?"

"Under one condition," Marlene said with a mischievous smile.

"What?"

"You have to stay until ten—and you have to give Remus a dance!"

"Why are you guys trying to set me up with Remus?" Hermione demanded plaintively. "I don't see him like that!"

"Oh, it's not you," Alice assured her. "But how would you feel if you went to a party and no one asked to dance with you?"

This made Hermione pause for a moment.

"We just want to make sure Remus has a good time. He's never been much of a party animal, but he wants to come along to this one," Marlene explained calmly. "It would be nice if you helped him get into it—pull him into the dancing until you get an opportunity to switch partners."

"So you're not trying to set me up with him?" Hermione asked, for clarification.

"Merlin's beard, no! Remus told us himself that he thinks of you like a little sister. We sort of imagine you feel the same way, too." Hermione nodded. "It's nothing like that."

"Alright," Hermione said leaning back in her chair with a smile. "In that case, I'm happy to."

"Excellent!" Alice bounded toward the door. "Let me go check on Lily and see if she needs any help, and then we'll go."
When Hermione stepped downstairs with Marlene, Alice, and Lily a short while later, she saw the boys waiting at the bottom of the stairs leading to the girls' dormitories with expectant looks.

They were all wearing robes that were very much like the ones Ron had worn to the Yule Ball with their fancy lace cuffs, but they were much more fashionable and looked quite new.

"Blimey," Sirius said with a grin, as he took Marlene's arm. "You look like a goddess!"

Frank could not help twirling Alice in his arms for a moment, before straightening his face and solemnly offering his arm to her. She did so and reached up to kiss him on the cheek, and then giggled as he leaned in to whisper a compliment into her ear.

Remus cleared his throat and pulled Hermione away from the group just as James took Lily's hand and moved to kiss and admire her spring-green robes.

"I just wanted to make sure you're comfortable doing this, since I know Marlene and Alice pretty much forced you to a—"

Hermione put a finger to his lips.

"I know you don't see me that way, and to be honest, I don't see you that way either," Hermione told him honestly. "But you're coming with me, and it's my job to make sure you have fun." She gave him a warm smile. "Have I missed anything?"

Remus looked simultaneously relieved and encouraged as he fiddled with the lacy cuffs of his robes. "No, that's it," he agreed. He tugged them down, rolled them back up quickly, finagled the buttons back into place, and then stood up straight.

"In that case," Hermione said, throwing him a playful grin and holding out her arm. "Are you going to escort me up to the party like a gentleman?"

Remus gave her an equally playful grin in return, and took her proffered arm before leaving Gryffindor Tower with the rest of the group.

~o~O~o~

They arrived at the party just as it was about to really get started.

The first thing that Hermione noticed was that Slughorn, at least, had far better taste than Gilderoy Lockhart and Albus Dumbledore when it came to holiday decorations. At the very least, the walls were not papered with hearts in varying shades of garish red and pink, and there were no annoying little dwarfs waiting to accost an unsuspecting recipient with sappy and badly-written love poems. If there was anything to be said, it was that he had that going in his favor.

Instead, his office had been greatly and magically enlarged. There were small tables adorned with black cloth, heaping with good food, scattered ever so often around the room. There were small, fist-sized cupids dancing on the tables and around the food, but they were hardly a bother, nor were they obnoxious; they were thankfully silent and merely visual decoration. The walls were decorated with hangings of pale red and white on the borders of the ceiling, and there were little white faeries flittering around the room unobtrusively. The center of the room was reserved for dancing, and though the lights were dim, tiny candles floated here and there about as high as the ceiling.

In fact, the whole room looked rather tasteful.

The only complaint Hermione had was in regards to the music. It would appear that twenty years
ago, the Wizarding Wireless and a magicked Record Player were the only sources available for good
music, and that depended entirely upon your definition of 'good'. The song currently playing was not
at all unlike the music that Gryffindor Tower had been stamping, beating, and cheering to in
celebration of the first-won first-played match of the year. It was music that people of good sense
played when they wanted to start a mob riot.

In Hermione's opinion, twenty years ago, the Wizarding World's definition of good music was
inhumane and perverse.

The fact that Alice, Marlene, and Lily all eagerly grabbed their dates' arms and dragged them to the
dance floor after their requisite greetings to Slughorn and polite introductions to some of his other
guests did not help Hermione's case at all. Nevertheless, she gave Remus a friendly smile, took his
hand in hers, and led her out to the dance floor.

"I've never danced before," Remus said apologetically.

"Don't worry about it," Hermione advised, gesturing at the other dancers, all of whom who did not
seem to be following any kind of coherent dance sequence. "Just do what feels natural."

Remus did. While the rest of the dancers moved quickly and wildly, he and Hermione slow danced
until he had the hang of it, and then he tried twirling her the way he had seen Frank do to Alice
earlier. When that worked, his smile and posture grew more confident, and with Hermione's help, he
was soon quite good at dancing to the jaunty tune of the Wizarding Wireless booming in the
background. When he slipped up, Hermione merely helped him get back on track, without stopping
to complain about his lack of skill. Soon, he was completely at ease. Hermione grinned broadly at
him when she saw that he was actually having fun, and when the music switched, he took Lily's
hand while Hermione took Sirius's—with James taking Alice, and Frank taking Marlene—and tried
out a new beat.

"Like the music?" James asked loudly, trying to be heard over the noise.

"It's loud," Hermione said, stating the obvious.

"That's the best kind of music there is!" Sirius shouted.

Hermione snorted. "Then you haven't heard anything yet!"

They both burst into laughter, and continued dancing until the room switched partners again.

When the song finally ended, and the volume lowered to rather acceptable levels with a softer,
swaying beat, Hermione glanced around the room to see if she could spot Remus. Seeing him
cheerfully dancing with one of the Ravenclaw girls, she turned around to grab a drink and abruptly
bumped into a wall of solid black.

She quickly looked up, and sudden, smug satisfaction speared through her.

Severus's jaw had, indeed, dropped when he saw who it was. He took a step back, arms splayed
slightly in silent apology to the girl he had just rudely stonewalled, and his eyes were as wide as
Hermione had ever seen them get. He closed his mouth after a moment of gaping, and he took
another moment longer to look her up and down.

"Good gods, Hermione!" His voice came out slightly strangled. "I thought the girl dancing with
Lupin was you, but I couldn't be sure—I didn't believe it!"

Hermione grinned triumphantly at him. "I'll take that as a compliment." She took a moment to look
him up and down, as well, and was frankly surprised to see him wearing solid robes, forest green, with white cuffs that were thankfully not composed of lace—Hermione didn't think she'd have been able to rein in her laughter if he'd been wearing the same kind of fancy cuffs the Marauders were. She was surprised to see that he looked as though he had actually made an effort to wash his hair, for it did not look half as greasy as it usually did, though it was still lanky and had a bit of a greasy shine on it that was not caused by the use of good shampoo.

"You look rather nice yourself," Hermione said, done assessing him and liking what she saw. "Very striking."

He seemed slightly taken aback, and Hermione rather suspected he was still getting over the shock of seeing her. She gave his sleeve a gentle tug, and pulled him toward one of the tables, where chocolate strawberries were clustered around a small, silver fountain.

"Here, let's get out of the way before one of the dancers trample us." She turned back to give him a mischievous grin as she picked up a plain strawberry and took a bite out of it. "Mmm. So, I suppose my housemates didn't make too much of a disaster out of me?"

"Quite the contrary," he said, and it seemed as though he had finally regained control over his voice. "They appear to have made a miracle out of your hair."

Hermione was about to respond, when Slughorn clasped a hand on both hers and Severus's shoulders.

"Ah, Severus, Hermione!" Slughorn said, turning them around. "Just the two I'm looking for." He gestured at a pale blond man next to him, and the good feeling that had been coursing through Hermione earlier died a cold, sudden death. "Severus, you already know Mr. Malfoy, but I'm not sure Hermione has…?"

Hermione stared into the pale grey eyes, which were full of carefully disguised hate and disdain, and gathered the very same wits Mad-Eye Moody and Kingsley Shacklebolt had so tenaciously drilled into her the summer before. Her expression grew calm, almost detachedly polite as she replied.

"No, I don't believe we've met before," she lied coolly. Severus turned to look at her in surprise, and a faint tic appeared in Lucius's cheek at this. She met the pale grey gaze with a polite, empty smile. "How very nice to meet you, Mr. Malfoy."

"Lucius here has just given St. Mungo's a donation, a very generous donation to help mitigate costs for medical research," Slughorn said, beaming. "He was my student almost five years ago."

"That's wonderful to hear," Hermione said with false enthusiasm. "I'd love to learn more about it, but Severus has promised me a dance, so—"

"Of course, of course!" Slughorn said, with a hiccup. "Go on, Severus, give the girl a dance."

"Yes, go on," Lucius mimicked, his voice soft and mocking.

Without another word, Hermione took Severus's hand and led him onto the dance floor.

"What did you think you were doing?" Severus hissed into her ear. "Why do you insist on provoking him like that?"

"We can have this conversation another time," Hermione told him firmly, placing her hands on his shoulders and nudging him to put his on her waist to that they could fall into the slow dance-steps that were now being traced across the floor. "For now, just pretend that you actually don't mind"
dancing with me until Slughorn passes Malfoy off to someone else."

"I don't mind dancing with you," Severus growled, taking her hand and beginning to lead as the song picked up a single notch. He fixed her with one of his glares. "But we will have a discussion about this later."

Hermione nodded, and they fell silent, instead focusing on the rhythm of the music and trying to keep in-sync. She felt secure in his arms, but she didn't have much focus on that as her mind once again replayed her encounter with Lucius Malfoy just moments before.

Slughorn invited a Death Eater to Hogwarts. A bloody Death Eater. How can Hogwarts be safe if they can get in this easily? Does Professor Dumbledore know? That last question was immediately thrown out by the voice of reason. Of course he knows. He knows practically everything that goes on in this school. I wouldn't be surprised if he's asked Slughorn to invite two or three guests who are Aurors at the Ministry... and the other teachers are probably on guard, I wouldn't be at all surprised to find McGonagall and Flitwick patrolling this early in the evening...

She glanced away from her partner to scan the room, and was relieved when it seemed as though her assumptions were validated: she recognized the relaxed yet alert stance of a man who she had never met, but given the way she watched Kingsley and Mad-Eye hold themselves—as well as the badge she saw tucked into the pocket of his robes—she was fairly sure he was an Auror. Only slightly appeased, though undeniably relieved, her eyes traveled across the room. They roved over the different couples now picking up the pace, including everyone from Remus with one of the older Ravenclaws to Barty Crouch Jr. dancing with a slight Slytherin sixth-year.

She finally turned to look back at her partner, satisfied with her level of awareness concerning the people around her, and realized that Severus's eyes were focused lower than her face.

She let out a snort of amusement. Severus's head shot back up and his eyes were once again locked onto hers.

"Something amusing you?" he asked casually.

"Not at all," Hermione said, smiling wryly up at him. She saw his eyes flicker from her face to her chest and then back, and sighed. Truly, at this moment, she was both flattered and ready to hex him. He was doing an absurdly poor job of hiding what he was doing—his eyes appeared that firmly transfixed by her breasts. She blamed the robes. "I'm just counting down the minutes before I'm allowed to leave."

Severus raised an eyebrow. "Allowed?"

"Marlene and Alice only promised to show me how to use a Curling Charm—which, incidentally, is not taught in any of our textbooks—if I stayed until ten."

"You have another forty-five minutes to endure," he drawled.

"Yes, but I doubt it will go by faster if you spend it staring at my breasts," Hermione said, calmly calling him out right then and there. She saw the telltale signs of alarm freeze his features, and laughed. "Honestly, Severus. You were being so obvious that I had to wonder if you were even trying to hide it."

She saw Severus's features relax a fraction of an inch. "Your robes make it difficult to ignore," he said coolly, his lips twitching upward in a half-smile. "One would even suspect you were dressing to impress on that front."
Hermione looked up at him coolly, though inside, she was beyond giggling uncontrollably. "I dress to look nice because I can. Only my roommates will tell you that's what it's for, and that's because they took it too far when they decided to add their own touches to it."

He snorted. "Of course."

"Yes, of course. Are you planning on escaping anytime soon or are you staying for the duration of the party?"

"As soon as you can help me leave without being accosted by our dear professor for another round of chatting with his very important guests, I will take off."

"Another forty minutes to go, then."

"Indeed." He looked up, glancing over her head at something, and then stopped dancing. Hermione halted with him. "Lucius is waiting for me by the drinks—I must speak with him. Don't sneak out without me, or I'll be sure to thank you with a hex on Monday."

"It would be worth that hex to force you attend the entire night," Hermione riposted, casting him a grin, but she knew that he was well aware that she would not be leaving without him. "Go on. Have a chat with your Death Eater friend. I'm going to give those chocolate strawberries a try."

She heard Severus mutter a snarky reply under his breath as she left, but he nevertheless disengaged himself from the dance floor and strode over to where Lucius Malfoy was waiting, his entire demeanor cool as ice and thoroughly irate.

Hermione watched them talk from where she was dipping a strawberry into a fountain of melted chocolate. She saw Lucius hiss something low under his breath to Severus, who bravely did not flinch, but looked as though he wanted to. His reply looked stilted.

Then she saw Lucius's eyebrows raise in surprise before his lips curled into a curious smile and he placed an arm around Severus's shoulders.

"Come on, he said, his lips moving enough for Hermione to read them. Let's take this outside, shall we?"

She saw Severus cast a glance in her direction, and then steel himself to follow Lucius. Hermione deliberated for a moment, unsure of whether or not to follow, and in a moment of decisiveness, she did. She slipped through the crowd of couples still dancing on the floor, slinking toward the door without being seen, and slipped outside. Casting a Silencing and Disillusionment Charm on herself the minute she shut the door, she kept close to the wall, following the echoing footsteps of the two Slytherins as they disappeared down the other corridor.

She stopped at the edge of the corner in time to hear part of Lucius's words.

"...cannot back out of this, Severus, because if you do—"

"I have no intention of backing out, Lucius!" Severus snapped. "I have already sworn allegiance to the Dark Lord, and I will take the Mark this summer as planned. There is no cause for concern."

Lucius's voice carried an edge of relief, even as disdain, anger, and suspicion laced it. "Your relationship with the Mudblood Granger is suspect, Severus. I know you claim to only be friends—and for once, I actually believe you on the matter," he said, letting out a short, humorless laugh before he continued, "but the fact that you are so close to her, spend so much time with her—"
Severus interrupted him coldly. "The Dark Lord considers Granger to be a threat, Lucius. As do you. She defies you without a moment’s hesitation, and the other Slytherins despise and fear her. She had landed them flat on their backs and sent them up to see Madam Pomfrey every time they've attempted to accost her—she is a formidable opponent, though I have never managed to convince her to partake in a duel with me. Surely you see the benefit in retaining her friendship despite my future among the fold?"

"You make a valid argument," Lucius responded smoothly, "but I think your role has become too… attached."

She saw a vein tighten and pulse in Severus's throat as he clenched his jaw. The response he murmured was too low for her to hear, but it seemed to be all Lucius needed to know, for he backed away from Severus and began walking in the direction from whence they had come, followed closely by his raven-haired companion. Hermione immediately pressed herself against the wall, as the two men passed, unaware of her presence. She had a split-second to register the look on Lucius's face: it was a mixture of satisfaction and relief, with just a hint of smugness. As soon as they were gone, Hermione slipped out from her hiding place and began making her way toward the girls' bathroom, to make her excuse for her absence and to clear her head.

~o~O~o~

The next morning, when Hermione got up and began brushing her hair out, she couldn't help just sitting there, staring aimlessly at the mirror as she tugged at the bushy birds nest that was her hair. Last night had been a confusing turn of events, and she was still trying to get a grasp on it. Every time something like this happened over the past year, one thought speared Hermione's mind and made her heart sink: It's starting now.

When something like last night happened, she was waiting for the avalanche to come loose. But now she finally realized that everything up until now was simply throwing kindling on the fire, and that the match would not spark until something—probably something involving James, Lily, and their yet-unborn son—happened. Until then, everything that happened now was merely preparation for an out-of-control bonfire. It was not a reassuring assessment, but it was the most accurate one Hermione had come up with.

Severus would be taking the Dark Mark soon, probably as soon as school was over.

When that happened, would their friendship be over?

The thought worried at Hermione while she worried at her hair, and unable to come up with a satisfactory answer on her own—or fix up her hair, for that matter—she reluctantly set the brush down and set out to see whether Marlene had not yet gone down to breakfast.

A quick lesson on Curling Charms and a recommendation for hair conditioner later, Hermione had grabbed her things and headed down for the last lessons of the week. She had no more detentions to serve and no more festivities to be shanghaied into attending. NEWTs were four months away, and with that knowledge in mind, Hermione was planning on keeping her head down and her nose in her schoolbooks.

It wasn't until later that evening, after she had set herself up in the library with her homework that she discovered that all had not been concluded for the time being. She watched as Severus cast one of his spells—Muffliato—and then took a seat next to her, his face contorted into a scowl.

"We need to talk."
"About what?" Hermione inquired.

"Lucius," he responded tightly.

Hermione sighed and set down her book, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"I will be blunt and honest with you, Severus," she said coolly. "I find Lucius Malfoy to be a despicable man. He despises me for no other reason than the fact that I am Muggle-born. He would probably kill me, and enjoy it too, if he had the means." She flashed him an angry, defiant stare. "Why should I show him any respect, any hint of deference?"

Severus pursed his lips tightly, and she watched as he brought a finger to trace them, the way he did when he was deep in thought. "There are advantages to having a Slytherin mindset when dealing with people you don't like."

"Pardon me, Severus," Hermione said, giving him a cold smile, "but there is no way that giving him what he wants will somehow make him more kindly disposed toward me."

"It would be better than painting a target on yourself," he argued.

"I'm already a painted target because I'm a Muggle-born," Hermione snapped.

"You have called unnecessary attention to yourself—"

Hermione stood up, slamming her book down on the table with such force that her companion actually flinched. His finger stopped moving. Her patience had finally thrown its hands up and declared itself to be on an official vacation, and now all her pent-up frustration had collected into a veritable monster of suppressed, tightly-coiled anger.

"Lucius Malfoy is a monster," she hissed quietly, "whether or not I call attention to myself has no bearing on whether or not he would kill me. The mere fact that I am Muggle-born is cause and justification enough for his twisted ideology. I refuse to defer to him or give him any kind of respect or acknowledgement, and if that has the added bonus of infuriating him, then so much the better. Men make mistakes when fueled by rage rather than reason, and if the former is what drives your friend," she spat the word at him, "then he will make a fatal mistake if and when he decides to deal with me. I will never give him any satisfaction."

She saw Severus stiffen visibly, and then he too stood up, towering over her with a sneering, intimidating countenance.

"You are too prideful, too confident in your capabilities and your ability to save yourself," Severus snarled at her, his patience worn thin.

"And you're not, Severus?" Hermione countered.

She saw rage flare up in his eyes, darkened with fury. "This isn't about me," he ground out. "This is about you—"

"Yes, it is about me!" Hermione said with just a hint of shrillness in her voice, slamming her hand down on the table. "This is about me and the fact that you expect me to sit back and let pompous, twisted arseholes like Lucius Malfoy—"

"Lucius is my friend," Severus hissed at her, "and my status among the Dark Lord's inner circle is vitally important. The two go hand in hand, Hermione! You cannot be so pathetically stupid as to ignore that!"
"Fine,\" she said brokenly. She brought one hand to limply slide her books back into her bag, whereupon she hoisted it back over her shoulder. \"He's your friend. I'm your friend, too, or at least I thought I was. Your friend wants me dead, and my only defense is to antagonize him in the hopes that it may keep him off-kilter. But naturally, if you take offense at that,\" she said bitterly. \"I suppose the answer is fairly clear.\"

\"Hermione…?\" Severus looked eminently confused, even taken aback by her tone.

\"I think we're done,\" she pronounced with difficulty. \"You'll be graduating in less than four months, so you'll never have to deal with me again. Focus on getting into the Dark Lord's good graces—I'll just focus on getting through school alive. As pathetically stupid as you think I am.\"

With that said, she strode off, head bent as she left. Severus stood up quickly, one hand outstretched to halt her retreating back as the meaning of his words finally hit him.

\"No—wait—\"

But Hermione had either ignored or not heard him, for she left, footsteps fading in the distance, and she did not return.

~o~O~o~

Hermione went back to Gryffindor Tower that night and, when her friends saw the expression on her face and stood up to try and feel out what was wrong, she pulled away and stalked upstairs, leaving the boys hanging at the staircase and looking quite helpless while the girls tried to reassure them that they would take care of it. But Hermione went to her room and after a few flicks of her wand, changed into sleep attire and crawled into bed. She pulled the curtains around her and though she laid her school work out on the coverlet, she could only curl up and bury her face in her arms.

She had not wanted to imagine something like this could happen. She had always known that Severus would choose Lily over her, but she had at least thought she ranked higher than Lucius Malfoy—a man who treated Severus as his inferior rather than his equal and flaunted his wealth in his face, knowing he could use his status alone to buy favors. But perhaps that was it, really. She thought that Severus valued her intelligence and friendship over the fortune and prestige Malfoy offered, but really, who had she been kidding? Severus was a Slytherin. Right now, he cared only about a select few things: the safety of Lily Evans and his status among the people he perceived to be his superiors—and the people his superiors perceived to be his peers. Hermione did not fit into that list, unless she counted as both a source of knowledge and curiosity, something to keep him occupied until he graduated, and a way of raising status among his cohorts by keeping tabs on her. In short, an entertaining distraction.

A bitter feeling wormed through her chest at this thought.

Alice pulled back her curtains several minutes later to find Hermione still balled up on the bed, The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 6 opened up at her feet.

\"Go away,\" Hermione said listlessly.

\"Not until you tell us what's wrong,\" Alice said, slipping onto the bed and shutting the curtain behind her. \"You're obviously upset.\"

\"It's nothing you can help with,\" Hermione said, burying her face in her arms once more. \"Just leave me be. I appreciate your concern, it's just not necessary.\"
"Hermione…" Alice paused. "James and Sirius are downstairs waiting to talk to you. They know you came back from the library, and now they're ready to go out and find Snape and hex him."

Hermione failed even to look up. "Tell them to not bother. It's not worth it."

"They said that unless you go downstairs to dissuade them otherwise, they're going," Alice said warningly. She paused. "And… Lily—Lily's telling James that she knew this would happen. I hate to say it, Hermione, because Lily's a really nice person, but—"

"She's gloating," Hermione responded dully, her voice muffled.

"I hate to say it, but yes."

"Go downstairs," Hermione instructed, looking up at Alice. Her eyes were rimmed red from quiet crying. "And tell James and Sirius that if they want to leave Hogwarts with their bollocks intact, they will not leave the common room tonight to go seek out Sev—Snape. And furthermore, please go tell Lily to stuff a sock in it."

Alice's mouth gaped open in a silent 'o' of surprise, and then she shut it. "Be right back, then," she said, slipping through the curtain and disappearing from sight.

Hermione buried her face in her arms once more, and cried.

When Alice returned a quarter of an hour later, she did not press or badger Hermione for more information. She pulled the distraught girl into her arms and held her, offering almost motherly comfort to her, until Hermione sniffled her way out of her tears and forced herself to finish up the homework due on Monday. Alice grabbed hers, and the two sat together on the bed and worked in relative silence for the rest of the night.

The next morning was thankfully a Saturday. Hermione didn't even bother leaving her dorm room: she ordered breakfast up with the elves and sat in her room all day, working. She didn't even venture downstairs. Marlene and Alice came in several times a day to try to coax her out with suggestions of a walk around the grounds or a trip to the library, but Hermione put them off. She didn't feel like dealing with the other students right now.

Lily came in some time after lunch to try and talk to her, but Hermione, in a fit of uncharacteristic temper, snarled at her to get out.

She did not feel like dealing with other people today. To make things worse, her period had just started, which meant she would riding an emotional rollercoaster for the next few days. The smallest things set her off, the tiniest problems made her depressed. Given what had just happened, it was hardly a wonder that she was feeling listless and despondent. And right now, all she wanted to do was get her work done. She had a massive amount of homework, and by shutting herself in, she isolated herself from any and all things not directly related to the completion of all known homework assignments due sometime within the next week.

Sunday evening, Alice forced her to get up and walk around the room a bit, opening a window to give her some fresh air, and then—with a meaningful look at her hair—suggested that she take a shower before tomorrow. Nearly complete with her work and with nothing better to do, Hermione obeyed, and felt a good deal better for it.

Monday morning, classes resumed as normal. Hermione went down to breakfast with everyone else, ate, and hurried off to class without a second glance. She saw Severus out of the corner of her eye several times throughout the day, but before he could get near her, she was gone. She was feeling
poor enough as it was without having to confront him. She did not care to entertain any of his excuses, and she was afraid that if he did, she would be inclined to either hit him or forgive him.

She was successful in avoiding him until Thursday, by which time her period was over, and she was feeling normal again. It was also when James and Sirius cornered her in the common room and confessed that they had confronted Severus on Monday to find out what had happened.

"I hope you didn't hex him," Hermione said, eyeing them suspiciously.

James put his hands up placatingly. "We didn't send him to the Hospital Wing, if that's what you're asking."

Hermione sighed, and glanced back down at the Arithmancy problem she was working on.

"James…"

Both boys sighed and exchanged glances, as though they still had not worked on how they were going to explain this to her. Sirius gave it a go.

"The greasy git wants to talk to you," he said, eyeing her hand just in case it twitched warningly toward her wand. "He says he's sorry, although he wouldn't tell us what for."

Hermione turned her attention back to her work. She swallowed. "Tell him that he's forgiven, but that what I told him still stands."

James and Sirius turned to look at each other, and shrugged. They did a quick game of rock-cake, parchment, wand, and then James ambled off, no doubt to deliver her message.

~o~O~o~

Hermione was returning from Astronomy that night, the last student descending down the stairs after she'd had an extended conversation with Professor Sinistra about the assignment due next Monday, when a dark shape slipped out of a hiding place in the wall. Hermione immediately dropped her bag, wand whipped out of her sleeve, and raised in defense.

A deep, silky voice snapped, "Expelliarmus!"

Hermione blocked the spell with a Shield Charm, and then—instinct taking her over, along with her summer training—she snapped her wand in his direction.

"Stupefy!"

There was a shattering flare of sparks as her spell crashed and rebounded off Severus' own Shield Charm, and Hermione ducked forward, on the offensive.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded, slashing her wand in his direction. Severus dodged it by a hair, and stepped back into the safety of the darkness. The torches had been extinguished by the force of their spell work, and Hermione stood at the foot of the steps where there was just enough moonlight for her to see into the gloom ahead.

"I'm here to talk— damn it!" He let out an expletive as he was forced to block another shield-rattling hex. "Stop attacking me! I'm not here to hurt you!"

"You should know by now that I don't take kindly to being disarmed," Hermione snapped, sending another incapacitating spell his way. "Diffindo!" There was a crack, and a sudden yelp of pain, and Hermione backed away, trying to get a visual on her target in what little light there was. She couldn't
be bothered to cast a Lumos when she might need her wand to cast a Shield Charm instead. She sent a flurry of several other hexes down the hallway, hoping to hit him, and trying to get a glimpse of where he might be. "Where the hell are you? Come on out!"

"Lower—lower your wand," Severus's voice demanded jerkily. Hermione's ears twitched, trying to feel him out. "Please—just lower your wand. I haven't cast anything more at you than a Disarming Charm. I'm only here to talk to you, since you've been avoiding me all week."

"If you were just here to talk," Hermione said, wordlessly sending another hex his way, "then you wouldn't have attacked me. Incarcerous!"

He blocked both spells, and after that, there was no talking. Hermione had ducked into the gloom, and spells began to fling back wildly between them, exploding into the walls and their enspelled shields like sparklers. Severus's spells all originated from the same location, and after a few moments, Hermione was able to identify his position.

She was about to retreat back to the lit base of the stairs where she could see properly when his strong arms suddenly wrapped around her, pinning her helplessly against his chest. She made to scream, but a Silencing Spell rendered her mute, and, cursing her idiocy, she flailed helplessly, trying to loosen his grip on her. She kicked his leg with the back of her heel, and to her surprise, he crumbled to the ground, though he still held on tightly. She heard him give a grunt of pain, and when she tried to jab him in the jugular with the handle of her wand, his chin knocked into her hand, sending her wand skidding across the floor.

"Damn it—stop—damn it, stop struggling—my leg!" Hermione rammed the back of her head into his face, and she felt him loosen her grip. She pulled away, feeling around wildly for her wand, and he grabbed her leg and dragged her backwards, causing her to scream silently in surprise and fury.

"You broke my ankle with your stupid spell—" He heaved himself up, maneuvering until he had her pinned down on the ground, her face pressed into the cold stone floor. His leg was splayed at an odd angle, and when he managed to wordlessly light his wand so that they could see, she saw that, indeed, his right ankle was resting on the ground at a twisted, sick angle. And it looked as though it were causing him a good deal of pain.

That must have been the Diffindo, Hermione thought. And then with a bit of sadistic satisfaction, added silently, Good. He deserves it, the bastard.

He was hovering over her now, she saw, his face inches from hers. It was pinched with pain and frustration, but for some odd reason, she truly was not all that afraid. He was panting hard, and she watched him take in a huge gulp of air before being able to speak. Up close, she did not fear him. He closed his eyes for a moment and gritted his teeth with pain, before opening them.

"If I let you go, will you sit quietly and let me talk?"

She stared up at him defiantly, which he took for a 'no.' She saw him raise his wand, and struggled futilely for a moment, unable to throw off his weight, before she felt her entire body freeze from his Petrificus Totalus. He let out a groan of pain, and moved to rest his weight entirely on his left side to spare his right ankle as much pain as possible.

"You've been avoiding me all week," he said, wiping his face with the back of his sleeve. "James Potter gave me your message, but he apparently didn't give you mine. No matter. Hermione, if you've forgiven me, why won't you talk to me?"

Hermione gave him a medusa-worthy glare, silently and impotently, and he sighed.
"Right—can't speak yet—but you never gave me a chance to explain…” He dug the fingers of one hand in his hair, as though trying to think about how to say something. "I didn't mean to call you pathetic or stupid. I shouldn't have disregarded the fact that you probably have a fairly good reason for hating Lucius, either…”

Hermione felt her jaw unfreeze just enough to work the saliva in her mouth, but she still couldn't speak.

"I should have apologized right away—I tried to, actually—but you'd already left, and you hadn't given me a chance to. Short of threatening to sleep outside Gryffindor Tower again—which, I might add, made me the laughingstock of Slytherin and Gryffindor for months to follow, and which I couldn't afford to do right now—" Funny, he almost sounded like he was rambling his words. "This was the only way I could think of getting you to let me talk.” He looked down at her with a mixture of pain and something else, which probably had to do with his broken ankle. "I'm sorry, Hermione. That's what I've been trying to tell you.”

Hermione worked her jaw, a moment longer, and then craned her neck up at him, glaring.

"And I'll try not to be such an arse next time, but can—"

Hermione worked her legs slightly, just to make sure they were working, and then in one swift moment, she connected her knee to his crotch with as much force as she could put behind it. She extracted herself out from underneath him while he doubled over in agony, his right ankle still twisted at an odd angle, and let out a very audible string of pained whimpers mixed in with cursing.

"You could have put all of that in a letter without making me think you were trying to kill me,” Hermione told him coolly, brushing off her robes. A moan of pain was her only response, and she stretched out her limbs to check that they were in good working order before she bent down and pulled one of his arms free from where he was clutching his groin in pain, and pulled it around her shoulder, helping him to his feet. "We'll talk about it while Madam Pomfrey fixes you up."

Severus did not seem capable of speaking until they had managed to hobble down two floors in the direction of the Hospital Wing. "A letter… is so… impersonal… cold… not the right way to go about things…"

"So is hexing and wrestling someone to the ground," Hermione told him, feeling only slightly sorry for his pain. She knew she would probably feel exponentially worse than she did now once she had time to sit back and think on it, but at the moment, any regret was dulled by the adrenaline still coursing through her veins. Adrenaline and a good deal of pent-up anger.

"I tried finding a way to talk to you in-between classes…"

"I avoided you."

"…tried catching you just before… lunch…"

"I was probably a bit too quick for that."

"…and if I'd managed to disarm you… as planned… it would have been less of a wrestling match…"

"I don't make things easy for people who plan to disarm me," Hermione said, her voice cheerful for the first time that night. "You should have noticed that by now."

"I noticed," he said stiffly, paused, and then stumbled for a moment as Hermione helped him down
another flight of stairs, before muttering distractedly, "Fuck. You're a good duelist."

"You already knew that," Hermione reminded him.

"Kindly remind me… not to try this again… any time in the near future…" He grimaced in pain, and then pronounced as clearly as he could, "I must have been insane to try."

Hermione gave him a half-smile. "I could have told you that from the start."

"So…" Severus paused for a moment as Hermione helped him down the last flight of stairs and helped him limp toward the Hospital Wing. "Does this mean you'll… ow…" he stumbled for a moment, his leg catching against the ground, causing his face to contort in pain. "Does this mean you'll meet me at the library again, tomorrow?"

"Let's talk it over while Madam Pomfrey fixes you up," Hermione said, adjusting her grip on him. "You've got your own problems to deal with without throwing me into the mix, and if I really cause that much trouble for you—well—" her tone turned uncertain, "—you graduate in four months, and then that's it. Shouldn't you be focusing on… well, on your future?"

Severus ground down on his teeth. "No." They hobbled the last few steps toward the door, and Hermione lowered Severus gently to the ground so that he could sit against the wall while she knocked on the door.

"I would think that would be more important," Hermione responded carefully, as she heard footsteps approaching the door.

"Not when you're my best friend," Severus replied, shifting into a more comfortable position as the matron opened the door and peered out.

The minute she saw Severus, she let out a sigh of long-suffering, and signaled Hermione to help him up and into the room. She shut the door behind them, and shook her head.

"What happened to you this time?"

Hermione watched Madam Pomfrey as she helped Severus onto one of the beds. Straight-faced, she replied, "We had a bit of a disagreement."

The matron's eyebrows merely rose to her hairline as she took in Severus's broken leg.

"I can see that," she said.

Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
"Looks like you made up with Snivellus," Sirius said with a nod at the Slytherin table the next morning as he stabbed his sausage with a fork.

Hermione glanced up from her own breakfast, eyeing him suspiciously. "How can you tell?"

Sirius grinned at her. "He's limping."

Hermione turned her gaze over to the Slytherin table, where Severus was picking up his bookbag and making his way toward the doors. Indeed, he was limping. Slightly. "How do you know I had anything to do with that?"

"Because if it wasn't us, it had to be you," James said, with an unsympathetic smirk in Severus's direction as he exited the hall. The smile suddenly slid off his face. "I suppose that means you're going back to spending time with him?"

"Inevitably," Hermione agreed.

"I think that's a bad decision," Lily said, glancing over at Hermione and letting out a sigh. "Next time —"

"Next time, I'll send him to the Hospital Wing and then we'll kiss and make up," Hermione responded sarcastically, taking a stab at her eggs. "Business as usual."

The boys visibly gagged at this.

Lily let out another sigh, and then seemed to drop the matter. Hermione couldn't tell if she was genuinely concerned about her, still angry with Severus for the incident that had caused their breakup, or a mixture of both. She suspected the lattermost possibility.

"I suppose this means they're not allowed to hex him," Remus said mildly, looking up from his book, which he had propped up against his goblet of pumpkin juice.

James and Sirius glared at him good-naturedly, if such a thing were at all possible.

~o~O~o~

"You're still limping, I see," Hermione said, nodding at Severus's leg as he made his way over to their table later that evening. He slid his bag off his shoulder and onto the table where it landed with a heavy thud, and pulled out his Arithmancy text.

He scowled at her. "Thanks to you, I might add."

"You deserved it," Hermione said, grinning up sheepishly at him.

"Not that I'll ever admit it," he muttered, before sliding into the seat next to her.

And just like that, it was as though nothing had happened. They worked on Arithmancy together,
arguing over the petty details, before diverting their attention to separate assignments. It was not until Hermione began working on her Defense Against the Dark Arts homework that she realized something was amiss.

"This may sound slightly paranoid," she said, examining her assignment, "but it seems to me as though Faulkner is assigning us more dueling spells. I feel like he's preparing us for something."

Severus gave her a nasty, superior grin. "So what if he is?"

Hermione gave him a suspicious stare.

"You know something," she stated.

He leaned back in his chair, gingerly crossing his legs, and gave her a smug, self-satisfied sneer. "So what if I do?"

Hermione studied his face for a moment, and then with a complacent smile, turned away to resume her work. "Then I suppose I'll just have to wait to find out."

He stared at Hermione for a full minute, as though he could scarcely believe what she had said, and turned around in his chair to face her. "You're not going to impersonate the bloody Spanish inquisition and interrogate me for hints?"

"Of course not," Hermione said with a huff, frowning down at her assignment. "You probably wouldn't tell me even if I asked, and I don't need garbled hints in order to do well in my classes."

"You are a dry, withered-up bookworm," Severus muttered sourly, glaring down at his Transfiguration essay. "You lack that necessary bit of humanity that allows for entertainment."

Hermione turned to give him an exasperated look. "Begging you for hints would hardly be fun for me!"

"So was being kicked in the bollocks, but that didn't seem to stop you," Severus said, re-inking his quill and starting a new paragraph of his essay. "I'm sure you enjoyed that."

"As a matter of fact, I did not!"

"Of course you would say that, in the interest of resuming diplomatic international relationships—"

Hermione groaned and buried her face in her hands. "You are never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Probably not." Severus peered down at her face, which was now suitably smudged with ink. "And I do believe you've just decorated your face with your fingerprints."

Hermione looked down at her hands, the tips of which were smeared with ink, and groaned.

The rest of February passed quite uneventfully. March was interrupted mid-way by a ridiculously heavy snowstorm, landing the school in over three feet of snow. Severus actually stood back to watch with sneering amusement as Hermione helped pull a first-year Hufflepuff out of a snowdrift he had fallen into; the poor boy was so short that when he had tried to step into it, he had sunk in over his chest, lost his balance, and landed face-first into the snow, flailing helplessly. It was somewhat absurd to witness. Nevertheless, that day, he had a very good excuse for being fifteen minutes late to Herbology.
By the end of March, the incident that had driven Hermione and Severus apart during February had fairly blown over and been delegated to the back of their minds with all the other fuzzy memories they had of earlier school years. Hermione had tucked it away with her memories concerning the time Harry and Ron had not been on speaking terms early on in fourth year.

Ironically, on April 1st, panic concerning the upcoming exams actually began to settle into the students when Professor Faulkner, in a joke that involved the rest of the staff, informed the students that they would be taking their exams in early May rather than the middle of June.

The flurry this caused in the Great Hall had been utterly absurd. There were several screams, two fainting students who had to be carried up to see Madam Pomfrey, and a flurry of papers as the students all dug into their bags to check that they actually had their notes. Those who did not quite literally tripped over their seats trying to find the housemates who they knew actually took comprehensive notes. It was very nearly raw chaos, and Hermione had not been apart from it. She was among the students who had been frantically checking her notebook and the lesson syllabi that the teachers had passed out earlier that year, and had nearly lost it when the full implication hit her that she would only have one full week to study before her exams.

It took three sharp bangs from Faulkner's wand to regain the students' attention long enough to inform them that it had been nothing more than a joke. The normally strict and austere Defense professor's eyes were crinkled with laughter, and he received a chaos-strewn hall full of glares for his trouble.

But if Faulkner's desired outcome of the prank was to raise the students' awareness that their finals were not as far off as they would like to imagine, it worked spectacularly well. Exam fever had gripped the students, and in the upcoming weeks, Hermione helped Lily, James, and Remus crack down on the illicit trade that had sprung up among the students. Students claiming to have magical objects of great value in regards to boosting testing performance had their would-be miracle ingredients confiscated and, if Hermione was able to report them to the prefects, detention. Students were now bargaining copies of notes as though they were money—which Lily put a stop to by making free copies of her own meticulous notes and passing them around—and they could be more often found studying than slacking off.

Exams began looming over their heads like an oncoming stormcloud, and by May, amid the thunderstorms that raged against the castle walls, it had the motif to match. Between reviewing the year's notes and taking turns questioning each other during their evenings in the library, Hermione could not help feeling a pit of dread welling up in her gut whenever she look at Severus. In less than two months, he would be gone. Graduated. As would Lily, James, Sirius, Remus, Frank, Alice, Marlene, and all the other seventh years. This thankfully incuded Pettigrew, who Hermione had never really learned to like (much to the confusion of the other Marauders, and it was a secret that she kept painfully locked away) but it meant that all of her friends would be gone, too.

Already, she felt piteously alone.

What would happen to Severus once he left? Would he take the Dark Mark immediately? Was he planning on pursuing further study in the art of Potions on his own time? Where would he go? Did he even consider keeping in touch with her while she completed her seventh year? What would happen to her?

She kept her worries bottled tightly in her heart, and instead poured her efforts into spending as much time with her friends as possible while also studying for the ever-nearing exams. By this time, she had resumed being on good terms with Lily: the green-eyed girl never brought Severus up in conversation unless in passing, and they worked well together when it came to reviewing and
sniffing out students who were trying to dupe their fellows into buying useless junk that allegedly produced miracles.

She also discovered that James and Lily were planning to marry in a quiet ceremony sometime within the year, as soon as they had graduated. Sirius and Pettigrew were, of course, invited. James personally took Hermione aside to ask if she would do them the honor of attending.

Hermione had mixed feelings on the matter. Their wedding was planned during the following school year, which was a good excuse in of itself, but the fact of the matter was that she simply didn’t feel it was her place to be in those memories. Pictures would be taken. Harry would get the remains of those memories from Hagrid, and they would be all he would have left of his parents. But James and Lily were her good friends, and if nothing else, she felt she should be there for them at this special moment in their lives. James was inviting his very closest friends, and Hermione was truly honored to be considered among them.

She therefore accepted—only to be pulled into a bear-hug by James, and then later informed by Lily that she would like Hermione to be her Maid of Honor.

"I know we haven't always seen eye to eye," the woman admitted sheepishly, smiling warmly, "but you’ve been an incredibly good friend to us, and I would like you to be there in that stead."

"Of course," Hermione answered with genuine enthusiasm.

"Oh, Hermione!" Lily pulled her into a hug and kissed her cheek. "You don't know how much that means to us. Thank you."

Severus’s face became almost disturbingly blank when he heard the news. Hermione stared into his expressionless countenance as his eyes took on a far-away look, suggesting that he was still absorbing the news, and he shortly came back to himself.

"I see," he muttered, his demeanor closed, sullen even.

Exams finally arrived. If Hogwarts had been in an uproar earlier, what had passed for pure chaos earlier was now simply raw, unadulterated, unleashed, near-explosive pandemonium. Even the teachers looked a little taken aback by the students’ frantic and harried behavior, and Hermione heard McGonagall remark to Flitwick that perhaps they could try this in another decade or so, once they had an opportunity to invest in some anti-riot equipment.

Hermione was kept studying until the very last possible moment. But when exams finally arrived, and it was time to set her notes and books aside and begin the written portion of her Charms exam, she did it with the mixed attitude of a prisoner approaching the guillotine and a race horse chomping at the bit. All throughout the week, stress levels achieved an all-new high. Madam Pomfrey was passing out Calming Draughts to the students like pumpkin juice, and she ran low very quickly, forcing her to request more from Slughorn, who was only too happy to provide her with a regular supply.

"You know how it is, Poppy," he told her with a genial sigh as he delivered two cratefuls of the stuff to the Hospital Wing. "They go through it like butterbeer."

Hermione’s day fell into a regular pattern during the two weeks that encompassed testing. Study, take her exams, eat, sleep, and flip a knut to see if she would remember to shower. Severus followed similarly, and the two of them often ended up kipping in the library, much to Madam Pince’s self-righteous disgust. Exceptions were made during exam week, and it was not uncommon to see a student passed out over their books in the morning when the library re-opened, but the librarian
clearly did not like it.

The Defense Against the Dark Arts exam was undeniably the most interesting, if not harrowing, one. Professor Faulkner had set up a bit of a challenge course using what had been the Forbidden Corridor in Hermione's first year for his sixth-year students, where they had to deal with a wide manner of dangerous magical beasts that were not even covered in Care of Magical Creatures beyond being assigned as an essay: the Defense teacher had somehow managed to get ahold of a Quintuped, which had to be quickly Stupefied and bound before the student could continue. Boggarts, too, were present, which Hermione was able to take down with sufficient skill. Voldemort, scaley and grey, with red eyes, appeared before her, but he was so different from how he appeared now, given that he still had a fairly human-like form, that it was easy for others to assume that the boggart had turned into a personal, nightmarish creation.

A firebreathing chicken running amok, a demon-possessed book that chased after the students with papery teeth, and a Sphinx were all part of the exam. Students who were unable to solve the lattermost's riddle had to be quick on their feet to incapacitate it long enough to escape.

Doxies had to be watched out for, since there were some hidden behind innocent-looking obstacles such as trees or logs. A chameleon ghoul had been set loose and, enraged, was a formidable thing that had to be quickly subdued. Faulkner had even managed to acquire a five-foot tall Acromantula, likely from the Forbidden Forest and with Hagrid's help, and Hermione was one of the few students who managed to get past it relatively unscathed; knowing that the eyes and underbelly were the weakest, softest spots, she had magically bound it up with rope to distract it long enough to slide underneath its belly and aim a series of stunners at it. It crumpled over to the side, and she left that particular room feeling quite relieved.

Ron would have had a heart attack, Hermione was sure.

But when she got to the second-to-last part of the exam, she discovered that she was not just dealing with dark creatures anymore. Professor Faulkner, standing against the far wall, informed the students who made it this far that they would be dueling people.

Seventh-year students, to be exact. Hermione only later discovered that the students in question got to choose which sixth-years they wanted to duel, for she was very surprised at the time to find that Severus was to be her opponent. There were only about ten seventh-year students in the class, and nearly twice as many sixth-years, which meant that they would have to duel two sixth-years each.

Severus's words several weeks ago finally made sense to her. Faulkner had probably prepared them to make them as difficult to defeat as possible, and she gathered that this was just as much a test for the seventh-years as it was for the sixths. Of course, the seventh-years were taking their NEWTs, but Severus later told her that whether or not Faulkner wrote a recommendation for them rested largely on their success in dueling his sixth-years.

Faulkner's instructions were very clear as Hermione and Severus strode to the center of the room, wands raised and waiting for the signal. He was smirking at her as they readied themselves.

"You may use whatever magical means you have at your disposal to win," he told them seriously. "You may not resort to purely physical means—this is a test of your magical prowess, not your bar-fighting skills. Unforgivables are, as they would be anywhere else, off-limits." His eyes narrowed dangerously at this, and Hermione suspected that there must have been some kind of incident in his seventh-year class to cause him to issue such a stark warning. "This is not maypole dancing. You are fighting to win, and that means getting dirty, then so be it. Am I understood?"

Both participants nodded.
"Begin."

They were in a clearly-lit room. Unlike their last fight, they could see each other clearly. They both entered the duel ready to throw more than just a disarming or momentarily crippling spell; they were working to solidly incapacitate. Severus's movements were practiced and swift, and Hermione suspected that if she had not caught him off-guard with a *diffindo* up at the Astronomy tower, she would have lost the battle quite spectacularly. She had not been in the mode for all-out fighting. Now, however, she was and she never stayed in one spot long enough for her raven-haired opponent to take aim.

Spells flew across the room, bouncing off of walls, shields, and even the ward that Faulker had erected protectively around himself. Hermione was completely in her element and, with all senses alert and her visuals well-supplied, she soon had Severus dancing on the edge of having just enough time to defend himself. She didn't give him an opening, not even a split second to attack or retaliate once she had him off-kilter.

But she couldn't land a solid hex on him. Neither could he on her. It became a game of either putting up shields or dodging before commencing an attack. They were both advantaged and disadvantaged by not being able to edge close enough to the other to body slam them off balance or use some other form of physical incapacitation.

Hermione did not know how long their duel took, but they were still fighting, sweat pouring down the side of their faces and their brows pinched in frustration and concentration, when the next seventh-year poked his head into the door to check if it was his turn to come in. A similar thing occurred with one of the sixth-years, and he ducked back from whence he had come, slamming the door shut, when a snarled *'Incendio!'* exploded inches away from his face.

Hermione was holding her own with admirable skill and tenacious determination, and by now she would have successfully disarmed any ordinary Death Eater, but Severus was amazingly good. Mad-Eye told her that most of Voldemort's followers fought in the style of 'stand-and-attack'. That meant they moved little and defended minimally, often preferring to take their chances with loud, powerful hexes. Severus was quite the opposite, moving gracefully and supinely, and preferring to use spells whose effects were surgically precise rather than raw explosions, and shielding at every turn.

This was not the kind of battle-style Hermione was accustomed to dealing with, and had this been anyone else, she might have still won easily. But she had not been training to the same strenuous extent that she had been put through that summer, and though she remembered every word her mentors had taught her, and the instincts were still there, her reflexes were a bit out of shape.

Hermione was caught off guard by the sudden tell-tale *crack* of Apparition. Her eyes widened in shock as she realized that the Anti-Disapparition wards on the school had been lifted from this particular room. She had known that was possible, given that she took her Apparition lessons in the Great Hall with all the other sixth-years earlier in January, completing the twelve-week course and earning her license along with the majority of the class, but she had not known that it applied in this particular instance.

*Shite!*

Her response was too slow. Severus was mere feet away from her, and he triumphantly flicked his wand upward in her direction.

Hermione yelped and suddenly found herself hoisted into the air by her ankle. Her robes dropped around her, and it was at this moment that Hermione was fervently grateful that she had thought to wear jeans today, since she had also taken her Herbology practical earlier and had thought them a
prudent addition. She had not, unfortunately, thought to put on her Muggle jumper—it was far too hot for that, and as Hermione writhed in the air, trying to get free, she wished she had. Her arms were tangled up by the sleeves of her robes now, and she wriggled around, trying to dislodge the obstruction before Severus could disarm her.

"Stu—"

"Protego!" Hermione gasped, just barely managing to block the spell. She cast a charm on her robes that caused them to tear off, and trying to ignore the humiliating fact that she was now dangling upside down in the air in nothing but a bra and jeans, she snapped her wand in his direction. Now was not the moment to worry about feminine modesty—she had found herself in a similar situation in more than one duel with Alastor and Kingsley, who had shown her no mercy, and knew there would be time to be properly mortified later.

"Relashio!"

Severus was thrown backwards, his wand almost exploding out of his hands and skidding off to the side. Hermione's head pounded, the blood rushing to it almost dizzyingly, and she twisted around as she spun slowly in the air by her ankle, trying to get a reasonable shot at him.

"Conjunctivitus!" She snapped her wand at his neck. "Confundo— Carpe Retractum!"

The first spell hit his eyes, as intended, causing him to let out a yell not unlike the one Hermione had heard from the dragon Viktor Krum had used the very same spell on in her fourth year. It was one of surprise, rage, and excruciating pain. The second stopped him cold from scrambling about for his wand, whereupon he fell to his knees, swaying and gripping the floor, trying to regain his wits. The third had snapped a rope around his neck, attached to her wand, and was dragging him toward her on the floor.

He struggled, hands clawing at the rope uselessly, and flailed about, temporarily blinded and quite helpless. Gritting her teeth, Hermione pointed her wand at herself, and cast the countercurse to the spell keeping herself levitated. She dropped with a loud 'oomph!' right on top of her opponent, using him as a cushion so that she did not crack her skull on the hard stone floor. He let out a grunt of pain, and she rolled off quickly, adjusting her bra which had come loose, and grappled for her torn robes, pulling them on to cover what she could.

Severus was letting out a garbled stream of swear words, mostly unintelligible since the rope around his throat was still choking him. Hermione disengaged the spell, causing the end of the rope to drop from her wand and go slack, and she watched Severus let out a gasping cough, his fingers scrabbling against the noose around his neck to try and remove it. He managed to roll to his knees, searching around blindly, desperately for his wand.

Hermione summoned the stick of ebony to her hands and, satisfied that she had well and truly won, reversed the damage to his eyes. He stopped to blink and rub them, and when he could see clearly again, looked up at her, wearing the most furious, snarling scowl she had seen yet. His eyes were rimmed red, he had rope burns on his neck, and his hands were slashed from the Releasing Charm. She had her wand pointed at him.

"I win," she said, breasts heaving as she used the opportunity to catch her breath. "Bastard."

"My eyes, you bitch," Severus growled, slowly bringing himself to his feet.

Professor Faulkner chose to intervene at that moment, stepping in and plucking Severus's wand from
Hermione's hand and tossing it back to its owner, who quickly snatched it out of the air.

"Excellent work," he said. He was smiling fixedly, but his eyes were lit up with laughter. "I dare say Miss Granger is undisputably the winner. Go on, then," he said, pointing to the door. "Fix up your robes and head on to the next part of the challenge."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "There's more?"

"Of course. Surely you didn't think this was the end?"

Muttering mutinously under her breath, Hermione repaired her robes and stalked off to the next room.

When the exams were finally over, the guillotine fell, and the chains were broken. Two very different feelings warred within Hermione. She had survived her sixth year, and was well on her way to taking her NEWTs next year. Exams were over. Summer had arrived. On the other hand… even though she would be keeping in touch with all of her Gryffindor friends who were soon to become Hogwarts Alumnae, there was one person whose future she was uncertain about.

She certainly had it out with him once the exam was over.

"I can't believe you did that!" Hermione raged at him, having cornered him in their usual spot in the library. She watched him discretely cast Muffliato and a Notice-Me-Not spell when her tone rose above acceptable indoor decibels. "If I hadn't just come back from my Herbology exam, I wouldn't have been wearing anything!"

"It was fair game," Severus responded silkily, giving her an infuriating, slight curl of a smile. "I was rather hoping you would switch your focus from me to protecting your modesty." He placed delicate emphasis on the last word, and then frowned. "I have to admit that I was rather unpleasantly surprised on that front."

"It was still a dirty trick," Hermione snapped, glaring at him.

"You were warned. Besides," Severus added, scowling, "I'm beginning to wonder if you don't get off on causing me pain." He rubbed his neck, where Madam Pomfrey had had to heal the rope marks Hermione's spell had left behind. "You certainly fit the profile for a sadist. Using one of your immobilizing spells would have sufficed—instead, you had to blind, strangle, and Confund me."

Hermione sniffed at him. "You deserved it."

His scowl deepened, but Hermione couldn't help wondering if the glitter of amusement she thought she saw in his eyes was not just her imagination.

The lazy summer days strolled over Hogwarts, encouraging the students to go outside for a walk or to play games with the Giant Squid now that the stress of exams was over. Some remained inside to read or wander the halls. Hermione found the weather too hot for her liking, and instead retreated to the library, where she curled up in that special corner between two bookcases and a stained glass window and tried to set aside the worries that could not be immediately helped by delving into the pages of a book.

The days flew by. The Leaving Feast approached. Hermione left it early after saying good-bye to her friends, and slowly returned to the library, with a sense of foreboding and depression. She slumped down in her usual seat and pulled out a book. She tried to read, but she simply didn't have the energy to do so. Resigned, she leaned back against the shelf, crouched down on the floor as she was, and peered at the shadows that flitted across the colors on the window.
She was distracted from the quiet solace she had found by familiar footsteps. Only one person would know to look for her here, and sure enough, when she turned around, there was Severus Snape, wearing all-black and quite full grown. There was not a trace of boyish features left in him; over the last year, he had finally reached the last half-inch of his full height, and he did indeed look like the Professor Snape she remembered; just younger, decades less careworn, and decidedly healthier—and a good deal happier and more relaxed.

She watched him walk toward her, her eyes glued to his boots—when had he traded his trainers in for them?—and slowly stood up, brushing off her robes.

She took in his face, trying to commit it to memory, knowing that it would change a great deal in the coming years. But right now, he looked human, very much a young man anticipating a future ahead of him.

"You didn't stay at the Leaving Feast for very long," Severus observed, gracing her with a faint half-smile. In this moment in time, everything seemed absolutely serene, perfect even. Sunlight streamed in through the window, the library was mercifully quiet, far quieter than it had been in weeks, and she felt quite at peace without the stress of homework as an added burden. "You seem somewhat upset."

"I just needed some peace and silence," she said calmly, with a slight smile.

"Something's been on your mind a lot over the past few months," Severus told her, moving to lean against the window. There was no bite to his words: to Hermione, it felt as though neither of them simply had the emotional energy or inclination to snark at each other right now, even in good jest. "Indulge me."

Hermione closed her eyes. "You won't be here next year."

He seemed gratuitously surprised by this statement. "You'll miss me?"

"Of course," Hermione replied softly, pressing her cheek against the window. "You're my best friend. We've had our disagreements, and I suspect we always will, but—that's how it is."

He examined her face closely. "Is that all?"

Hermione shook her head. "What will happen when you're gone?" she whispered, the thoughts that had plagued her over the past few weeks slowly simmering to the surface. "Will you still be my friend? Will I ever see you again as such, even as we take opposite sides of the upcoming war?" She closed her eyes, willing the tears prickling at the corners to go away. "Will you even bother to keep in touch?"

There was a long silence that stretched between them at this revelation, and then to her surprise, his hands slowly came to cup her face, tilting it up to look at him. He used the heel of his palm to wipe away the faint trail of tears curling down the corners of her cheeks, and rather than scoff at her, his expression had turned soft and considerate, if somewhat brooding.

"I will write, when and what I can," he promised, giving her one of the rare half-smiles that were of genuine affection. "As for your other concerns—you know where I will be, but I am certain that there will be times and places we can and will meet again, not under the banner of our respective sides, but as just—friends." There was a faint trace of uncertainty in his voice. "That's what we've been doing all along, haven't we?"

"True enough," Hermione replied, feeling relieved and slightly light-headed at his reassurance. She
smiled up at him, a gentle smile of real warmth, and then glanced down at her watch.

"You have to leave in five minutes," she said sadly, staring back out the window. The feel of his hands, which had dropped to her shoulders, were calloused and warm on her face and oddly soothing. "The Leaving Feast is over by now. You had better hurry."

He did not pull away immediately, and when she glanced back up at him, she saw several expressions warring across his face. He seemed to be debating something within himself, as though he had already convinced himself to do it, and was trying to convince himself to actually go through with it. A moment later, his expression solidified into one of determination, and he leaned forward. He did not hesitate, cupping her face in one hand as he kissed her.

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise as his mouth moved to cover hers, but she did not make to protest or pull away. His lips slid cautiously against hers, and when faced with a distinct lack of resistance he moved to explore her mouth, tasting it. Hermione finally registered what was happening, feeling a faint flutter in her stomach as she did so, and in a decision to not overanalyze that moment, she responded wholeheartedly. He had caught her into a slow, drugging kiss, and her eyes fluttered shut. His lips were thin but soft, and he suckled on her tongue, giving the impression that he was quite enjoying himself as a man who would never get a chance to sample a delicacy enjoyed his one opportunity to have it.

He pulled away a moment later, staring down at her with an expression she could not yet quantify, though it seemed akin to a combination of lust and regret. She stared up at him, unconsciously licking her lips to draw out the sensation, and then closed her eyes for just an instant to savor the moment.

"I was right," she heard Severus murmur close to her ear, his thumb and forefinger stroking her cheek gently just before he withdrew. "The taste of your lips…"

Hermione opened her eyes, quite unable to think of anything safe to say, but wracking her brain for something. He stepped away, and then his expression grew shuttered and closed, carefully masked once more.

"I have to go," he said, turning to leave abruptly.

Hermione stood there and watched him leave, her legs unresponsive, trying to pull her wits together. When she finally managed to unglue her feet from the floor and force herself to move, she ran quickly, ducking out into the hallway and running for the nearest corridor that had a window view of the lake.

The horseless carriages had begun to roll. Turning her gaze onto the lake, she saw the seventh years gliding across it, making their final journey from Hogwarts.

Please Review!

...and don't hex the author?

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione continued to replay the kiss in her mind again and again, for lack of anything better to occupy her time. She had no responsibilities, no obligations of any sort to distract her from otherwise mulling over the last few moments she'd had with the Slytherin.

It had been a sudden, unanticipated move, but once it had happened, it had been absolutely delightful. However, she had no opportunity to pursue an explanation or—which was what she would like to do, should she get a chance to see him in person—experience it again. The memory alone had her tingling with pleasure. She had not even thought to compare it to her previous experiences which, in retrospect, simply did not measure up. Trying to quantify how he had tasted so that she could imprint each aspect of the moment in her mind, she nevertheless found herself obsessing over it with nothing to distract her from it.

It was a kiss. A simple kiss that changed everything. At one point, she felt angry that he had put it off for so long and only done it moments before he was about to leave. Another time, she wondered if she had been used, though she discarded the thought rather quickly. Again, she wondered what underlying implications it gave face to. Their relationship had been strictly platonic up until the point—that very point just before he left—and now she was working on uneven, uncharted ground.

Did she like him that way? Given the way that single kiss had made her feel, she had to answer with a resounding 'yes'.

It was aggravating beyond measure that she could not go and find him so that she could get the answers to her questions. If she could have that, then she could sort out what had happened and what would happen next. But she simply could not. For one, she had no idea where he was right now. At Malfoy Manor? Some obscure location on the British Isles? Was he even in the country? He probably wasn't even in any position to owl her, given that she had not yet received any kind of post. He always kept his promises, and he had promised to write. She would hold him to that.

Yet, despite the pleasure and confusion dancing around each other in tandem in her head, her mood quickly sobered when she looked at cold hard facts.

He had kissed her. She had enjoyed it immensely. It was very high on the list of things she wanted to repeat.

She had been kissed by a man who would soon have the Dark Mark branded on his forearm. That was not a happy thought, and to prevent herself from going stir-crazy from attempting to overanalyze it, she tried to push the experience aside altogether and to not dwell on it too much. With the students gone, there was too little and yet so much to do. She spent a great deal of time in the library, and arranged to resume practicing Occlumency once a week with the Headmaster to make sure her barriers remained strong, though she had consistently practiced exercises at night throughout the year for such reasons. Occasionally, Moody or Shacklebolt would drop by to see Dumbledore, and would stop to give her a bit of dueling practice.

Since she was now of legal age to Apparate and perform magic outside of school, she paid a visit to
Diagon Alley and got a summer job working at Flourish and Blotts, where the pay was ten galleons a day, and since she worked five days a week, it was a total of fifty galleons added to her pocket at the end of each working week. On her lunch breaks, she would stop by Florean Fortescue's and—on impulse—she decided to eat her ice cream up on the balcony where she and Severus had celebrated his birthday. Passer-bys would wave up at her from their shopping, and she became a regular fixture there. She was simply known as the nice girl who worked at the bookstore and had ice cream at twelve forty-five Monday through Friday on the boarded-up railing above the establishment.

A month passed, and though Hermione kept up correspondence with many of her friends, there was not a single letter from Severus. James and Lily owled her to give her the exact date of the wedding, and Lily made note to tell Hermione to "please wear something ivory or off-white." James had recently inherited Godric's Hollow, and Lily had moved in with him, where they were settling down in their new lives quite happily while also working for the Order.

Alice and Frank were planning on getting married as well, though they were having a quiet, private ceremony with the family. Frank's mother was not at all happy with this, Alice wrote, for she felt that her son deserved a much more noteworthy event for his nuptials, but both Aurors—for the two had taken a position in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and were half-way through training—had argued her down. It had been a miraculous feat to do so, Alice claimed, but they had somehow managed to succeed.

Hermione remembered the one time she had met Augusta Longbottom, that day in St. Mungo's, and could quite agree.

Sirius and Marlene jointly penned a letter informing her that they were going steady now, and that Hermione was welcome to visit them at any time, given they were staying at the McKinnons'. Sirius said that he was concerned about her, and that if she needed anything—whether it be money or some human companionship ("You have to get away from those books sometime," Sirius's portion of the letter told her teasingly)—he would be happy to drop by. Hermione was warmed, moved even, and wrote back that she had a summer job and was still staying at Hogwarts, but was very grateful to have his support at hand.

Hermione was legally an adult, but the Headmaster insisted that she not be kept abreast of the Order until after she graduated. He was very firm on this matter, and thus, Hermione was left to fume impotently in the dark, ignorant of the Order's plans and information, and quite frustrated with the lot of them for it. She argued that she was capable of Occlumency and discretion, but the Headmaster's word was final.

What she wanted more than anything was to see Severus face-to-face—and to receive an explanation. Without the latter, she had difficulty resisting the urge to try and overanalyze. Whenever she had a reprieve during work—a brief space of time when no one was bugging her about where they could find a book or waiting in line to pay—she found herself thinking of him.

And even beyond that, she missed him. She missed his companionship. He was always ever so amusing in a witty, pedantic, and often sarcastic sort of way, and she missed being able to simply talk to him or even work in companionable silence.

Hermione received a list of school supplies, as well as her exam scores—and was extremely pleased that she had passed every class with all 'Outstandings', even Defense Against the Dark Arts—at the end of July. Counting out her accumulated wages, she found she had more than enough—she had a surplus even if she did not pay for second-hand articles. She planned on converting some of it into Muggle pound notes so that she could get a new pair of jeans and a jumper to wear on the weekends, but beyond that, she carefully hid all of her earnings away.
September 1st arrived, without a single piece of correspondence from Severus. Hermione had no idea where he was, and as she sat outside on the stone steps of the courtyard waiting for the train to arrive, she had her suspicions. She was a logical, rational thinker, and she knew what Severus's post-graduation plans involved. She was left with two ideas of why there was a distinct lack of word from him, the first implying that he had lied and broken off all communication, the second suggesting that he was not a safe position to pen a letter to her.

It was the start of the new school year now. Summer had passed. And Severus, she was sure, had taken the Dark Mark.

~o~O~o~

With classes acting as a suitable distraction, Hermione found the work to be almost therapeutic as she fell back into the routine of homework, note-taking, essay-writing, practicing, and the vivacious, inherent need to learn. She missed her friends dearly. Mary had not returned to Hogwarts this year, though Hermione and her other friends had sent out inquiries, and she was growing concerned for the witch when nothing turned up. She missed being able to sit and talk animatedly with her tablemates; she hardly knew the people in her year on a personal level. As a result, Hermione retreated from the student body and instead turned her focus almost entirely on studying.

That was not to say she did not remain in contact with her graduated friends. James and Sirius sent her a box of sugar quills along with their regular letters. Remus was working with the Order while still struggling to find a job that would be accepting of his condition, but he too sent cheerful, optimistic, and sometimes even entertaining correspondence. Alice, who had become Mrs. Longbottom in mid-August, eagerly detailed her work in the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, though her letters had become intrinsically more serious as she began to detail what she could of the deaths and other disturbing reports that had begun popping up with more and more regularity.

It had not yet been leaked to the *Prophet*, Alice admitted, but many of the long-time Aurors were being called out on multiple cases before lunchtime, and that by the end of her training, she was already being told to do work that only senior and experienced Aurors had ever been expected to do. She had more than fifteen different cases to handle personally in one week, back in mid-August, and the Order was now actively putting forth military effort to stop Death Eaters from laying waste to Muggle structures and dwellings.

Hermione's birthday arrived with bad news from Alice. As soon as the congratulations and happy wishes for her birthday had been gotten through with, her letter went somberly straight to the point.

*We believe we found Mary MacDonald's body last night,* Alice's letter explained mournfully. *We are still waiting for her relatives to confirm her identity—they're Muggles, you see, so that's a whole different procedure to go through, which takes longer—but I believe we now have an explanation for why she has not returned to Hogwarts via the train, and we're still trying to locate the other two.*

Hermione had read the note, and swallowed hard, trying not to cry. Looking down the table at the other students, she realized she was not the only one. The *Daily Prophet* had reported several new deaths and abductions this morning, and Hermione watched as the Heads of House gathered up a total of six students, all of whom were led out of the hall to be informed that a parent, a family friend, an aunt or an uncle, had either been found dead or gone missing. Those students were not in class that day.

A kind of weary gloom began to settle over Hogwarts, followed shortly by panic and fear. It had finally, at long last, registered to everyone that the situation outside the walls of Hogwarts was
growing serious. Many had not yet been affected by the war, which had been primarily targeting Muggles, and they had only registered the news as a dim, distant occurrence. Now that their families, friends, and wizarding proprietors in London were starting to go missing, understanding followed by real impact on their lives finally reached them. There was whispering during class, the exchange of news that was not printed in the Prophet, and those who had missing or dead relatives pressed those who knew members of the law enforcement department at the ministry for information on certain cases.

"Have you asked your aunt about what happened to my brother? Has her investigation found him yet?"

"Any news on my mother?"

"My father—my father—did your friend get back to you about him?"

"My uncle went missing last week—"

It was disturbing to realize just how untouched these peoples' lives had been until very recently. The deaths of other families, the mass-murder of Muggles, had left very little impression on them. But now that they were personally impacted—whether by way of their own family or by a classmate's tragedy—the war was quite suddenly the center of their lives. Sides were taken. A good deal of the students wanted to leave the school to hide or to fight. Others wanted to go into the Ministry as law enforcement to help apprehend Death Eaters, thereby seeking justice for themselves or their friends, and there were an extraordinary number of prospective applicants for the Auror Office.

Many of the Slytherins espoused pureblood supremacy, and if they were affected at all, it was to find that their families were profiting from the war in various ways. Barty Crouch's father was the Head of the Auror Department, and he often bragged about his father's accomplishments in public, though Hermione had heard him muttering mutinously and bitterly about what his father was really like—and made his disagreements with his father on ideology quite well-known in Slytherin House.

Worse still was when the students did get news. By late October, many of the half-blood students had lost at least one relative or someone close to them. Muggleborns were afforded a kind of twisted protection: by being Muggle-born, they were targeted as individuals, but their parents were not specifically targeted. Muggles were killed indiscriminately. Thus, many lost relatives, but some of them managed to acquire correspondence with their families to tell them to get out of the country. They would not be tracked down out of Britain. Some even managed to appeal to their Heads of House for an excused and accompanied visit to their families to have them secretly transported to another part of Europe.

Hermione took it upon herself to comfort the younger students when and where she could. And as she had a friend in Magical Law Enforcement, she was able to make discrete inquires on the state of several investigations into disappearances.

Visits to Hogsmeade were canceled when the owners of several establishments closed up shop and went on vacation for what they described as an indeterminate amount of time. In the face of the bleakness of the war, Hogsmeade had been one of the only things students had to look forward to, and with that gone, life in Hogwarts was a mixture of misery and fear drowned in hopelessness.

Some of the Slytherin students took it upon themselves to enforce their ideology in the school by ambushing and attacking Muggle-borns and half-bloods, and it was only when many of the younger students began to travel in groups together with some of the older students that the attacks lessened. At one point, Hermione lost all vestiges of restraint after the same Hufflepuff boy she'd helped out of a snowdrift last year ended up being transferred to St. Mungo's after being hit with an Entrail-
Expelling Curse, and she stormed down to the dungeons where she sought out the entrance to the Slytherin Common Room.

It was a foolish, dangerous endeavor, but when they came out to confront her, she promptly thrashed them. She left them where they fell, after making several alterations to their face and limbs, and many were not seen in class for several weeks while Madam Pomfrey tried to reverse the damage done to them.

Hermione was rather under the impression that the Matron was not trying all that hard to begin with, for once. She was well aware of who was attacking her other, more vulnerable charges and seemed quite content to give the other students respite from the merciless bullying and harassment. No one could ever prove that it was Hermione, since she had asked everyone in Gryffindor Tower to swear that she had been working in the Common Room all evening. Her housemates all loyally and dutifully complied.

When the Slytherins returned to class, ambushes did not cease entirely, but they stopped becoming a regular, expected part of the daily routine. This became especially apparent after Hermione had gotten together with the other NEWT students in their Defense Against the Dark Arts class and arranged to teach the younger students some self-defense, trying to mimic the way Harry had taught the DA. This worked out rather soundly, for though not every student became adequately capable, a good enough number did so that when they all stuck together, they were well protected. It was not as absurdly easy for them to be attacked as it had been before.

It did nothing to curb the slurs and insults that were jeered at them in the halls, but at least the instances of physical injury had been lessened.

Faulkner had left as he said he would, leaving a new teacher in his place. His replacement was a thickly-built man with short, cropped hair and a squashed nose that looked as though it had been broken one too many times. His attitude towards the subject was that of a strong offense being the best defense. He was loud and belligerent—he preferred to shout, even when students were less than a foot away from him. The students disliked him almost immediately, not because he was ineffective as a teacher, but because the man was a callous sod and he ground on their already wrought nerves. When he heard that a particular student had lost a parent or a sibling, his response was to shrug and then belt out a command for them to stop acting like "a bunch of poncy nanny-boys."

The man knew his stuff, but he beat it into them with demonstrations and demands for them to practice on each other. If a student got injured and they asked to go to the Hospital Wing, he yelled at them. He insisted that the best way to learn was to work under duress, and that going to get fixed up after every little scrape only made them weak. Points and detentions meant nothing to him—he touched nothing of them, which was a small relief, but he did far more damage to their self-confidence and mindset than point loss or other punishment could have done. More than one student left his class in tears.

If a student got something right, he would roar at them in approval, causing them to shrink back in fear at the loud, overbearingness of his tone. He would sometimes clap them on the back with his large, meaty hands, which would literally knock the student forward from the sheer force. He rarely assigned essays on his topics, but no student dared to come to his class unprepared. His wrath was terrible. He never physically harmed a student, but being shouted at as though one were at a Muggle boot camp was near-horrifying.

Professor Jonas Welk was the single least favorite teacher in the entire school, and also the most feared. Many students left his class emotionally traumatized, and those who had Professor Sprout, Flitwick, or Slughorn next were lucky; they took pity on the students and began carrying little
comforts with them, such as chocolate or sips of Calming Draught. Professor McGonagall ingeniously borrowed several pots of Wafting Hydrangeas from Professor Sprout and kept them in the classroom, where they released a soothing aroma that, five minutes into the lesson, did a sufficient enough job at putting the students at ease without disrupting her class.

Hermione knew that the four Heads of House had confronted Professor Welk more than once about his behavior, but he did not change his tactics one whit, and though the students learned, they suffered for it under his hands.

Hermione also learned very early on that the Divination teacher last year had retired. She was therefore surprised to discover that Professor Dumbledore had not scrapped the subject altogether, but was searching for a new Divination professor. Hermione, who had had storms out of divination in her third year, had not bothered to return after being thrown back twenty years in time. But whether time progressed as it should was of great interest to her, and so she waited.

~o~O~o~

Mid-November arrived, and Hermione had already garnered permission from Professor Dumbledore to attend the Potters' wedding. On the Saturday morning of the wedding, accompanied by her Head of House, Hermione Flooed to Godric's Hollow. She was wearing a set of simple ivory robes, and wore her hair in a chignon, which was how she kept it well-managed these days. They Apparated from there to a nearby park, with the other guests, where a tent had been set up over a cobblestone dais. There were less than thirty guests to be counted, and they all found nice seats up front. Hermione went to meet with Lily, and pulled her into a gentle hug to avoid messing up her dress, and when the music began to play, Hermione moved to her position.

The ceremony was short. Hermione stood by Lily's side, and when the sermon was over ("You may kiss the bride") Hermione was there with the rest of them clapping and smiling as the newly-wed couple jogged down the aisle, laughing with delight.

Pictures were taken. Hermione, Remus, and Sirius were moved like decorative objects around James and Lily, to give the photographer the best possible angles and appearances. It was a bit tiring to say the least, to stand up there trying to keep smiling even after her cheeks had begun to hurt, but she did it for the Potters. As soon as that was done, she kissed Lily on the cheek and congratulated her before doing to same to James, accompanied by a bear hug.

But it was still a relatively quiet affair. Tables were set up around the dais, and they all ate and talked while gentle but jaunty music played in the background. A few inquiries were made to fellow guests on their state of health, but most of the conversation was focused upon childhood memories and the reminiscing of old times, as well as marriage advice and high hopes and dreams for happy couple.

The cake was summarily cut and even more pictures were taken (James, for once, managed to look dignified as he stared into the camera, grinning and holding his new wife with frosting on her lips.) Everyone took a slice, and sooner rather than later, Sirius tapped his spoon against his goblet, calling attention to himself. He stood up, glass raised to toast to his best friends.

"I wish I could have something serious to say on this occasion," he said, wearing a playful smile, "but I've never been good with the somber and serious, as James would know." He gave his best friend a wink, garnering some laughter from the thirty-or-so other guests, and continued. "All I can say is that when Lily first met James, if she had known the spell for it, she probably would have tried to hex his nose off. When James first met Lily, he told me, while we were in the compartment on the Hogwarts Express, waiting to arrive—'That's the girl I'm going to marry.' And Merlin, I thought he was joking with me." Sirius let out a bark of laughter. "But either he wasn't joking, or our dear friend Lily has just married a Seer. I'm inclined to lean toward the former, but hey, you never know." More
laughter. "Nevertheless, their relationship at Hogwarts was rather rocky for the first few years, to say the least. James finally shrunk his head just a bit and took some advice out of *Twelve Fail-Safe Way To Charm Witches,*" he said, with a conspiratorial wink at the groom, "and after that, they just clicked together. You never saw James without Lily or Lily without James. And that," Sirius said, raising his glass higher, "is how I hope it will be for the new Mr. and Mrs. Potter and their married life. May you have a long and happy marriage!"

Glasses clinked and cheers were raised. Hermione toasted the newly-weds as well, and mindful of the fact that she rarely held her liquor well, she drank to them. Professor McGonagall was dabbing at tears in her eyes.

They had just finished eating when James and Lily stood up and, trying to follow tradition as best as the could, separated to find different dance partners so that they could allow themselves to be given away in the second dance. Hermione gracefully stood up and took James's hand, leading him out to the dance floor, while Remus gentlemanly offered his arm to Lily, who smiled brilliantly at him before allowing herself to be led out as well. Sirius and Marlene took one look at each other and stood up, walking hand in hand onto the dais, where they began to dance as well. The rest of the table started splitting up to do the same.

Hermione had a sudden note of alarm in her eyes when she realized Peter Pettigrew was not among the guests. How had she missed that earlier? She turned her attention back to James and, allowing him to lead, posed the question: "Where's Peter?"

James suddenly grimaced. "He couldn't come," he said sorrowfully. "He—Mary—Mary MacDonald—he's still grieving."

Hermione's mouth suddenly opened in a moment of surprise and understanding, followed by even more confusion, which she kept to herself. She closed her mouth, and murmured sadly, "I see."

James nodded. "It's my wedding," he offered with a slight smile. "I'd like it if… you know… I know Mary was your friend, but I don't want this to be remembered as a depressing occasion—"

Hermione smiled at him, and nodded. "Of course. I'm sorry. How about this—whose idea was it to get a cat?"

Hermione was, of course, referring to the grey tabby that she had seen sitting atop the kitchen counter, licking his paws when she and Professor McGonagall had arrived. She had received an unblinking stare when they entered the kitchen.

James suddenly grinned. "I bought Charlie for Lily as a gift—I got him for her the week after I proposed, and introduced them as soon as school was out. She fell in love with him almost instantly. If it weren't for the fact that he's a cat, I might have been jealous!"

Hermione laughed. "I'm sure he'll have enough on his paws when the rest of the family comes along."

"All we have to do is wait for Sirius and Marlene to tie the knot, find Remus a nice girl to settle down with—"

"And then you'll have your own Marauder toddlers," Hermione replied dryly. "What a frightening thought."

He gave her a grin which, at that moment, reminded her of Harry. "Don't worry. We won't teach them how to take over the world until they're twenty."
A painful feeling settled in her gut, but Hermione managed to keep her smile bright even as the topic turned to a future that she knew they did not have. "And what will they do once they've taken over the world?"

"Construct a Quidditch Pitch the size of Hogwarts Castle," James said seriously.

"James!" Hermione chided.

"Really, Hermione," James said, chuckling. "I don't care what my kid would want to do if he actually took over the world. I'd only hope he'd want to improve it—do some good, you know. We'll need it, once You-Know-Who bites the dust."

For the first time since they started dancing, Hermione gave him a genuinely warm smile. She took the lead, and began dancing in Lily and Remus's direction, as the first song came to a close. "If it means anything at all, James, I approve."

"Glad to hear it," James said, grinning at her as the song ended. He released her, and Hermione took Remus as her next partner while James and Lily finally danced together.

"Take good care of him, Lily," Hermione said.

Lily flashed Hermione a brilliant smile. "You know I will."

Hermione beamed. "Then he's all yours."

James took Lily in hand, and without further preamble, they began dancing the night away.

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As attacks outside of Hogwarts increased, whereupon the *Daily Prophet* began to report a growing number of werewolf attacks and giant upheavals in addition to the mix of murders and abductions, Slughorn managed to make things just a bit brighter by informing the students that he would be holding a New Years Party.

There was once again a flurry of excitement as every student involved in Slughorn's club was besieged with requests and subtle (or not so subtle) attempts at bribes and manipulations in order to be among the lucky invited. Even those who were not attending the party would not be entirely left out; Professor Flitwick had done a wonderful job decorating the halls to reflect a more festive spirit, and Hagrid had dragged in an enormous tree to be decorated. It was a real treat to see the grand pine tree decorated with bright bits and baubles and festive fairy lights. The star on top was replaced this year by a single tall candle meant to pay respects to the family and friends of students and staff alike who had suffered and lost loved ones. Many students stopped by the tree at least once to hang up an ornament of their own making with someone's name on it and to see the candle and appreciate the small comfort it gave, standing so very high on top of the tree.

Hermione put a pale pink bauble some seven feet up the tree with Mary MacDonald's name on it. She had been Hermione's first friend, the first person to reach out to her when she was alone and lost in a new time. They had grown somewhat distant as Hermione spent more time between Severus and the Marauders, but Hermione still felt the loss keenly. Mary had not been a particularly strong witch—quite the opposite, actually—nor had she typically been a social mover and shaker. But she had been a friendly and kind girl, shy and mild in temperament, and she certainly didn't deserve what she had gotten for it.

Hermione made plans to attend the New Years Party. There was no going to Hogsmeade to pick out a new set of dress robes, and even though the occasion called for nice evening wear, she decided to
go in Muggle clothes. She just did not feel like dressing up in anything particularly fancy that night. There was no one to laugh with while getting dressed, no one to help her do her hair or return the favor to, and no one to help her figure out what kind of makeup would match her best. She did not want to alter the ones Alice and Marlene had bought and made their finishing touches on, but she felt suitably comfortable in transfiguring her Muggle clothes, so she went in jeans and Transfigured herself a plain white Muggle blouse that fit comfortably and decided to simply go with that.

She was not going to the party to dress up. She was going there to get a tiny break from studying by using one night of the Yule hols to relax and talk to people, to meet some of Slughorn’s old favorites and enjoy some good food, maybe even a butterbeer or two. Thoughts of Severus, along with concerns about her other friends, often flitted through her mind during the day, and she was hoping for a pleasant distraction. She was asked by many if she would take them, and ended up flatly refusing all offers.

The holidays arrived, and on the last day of class, Slughorn asked Hermione to remain for a few minutes longer.

"Am I in trouble, sir?"

"Oh, no," Slughorn said, waving the question away. "Not at all, m'dear, not at all. I've just been meaning to ask you if you're showing up for my little supper on New Years Eve, since you're often so busy with work that I never know when you're actually going to come."

"I'm coming," Hermione said, suddenly standing up straight.

Slughorn beamed at her. A few more moments of idle chit-chat, and she was free to go.

A little over half the student body rode home on the train for Christmas to see their families, while the other half were sent gifts and letters accompanied by stern orders to remain safe, assurances that the family was fine, and instructions to stay over during the break for safety.

Hermione woke up on Christmas morning, heading downstairs to the common room to find the rug in front of the fire to be taken over with gifts. The Hogwarts Elves had apparently made their deliveries. Many of the younger years had already begun unwrapping presents while the upperclassmen sat on the cozy armchairs with hot chocolate. One second-year girl had received a quilted blanket from her mother, and was running around the common room with it tucked about her shoulders like a cape.

"Careful!" One of the sixth-years said, tucking his hot chocolate to his chest to protect it as she passed him. "And watch out for the fireplace!"

Laughing, the girl set her blanket down like a picnic cloth and curled up on it to open the rest of her gifts, inviting her yearmates to join her. They did, and resembled nothing so much as a group of bright-eyed birds tearing up colorful wrapping paper to build their nest.

Hermione took a spot on the floor and collected the wrapped gifts that were addressed to her, reading the cards that came with them first before opening them. Alice had given her a set of lovely ribbons for her hair. Lily gave her a book titled *Transient Transfiguration Tips* to accompany James’s delivery of a Honeydukes Christmas Package. Sirius had given her a generous allowance of Galleons ("Since I know you probably spend every knut you've got on books!" his letter chided) along with a santa hat that, when Hermione put it on, charmed her hair green. From Marlene, she got a pair of tiny rose-shaped earrings that slowly bloomed open for several moments before closing up and starting the process all over again.
From Remus, Hermione received a stuffed wolf that made noises when squeezed and a heartwarming letter. He had finally found a job, though it was a Muggle one, and he only had to convert his wages into Wizarding currency. It cut into his earnings, but his employer was willing to give him a week off every month, though Remus indicated that his boss assumed it was to visit family. This was some of the best news Hermione had heard in months, and a grin stretched itself across her face as she finished reading the letter.

Hermione had ordered gifts for her friends by owl, but as she still had no idea where Severus was, nor whether it was a good idea to send him a gift, she had not bought him anything. She received nothing from him either, and felt only slightly disappointed. She didn't care about getting a solid gift from him, but she had been hoping for some contact, even just a note to tell her that he was alright. The silence from him was deafening to her mind. They had spent so much time together, had grown so close, that the idea that he simply did not care for her was easily dismissed. Whatever it was, it seemed he was simply not in any position to contact her.

She wrote thank-you letters to her friends while munching on some of the Honeydukes chocolate that had come in James's package, and then decided to go downstairs for breakfast, musing that perhaps she could spend the rest of the day relaxing with a book in the library.

Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Twelve

Big thanks goes out to my beta, the lovely SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own!

Please review.

Hermione was accompanied by several Gryffindors as they made their way to Slughorn's office. It was down in the dungeons, which meant the possibility of aggression from the Slytherins, which was why they had all chosen to go together. No sense in getting ambushed alone if they could help it. It was a sad state of affairs when one had to travel in packs to avoid being sent to the Infirmary, but that was simply how it was. Hermione had the advantage of numbers with her as insurance for an alibi, and they had her dueling skills as security. It was a neat little arrangement.

Slughorn's office had once again been magically enlarged and now it appeared that it could hold some fifty-odd people. There was no dancing this time, but people were standing up and talking in little clusters. There were a few tables here and there along with a fireplace surrounded by cozy couches that one could sit on, but it seemed that to start with, everyone was inclined to stand. The Gryffindors immediately dispersed around the room, the excitement and merry festivity of the occasion affecting them almost immediately.

The tables were dressed with white tablecloths, and many were once again burdened with rich and delightful food. Hermione was immediately pulled into a conversation with a group of sixth and seventh years from Ravenclaw over by the fruit bowl, where they began to discuss the influence of Alchemy in different branches of magic. They were kind and gracious enough to include her in their discussion, and Hermione found that they were all quite interested in what she had to say. It was a far cry from the dull and glassy-eyed looks she sometimes received when she began postulating on a subject that genuinely interested her.

Hermione later excused herself to grab a butterbeer, and was about to do just that when she was intercepted by Professor Slughorn, who looked only slightly tipsy on his feet.

"Ah, Hermione," he beamed, "just the lady I was looking for."

"I'll be right back, sir, I'm just going to go grab a drink…"

"Nonsense! There will be time for that later. Right now, I have someone here who I'm certain you'd like to meet—ah, here he is!" He gestured at someone behind her, and Hermione turned around, about to make her excuses to extract herself from the situation when her protest promptly died on her lips.

Severus Snape was smirking down at her, his eyes glittering with amusement at her predicament.

"Hello, Hermione."

Hermione gaped at him, completely caught off guard. At least a dozen different answers ran through her mind, and she picked what seemed to be the most urgent one at that moment.

"Am I imagining it or have you grown another inch?" She turned around to ask Slughorn to excuse them for a moment, only to find that the man had left on his own, his attention turned to two students whom he was introducing to another famous ex-pupil. She turned back around to look at him, and
then her eyes narrowed in playful suspicion. "Have you been adding height to your boots?"

Severus scowled at her. "I grew another half inch, and the boots did the rest. Is that really the first thing on your mind?"

Hermione grinned at him, suddenly very happy, very delighted at seeing him. It had taken a moment for the shock to settle in, but now he was here again, and she felt lighter than she had in ages. "No, but it was certainly the safest." Her expression softened. "How have you been?"

Severus hesitated, and then placed a hand on her shoulder. "Let's find somewhere else to talk."

Hermione nodded, and they edged their way through the crowd until they found a spot near the corner. A few spells to ensure their privacy and to quiet the space around them so that they could hear each other above the noise in the background, and they settled down.

"To answer your question, I have been busy," Severus responded, folding his arms across his chest. "I took on a six-month arrangement with Arsenius Jigger, and earned money helping him gather ingredients. We went out of the country for a bit." He hesitated for a moment, and then continued. "In addition, I have been spending… a great deal of time in the Dark Lord's presence. He has found my skills as a brewer useful."

Hermione bit her lower lip, and glanced down at his left arm.

"As a result, I either simply did not have the opportunity to write or I was under too much supervision to safely send anything to you," Severus continued. "Or I would have certainly sent something." He looked hesitant for a moment, cautious even, before he added carefully, "I suppose you were not happy about that."

Hermione breathed in deeply. "I rather suspected that it was one of those reasons, yes, although I don't understand how being out of the country would preclude you from writing letters."

Severus's lips twisted into a self-deprecating smile. "Because our time was spent almost exclusively in the wilderness trying not to get killed." He pulled up his right sleeve, where Hermione could see a white bandaged wrapped around his forearm. "Searching for dragonsbane in Romania was more entertaining for the dragons than it was success for us. We tried to bring an owl, but the first time Master Jigger sent a letter, it never came back."

"That would explain it," Hermione agreed.

There was an awkward silence for a moment, and then she added, "My summer job was much less life-threatening. I worked at Flourish and Blotts, and the only risk there was of an aggressive book or a papercut."

Severus smirked. "I'm sure you enjoyed yourself thoroughly."

"Oh, yes. Endless access to books," Hermione joked. "Every bibliophile's dream."

Severus gave her a thin-lipped smile, and then there was a second awkward pause, before he finally addressed the metaphorical hippogriff in the room. Or rather, he tried. "Last year, just before I left… I… well…” he looked extremely uncertain, and it seemed to Hermione that his gaze was entirely on her, trying to gauge her reaction to the minutest detail. "I believe I left before anything could be explained or… or sorted out."

Hermione tilted her chin up to look at him squarely. "Why did you do it?" she asked simply.
In response, Severus slowly placed one hand on her cheek. When she did not pull away or protest, he leaned in slightly so that they were face to face. "Because since that time you and I ended up in that month-long detention, I realized just how much I liked you." This thumb traced the corner of her lips, and he continued, "And I started to notice you as more than just a friend. Everything about you simply… entrances me. But I was too scared—too shy—to say a word about it to you. Until the last minute, when I decided that I had nothing to lose in trying."

"Do you still like me that way?" It was a simple question.

"If anything, having not had a chance to see or talk to you in nearly half a year—gods, yes," he murmured. "But you haven't said a word about how you feel—although surely, at this point, if you haven't already pushed me away…"

On impulse, Hermione brought a finger to his lips to quietly shush him. He fell silent, and she pulled her hand away. And then she leaned in and kissed him.

He was surprised. There was no other word for it. She had taken him completely by shock. If he had been expecting some kind of response, this certainly wasn't it. But he certainly was not complaining—far from it. As soon as he registered what was happening, his hands came to rest on her waist, and he quickly responded, practically taking over in his eagerness. Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and closed her eyes, as the pleasurable memory of their first and last kiss replayed in her mind, encouraging her to savor this one as well.

If Hermione had any doubts about whether Severus had been sincere, they promptly self-immolated. Passion of this kind could simply not be manufactured. The way he was kissing her, nipping and suckling in a manner that could only be described as him wanting more, and simply not being able to get enough, was self-evident. As soon as Hermione managed to regain her bearings, she responded in kind. That delightfully masculine taste she remembered from last time was still there, and while he snogged her thoroughly, she delighted herself with it.

When they finally pulled away, breathless, Severus gently rested his forehead against hers.

"I take that to mean you like it?" he whispered. His eyes were dark with what could only be described as lust, and Hermione could not help but feel the same titilating thrill that their slow and heavy kiss had left them with.

Something suddenly clicked in her mind, though, and she pulled away.

"Let's go," she said, gesturing at the door.

Severus's eyes flickered toward the others guests in the room, and then back at her. "No one will notice if we're missing," he agreed. "I'd rather find a more private venue for our… discussion."

Indeed, no one did notice them missing. They both slipped out of the office without another word to anyone, and given how preoccupied they all were with the other going-ons around them, it was hardly difficult. Nevertheless, Severus closed the door behind them as quietly as possible, and they walked a-ways down the hall until they were well out of sight of the door. They were in the dungeons still, but none of the Slytherins would be passing by Slughorn's office at this hour, especially during the event going on. Regardless, privacy charms were still cast, and they slipped within the shadow of the walls so that they would not be immediately seen, should someone happen to pass by.

As soon as they did so, Hermione turned around to face him. Two strides forward, and she caught hold of his left arm, and without a word of protest from him, yanked the sleeve up.
A grotesque-looking skull with a snake protruding from its mouth met her gaze. The black, vile thing seemed to writhe and move ever so slightly, as thought it were alive, the putrid thing that it was. Hermione swallowed, and allowed the sleeve to drop back over it.

"You're a Death Eater now," she said, gripping his hand tightly.

"You already knew that," he responded, a bit tersely.

Hermione closed her eyes and bit her lower lip, thinking. "What does this mean?"

"It means that we're trapped into taking opposite sides of this war," Severus told her, taking another step forward until he was towering over her, his presence as dark and intimidating as ever, though Hermione still found it strangely comforting. His intimidation had never been aimed at her in this timeline, and she had grown to see it as a wall of solid protection rather than a rearing threat to her. Others might fear it now, but she no longer did. "But it means little else. I don't give a damn about the Dark Lord other than what he can teach me and the protection he can afford people who are precious to me—and the war will be over soon, regardless."

Hermione gave him a wary look at this. He had spoken the last few words with such surety and confidence that she had to wonder how he knew. "How do you know?"

"The Dark Lord is growing paranoid, Hermione," Severus said silkily, gripping her shoulders. "He knows there is someone out there waiting to dethrone him. He has turned his focus from his followers to his enemies, and it has made their organization sloppy and ineffectual. He is spending his time and effort on discovering whoever is destined to overthrow him before they find him first."

"Yes," Hermione found herself agreeing, her mind wandering off down to another timeline, a timeline she existed in before, and one that had the information she needed to piece this revelation together.

"Our loyalties have never stopped us from being friends, Hermione." He said coaxingly. "What is to stop us from becoming—more?"

"Only the fact that this whole thing has bad idea scribbled all over it in your spiky handwriting," Hermione joked faintly.

He gave her one of those devilishly persuasive, mischievous grins that Hermione knew usually precluded trouble, and repeated, "Has that ever stopped us before?"

Hermione laughed. "It's not like I'm willing to start sneaking out of the school once a week to see you. I don't need to be given a lifelong detention extending Merlin-knows how many generations."

"I wouldn't ask that of you," Severus responded, smirking at the implication of detentions, "but there will be other opportunities to visit Hogwarts. I am loathe to admit it but Slughorn is a creature of habit, and given his tendency to invite alumni to his inane suppers… I would be much obliged to thrust the entire holiday into a pit of poisonous vipers, but he always holds a party on Valentine's Day."

Hermione sorted with laughter at this. "I suppose that's not a bad idea."

There was a pause, and then Hermione regretfully steered the conversation into more dangerous waters.

"Don't do anything that will raise You-Know-Who's suspicions," she said, her tone both serious and quiet. "I care for you a great deal, Severus, and the last thing I want to do is to see you killed. Don't
be reckless.” It was odd, really, to be the one telling the future Head of Slytherin to Not Be Reckless, but she felt it necessary. Severus’s behavior in the past made her feel it was distinctly necessary.

To her surprise, his face became smoothly blank.

"The Dark Lord has taught me well, Hermione. You need not worry.” His eyes flickered over her face sharply, with the same kind of emotionlessness that she had once been accustomed to seeing on his adult face. "Followers who act rashly are punished quickly. That is, fortunately, a lesson I have only had to learn from observation. The Dark Lord does not suffer fools."

Hermione gazed into his eyes, realizing just how much Severus had changed in six months. Six months in Voldemort's service had brought out what Hermione deemed to be the roots of the Professor Snape persona: darker than ever, unforgiving, cold. She leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him, as though that alone could erase the alterations to his personality that she could see. It couldn't.

"You have my word that I will be cautious, Hermione," Severus said silkily. There was a pause, and he leaned forward to nuzzle her hair, his hands coming to rest on her sides. "Communication by owl will not be possible until after April. Until then, I will be remaining at Malfoy Manor."

"Why is You-Know-Who keeping you there?" Hermione asked with a frown.

"Brewing. Lucius's place is secure from the interference of Aurors and has everything I require to work effectively. For him, it is the ideal place to keep me while he gauges my usefulness.” He caught a lock of loose hair behind Hermione's back, and curled it between his fingers, his expression thoughtful and no longer shuttered. "In addition, I prefer Malfoy Manor to my home in Spinner's End. You've never heard of it, I'm sure, but it has fallen to ruin and I haven't had the time to clean it up. It hasn't been lived in since my parents died."

Hermione nodded, still processing the information he had just given her. "When are you going to fix it up?"

"This summer, in all likelihood," Severus told her. "You could help me if you like."

"Under one condition," Hermione responded, liking the idea immensely of having both a place to stay, a means of spending time with him, and a project to keep her occupied while she figured out what to do with herself once she left school. "Will there be any of your Death Eater friends visiting?"

"None," Severus assured her.

"Then I'm all for it," Hermione said, smiling brilliantly at him.

His face brightened immensely, and the tension Hermione had not realized was coiled tightly in his body slowly relaxed. He ducked his head forward to steal another kiss and Hermione, laughing, complied.

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The fact that Hermione could not post mail to Severus was frustrating, to say the least. But now that she had a solid, confirmed idea of what his position was, and the reasons behind it, she was at ease. It didn't make her happier about it, and she still found herself worrying about him, but with the understanding she had of where he was and what he was doing, she had easier ways of convincing herself that he was perfectly alright.

At times like these, she would play with the watch on her wrist, fiddling with the dials without
changing the time or activating the portkey. It had become her alternative to biting her nails or chewing on her quills. Severus was not the only one she was concerned about: Alice and Frank were extremely busy, and on top of that, they were being put under enormous pressure. They were being thrust into life-threatening situations on a daily basis that were far more than the average bar brawls junior Aurors had to deal with in peacetime; they were working alongside Aurors who had been in the Ministry for years, fighting for their own lives in addition to those of who they were trying to save, and to top it all off, Alice suspected she was pregnant. She had not had a chance to visit a Healer yet to confirm it, but she wasn't the only one: in late January, just a week after she'd gotten the news about the possible pregnancy from Alice, James had sent her a letter too. At the very bottom was a post-script wherein James wrote down the confirmation that Lily, too, was pregnant.

The news caused Hermione to feel a myriad of things. She still missed Harry and Ron dearly, but she had done her best to move on, to stop feeding the heartache with grief. She could not mourn their loss forever. On the other hand, she was close to seeing her best friend again, but not as she last remembered them, and trying to contemplate it was dizzying. It gave her an uncomfortable sense of vertigo to digest it all at once.

James and Frank were both members of the Order, and from what Kingsley told her on one of his visits to the Headmaster, they had both turned into wrecks. To deal with an impending child while also trying to fight a mad psychopath was a lot of strain on them, and to hear tell, Frank had it the worst, trying to convince Alice to ask for extended leave. But Alice stubbornly refused to do so until she started showing.

_I'm pregnant, not made of glass!_ She wrote in one of her more recent letters. _I have a job to do. The war will not fight itself, and there are people whose lives depend on me. I risk my life every time I go out there—knowing that I'm pregnant will just make me fight harder to keep the baby safe. I've asked my boss for permission to take maternity leave in a week's time—I suppose that will make Frank happy. He can't do his best if he's focused on worrying about me._

Hermione wrote back saying that she approved of Alice's decision and understood how she felt. Alice was the kind of woman who didn't like to sit back and let others do the work—she had precisely the attitude and outlook that made valuable Aurors, the kind that made them eager and prepared to do their jobs. Hermione made a mental note to herself that if she ever got back to her own timeline, she would find a way to show Neville—perhaps by using the letters Alice had sent her and removing the name of the person they were addressed to—some insight on what his parents had been like before they were tortured to insanity. He was proud of his parents, she knew, and felt that he deserved some deeper insight on the people they'd been other than a laundry list of their accomplishments in the war.

Lily was still active in the Order, despite her condition. She carried the same sentiments as Alice, and refused to sit at home doing nothing. Instead, she was apparently staying at Headquarters and using her considerable knowledge and intellect to help figure out who was killed where and how, what their strategical weaknesses were, and—above all—try to weed out who was the leak.

Because indeed, there was a leak. Someone had begun leaking information to Voldemort since August, and this state of affairs put them all at risk. They confined their most important meetings to just a few of the most important movers and shakers in the Order, which had prevented some of their most important plans from being disseminated, but it still did not make them much more comfortable to know that someone among them was a traitor. In addition, some of the plans were not leaked immediately, but after the orders were given, long-term ones were most definitely being handed over to Voldemort.

This had made several people suspect. Hermione was sorry to hear that she had been one of the
primary suspects—due to her constant contact with Order members despite her lack of official membership—but she was grateful that the suspicions had been immediately dismissed: she did not even know a quarter of their actual plans, nevermind enough to disseminate that amount that had been leaked thus far. In addition, Kingsley—who had been in her mind often enough during Occlumency practice—had vouched for her loyalty and deep-seated hatred of Voldemort, and even Moody had stood up and told them all, loudly, how absurd the idea was.

According to Lily, he had roared at them that "'Constant Vigilance!' does not mean turning on your friends like a pack of dogs!"

In addition, the only ones who had even considered the idea were those who did not know Hermione personally. James and Lily had been outraged at the very suggestion, and Marlene had reportedly been forced to bodily restrain Sirius from taking a swing at the Order members who had suggested it. As soon as they had calmed down, Lily wrote, they were able to rationally explain why it would simply be impossible on several levels for Hermione to be the leak.

There were other suspects, too, but they were either thrown out based on logistical impossibility or pushed aside due to an inability to confirm or deny the allegations. It created a degree of tension among the Order that made it difficult to foster trust.

Hermione was taken aside by Professor Slughorn a week before Valentine's Day to inform her that he had invited Severus, but that the other Slytherin had been forced to decline—and had asked Slughorn to relay that message to her. Hermione was severely disappointed. In the midst of all the bleak news that had overtaken her life, seeing Severus had been one of the few things she had truly had to look forward to. It also caused her no end of concern. Was there a meeting he had to attend? Appearances he was keeping up for safety’s sake? Or had Voldemort's paranoia superceded the realities of Hermione's timeline causing him to decide to get rid of Severus?

It caused her no end of worry, and in desperation, she ended up sending a letter of subtle inquiry to Alice and Lily to ask if they knew about any Death Eater meetings that were known to take place on the 14th. Alice knew nothing; Lily wrote back about two weeks after Hermione's letter to say that yes, there was evidence that there had been a meeting, though it was an unusually quiet one. Only a few Death Eaters had apparently been present, and they were still trying to determine its purpose. Lily explained that the Order was confused about this particular meeting because the Death Eaters attending in question were all of different rank, which was very unusual for a closed meeting.

Hermione was much relieved by this. She didn't know why, but she was certain that Severus was among the mixed-rank gatherers at that meeting, although what for, she did not know. But without a means of communication, she remained uneasy. In addition to that, guilt had begun to worm its way into Hermione's mind, not because she was worrying over a Death Eater, but because she was also spending time thinking about kisses—and, more often than not, even more intimacies—from that very same Death Eater.

But she was always careful to keep things in perspective. Severus was her friend and not a true believer of the pureblood supremacy idealogue—and soon, she knew, he would defect altogether. She was not an official member of the Order, but she was loyal to the cause that would bring about Voldemort's downfall. Right now, her concentration was on helping the Order in any way she could while also trying to keep the younger students physically and psychologically intact where the teachers could not. Whatever time she had to herself that was not dedicated to the aforementioned, or had to do with academics, was when she allowed herself those moments of relaxation and musings—and this was usually right before bed.

Sometime around the middle of February, a few Slytherins in particular had become unbearable. It
was as though the ones who were budding Death Eaters in waiting had received jubilant news of a sort, and it showed. What that news was, Hermione could not even begin to guess, until she found herself cornered in the library by two people she least wanted to see: Bellatrix Black and Barty Crouch Jr.

"Having fun, Mudblood?"

Hermione didn't even deign to glance up from her book, though she shook her sleeve slightly, wand at the ready to be pulled out from its hiding place. "Enjoying the inferiority of lacking genetic outcrossing?"

"Speak English, Mudblood, and be quick about it."

"Very well," Hermione said, snapping her book shut. "I just called you a bunch of inbred trolls. What do you want?"

She saw Bellatrix's face contort dangerously, but Crouch but up a hand as a subtle signal for her to contain herself. Barely. "Is that any way to thank your messengers, Granger?"

Hermione's face turned stony. "What's the message?"

Bellatrix's face suddenly transformed into a wide, cruel smile, but it was Crouch who replied. "You graduate in four months, Mudblood. As soon as you step foot outside of Hogwarts, you sign your death warrant."

Hermione felt her blood turn to ice, but merely raised an eyebrow in reply. "Is that all?"

The heavy-lidded girl's face, as terrible and expressive as ever, seemed to become almost enraged by this lack of reaction. Hermione was surprised she had not gone for her wand yet.

"The Dark Lord wanted you to be informed personally," Crouch told her nastily, "so that you can get your affairs in order, such as they may be. Unless…" his expression turned thoughtful, and his tone instantly became cordial, almost persuasive. "Unless you would like to offer your services to our side."

Hermione laughed. "I'm sure your lord would kill me on the spot for the insult of it."

"Not so, Granger, not so," Crouch said, waving a hand almost dismissively. "You claim to be Muggleborn, but we have not found any relatives of yours, Muggle or otherwise, to confirm such a story. You have no relatives to speak of, dead or alive. You are also a powerful witch—"

"As demonstrated by your continued adventures as a canary, I suppose?"

She saw a tick pulse in the side of his jaw, but the Slytherin went on talking smoothly. "—and given the possibility that you may, in fact, have some actual magical blood in you that is not merely the result of an abominable accident of nature, the Dark Lord would much rather have you as a friend than an enemy."

"The Dark Lord doesn't have friends," Hermione replied coldly. "He has slaves."

"The Dark Lord offers power beyond your wildest dreams," Bellatrix hissed. "Power lowly dirt like you should leap at the chance for!"

Hermione sighed and leaned back against the wall.
"I'm going to teach you a bit of Muggle history," she said, bringing a hand up to her hair and curling it between her fingers. Her entire body was stiff with a mixture of fear, anger, and confusion, but she disguised it admirably by taking a leaf out of Severus's book and merely looking bored, staring down at the cover of her book. "In the nineteen-forties, there was a mass Muggle-generated genocide. I'm not going to get into the details—you probably wouldn't understand half of what I told you. But suffice to say, an interesting phenomenon occurred where the Nazis would make exceptions for certain people they would otherwise kill. They hired Jewish practitioners into the business of killing and extorting their fellows in order to be spared the same fate, and sometimes gave Aryan-looking people papers that exempted them from being arrested and killed."

She looked up at them now, her eyes burning fiercely with disgust. "What you're asking me to do is pretty much the same thing. Give me an excuse not to be targeted by claiming I have non-Muggle relatives, making me a half-blood at best. Give me an opportunity to work for the Dark Lord in killing other Muggle-borns and so-called blood traitors, and in return I'll be spared." She was smiling now, but it was a stomach-churning one, cold and humorless. "Wonderful deal, isn't it? In short, because I'm deemed useful, excuses will be made for my heritage, and as long as I help murder other Muggle-borns, you'll keep me around like a pet."

The next moment, she was on her feet. She threw her book at Crouch, who was too slow to react, and he sank quickly to the floor when the full force of her five-pound book hit him square in the face. Her wand was pointed directly at Bellatrix, straight between her wide, hate-filled eyes.

"Only cowards throw others in the face of the killing machine to spare their own miserable lives!" she spat. Her wand slashed upward. "Get out!"

Her spell hit Bellatrix, who doubled over in pain for a moment as the muscles in her forehead and ears contracted painfully, and then hissed a string of curses at her as she made a hasty retreat. Hermione stepped over to Crouch's body, and she kicked him where her book had hit, smacking his nose and leaving a shoe-shaped bruise under his eye. Blood trickled down his nose, and his eyes fluttered open faintly as he tried to regain his bearings.

"Don't ever make such an offer to me again," Hermione told him, her voice tight with cold fury. "You can go tell Voldemort—" Crouch's entire body convulsed at the name. "—that he can go stick his offer up his arse. You are hereby warned—Unforgiveables are sanctioned by the Ministry under self-defense, but I don't need a Killing Curse to kill. Any Death Eater who tries to attack me will not be returning intact. Am I understood?"

She saw Crouch's eyes light up with fury, but he nodded faintly.

"Mudblood bitch," he spat, bloodied spittle mixing with the mess of his nose.

Without another word, Hermione retrieved her book and her bag and stormed off.

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Hermione was called to Professor McGonagall's office later that evening. She knocked on the door, waited until she was bid to enter, and then took a seat on one of the armchairs. McGonagall was sitting at her desk, stirring her tea, and she took an extra moment to add lemon and sugar before moving to take a seat opposite of Hermione.

"Two students made it to the Hospital Wing today with a severe migraine caused by a Pressure Charm and a broken nose," McGonagall said shortly. "Both of them named you the culprit, and before assigning you detention and point loss, I should like to hear an explanation from you, if you care to give me one."
Hermione took a deep breath, letting out the tension in her mind and body, before she sighed. "They approached me while I was studying," she said quietly.

Professor McGonagall waited patiently.

"They also had a message for me from V—from You-Know-Who," Hermione said, twisting the watch on her wrist.

The Transfiguration teacher's eyebrows rose dangerously at this, and her appearance suddenly became very hawk-like, much sterner than usual, if that were possible.

Hermione swallowed, and then spoke carefully. "You-Know-Who is apparently willing to make the very generous offer of overlooking the issues of my heritage if I would join his cause."

Hermione had never seen Professor McGonagall's jaw drop before, but it seemed there was a first time for everything. She covered her gasp with her hand, and was about to speak, when Hermione interrupted:

"I threw the book I was reading at Crouch and hexed Black," Hermione responded coolly. "I told them that only a coward would accept such an offer—and that they could tell You-Know-Who where he could stick it. In addition," she said, speaking loudly to cover over McGonagall's next attempt to stagger out some words, "before they got to the offer, they told me that the minute I set foot outside Hogwarts, I am dead. So my choice was thus—I either join or die." Her lips pressed into a grim smile. "I pretty much told them to bugger off."

She had never used such coarse language with a teacher, either, but she supposed there was always a first time for her, too. Professor McGonagall stood up for a moment, her hand over her heart, and shakily walked to the window to regain her bearings. Hermione waited there in silence for a moment, wondering what was going to happen next, certain that she had done the right thing. A few moments later, it seemed her Head of House had finally pulled herself back together enough to turn around and speak clearly.

"I must admit, Hermione," she said, addressing her by her first name for the first time Hermione had ever known her in this timeline, "that I always worried—what with the way you spent time with Mr. Snape—that you might be tempted by an offer to join…" she looked quite disturbed. "Albus was always concerned that an offer would be made—he was certain that it would—but now that you've rejected it in such a way that there is no conceivable possibility of it ever being made again…"

Hermione felt a deep pang of hurt in her chest at these words. "You thought—you seriously thought I might consider joining Vol—You-Know-Who?"

"It was a concern," McGonagall said, her hands shaking as she moved to refill her cup. She gave Hermione an odd look at the almost-usage of Voldemort's name. "I didn't believe you would, but it was always a possibility—I never thought you had it in you, but I also knew that with the way Mr. Snape was always able to persuade you into doing things you would otherwise never dream of… you might be lured in much in the same way he himself was."

Hermione suddenly understood where her Head of House was coming from. In a way, she could even sympathise. But it didn't take away the pain entirely.

"I got upset when I realized what they were asking of me," Hermione said quietly. "That's why I lashed out."

McGonagall nodded, and then resumed her seat across from Hermione.
"I need you to relay your conversation in full," she said, her voice soft but stern. She was looking at Hermione as though she had never properly seen the Gryffindor before. "Every detail. Don't leave a thing out, if you please."

Hermione did so. When she finished, the McGonagall sat back in her seat, deep in thought.

"The Headmaster will be informed of this," she said. "And I think… I don't think you will be leaving Hogwarts after graduation."

Hermione shook her head, but kept her mouth shut. She had her own plans, and the person to appeal to here was not her Head of House, but the Headmaster. And once she graduated, she would no longer be a ward of the school. He could do no more than advise her against it, and Hermione rather thought he might even approve of her choice. It would give them a free opening into seeing what was happening in Voldemort's camp, if she could get Severus to divulge to her. Dumbledore feared for her safety, but she also recognized him as a careful, manipulative chess player who took risks that might, in the end, pay off enormously.

She wondered, perhaps, if her stay at Spinner's End would be what caused his defection.

Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione received a flurry of owls two days later. The one from James fairly summed them all up, though Sirius, Marlene, Alice, Lily, Remus, Moody, Kingsley, and even Frank had something to say to her.

*I can’t believe you did that!* James’s letter exclaimed. *I mean, gods, but that was brilliant! I wish I’d seen the look on their faces when you threw their offer back at them like a sack of dung bombs—but that was also ruddy stupid, too! Now they're going to be after you more than anyone else, and we've got enough on our hands without a bunch of fucked-up Death Eaters rioting for your head. I hope they delivered your message about where to stick it, though—everyone in the Order couldn’t help but laugh their heads off when they heard that. If anyone had any doubts about your loyalty to the Order, they were all thrown out the window the moment that came out. No one tells You-Know-Who where to stick his offers of immortality and world domination…*

Yes, they were all along those lines. Shocked, but awed and admiring. Cautiously worried that she had just made a bigger target out of herself, but still roaring with laughter at her audacity. Glad that she had finally, vocally, and very unalterably made her allegiance against Voldemort known.

Hermione also heard news from Alice that Molly Weasley (“A very nice woman, Hermione, you've never met her, but she's heard all about you and was so horrified—and secretly admiring, I think—when she heard about what you did!”) had given birth to her sixth son and named him Ronald Billius Weasley. It was just a side-note from Alice, who was now five months along; she was getting some experience by helping Molly handle her other kids when her husband was away at the Ministry and she needed to either focus on her newborn or help out the Order by cooking dinner for them all (“She's a fantastic cook, you know.” Yes, Hermione did know.)

A good deal of Alice and Lily’s letters had begun to become very baby-oriented. They both wondered what their babies would look like when they were born, and they worried constantly about their babies’ health over their own. Above all they tried to muse out how they were all going to handle dealing with children in the middle of a war. (“It wasn’t exactly the best time, you know,” Alice wrote dryly, “but I’m still very happy. I just hope this war is over soon…” ) and Hermione, though she could not sympathize with them, offered them her ear and attention as an outlet for their frustration while the stress of their pregnancies grew on top of everything else.

Lily even sent Hermione a picture of them all together at the Order Headquarters, though Hermione couldn’t have for the life of her determined where they were from the picture alone. It looked like a large, well-furnished wooden house, and she suspected it belonged to another Order member who was willing to have their home put under considerable protections against even neighborly visits. In it, Lily, Alice, and Marlene stood shoulder to shoulder, arms wrapped around each other, smiling happily for the camera. Marlene stood between the two of them, not pregnant, but definitely a comforting presence for the two women. Hermione tucked the picture away with her other important things in the drawer of her nightstand, feeling comforted by the memo of them all being happy and healthy together even in this time of war.

Now that she had made her allegiances unmistakably clear, she began receiving more information in her letters concerning the Order and the enemy. She was no longer entirely in the dark, though she
knew she would not be made privy to everything until after she had been properly inducted, and it was not safe to write down important plans in a letter unless it was in code. In return, from the perspective of an upper-class student, Hermione was able to give them information and keep tabs on students who she suspected or known to be present or future Death Eaters. It was a great help to the Order, because by identifying the students, it was easier to identify who was being influenced into their choice by their parents—and then add their parents to the list of known Death Eaters.

She later received a short letter of apology from Caradoc Dearborn for suspecting her of being the leak. Hermione's response was kind, and she was rather under the impression that this misjudgment of character had upset the man greatly. She had never met him, of course, but heard a great deal about him from the girls at Headquarters, and thought him to be a very capable and considerate wizard based on the information given to her.

On the other end of the scale, Hermione now had to watch her step whenever she passed someone in the corridors. The group of Slytherin Death Eater wannabes, as she had dubbed them, wanted her head on a pike, or at least her body in the Hospital Wing.

It was an unfortunate occurrence for them that most of their efforts resolved themselves in their being sent to Madam Pomfrey in her stead.

As Severus was unable to make it to Slughorn's Valentine's Day supper, Hermione spent the evening up in Gryffindor Tower, alone.

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One Friday night, in the middle of March, Hermione stirred in her sleep overcome with the feeling that something was not right. Her eyes were closed, and she was still comfortably dreaming, but her nighttime fantasies of strong hands and mouths that nuzzled and kissed her were disturbed by the sense that someone else was in the room. Her level of awareness was strictly heightened, since she often fell asleep in the library and had to be up at a moment's notice to avoid being hexed with her head down on the table. But she wasn't in the library, so she didn't know why her senses were going off until there was a cautious but near-frantic tapping on her shoulder.

Annoyed, Hermione buried her face deeper into the pillow.

"Go away James," she mumbled, forgetting at that moment that James was not in school anymore.

"Hermione—Hermione—" it was definitely not James's voice, but it was familiar and soothing enough that at the moment, Hermione really did not care that it wanted her to wake up. It was the middle of the night, damn it. "Hermione, please, wake up—don't make me… Hermione!"

With an annoyed groan, Hermione forced herself up and opened her eyes. It took less than a moment to register who it was, and then her eyes widened.

"Severus!" she hissed, glancing around at her roommates, all of whom were still sleeping soundly. "What are you doing here?"

Severus pressed a finger to her lips. Like James had before him, he looked panicked and afraid, and it registered in his voice.

"I made a mistake, Hermione," he said, gripping her shoulder with his other hand to make sure he had her attention. "I—a terrible mistake. I completely fucked up—all my fault—"

Hermione was utterly bewildered. "How? What did you do?"
"I—I was spying on Dumbledore," Severus said, his expression pained. "In the Hogs Head—there was a prophecy—I was thrown out, but I still managed to relay it to the Dark Lord—and now he thinks—this is all my fault, all my bloody fault—"

Hermione slid out of the covers quickly, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. "Talk to me," she demanded insistently. "Tell me what happened. What do you need me to do?"

Severus took in a deep breath, rambling insensate. "Tell—the Headmaster—I need to arrange a meeting with him, one where he won't try kill me—I need to explain to him, warn him—"

"Is this a trap, Severus?" Hermione shook him. "Did Voldemort tell you to do this?"

Severus's eyes snapped open, and he seemed to return to himself, if only slightly. "Do not say his name—! No, I'm here on my own—he doesn't know…"

Hermione squeezed his shoulders in a measure of comfort as she tried to figure out his words. They made very little sense to her, but they didn't need to right now. Right now, she needed to notify the Headmaster. "Wait here," she said, standing up. "I'll go get Professor Dumbledore."

"No," Severus hissed. His pupils were dilated in fear. "No—I can't do it here. I shouldn't even be here—my departure was suspicious as it was, it has to be tomorrow… tell him," he insisted, standing up and pulling Hermione almost frighteningly close to his face. "Tell him to meet me on the westernmost moor in West Yorkshire."

Hermione stared at him, her expression near-uncomprehending, and he uttered, "Please!"

Hermione pulled away, trying to process this all. "Westernmost moor in West Yorkshire… tomorrow, at noon?"

"Yes. Please!"

"Alright," Hermione said, standing up straight. "I'll go tell him—but you'd better get out of here quickly. I don't know how you got in, and you're going to have a good deal of explaining to do when you return, but for now—get out."

Severus gave a short, jerky nod of his head, and then with a flap of his cloak, he turned around and left through the door. Hermione swallowed down her apprehension, and brought her fingers down to the third dial on her watch. She couldn't afford to be caught wandering the halls right now with such an urgent matter to deal with, and this did classify as an emergency—

She flicked the dial out, gave it a full turn, and pressed it back in.

There was a yank behind her navel, and she was gone.

~o~O~o~

Hermione found herself pacing the Headmaster's office as she watched the arching path of the sun move painfully slow throughout the day. Her sudden appearance in the Headmaster's office, which had been fortunately occupied by its owner, had been followed by a rapid explanation of recent events. Dumbledore had made a quick request to the portraits to check that Severus had, indeed, left the school and commanded them to help make sure he was not caught by any night-time patrollers, should that not be the case. He then ordered Hermione to wait in his office. He left by Floo moments later, and Hermione had spent the greater part of her Saturday locked in his office.

She had fallen asleep curled up in one of the armchairs after three hours of waiting, and woke up early, still on edge with uncertainty. The house elves had been considerate enough to bring her food
and a fresh change of clothes, and she had tried to settle herself with a book from one of the shelves, but she was too distracted to apply much brainpower to them. She didn't dare touch or fiddle with the things on the Headmaster's desk, and thus, tired of being cooped up and bored and worried out of her mind, she was reduced to pacing like a caged lion.

She looked down at her watch every so often to formally note the passing of time. Noon passed, and then one, two, three o'clock. It was just moving onto four-thirty, and Hermione was trying to resist the urge to either ask the house elves for yet another snack or break out of the office entirely when there was a sudden burst of flame. Hermione let out a yelp of surprise and stepped back as Fawkes appeared, perched on Dumbledore's shoulder. Severus was with him, and looking momentarily disoriented in the midst of his distress, he stumbled forward whilst trying to regain his bearings. His hair was windswept, his eyes wild, and his knees were caked with dried mud.

He looked up a moment later, and when he saw her, his expression became slightly relieved.

"Hermione," he said hoarsely.

Hermione looked up warily at the Headmaster, whose expression was serious, but also contemplative.

"Miss Granger, thank you for your patience in waiting," he said, holding his arm out to the armchairs in a gesture that they should sit. Hermione did, as did Severus, and Dumbledore moved to stand behind his desk. He let out a weary sigh, and then sat. "I am sorry to have kept you for so long." His beard lifted up slightly in the faintest of all smiles. "You must have been bored to tears."

Hermione's mind brimmed with a hundred questions, but she kept her mouth shut, waiting for him to speak.

Dumbledore let out another sigh, as though he was gearing up in preparation for something, and then he spoke.

"Miss Granger, what is said in this room does not leave this room," he said with weary sternness. Hermione nodded. "Furthermore, I ask that you not interrupt until after I have finished speaking."

"Understood, sir," Hermione said, glancing over at Severus. He was staring at the floor, his hands buried in his greasy hair, though it was clear he was listening.

"Afterwards, I will make an offer to you, and I want you to think it over carefully." The wizened old man leaned back in his chair, and with yet another sigh—he had sighed too much already for one day, Hermione felt—he began.

"In the middle of August, I had an interview with Sybill Trelawney, our new Divination teacher. I was prepared to scrap the subject altogether, and therefore not too keen on the interview to begin with, but I felt inclined to have the interview for politeness's sake." He closed his eyes. "The interview was rather dull, to say the least, and I was prepared to leave when she began acting strangely. She began reciting a prophecy to me—a true prophecy—and in the middle of it, we were interrupted when the proprietor of the Hogs Head found young Severus here—" he inclined his head toward Severus, "—eavesdropping on our conversation. Severus was promptly thrown out on his ear, so I'm told, but he had heard the prophecy— half of it, I suppose—and when he realized it was an obscure reference to the Dark Lord's downfall, he rushed to tell his master."

Hermione's brow furrowed at this, but she did not interrupt. The Headmaster continued;

"Severus's revelation to Voldemort gave him a level of safety and rank not usually given to new
recruits," Dumbledore continued heavily, opening his eyes. "Voldemort spent many months pondering the meaning of the prophecy. I will recite it to you, if you will listen." He leaned forward in his chair, his eyes serious as he spoke:

"The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...Born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies...and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not...and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives..."

Hermione's eyes widened as the Headmaster sat back, folding his hands carefully in his lap.

"Do you know to whom this prophecy may refer to, Hermione?"

Hermione swallowed.

"The Potters," she whispered. Everything at once began clicking into place. It had never made sense to her before why Voldemort would choose to attack Harry when he was not yet even old enough to know what a wand was, but now it did with a disturbing amount of clarity. "Lily's unborn son."

Dumbledore nodded gravely.

"Not just the Potters, I'm afraid," he said. "Alice and Frank Longbottom are also targets. Their child is due to be born near the end of July, and they have defied Voldemort three times. According to Severus, however, even you were a targeted possibility when Voldemort first heard the prophecy. When it became clear that only the children of Lily Potter and Alice Longbottom would fit the constraints, you were dropped as a suspect immediately."

Hermione swallowed. *Dear gods!* She thought, looking between Dumbledore and Severus. *What kind of mess has this turned into?*

"Protections on the Potters and Longbottoms will be increased," the Headmaster said calmly. "If the situation continues to escalate, further measures will be taken."

Forgetting Dumbledore's bid not to be interrupted, Hermione interjected, "But me, Headmaster! What on earth does this have to do with me?" She wanted to close her eyes and block out all sound. This was too much. She was not only witnessing, but now being made a part of, the months leading up to the murder of her best friend's parents. "Why are you telling me this?"

Dumbledore's words were measured. "Because Severus is now a spy for the Order of the Phoenix."

Hermione felt her chest constrict. *So this is how it happens. And all for Lily..."He's going to be spying on Vol—Voldemort, sir?"* she asked, glancing over at Severus, who had flinched visibly at the use of the name. "But I still don't understand why you're telling me this—wouldn't it be smarter and safer to keep me in the dark?"

"Not necessarily, Hermione," Dumbledore said, pressing his fingertips together. "Come graduation, you will be officially inducted into the Order. As a result of your particular... situation," he said, looking at her meaningfully. Hermione knew he was talking about the fact that the Death Eaters now had a warrant issued by the Dark Lord to personally hunt her down. "I feel it would be best if you were not on the front lines. You are a strong fighter, but your talents are better used elsewhere."

"Sir...?"

"Do you know how espionage works, Hermione?"
Hermione frowned, thrown off guard by such a simple question. "A spy collects information and then disseminates it to the person he works for, sir."

"A spy does not always give information directly to the person he works for," Dumbledore said, wearing the faintest trace of a smile, though it seemed to be a rather mirthless one. "Oftentimes, a spy has a handler, a specific person who works with the spy and is in a position to give information to the person they work for without arousing suspicion. A handler's job is to look after the spy's welfare, look after the best interest of the organization's goals, and essentially take all the information given to them and deliver it back to their mutual employer."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"Any letters or meetings Severus arranged with me would put the entire operation in jeopardy," the Headmaster said, enunciating clearly enough that Hermione could not possibly misunderstand him. "No matter how careful or discreet we might be, Severus would still be at an exorbitant risk of being found out and killed for his defection. There would simply not be enough excuses in the world to cover the range of activities that would be required for me to effectively employ Severus's capabilities. You, however," Dumbledore said, his eyes lighting up for the first time that evening, "have a history of contact with him that would not only keep Voldemort's suspicions at bay, but may even provide Severus with a means of gaining his trust. Furthermore," he said, holding up a hand to stop Hermione from interjecting in protest, "you are extremely skilled at compiling information in a neat and organized manner. I need those skills from you now, Hermione. As does Severus."

"He cannot do this alone," Dumbledore stressed, "and he and I cannot have direct contact on a regular basis. We have no other Order members who would be able to fill this position, nor any whom Severus trusts to the same level or degree that he does with you. You are a good judge of his character, and are a skilled Occlumens. You are talented at cataloguing information, have a cool head on your shoulders, and can hold your own in a fight—though fighting has never truly been your forte, I must admit, you have worked exceedingly and admirably hard at it," he added, with a tilt of his head in Hermione's direction. "You are also loyal to the Order, loyal in a way that is unfaltering and strong."

Hermione swallowed, but she was unable to tear her gaze away from the Headmaster. This moment felt surreal—so surreal—and she forced herself to remain calm and collected as she absorbed every bit of the information she was being given.

"I want you to be Severus Snape's handler," Dumbledore told her firmly. "There is no one else."

Hermione took a deep breath, and glanced over at Severus. He had finally looked up, though his expression was a mixture of pain, several levels of fear, determination, and hopefulness. She knew Professor Dumbledore was right. She did fit the bill—and furthermore, he had her pinned down exactly when he pointed out that she was perfectly capable of holding her own, but was not the most inclined to rush into a fight. She was rarely the instigator in her run-ins with Slytherins, and much preferred to retaliate when they attempted to take her down.

And until Severus acquired a good excuse for being in close contact with Professor Dumbledore—such as taking on a teaching position, for starters—any contact between himself and the Headmaster would be suspect. No matter how much they tried to hide it, his constant disappearances and inability to adequately explain where he had been compounded with the lack of a solid alibi would have him tortured, his mind ripped open, and his invariable death before the month was out. He needed someone he could deliver information to without it being suspicious.

She had defied Voldemort in such a way that there were one of two outcomes. The first would be that the Dark Lord would kill Severus for remaining in close contact with a slip of a girl who had
turned him down so rudely. The second would be for the Dark Lord to think he was using Severus as a means of keeping tabs on her—and by extension, the Order—as well as possibly manipulating her into helping them without her realizing it.

The Dark Lord was a manipulative blowhard by nature. He liked to toy with people. And since Hermione was not immediately within his grasp, the idea of using her without her apparent knowledge would appeal to him greatly. It was the perfect cover for Severus to work under.

And even if there was someone equally placed to work with him without arousing suspicion, Severus would not have the rapport and understanding that he had with her. They had a level of trust that allowed Hermione to believe him when he had said he was here on his own, and not on Voldemort's orders. She had trusted him when they snuck out to Hogsmeade, believing that it was not a trap. She trusted him enough to sneak out of Slughorn's party with him in order to carry on their conversation privately. She trusted him enough that she had started falling for him. And she knew that out of anyone else he might have in his life, she was the one who had earned the most trust from him. That was why he had come to her, why he had wanted her along for his birthday, and why he would agree to work with her without being obstructive in any manner.

She also knew how to handle him as a person. There were times when he was friendly and times he looked prepared to hex someone into a stain on the wall. Good or bad, she was not afraid of him, which allowed her to stand her ground with confidence while she tried to get something across to him. He could be a temperamental git at times—though in truth, so could she—and only she was used enough to him to know how to deal with it.

In short, if there was anyone who could work with him without one of them going postal, it was probably going to be her. The very concept had her shaking in a mixture of fear and disbelief, but it had to be done.

"I accept," she said.

She saw Dumbledore's face, tense and lined with worry and the other concerns that had placed themselves upon the ever-growing burden that rested upon his shoulders, relax. He actually broke into a wide, relieved smile. Severus was staring at her with something akin to disbelief, as though he couldn't understand how—or why—she would agree to work with him after everything she just heard.

"I just have one question," she said, curling her hair between her fingers. "Does this mean that my summer plans are no longer my own?"

"Elaborate, if you please," Dumbledore said, sitting back in his chair with an almost relaxed look.

"Severus and I were planning on fixing up Spinner's End this summer as part of a summer project," Hermione said, glancing down at her watch. Five-thirty. They were well half-past dinner now, and she was quite certainly starving. "I was planning on staying there while I figured out what to do for a job. Am I still allowed to do that?"

To her surprise, Dumbledore's expression became more thoughtful, and if possible, more relieved. "That may not be a bad idea to begin with, Hermione. It is certainly a good way for the two of you to remain in consistent contact. As for a formal job, however, I was thinking that perhaps you might come back next year as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. Horace Slughorn is retiring next year, we will have a vacant position that I'm certain Severus here can take, should he choose to do so." He gave the raven-haired man a meaningful look. "How does that sound?"

"The Defense Against the Dark Arts?" Hermione squeaked, backpeddaling at once. "Professor, the
"Job's jinxed! No one's managed to stay for more than a year!"

"No one has ever been seriously injured teaching it," Professor Dumbledore reminded her.

_Actually, I beg to differ, Headmaster, but I somehow suspect explaining to you that Voldemort got caught in his own jinxed job in my first year is not going to make one whit of difference to you..."

"In addition, it keeps you at close and suspicion-free contact with Severus," Dumbledore continued. "The following year, we will review the situation."

Hermione closed her eyes. _In for a knut, in for a galleon_, she thought with a sigh as she resigned herself to her situation.

"Very well, sir," she replied stiffly.

Dumbledore's visible ease was little comfort to her.

"I will have to ask Horace if he'll hold an April Fool's party," he said, his expression suddenly thoughtful. "He will likely jump at the chance to invite some of his former pupils to another of his gatherings. In the meantime," he said, with a nod in Hermione and Severus's direction. "I suggest you find a quiet place to talk. I'm certain you have a great deal to discuss. The Seventh Floor is a useful place for private conversation—particularly in front of the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy. Why don't you walk around for a bit?"

Hermione stood up. Naturally, she obviously knew where the Room of Requirement was. _Very subtle, Headmaster._ "Yes, sir."

Severus stood up as well, and with barely another word to each other, they left the office.

Hermione heard some of the portraits of previous headmasters and headmistresses stirring as they made their exit.

"But Albus," she heard one portrait protest, "they're too young! You're placing too much on them at once."

"In my time—" one other headmaster rumbled.

"I have great faith in Hermione and Severus," Dumbledore said, with a note of finality in his voice, cutting the conversation short. "They are remarkable young people who have had to grow up quickly — too quickly, but alas," Hermione heard him murmur as the door closed behind them. "It's been that way for far too long. But they are no longer children, Professor Derwent. I'm afraid they have seen far too much for that."

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"How long have you known about this room?" Severus asked restlessly as Hermione led him through the revealed doors to the Room of Requirement.

"Quite a while, I suppose," Hermione responded, looking around the room. They had been given a cozy chamber with a roaring fire and several plush couches, along with a coffee table, though there was regretfully no food. She took a seat and verbally summoned one of the house elves, politely requesting some leftovers from dinner before leaning back and attempting to de-stress. It was difficult, to say the least. Her mind was still spinning, and her body felt so tightly coiled that unwinding seemed nearly impossible. She sighed. "Not that it matters, at this point. We need to talk."
Severus was about to speak when food appeared, almost of its own accord, and Hermione leaned forward to help herself to some steak. With a sigh that mirrored her own, he took the seat opposite her and helped himself to a goblet of pumpkin juice. Hermione took a moment to sate the growling of her belly, and then—in a decision to start from most recent and then backtrack—she began with the first line of inquiry.

"How the hell did you sneak into my dorm?"

Severus set his goblet down slowly. "I snuck in through the passage from Honeydukes. I got lucky—I was able to slip in, Disillusioned, behind one of the Gryffindors who had come back late."

Hermione stared grouchily at her food. "How the hell do boys keep getting up into the girls' dormitory?"

Severus worked his jaw for a moment, as though he were resisting the urge to smile, and then said seriously, "I didn't use the stairs. The railing just above the common room—I used Carpe Retractum. The same spell you used to choke me during final exams last year, incidentally."

Hermione smiled faintly at him, and then snorted. "I see. That would explain it." She paused to take a bite of pudding, and then said, "Tell me about what happened at the Hogs Head."

Severus bit out an exhalation. "That was several months ago. I knew there would be an interview taking place at the Hogs Head. The Dark Lord did not know yet how to use me, so he suggested giving me a chance to prove myself by seeing what I could come up with." He looked at her glumly. "I suppose I did, after a fashion."

Hermione shook her head. "It didn't occur to you to withhold that information from him?"

"Oh, it did," Severus said, glaring into his pumpkin juice. "But not for long. I didn't have any idea who it was in reference to, and I figured that if someone was destined to dethrone him, getting into the Dark Lord's good graces by letting him know someone's out there waiting to take off his head in the interim wasn't a bad idea." He sighed, his expression focused and pained. "It seems I was wrong."

"Dumbledore will protect them," Hermione said with more confidence than she felt. Her heart sank even at her own words, but she plowed on. "As long as the Potters and Longbottoms do as they're told—put their trust in the right people—"

"And who are the right people?" Severus asked snidely.

"Their friends," Hermione said slowly, looking down at her food. "Those who wouldn't trade the lives of their loved ones to buy more time for themselves."

"Yes, I heard all about that," Severus said disparagingly. "The Dark Lord is furious with you. It's going to take a great deal of persuasion on my part to convince him that you can be tamed—manipulated—"

"You are rather adept at Occlumency, are you not?" Hermione asked, lifting a goblet of milk to her lips. "We can create false memories and scenarios for you to present him with your success, if need be, while also protecting him from seeing the more important things."

Severus nodded stiffly. "Indeed." He paused, and then said rather wearily, "do you mind if I take some time to rest?" Seeing her raised eyebrows, he leaned back tiredly in his seat to look at her. "Dumbledore performed a good deal of Legilimency on me in the time following our initial meeting, to ascertain my sincerity—it has been rather taxing." He closed his eyes. "I am tired, and have an
impending headache. Some time to recover would be nice."

Hermione of all people knew just how tiring Occlumency and Legilimency could be when merely practicing, never mind when you were allowing someone to go through your head in a way that forced you to not only hand over your mind, but also go through the thoughts and memories with the observer. When done for a long period of time—such as several hours, as had been the case here—it could indeed be psychologically draining.

Severus was sitting in an armchair. Hermione was on the couch. In a moment of impulse, she tapped the cushion beside her. "Come here."

Grateful, though looking the slightest bit wary, Severus crossed over to the couch and sat. Hermione scooted until she was sitting on the very edge, and then leaned over and tugged on his shoulder. He went down on his side, and after a moment of shifting, was resting his arm on her lap, using it as a pillow. He took a moment to kick off his boots, tucked his feet up with more comfort, and stretched out on the couch, which seemed to have mysteriously gained another foot and a half to accompany him.

"You're sure?" he muttered.

"Unless you'd rather have the entire couch to yourself," Hermione offered.

He shook his head slightly. "No. I appreciate this."

"We'll talk more once you're feeling better," Hermione promised quietly, shifting once to make sure she was comfortable enough to stay there for a while before placing one hand in his hair, stroking it soothingly. If she had thought this was difficult for her to take in, it wasn't a far cry to gauge how much stress he himself must be under at the moment.

His response was muffled, but then he fell silent. A few minutes later, when Hermione flicked the hair out of his face to look, she could see that he was asleep. She stared at his sleeping form for quite some time, using the lull as an opportunity to sit back and try to unwind.

She continued stroking his hair as her mind wandered elsewhere. She was now his handler. Aside from the fact that this included a whole host of responsibilities Hermione had otherwise never thought she would be taking on, she began thinking ahead about how she was going to organize this and keep her information straight. It was simply unrealistic to think that she would be able to remember every single detail that Severus gave her—details that may be as important as they sounded inane. She would need a reliable way to record the information he gave her without making it easy for others to read.

Her thoughts turned to her fifth-year for guidance. When everyone had been reading the Quibbler and working to do it under Umbridge's fat, toady nose, they had been extremely creative. Some had used spells to make their copies of the Quibbler appear to be text excerpts or blank bits of parchment. The Marauders, too, had used similar methods to charm their map to unlock to a specific phrase.

The best idea seemed to be to find a notebook to record and date everything, and then charm it for her eyes only. She tossed around the idea of giving it a password, but then rejected it. It would be useful if she could give the notebook to certain people for them to peruse, but if she were somehow captured or her notebook stolen, it would be much safer if there was no way for them to get at the information inside without potentially harming the source. No, she would charm it for her eyes only.

I need a notebook, she decided. A comfortable-sized one, perhaps of similar size to my planner—
easy to write in, but also easy to carry around. A Compression Spell on it would probably not go awry, either—I'll need to keep adding pages to it without it becoming too heavy or too thick. And once the privacy spells are put in place, I can probably give it some additional protections...

She was about to lean forward as carefully as she could without disturbing Severus's sleep to retrieve her wand and summon her book bag to her when she realized that there was a book on the coffee table. Her expression dawned with realization as she picked it up and flipped through it.

*Merlin's holy teakettle, this room isn't called the Room of Requirement for nothing!* She thought with amazement as she examined it. It looked rather unremarkable—brown and plain, with simple blank parchment pages. A quick magical scan made Hermione sigh and lean back into her seat with disbelief; the Room of Requirement had given her the very product of her exact musings. When she flipped through the pages, there was always one more to go to the end, and they were neatly numbered; she counted over five-hundred pages in her initial flip in what looked to otherwise be a fifty-page notebook, and eager to experiment, she very conveniently found a quill and a bottle of black ink resting atop the table as well.

She paused, unsure of what to write for a moment, and then opened it to the first page.

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Hermione found herself dozing off against the arm of the couch, having tucked her notebook inside her robes, when she felt Severus twitch underneath her hand. Her fingers were still twined in his hair, stroking with lazy, sleepy movements, and she felt him tense up for all of one moment before he relaxed, signaling to her that he realized where they were and why. Hermione's eyes were still closed, and she had buried her face in the arm against the couch to try and catch some sleep. He didn't move immediately, for which Hermione was fuzzily aware to be grateful for, but she knew he was no longer asleep.

A half-aware glance at her watch told her that it was well past nine, which would explain her subsequent tiredness. Weary thoughts jumbling together as she settled down for a bit of a longer nap, she momentarily forgot that it was a Saturday, and wondered what homework she had due tomorrow.

When she finally opened her eyes again, it was to find that she was no longer slumped against the arm of the couch, but that her head was resting comfortably against something warm, if slightly scratchy, and someone's hands were tangling in her hair. Opening her eyes, she realized that Severus was leaning against the arm of the other side of the couch with a book, and that her head was pillowed in his lap. Their previous positions had been neatly reversed. She took a moment to blink herself to awareness, yawn, and then finally sat up, glancing over at the coffee table to realize that the house elves had thoughtfully served breakfast. She felt Severus's fingers slip out of her hair, and found herself regretting the loss.

"Thanks," she murmured, stretching with another yawn before she leaned over to grab a bit of toast. "I'm sorry I fell asleep. You must have been bored."

"I had a headache when I woke up," Severus said by way of explanation, helping himself to a plate of eggs. "I was not in any mood to talk regardless of whether you had remained awake or not."

"Looks like it's good that I got some sleep, then," Hermione said, cracking a smile before she began eating in earnest. They took several minutes to satiate their hunger, before Severus set his food aside to speak.

"Knowing what you do now, about—about what caused this mess in the first place," he muttered,
Hermione sighed. "Not particularly. You weren't trying to get someone killed. You were trying to cement your place within You-Know-Who's ranks so that he wouldn't be inclined to kill you for incompetence, I imagine. We all make mistakes and at the very least, you owned up to this one."

"You don't hate me for putting the Potters and Longbottoms at risk?" Severus clarified.

Hermione shook her head. "Absolutely not. Get that thought right out of your head," she ordered.

She saw Severus's lips curl up in a faint smile. He looked quite relieved to be frank, but his next question brought them back to the issue of business.

"How are we going to work this out?" he asked, stirring himself a cup of tea. "I will not be able to visit often. And Dumbledore—"

"Dumbledore will find ways to arrange plausible opportunities for us to meet, probably about once a month over the next four months," Hermione stated, taking a sip of pumpkin juice. "We know the next one is the first of April—he'll likely convince Slughorn to invite you. We'll find a way to slip out of the party and meet in private. The Room of Requirement is seven floors up, but it probably wouldn't be a bad idea to use it. Not many people know about it, and those who do can't get into it if someone else is already inside unless they know exactly what the first occupant asked for."

"After that?" Severus pressed.

"Weren't you listening in Dumbledore's office?" Hermione asked, taking another sip before draining her entire goblet and setting it aside. "I'll be staying with you in the summer, as planned. I'll be helping you fix up Spinner's End." She gave him a wicked grin, injecting humor for the first time in what had otherwise been a very sordid and depressing conversational affair. "I just hope we don't drive each other mad, being in such close quarters and all."

For the first time that evening, she saw Severus relax enough to smile. It was more of a smirk, really, but it was hard-won all the same. "I don't think that will be a problem."

Hermione couldn't help it. She flushed, and began fiddling with her watch. "I—well. Do you think we should head back up to Dumbledore's office now? He's probably expecting us."

"Just a moment." Severus set his tea down, and then in a maneuver that completely surprised Hermione, twisted around in his seat so that he was now facing her. He leaned in, and she thought he was about to kiss her when he stopped just shy of doing so. He paused to gaze into her face, and then asked very clearly, "Has this changed?"

Hermione hesitated for all of one moment. She was his handler now, but nothing said she couldn't be his lover. She was not certain how far they would get in this, but truth was, she wanted to see where it led. There were many benefits to be had if this worked out, and only a few downsides. Still, she had to be certain.

"If this doesn't work out," she asked carefully, "will you refuse to work with me as your handler?"

He shook his head no.

Hermione smiled, and leaned forward, closing the distance. She kissed him, sliding her lips with newfound familiarity over his, and he nipped playfully on her lower lip to ask her to open before
moving to suckle her tongue. Hermione let him direct the kiss now that she had initiated it, and she closed her eyes, responding to him with eagerness that only seemed to drive him further. He drew back for a moment to skim his lips along her neck, causing Hermione to gasp at the pleasurable sensation before she moved to retaliate by aiming for his ear with her tongue. He conceded defeat with a groan and a swift return to devouring her lips. When they finally broke apart, she looked up at him, her eyes sparkling brightly.

"No," she said, leaning forward to kiss the tip of his nose before returning her attention to the wonders of his mouth. "I don't think it's changed at all."

They parted reluctantly several minutes later, Hermione's neck still tingling with remembered pleasure as they retraced their steps to the Headmaster's office.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Fourteen

Big thanks goes out to my wonderful beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review!

Hermione leaned forward in her chair, fingers smeared with ink as she scribbled away in her notebook. Severus was standing over her shoulder, gripping the back of her chair as he watched her words disappear before his eyes almost as soon as they were written.

"The Edenburghs… E-D-E-N, not E-D-I-N… around noon, tomorrow," he finished smoothly, watching her tap what appeared to be an blank page with her finger to wandlessly fix her misspelling. A moment later, she resumed writing down his dictation. "They work for the Ministry in the Department of International Magical Cooperation. The Dark Lord wanted their assistance in raising support for anti-Muggle legislation, but they refused—twice, so…” he spread his hand to either side. "He's ordered them to be tortured and killed, and then dumped in front of the Ministry. It sends a message, you see."

Hermione finished scribbling the last entry down, and then leaned back in her chair, trying to work the kink out of her neck. "Is that all?"

"The Dark Lord is growing wary the longer the Potters and Longbottoms remain at large," Severus responded quietly. "Restless. I fear he will launch an attack soon. He is more paranoid than ever."

Hermione scribbled that down as well, and then with a nod from Severus, shut her notebook and slipped it back into an inside side-pocket of her robes. "Alright. I'll bring this to the Headmaster. You'd better return to the party—at least make a show of having stayed for a substantial amount of time before getting fed up and leaving."

Severus smirked, and bent down to kiss her neck before straightening up to leave. "Very well. Do you know when the next…gathering is to take place?" he asked, stressing the fifth-last word with a sneer.

Hermione smiled faintly at him. "May fifth. As the Headmaster so nicely put it, 'Happy Cinco de Mayo.'"

"That's a North American holiday," Severus responded, quirking his lips.

Hermione shrugged, grinning. "Any reason is a good reason, I suppose. You don't hear me complaining."

~o~O~o~

All throughout April, Hermione's focus was divided between two very important things. The first was her academic schedule, which was beginning to thicken with chaos at an alarming speed with the promise of NEWT exams in a month and a half's time. The second was her duty to the Order which involved reading out the information from her notebook to Dumbledore out loud, reporting on her progress on working with Severus on a personal and professional level ("Yes, sir, we're getting along fine.") followed by being kept up-to-date on the latest news from her friends still at Order Headquarters. It was an enormous workload, and Hermione felt like Atlas as she took her burden
with a grain of salt.

April quickly turned to May, much to Hermione's simultaneous horror and relief. Exams were all that much closer, but it was another chance to see Severus as well as to update her notebook and deliver some more of the time-sensitive information to Dumbledore. She and Severus had a few intimate moments together in the comfort of the Room of Requirement before Hermione was forced to send him back to the party, where he was to look as though he was actually engaging with the other guests. Voldemort had approved his visits, sending Severus was an opportunity to observe and keep up-to-date on the going-ons at Hogwarts, particularly those within his own alma mater, and to see if he could detect trace of people who had otherwise been in hiding but were poking their heads out when they thought the chase had ended. The Dark Lord had finally discovered the value of using Severus as a spy, and it was to Hermione and the Order's advantage that Tom Riddle was so eager to push this usefulness: it made remaining in contact with him that much either.

Hermione began studying for her NEWTs with even more urgency and fervor than she had previously. She once again spent sleepless nights in the library, remaining awake until ungodly hours trying to forcefully re-cram ever factoid she had ever learned over the last two years, despite the fact that she already had a good deal memorized to begin with, and her stress levels began to bleed into her correspondence; Alice made a subtle suggestion that she spend some time reviewing the recipe for Calming Draughts, and Lily reminded Hermione that she had passed her OWLs with flying colors, and that she would do just as well without killing herself. Sirius, James, and Remus all sent her correspondence with varying suggestions on how to study without running herself into the ground, the first accompanied by a box of sugar quills to give her something to nibble on and keep her energy levels up while studying. Marlene jokingly suggested she go on a hexing spree to 'get rid of all that pent-up frustration.' Hermione appreciated their letters immensely, and the accompanying gifts, but she refused to slow down.

She was nearing the finish line of her career at Hogwarts. A finish line she had been looking forward to with wide, awe-struck eyes as a first-year, and now that it was so close, she refused to get anything less on it than an 'Outstanding' in every single subject. Even if it killed her, it seemed. The younger years, who had learned to rely on Hermione for psychological and academic support, quickly learned to part like the red sea on the few mornings that she did come down into the common room, and didn't squeak a single question her way as she rushed off to the library, her hair still an untangled bird's nest. Truth to be told, they were frightened enough of her at this point to believe the rumors that she was distantly related to Medusa.

The first week of exams arrived, and Hermione, a nervous but excited wreck with tangled hair and mind jumbled with memorized facts and wand-movements, threw herself into them with gusto. She slept the entire weekend, having crashed the minute her Friday exams were over, and was refreshed enough the next Monday to go through her second week of exams with similar, nerve-wracking enthusiasm.

During all this time, Hermione kept her notebook tucked securely somewhere on her. She never let it out of her presence except for when she showered which, during NEWT exams, was a sadly rare occurrence. Even then, her robes were in the bathroom with her, and her book was carefully kept within the inner pockets.

When exams were finally over, Hermione was able to take a nice, long, well-deserved bath, fix up her hair properly for the first time in nearly a month, and sleep well into the afternoon. The younger years were either goofing off or fussing over the exam scores they would not receive until later in the summer, the majority choosing to partake in the former, and as soon as Hermione felt refreshed enough to do so, she joined them.
She would be coming back next year as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. *Good riddance,* she thought with annoyance as she saw Professor Welk limping up to the Hospital Wing one evening, after an unexplained visit to the Forbidden Forest that had unsurprisingly gone horrifyingly wrong. He had been an awful teacher, and Hermione was glad to see him go, if only to then be concerned about whether she would be leaving quietly without a scratch or be sent to St. Mungo's after being driven mad. She was only planning on staying for a year; Professor Faulkner had left without one bit of fuss when he had declared his intention, and Hermione planned to do the same.

Professor Slughorn had announced his intent to retire some two months ago, which was a good excuse for the exorbitant number of parties he had sponsored that year, and Severus arrived the week after exams were concluded to presumably speak to the Headmaster about formally applying for the position. He had introduced the idea of becoming the new Head of Slytherin and Potions Professor to Voldemort with great success, who was eager to have a player close to his most ardent opposition, and Hermione caught up with him on the way to Dumbledore's office to talk.

"I'm finally finished with exams," she told him, tone laced with disbelief. "I can't believe it's all over." She paused for a moment, biting her lower lip, and then admitted, "It feels odd not to be graduating with my friends. I still miss them." Severus turned to listen to her as they walked, and she elaborated, "We always did everything together. Somehow, even after all that's happened..." she trailed off.

"I understand," Severus said, looking away as they ascended one of the staircases. "It will probably feel strange for a while."

Hermione nodded, and then geared up her courage and pushed the thought away. She couldn't dwell on Harry or Ron—especially Harry—right now. "Any news on your end?"

Severus smirked. "Lucius and Narcissa have a son named Draco—he was born earlier this week. He has a mop of hair that is just as blond as his parents'."

Hermione giggled. "I've had to wonder on more than one occasion if they charm their hair the minute they're born."

Severus snorted. "Amusing as it is, I'm afraid Lucius would be quite offended at the notion."

Hermione laughed in agreement.

There was a pause as they reached the landing, and then Severus said seriously, "I've been named as his godfather."

If Hermione had been eating or drinking something, she would have choked on it. As it was, her jaw dropped unflatteringly as she took this in. "You're joking."

"No," Severus responded silkily. "I'm afraid I'm not."

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"In order to apply for the position, I would like some assurance that you know enough about your subject to teach it," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling as he admitted them into his office. "Just a few questions, Severus. Very basic, very informal. Now," he said, clasping his hands together, "What is the difference between Monkshood and Wolfsbane?"

Hermione was about to respond from ingrained instinct, but Severus interrupted her first. Throwing the Headmaster a glare, he sneered, "Very simple. One is used to hood monks, and the other is to repel wolves."
Hermione nearly gagged in surprise at this. Dumbledore, however, looked rather amused.

"What is a single object that is often used as a quick solution to counteracting most poisons?"

Severus rolled his eyes into Hermione's direction, and at that moment, Hermione realized he was not taking the Headmaster's questions seriously. She giggled. "I'd pull out my seventh-year Potions book and find the answer scribbled in there somewhere. Most likely on the page concerning Golpalott's Law."

Hermione was unable to restrain a snort of amusement at this. When all else fails, she thought.

Dumbledore was smiling genially at him now. "And the powdered root of asphodel with an infusion of wormwood?"

Severus stared straight ahead at him, his expression dead-set. "I suggest you don't drink it."

At this point, Hermione was reduced to peals of laughter. Severus's expression broke as well, and he was grinning a very un-Snape-like grin.

Dumbledore chuckled. "Needless to say, I believe you failed my little pop-quiz spectacularly."

"As if you would dare refuse me a job on that alone," Severus drawled. "My Hogwarts transcript should be more than enough."

"So it seems," Dumbledore said, beaming at the both of them before he moved to take a seat behind his desk. "Now that we've sorted that out, I believe we have other matters to discuss. Your summer plans?"

"Still the same as before," Hermione told him, covering her mouth with her hand to try and regain her composure. Severus had deliberately made a joke out of the very same questions he would be grilling Harry on when he arrived as a first-year. Questions he would also be deliberately excluding her from answering, though she now suspected that it was a private moment of amusement for him. Sadistic bastard, she thought fondly. "I'll be staying at Spinner's End unless we have some unexpected guests—in which case, my visit will probably be cut short."

"That's not likely to happen, Headmaster," Severus responded smoothly.

"Your plans are perfectly acceptable to me but for one condition," Dumbledore said, steepling his fingers. "I would like Hermione to be officially inducted into the Order. This can be done before or after summer begins, although I rather imagine you would find it far more convenient to have that out of the way."

"That's an acceptable plan," Severus said, turning to look at Hermione.

"I'll go directly to Headquarters first," Hermione said, clasping her hands together, her expression thoughtful. "It will be nice to get a chance to see everyone again—then, of course, I'll come to Spinner's End."

"That's settled, then," Dumbledore said cheerfully, sitting up straight. "You're free to go now, if you wish."

Satisfied, and feeling oddly relaxed, Hermione left the office with Severus at her heels. They descended several flights of stairs down to the first floor, and then let themselves out into the courtyard, which was quite deserted as everyone else was down beside the lake, enjoying the lazy promise of summer. They came to stand under the shade of one of the pillars, watching as two very
daring fourth-years played a game of poking the giant squid's tentacles with a stick off in the far
distance. She saw Severus hesitate for a moment, before he geared up the courage to speak his mind.

"Will you check up on Lily for me when you see her?"

Hermione turned to look up at him, her expression narrowed in suspicion. "Severus," she began.

Severus shook his head quickly. "Don't go there, Hermione. My request has nothing to do with that."

"Then elaborate, if you please," Hermione said, crossing her arms. "I'm listening."

"Lily was my childhood friend," Severus said shortly, by way of explanation. "You already know
this. I still feel responsible for her welfare, especially—particularly since the danger she's in now is
largely because of me." He gave Hermione a pained look. "I just want to know how she's doing. I
haven't entertained romantic notions of her since after that incident with the werewo—Lupin. She's
married and pregnant," he finished, rubbing his face with his hand, and letting out a sigh of
frustration. "We're not friends anymore, but I still care for her as one."

Hermione dithered for a moment, unsure of whether to take his words at face value. Because the
truth was that she found it very hard to believe, at times that he inquired about Lily, if he was being
honest. She didn't believe he would lie to her about this, but she had to wonder if he was lying to
himself to begin with. In a moment of decision, she lifted her eyes to meet his, and silently
commanded, *Legilimens!*

She felt Severus recoil in surprise, tightening his defense immediately, despite the fact that when she
came up against his Occlumency shields, her request to enter was gentle. There was a moment of
hesitation from him, and then some of the walls went down, and Hermione was allowed to slip into
the surface of his mind. She didn't bother delving deep; that stuff was still private and still very much
hidden. But he had taken down the barriers around his immediate thoughts and emotions, and was
able to divine the truth of his words.

A moment later, she retreated.

"Are you satisfied now?" he asked, just a bit bitterly.

Hermione nodded. "Very," she promised. She paused, and then admitted, "You see her sort of in the
same way one of my best friends used to see me. Ha—he treated me like a sister. Even when we
were angry at each other, or had our fights and disagreements, it was really nothing more than a
sibling squabble for us, really." She hesitated for a moment, and then confessed the final piece of the
story. "Back in my fourth year, everyone thought we were dating. There were a lot of nasty rumors
about it. It's a bit different than what happened with you and Lily, because I could never see my
friend in any kind of romantic light, but I understand the type of feelings you have for her now."

"You couldn't take my words at face value?" Severus asked stiffly.

Hermione bit her lower lip. "Sometimes, we lie to ourselves," she admitted softly.

She felt Severus tense at this, his face becoming blank and unreadable. She waited, watching him
worriedly, and then to her surprise and relief, he relaxed.

"Its part of human nature to lie to oneself at times," he agreed quietly.

"Over the next few years, you'll be doing a lot of lying to yourself," Hermione pointed out, with a
reconciliatory smile. "You might not even be able to remember what's real and what's not, when
you're trying to fool You-Know-Who."
"You underestimate me, my dear," Severus responded with a silky drawl, leaning forward so that his face was level with hers. "I shall maintain my distinctions, believe me."

She grinned at him. "If anyone else said that, I'd laugh at their naivety, but coming from you…"

"Glad to know you have faith in my abilities," Severus retorted, straightening. But the tension between them had broken now, and they were back to being at ease in conversation; Severus's words were more playful than retaliatory. Until he brought up a subject that, in hindsight, Hermione should have known might rear its head.

"Are you ever going to let me look inside your mind?"

Hermione squared her shoulders and looked up at him, still unable to wipe the grin off her face. "If you can catch me off guard— possibly. But I warn you that if you catch me at a bad time, I might not be gentle."

"I would know," he groused. "The first time I tried it, you came down on me like a bloody guillotine."

Hermione playfully stuck her tongue out at him, and squeaked in surprise when he took hold of her shoulders and pulled her to him, capturing her mouth with his, tongue and all. She laughed as he abandoned it for a moment to tickle the juncture of her neck with his lips, before returning to savor her taste.

They pulled away only for a moment, and in that time, Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck, while his had moved to encircle her waist and pull her closer to him so that when he straightened up, Hermione had to push herself up on her toes to reach him and continue their snog. Mouths mated, tongues licked and suckled with eagerness, and Hermione closed her eyes, thoroughly enjoying herself. She felt one hand slide downwards to graze her bum while the other moved to tangle in her hair, winding the curls around his fingers, and grinned wickedly as she retaliated by nipping lightly on his lower lip. He reclaimed full control over the kiss a moment later, covering her mouth entirely with his in a rather passionate and very heated kiss.

A stern, exasperated huff interrupted them. Both of their eyes flew open, and they pulled away quickly, faces flushed as they realized who had caught them.

Professor McGonagall gave them both a frightful, hawk-like glare. They stared back at her like startled rabbits, and then relaxed slightly as they saw her sigh in an expression of mere disbelief. She brought a hand to her forehead, as though trying to ward off an impending headache, and then spoke.

"I came to inform Miss Granger that she would not be rowing back to the train with the other graduates," she said stiffly. "You will be flooing to Headquarters through my office tomorrow morning. I have informed the elves that you will take care of packing your stuff, since you undoubtedly have a good many things that need to be sorted through, given you've been living here uninterrupted for the past three years."

Hermione nodded, still blushing red. The Transfiguration teacher sighed, and turned to leave.

"Miss Granger, Mr. Snape, you may no longer be students here, but it would be much appreciated if you would set a good example while you are on the grounds."

"There are no students here," Hermione pointed out. "They're all either inside or down by the lake."

"Fair point, I suppose," Professor McGonagall said, with just a hint of a tight smile. Hermione's
relaxed with relief that she was off the hook. "I shall see you in my office tomorrow morning. Don't be late."

"Understood, Professor."

As soon as she had gone, Hermione turned to Severus.

"I suppose I'll see you next week?" she said, sounding regretful.

He nuzzled her nose with his, before straightening up and pulling his face back into the blank, stony expression that he presented to the rest of the world—and, most importantly, to Voldemort. "Yes."

One last longing look at him, and Hermione reluctantly allowed him to leave. She watched as he disappeared around the corner, heading in the direction of Hogsmeade, and then she turned away to return to her room. She had packing to do.

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Hermione sat quietly in Professor McGonagall's office, her bags packed and being carried off by two men through the floo whom Hermione had only ever heard of, but had never met in person. Caradoc Dearborn and Edward McKinnon, Marlene's cousin, were transporting her luggage to Headquarters, and once they were done, McGonagall handed Hermione a small slip of paper.

"Take a moment to memorize it and then toss it into the fire," her Head of House instructed.

Hermione did so.

_The Headquarters to the Order of the Phoenix can be found at Tine Cottage, Tinworth._

Hermione memorized the familiar, slanted handwriting of the Headmaster, and then tossed it into the flames. The note burned up into white ash, and then Dearborn indicated the Floo jar. Hermione took a pinch of powder, throwing it into the flames before she stepped inside.

"Tine Cottage," she enunciated clearly.

The world revolved around her, spinning so quickly that she was forced to shut her eyes to avoid becoming too dizzy, and then she stumbled out of the fireplace, stepping into a new, unfamiliar place. She took a moment to regain her senses, and then registered the place around her.

She had flooed into a rather large kitchen, with brickwork floor and wooden walls. There was a stove and a counter at one end of the room; the rest was taken up by a rather large table holding too many chairs for anyone to possibly sit with enough elbowspace to sneeze. There were several windows, each with a small fire-lit lamp hanging from the top of the frame, and peering outside, she could see that the dwelling was on a cliff overlooking the sea. The air smelled of salt and seaweed, and as Hermione cleansed the soot off her robes, it quickly became very apparent to her that the kitchen was not empty.

No, not by a long shot. In fact, it was quite closely packed. Every single chair was occupied, and some people were even sharing laps or standing up behind another chair. The minute Hermione appeared, however, several people got up to greet her amidst the clamor of those who were voicing their own greetings and opinions. Before she knew it, she was being passed around like a teddy bear in need of a hug.

"Hermione!" Sirius roared, pulling her into an embrace. "Good to see you!"
"Finally made it, I see," James joked.

"You're still covered in soot—here, let me take care of the back of your robes—" This was, naturally, Marlene.

"Goodness," Remus said, pulling her into a half-hug since Marlene was still trying to charm soot off of her and James and Sirius had a claim on a full three-quarters of her person. "You've certainly grown. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine," Hermione gasped, squeezing whatever air she had in her lungs out with those few words. "Just fine."

"Give her some room, you lot!" Alice's voice called from the other end of the room. The others obeyed, and then Remus pulled Hermione out of the way in time to avoid being knocked over by Dearborn and the other McKinnon as they flooed in within moments of each other.

Minerva's rapt, stern voice followed mere seconds later as she, too, flooed in—with much more elegance than Hermione had managed.

"That's quite enough!" she said, stepping out of the fireplace. "Caradoc, Edward, please take Hermione's things upstairs." The two hastened to obey, flicking their wands at the three trunks worth of stuff that had been set aside near the doorway, effectively blocking anyone else from entering or exiting without somehow stepping over them. "The rest of you, please find a seat—or stand, at any rate," she amended, glancing at the overcrowded table.

There were a number of jests made in response to this, and then they all did indeed settle down somewhat. Hermione managed to squeeze herself into a spot behind one of the chairs near the wall, by Alice and Lily, which was something of a feat given how much space they took up now. Molly Weasley she recognized immediately, and her eyes widened perceptibly when she saw Ron. He was less than three months old, with a mop of unruly red hair. Mrs. Weasley was not nearly as plump as Hermione remembered—in fact, she still looked to be quite young and in fairly good shape, and had long curly red hair that reached down past her shoulders. She was holding her youngest son, who was asleep in her arms. Hermione forced herself to look away, not quite able to handle the sight. It was a bit too bizarre for her right now—she'd known it would happen, but it would take some getting used to. Bill and Charlie were upstairs somewhere, no doubt being bossed around by a four-year-old Percy and esconced with the twins.

Hermione met five other people with the surname of McKinnon, all related to Marlene, and the rest were a varied lot. Moody gave her a nod and a grizzled smile from his end of the table, and Kingsley waved at her in greeting. There were an absurd number of people in the kitchen, and as they all took a moment to introduce themselves to Hermione and talk, she couldn't help but feel slightly taken aback as they all seemed to know her name and quite a great deal about her, but she didn't know a thing about them. Lily and Alice were now quite far along in their pregnancies, and were one of the lucky few who had not only been granted a chair to sit in, but were even given a bit more elbow room for comfort.

Hermione actually found herself grateful for the distraction in the form of the Headmaster's arrival, which was preceded by a flash of fire, whereupon Dumbledore appeared with Fawkes perched serenely on his shoulder.

The table fell respectfully quiet, and room was made for Dumbledore to get close enough to the table for everyone to see him properly.

"What's the news, eh?" Moody said, leaning forward in his chair. The room was now fully attentive,
"The situation has not changed," Dumbledore stated clearly. "The Potters and Longbottoms are both quite at liberty to return to their homes at this time, should they wish to, though I would like to remind them to adhere to the new safety precautions," he said, looking at James carefully over his half-moon spectacles. James looked restless and dismayed by this, but made no word of protest. Lily placed a hand on his arm, which seemed to appease him only somewhat. "If anything does change, however, we will take appropriate measures."

There were nods around the table, a few whispers that Hermione was only able to vaguely catch, and then Dumbledore clasped his hands together, recapturing the room's undivided attention.

"On another note," he said, smiling genially, "I am pleased to introduce Hermione Granger as our newest member of the Order. Her duties will be largely behind the scenes, performing organizational and administrative tasks, though you may see her pop into Tine Cottage from time to time."

"You're putting her behind the scenes?" Sirius said with disbelief. "That's a mistake, Professor! Hermione's one of the best duelers I've ever seen. She should be on the front lines, like us!"

Hermione cleared her throat, knowing she would have to defend the cover for her handler duties. "There's more to a war than just fighting, Sirius. Things need to be thought through and strategized for them to work. Sending you lot rushing off without a plan is just asking to get you all killed. At least this way, you have an organizer who can't be kidnapped and interrogated for information easily."

"But still…" Sirius muttered.

"This matter is settled, Sirius," Dumbledore stated firmly. "Hermione may be given additional duties in the future, but for now, her talents and skills are being put where they are best suited."

"Is she staying here for the summer?" Remus spoke up with mild curiosity.

"I have other arrangements made, but as Professor Dumbledore said, I might drop by now and again," Hermione responded, trying not to fiddle with her watch.

"Where are you staying?" James pressed. "We can drop by a visit one of these days, to make sure that you're not holed up half-starved from reading books…"

Hermione giggled at this, along with several of her friends, but it was the Headmaster who answered. "James," Dumbledore said warningly.

James stood up, his face an expression of frustration and irritation. "I feel like a prisoner in my own home, Dumbledore—not allowed to leave except for Order meetings and short walks as long as we have a guard with us! Can't we visit Hermione, at least? Even if you don't trust our skills, I know you trust hers. If we knew where she was staying, she'd just be a floo call or an Apparation away!"

Sirius leaned over to tug on James's arm. "Sit down!" he hissed.

"I don't think that's possible right now, James," Hermione said, trying to imagine just what Severus's reaction would be if James Potter knocked on his door. Trying to be as encouraging and logical as she could, she added, "You should listen to Dumbledore on this one. Besides, I can't imagine that flooing or Apparation will be safe for Lily much longer—she's only two months away from her due date. But I will try to drop by," she stressed.
James reluctantly allowed Sirius to pull him back into his chair. "As you say."

Lily raised her hand. "Not to change the subject, Headmaster, but will we be allowed to visit my parents? They're leaving for France in a few weeks to get out of the country, and I'd like a chance to see them before then. And my sister, if possible, though I'm not certain..." she trailed off, hesitant.

Dumbledore gave her a piercing, considering look.

"No," he said. "I'm afraid not."

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The meeting broke up an hour later. A good number of them dispersed immediately, either through the floo or by stepping outside to Apparate, although two Order members had brought brooms. Molly went upstairs, no doubt to check on her children. Remus had to leave almost immediately to make it back to his job in time to take over the afternoon shift; Alice and Frank stopped by to chat with Hermione properly for a good ten minutes before making their way to the Floo.

Hermione managed to find a moment to catch James and Lily before they left.

"Just write me a letter, and I'll find a way to drop by," she said, knowing that this was just the beginning of the Potters' misery. They would continue to be restricted, and their leash would shorten as the threat of Voldemort escalated further. "I promise."

James and Lily both looked rather cheered up by this. Hermione pulled James into a hug, did the same to Lily as best as she could, and then watched them floo away. All too quickly, the room that had been so packed by people was now rather deserted, save for herself and Dumbledore.

"What is Tine Cottage, professor?" Hermione asked, walking over to examine one of the windows. The Order meeting had lasted several hours, and as such, the sky was now threatening dusk.

"I'm afraid that this place does not belong to me, but is actually a generous loan from my good friend Nicholas Flamel," Dumbledore stated, twiddling his thumbs absentmindedly. "He and his wife bought this place from a wizard some time ago. The young man had inherited the cottage from his uncle, who was from Ireland, and the Flamels liked the cottage so much that they bought it and turned it into a summer home."

"How long ago is 'some time ago' for Nicholas Flamel?" Hermione inquired.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "I would hazard a guess of some three hundred years, give or take a decade."

Hermione was now quite curious as to why this place was not used as the Headquarters for the Order in her time, but she kept her mouth shut. No matter how she phrased such a question, no matter how subtly, she would either not get the answer she wanted or end up giving something from the future away. It was best left untouched. With a sigh of mild frustration at having such a burning question eating at her, she nevertheless turned away from the window to face the Headmaster.

"Am I free to leave, sir?"

"In just a moment, I think," Dumbledore said, pulling out a chair for himself. "I wish to briefly discuss your duties this summer."

Hermione slid into a seat next to the Headmaster, pulling it out so that she was sitting across from him. "Yes, sir."
"You are aware, I'm sure, of how the Dark Mark works," Dumbledore said calmly, folding his hands in his lap. "When it burns, Severus will be required to stop whatever it is he may be doing at the time and Apparate to the Dark Lord's side."

"I understand that, sir."

"When he returns, you are to take care of several things, in this order," the Headmaster told her. "Firstly, you will have him discuss the meeting and tell you what information he has learned. Secondly, you will take care of his injuries, if he has any. Much of Severus's information will likely be time-sensitive, which means that it is imperative that I receive it as quickly as possible." He gave this a moment to sink in, and then amended, "Although if he is too injured at the time to speak, I will of course understand. But right now, your duties as a handler are more important than your obligations to him as a friend or as a lover."

Hermione felt a blush suffuse her face at the last word, but she managed to keep her face straight. The Headmaster's words made sense, and though she did not particularly like the order of his priorities, she understood and agreed with his logic. "Yes, sir."

Dumbledore nodded, seemingly relieved that she did not argue the point. "When you are ready to hand in your reports, please simply pop into my office. The Floo into my office will not work, I'm afraid, but it will allow you to Floo out."

Hermione's brows furrowed. "Then how do you expect me to come in, sir?"

Dumbledore smiled and nodded at her wrist. "Your watch."

Hermione's mouth opened into an 'o' of understanding, and then she shut it. "Of course. Yes."

"If I am not there for some reason, please leave the report on my desk and help yourself to a lemon drop and a pinch of floo powder," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling. "Fawkes will make sure I receive it."

Hermione smiled. "Understood. Is that all, sir?"

"Yes, I think so." Dumbledore gestured at the fireplace. "I suspect Severus is getting rather impatient waiting for you, so I'll let you go. I hope you enjoy your summer."

Hermione nodded her thanks and stood up. She shrunk her luggage enough so that they all fit into her pocket, and then tossed a pinch of floo powder into the flames. They turned emerald, and she stepped inside the fireplace.

"Spinner's End," she directed.

The world spun green around her, and she disappeared from the fireplace of Tine Cottage.

Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Big, enormous thanks to my brilliant beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

When she stumbled out of the floo yet again, coughing from the ash and soot that she'd inhaled—thinking that she needed to learn just how other people managed to do this without being reduced to a hacking cough—she found herself in a place that was just about as unfamiliar as it was dusty.

The floors and walls were covered in a fine layer of dust and cobwebs. There was a musty old couch in front of the fireplace that Hermione didn't even want to touch, for fear of breaking it and simultaneously setting off a dust storm. The room was incredibly sparse, and there was hardly any light to see by. Hermione managed to carefully walk across the room without disturbing anything with her touch, and slowly opened the door.

"Severus?" she called warily. The room she was peering into was as dusty and woebegone as the one she was standing in. A moment later, there was a flurry of dust and cobwebs and all manners of other things flying through the air and she let out a scream of surprise and stumbled into the door, smacking it open.

"I didn't think you would be flooing in—I was waiting in the living room for you to knock," Severus said, holding his hand over his mouth to avoid inhaling the dust swirling around them. "This place hasn't been lived in for nearly four years—Colligere!" he commanded. The cobwebs and dust in the room, whether they had remained untouched or had been disturbed moments before, suddenly pulled themselves to the tip of Severus's wand, collecting itself into a tightly packed ball. Hermione stood up and wrinkled her nose at it, and let out a sigh of relief when Severus promptly Vanished it. The room was now clean of the three-inch layer of dust and spidery designs that it had otherwise been encased in, and it looked better for it, though admittedly not by much.

A moment later, the couch suddenly let out a rattling shudder, gave way, and collapsed into a heap in the middle of the floor. A dozen doxies crawled out from holes in the fabric, and took to the air, angry at having their nest disturbed.

"Damn it. We'll deal with the little buggers later—come here," Severus said, pulling Hermione into the next room slamming the door shut. "Maybe I can collect their wings for potions ingredients."

He lazily flicked his wand again, collecting the dust that had been now twice-disturbed in the second room, collecting it into another compacted and enormous, gross-looking dust bunny before magicking it away. This room was thankfully free of any furniture, but for the wall which was lined completely with bookshelves.

"Please tell me you don't own a house elf," Hermione pleaded as she glanced around. "Last time I had to clean a place this filthy, we had to deal with a cranky old house elf, and as much as I have pity for them and their plight—"

"No, I don't," Severus sneered, looking around the room with distaste. A moment later, his expression dissolved into one of mild curiosity. "You've cleaned places like this before?"

"I'm fairly certain that it's safe to say that it was much worse than this place," Hermione said, grinning sheepishly at him now. "Things got a bit mad, really—it was more like waging war on the
"And the house elf was no help, I suppose?" Severus enquired dryly.

"I'm afraid he did his best to make it known to us that we were not wanted," Hermione said with a sigh.

"In this case, I suppose I am for once grateful that I don't own an elf," Severus said, sounding amused. He strode over to one of the bookcases, running his finger alongside one of the shelves before he pulled out one of the books. A door slid open, and he gestured for Hermione to follow—who was then grateful that she had, for the room he led her into was far cleaner and more welcoming. Severus had clearly taken pains to rid it of dust and at make sure that the furniture was rendered serviceable. The bookcase slid closed behind them, and with a sigh of relief, Hermione took a seat on one of the armchairs.

"How big is this place?" she asked, pulling her bags out of her pocket and enlarging them at her feet, before using them as footstools.

"It's not all that grand, but it's comfortable enough—or will be, once it's livable again," Severus told her, taking a seat in the only other armchair in the room. He crossed his legs and leaned back, bracing his elbows on the side and proping his chin against one hand. "Three rooms downstairs and a kitchen. There's a basement that I dread having to confront, but I plan to use it as a potions lab, so that must be taken care of. There are three bedrooms upstairs and a bathroom, none of which have seen the light of day in several years and have undoubtedly collected all manners of obnoxious and mildly dangerous things."

"I guess the thing to do would be to go one room at a time," Hermione said, rolling up her sleeves. "We should probably start with the kitchen and then go back to the room with the bookshelves and doxies," she added thoughtfully, as she stood up. "I don't think some doxycide would go amiss, either."

Severus waved it off. "We don't need doxycide—Stunning Spells will do the trick."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "Not if we're facing multiple doxies, and they are awfully small targets."

Severus lifted an eyebrow in return. "We're both quick with our wands. It should be fine."

"I disagree, but we'll go with your assumption for now," Hermione said. "Shall we begin?"

~o~O~o~

Taking care of the room with the bookshelves was rather easy. It required extensive cleaning, and Hermione had to get down on all fours at several points to poke her wand behind the bookcases, where she drove out several critters who had made their homes there. Bugs, mostly, were the culprit, although a lone doxy did worm its way out, followed closely by an enormous, two-foot long, flat centipede-like creature that Severus immediately shot dead. Some of the books had been nibbled on by mice, and Hermione helped Severus go through them all and figure out which ones were irreparable and needed to be disposed of.

Several of them contained Dark Magic. The books themselves did not appear to be dangerous, but the spells and instructions they held most certainly were. They numbered the minority amongst the other finds, however. Most of the finds were old textbooks and more benign spellbooks. Hermione chanced to open a few of the darker texts to have a look inside, and was met with instructions on
how to liquefy a person's brain, how to apply deafening pressure on the eardrums, how to spell-cut a person's heart out, and a variety of other gruesome ways to maim or kill a person—some of which had notations that suggested that some of the methods were essential in the collection of ingredients needed for certain potions. Overall, it was more disturbing than the time Hermione had looked into Moste Potente Potions.

That single room took them nearly all day. By six o'clock, they were both quite hungry, so they took a break to visit Diagon Alley for some food. They returned an hour later, quite refreshed and in a much better mood than the cleaning had left them in, and got started on the room Hermione had flooed into. Hermione had to admit that Severus had had a fair point; while she, Harry, and the other Weasley kids had been unable to clean Grimmauld Place with only magic, she and Severus were perfectly capable of doing so. Stunning doxies was not an easy task at first, but it proved to be entertaining; they took down several within the first few seconds, and then threw up a Shield Charm that the remaining dozen or so promptly crashed into, and bounced off of, causing them to go spiraled dizzily to the floor. Stunning them after that was a piece of cake. Severus Conjured up a box to stuff them all into, and kicked it aside to deal with later.

The couch ended up being levitated through the now-clean library and the living room, and was then bodily tossed out to the curb. Hermione thought the room with the fireplace to be a second sitting room. The first one was rather small but serviceable; the only way into the rest of the house was to know how to open the bookcase in that room. It was almost like a cell for receiving guests rather than a proper living room, to be honest. The room that Hermione and Severus had just eradicated of doxies was a good deal larger and better-designed for the purpose. An old rug, the drapes, a collection of out-of-date copies of The Sunday Prophet, and a strange vase that made odd clicking noises when approached summarily joined the dilapidated, musty, broken-down couch on the corner of the street.

Without the drapes blocking it, the windows were able to let in some light, although by the time they got that far, the sun was going down and what light that did filter through was dim. They repaired the lighting on the old iron chandelier hanging over the room—which required a bit of pest removal, since a pair of juvenile lethifolds had made their home there. Hermione's silvery otter cornered them near the ceiling, and Severus made use of a rather handy spell that destroyed them both.

By the time they were done, and had turned on the lights in the room to examine their handiwork, it was past ten o'clock and they had not yet gotten to the kitchen. The two rooms they had cleaned were sparsely furnished and despite being quite thoroughly clean, they were almost depressingly spartan.

Severus retired to what Hermione now thought of as the entrance hall instead of a sitting room. She decided to sleep in the room with the fireplace, and she managed to transfigure a blanket and a pillow for herself. The hard wooden floor was distinctly uncomfortable, so Hermione gave up and moved to the room Severus was sleeping in.

He'd had the good sense to transfigure both of the armchairs into a single, comfortable mattress, and he raised an eyebrow at her when the bookcase slid open. He was lying on his side, reading, and seemed more amused than bothered by the fact that she'd disturbed him.

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, having thought that she might be able to borrow one of the armchairs for transfiguration purposes, but saw clearly at this point that that would not be possible. She tried to think of something to say, but Severus beat her to it.

"Hard wooden floor not doing it for you?" he asked dryly.

"Hardly," Hermione retorted. She was sleeping in her Muggle clothes, which had made her
predicament more uncomfortable because of the way the waistband of her jeans dug into her sides when laying down. "I was actually going to ask if I could borrow an armchair, but seeing as you've used them both…"

"We could share," Severus suggested, sitting up a bit straighter. He was shirtless, though he had finally seemed to discover how useful comfortable muggle trousers could be; he was wearing a pair. The Dark Mark was visible on his arm from where Hermione stood.

"You must be joking," Hermione said, crossing over to examine the drapes that Severus was planning on throwing out last. He'd taken care of them before she had even arrived, and they were thus de-doxied, if still rather mangled, and they afforded a level of privacy from prying eyes. Still, they might be a temporary fix, if she could transfigure them into a thick enough mattress. "That's not happening."

"Why not?" Severus asked, setting his book aside. "It seems perfectly reasonable."

Hermione laughed. "To you, perhaps." She was feeling the curtain between her fingers now, trying to gauge its potential as a mattress, when she felt Severus's arms come to wrap around her waist. She twisted around enough to look at him, trying to suppress the flush of red that was rising across her face as he held her in place and nuzzled the back of her neck. "Severus!"

"I wouldn't do anything you didn't want me to," he purred.

"The fact that your hand is on my bum is not exactly encouraging on that front," Hermione pointed out wryly, sighing as she turned her attention back to the curtains. Really, they were bit too tattered and thin for her purpose, but they might still make it as a spring-less mattress…

"Look," Severus pointed out smoothly, the hand that had been resting on her backside now moving back across her belly, tracing ticklish, caressing circles underneath her shirt. "We're both adults now. You're not in school—we don't have to keep our activities… restrained." The way he said the last word, brushing his lips along the juncture of Hermione's ear now, made her shiver. Then his voice turned serious. "You trust me, Hermione. I know you do. Believe me when I say I won't do anything more than what we've already done unless you want me to."

"Oh, I trust you," Hermione responded, shifting slightly in his hold as the teasing of his fingers across her stomach finally got another reaction out of her; she was growing wet, though she hoped her face was not an instant giveaway of this fact. But what Hermione's fingers had managed to accomplish with a great deal of difficulty and the awkwardness of trying to silently frig oneself in bed had been sparked by just a few light touches of Severus's fingers elsewhere. It seemed her body was determined to side with him instead, even if her brain was recalcitrant. "But you're a Slytherin through and through, Severus—and when you want something, you're very good at finding loopholes."

Severus had the temerity to smirk at her. "So?"

Hermione managed to pull herself together enough to glare at him.

"No loopholes tonight," he promised silkily.

"You just wrote out a gaping loophole for yourself in that statement," Hermione remarked.

"But not for tonight," he countered. His hold around her tightened slightly, and he took a moment to suckle on the juncture of her neck and chin, causing Hermione to instinctively lift her head back to give him better access. "And I've wanted to do this for a long time—to just… hold you, while we
sleep."

Hermione sighed, and glanced back at the drapes once more.

"You have a silver tongue, you know that?" she said, twisted around in his arms to face him.

"I do now," he purred as he dipped his head forward to kiss her thoroughly. Hermione let him, even responding playfully by dragging her fingers down his chest, before she pulled away.

"Not a chance," she told him, giving him a mischievous smile. "But if you'd be a gentleman and give me something substantial to transfigure, I'd be quite appreciative."

He scowled blackly at her, but Hermione stood her ground as he reluctantly untransfigured his mattress back into two separate armchairs and then retransfigured his mattress, though it was noticeably smaller and less springy than the previous one. She knew that if she let him have his way, they would be having sex inside a week. Not tonight or the next night, perhaps; but they had not crossed certain lines while she was still in school, and Hermione had no intention of rushing into this and crossing them. They had not had any kind of romantic relationship while still in school together, and their interludes when they did see each other had been short. Hermione wanted to know if they could stand—if they could really stand—living with each other in such close quarters outside of school. They had barely been able to tolerate each other when they had first met; they would never have become friends had they not been very scholarly-oriented people.

Outside of that, what did they have other than their Order duties? If they could make this relationship work—and Hermione desperately wanted it to work—then she would be happy to take things to another level. But they were only just now spending time together like a real couple.

She thanked him with a kiss on his cheek, and though his scowl lessened slightly, he still watched her leave with her prize with a sullen expression on his face.

~o~O~o~

The next morning, Hermione woke up rather early and got dressed in a timely fashion. She slipped into the entrance room, and seeing Severus still asleep, quietly snuck up on him. She watched his brow furrow in his sleep as she approached, and she stood over him, silent and unmoving, until his senses finally got the message to his brain that there was someone else in the room, and his eyes snapped open.

Hermione couldn't help giggling at the startled look on his face. She bent down to kiss him, and then straightened up.

"Breakfast?" she asked, grinning at the bewildered look on his face. "We can Apparate to Diagon Alley and then tackle the kitchen."

His brows knit together into a glare, and then he sat up tiredly, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. His hair was mussed up and rumpled from sleep, and Hermione watched with something between surprise and amusement as he shook his head several times to get it out of his face.

"What time is it?" he growled.

"Seven," Hermione responded promptly.

He groaned and flopped back down on the bed. "Come back in an hour," he muttered, dragging the pillow over his face to block the sunlight streaming into the room.
Grasping both ends of the pillow, Hermione pulled it away. "We're starting work in an hour. Get dressed."

"Its summer," Severus snarled, yanking the pillow back and turning over on his side, his back to her. He was clearly not a morning person, with that attitude. "I'm sleeping in."

Hermione began wrestling the pillow from his grasp. "Severus Snape, just because the leaves are green doesn't mean you get to keep your lazy arse in bed until you feel like gracing the world with your presence. Get up!"

Severus let out a sound very much like that of an animal warning competitors off its territory, and yanked the pillow back. Hermione, who had not let go of the now much-abused pillow, tumbled forward on top of him, still clutching to object of their contention. They fought over the pillow for a moment, Severus sitting up to wrap his arms determinedly around it while Hermione straddled him in an effort to hold him down and get the upper hand.

"You—are most definitely—awake— by now—" Hermione ground out.

"I am not!" Severus gave the pillow another particularly hard yank, nearly ripping it out of Hermione's hands. He gave her a withering glare when she continued to hold onto it with determined tenacity, and then he stopped pulling; Hermione's only warning was the smug smirk curling up his lips, before he promptly let go of the pillow, causing Hermione to fall backwards onto the bed. He grimaced at this, wriggling his legs out from underneath her, before he attacked her throat with his lips.

And his fingers had gone directly to her stomach.

Hermione was then subjected to the experience of having the life snogged out of her while being tickled mercilessly.

"Oh god—Severus, stop—ah—stop this right—ah-haha—now—oh god, stop, stop stopstopstop—mrmmpf!"

She tried to push him away, but he was significantly stronger than her, and she was unable to muster up the energy when she could barely think straight. She was horribly ticklish, and Severus had her half-doubled over with laughter—laughter which was muffled by the fact that he was kissing her. He pulled away a moment later, and dragged her to him, spooning her back against his chest and locking her arms to her sides with his wrapped firmly around her.

"We've wasted fifteen minutes with our quarrel," he purred into her ear. "That means that you owe me the remaining forty-five minutes."

"Doing what?" Hermione countered.

"Snogging." He leaned back onto the bed, dragging her with him, and loosened his grip enough for her to twist around to face him. He reclaimed his pillow, and after a moment of fluffing it up, lay back comfortably with his hands buried in her hair, curling it around his fingers. He wearing an infernal, victorious smirk, and pulled her towards him, his mouth latching onto the base of her throat and suckling on it before moving up gradually to meet her lips. She folded her arms across his chest, laying half on him as she responded with eagerness, conceding victory to him this round.

He kissed her lazily, enjoying the taste of her mouth, her neck, what little part of her shoulder was exposed, and even experimented in nibbling on her ear. Hermione returned the favor by dragging her nails lightly down his chest, curious as to what his reaction would be. His chest was only very
sparsely covered in black hair, mostly centered in a thin treasure trail down his belly, and Hermione found she rather liked it.

What she liked even more, though, was his reaction. At first, it was minimal; he shivered a little underneath her touch, still nipping at the column of her neck. When she happened to drag it across the little coin-sized nipples, however, his head fell back and he bit his lower lip to bite back a moan. Mischievously pleased by this, Hermione continued to research, observing how his breathing quickened even as he regained enough control to drag her head down to his so that he could kiss her.

She felt something poking into her belly, and it grabbed her attention long enough for her to glance down at her watch to check the time. Seven fifty-seven. She gave Severus a smug, triumphant smirk of her own.

"Time to get up. Breakfast," she clarified.

He shifted underneath her, looking slightly uncomfortable for a moment before masking it with a scowl. "Fine. Leave for a few minutes, will you?"

Hermione slid off of the bed, and he winced at this momentarily before sitting up and throwing his legs over the other side. Hermione stumbled and shook the circulation back into her feet for a moment, and then left, the bookcase sliding shut behind her as Severus stood up to retrieve his clothes.

When she knocked again, and there was a muttered, "Come in," to let her know that he was decent, she saw he wasn't wearing robes.

"Good grief," she said, leaning against the doorway in a pair of Muggle jeans. "You penalize me for wearing Muggle clothes, and then wear them yourself? Hypocrite."

Severus gave her a withering look. "It's too hot for robes."

Hermione eyed the plain black cotton shirt he was wearing. One sleeve had been cut off at the shoulder, and it would have looked like a normal short-sleeved shirt if it were not for the fact that the other sleeve reached down just short of his left wrist, hiding the Dark Mark. He had changed into another pair of trousers, though these had been cut off just past his knees. He had no doubt gone out and found some Muggle clothing and altered it to his liking. For now, Hermione thought it looked ridiculous: all he needed to do was put on some metal and he would fit right in with an east coast rock band. It was completely absurd. It looked good on him, but was still eminently incongruous with his personality all the same.

To top it off, he was putting on a pair of black dragonhide boots. She placed a hand over her mouth and tried to refrain from giggling, but it was largely futile.

"Do control yourself," Severus snapped, not at all pleased with her amusement at his expense. He finished tying his boots, and straightened up. "Let's go."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, sniggering behind her hand as they stepped toward the door, "But does it have to be black?"

~o~O~o~

"We shouldn't be doing this," Hermione told him unconvincingly as they stopped by Fortescue's for an after-breakfast treat. "It's not healthy."

"It won't kill you, either," Severus remarked, as Fortescue cheerfully handed Hermione a double-
scoop of dark chocolate ice cream with a friendly, 'Here you are, Miss Hermione!' before turning around to take care of Severus's order.

If Hermione had thought Severus would stand out in Diagon Alley, she was quite mistaken. Some wizards who were most certainly strict, older-generation traditionalists insisted on wearing robes, but many were standing around in short-sleeves and pants. This month of June had hit one of those rare bursts of ninety-degree weather, and it was all anyone could do to stay cool. The only odd thing about his clothing, really, was that he was one of those mad nutters who insisted on wearing black.

When they returned to Spinner's End, they finished up their cold treats quickly and then ventured into the kitchen.

At first, its occupants seemed benign enough. There were several dead puffskeins that looked as though they had had an unfortunate encounter with the stove, and when one of the kitchen cabinets started rattling, Hermione and Severus had been forced to deal with a boggart. The boggart, confused by their double presence, and by their Occlumency shields, came out with the snarling jaws of a werewolf, its lower half fading away into a long sleeve of parchment, covered in exam questions, with a big fat 'T' at the end. It flopped and writhed on the floor, its canine head snapping impotently while the tail flipped and flapped uselessly. Hermione turned it into a stuffed toy, and banished it with little effort.

Severus had raised an eyebrow at this, but made no comment.

An infestation of chizpurfles was summarily purged by the rather unorthodox measure of summoning a horde of tiny splinters to stab and impale them all, but it got the job done. A dugbog had somehow gotten trapped in the oven, and Severus had wordlessly grabbed it by the tail and hauled it outside, tossing it toward the distant moor, where it scurried away. Flobberworms were extracted from the drain, along with an unholy amount of slime and gunk, and the rat and spider infestations were taken care of shortly after. A nest of yet more doxies had made themselves at home under the sink, and they joined their cousins in the box Severus had conjured earlier. The kitchen took longer than any of the rooms Hermione and Severus had previously cleaned, and they spent a good deal of time wrinkling their faces in disgust as they came across various problems.

Old food, or what was left of it, was thrown out. Broken shelves and termite-eaten wooden legs were repaired or thrown away. They stripped the place until it was completely spartan and bare, and then at long last stepped back to admire their work.

"Well," Hermione said, sitting down in one of the chairs that had survived the purging. "We could start stocking food here now, if you want. The entire downstairs is completely clean."

~o~O~o~

Cleaning the four rooms upstairs took far longer than the first floor had. For one, there was more furniture, and secondly, the creatures that had fled the downstairs upon Hermione and Severus's arrival had set-up shop upstairs, and had made the decision to not go without a fight. The erklings roaming the upstairs bedrooms were a particular problem. It took them the rest of the month to get past the upstairs hallway, and in all that time, Severus was only summoned twice.

The first time was two weeks after they began their project, and he was gone for the entire day. Hermione had spent the time nervously milling around the kitchen, putting in new shelves and stocking up on food. When he was gone for more than four hours, she had begun to worry.

"Please," she had thought as she turned and leaned against the pantry door. Please just let him come back in one piece. Why has he been called away for so long?"
When he came back, he was perfectly fine, although he nearly cracked the back of his skull when Hermione turned her wand on him in surprise at his sudden appearance. He had Apparated directly into the kitchen, and was blown backwards with a reflexively-cast Blasting Hex.

"I'm sorry!" Hermione wailed, quickly moving to check that he was alright. He staggered to his feet, tearing off his mask and gritting his teeth in pain. "I'm sorry—you caught me completely by surprise—I thought you were a Death Eater!"

"I am a Death Eater!" he had snapped at her in irritation as she helped him into a chair. He brought his hand to the back of his head, and withdrew it, examining the sticky blood and hair clinging to his fingers. To be fair to her, he was dressed up in enemy garb, but he was still rather irate with the welcome he had received in his own home. "For Merlin's sake woman, pull yourself together and get me some ice. Fetch your notebook while you're at it—I'm fine!"

First day in, Hermione violated Professor Dumbledore's orders. She fetched his ice first and then collected her notebook to jot down his report, her justification being that his injury was technically her fault.

The second time was the morning of July first. Hermione had begun sleeping in the same room, their mattresses side-by-side, both because she wanted his company and because she was tired of being awoken in the middle of the night by the sound of laughing erklings. It was difficult to deal with their haunting cackles and attempts at luring her to follow them when one woke up alone, and if she was in the same room as Severus, his presence made her feel safe.

The previous night, the erklings' calls had gotten louder, more bold, and more disturbing, causing Hermione to sit up on her mattress and scream out a string of elaborate threats which all ended with their sticky, painful demise if they didn't fucking shut up. This quieted them for all of five long minutes before they started up again. Hermione rolled off her mattress and crawled onto Severus's, and after yanking his pillow out from underneath his head with a startled yelp of protest from him, she used both pillows to try and block out the sound. Silencing Charms only stayed in place for so long, and though they had placed strong wards to prevent anything from entering their room while they slept, they still did not want to risk allowing themselves to be snuck up upon in their sleep.

Instead of yanking his pillow back and lambasting her for weakness, Severus pulled her against him, rubbing soothing circles on her back and, pulling one pillow away from her ear so that she could hear him, promised that they would take care of the master bedroom where most of the maddening creatures were holing up tomorrow. Hermione snuggled against him gratefully, and that was how the next morning had found them.

But instead of their planned erkling extermination, Severus had leapt out of bed before Hermione was fully awake with an exclamation of, "Bloody hell!" as he rushed to get dressed, clutching the writhing snake and skull tattoo on his arm. He was gone in less than three minutes, leaving Hermione to make breakfast for herself, alone.

The erklings made themselves known all throughout the morning, cackling and taunting her, and Hermione nearly snapped and went after them. She refrained; if it had been just one or two, she would have been able to handle herself just fine. But there were nearly a dozen of them, judging from the noise they were making, and Moody and Kingsley had taught her a valuable lesson in not throwing herself into unnecessary danger without backup.

*Tomorrow's tragic news,* she thought dryly as she took a sip of her morning tea. *Hermione Granger, duellist and spy handler, found half-eaten by a herd of rampant erklings. Investigation still pending on details concerning her demise...*
When Severus returned, he Apparated into the kitchen with his hands in the air to show her he was
unarmed, no trace of prestidigitation in his demeanor. Hermione nearly tore his mask off to kiss him,
had him out of his Death Eater robes in one minute flat, and was dragging him upstairs moments
later, wand at the ready and a slightly wild look in her eyes. The room of erklings was as populated
as they had suspected, and Hermione threw her sense of ethics aside and stood behind Severus to
cast a Shield Charm around him as he promptly cast the *Avada Kedavra* curse on the whole lot.

Later, she would blame it on insanity caused by listening to the cacklings of the now-dead erklings,
insanity that was not much different from extended exposure to Fwooper song. But as soon as they
were done, she pulled Severus into a passionate snog and told him how much she loved him.

It was only afterwards that they sat down and actually discussed the details of the meeting he had
been summoned to.

The rest of the day was spent exterminating the remaining creatures that had taken up residence in
the master bedroom. Infestations of all kind were to be found in the bed, dresser, nightstand, picture
frames, shelves, and even cracks in the wall. Every single piece of furniture was blown to bits in the
process of the extermination, and Severus had the honor of setting the bed in flames before disposing
of the ash while Hermione worked at repairing the floor. The drafts in the room were repaired after
several parts of the wall were knocked down to extract creatures that had otherwise thought
themselves safe from expulsion, and by the time they were finished, they had done a rather thorough
job: the room was completely devoid of furniture or anything remotely alive other than themselves.

"You know," Hermione said with a sigh as she took a seat on the floor, "I swear that after this, I am
never stepping in a haunted house ever again."

"Don't relax now," Severus told her, smirking. "We still have three more rooms to take care of. And
then there's the basement."

With the absence of the erklings, they finally got a good night's sleep, and taking care of the
remaining bedrooms was a comparatively painless task. The basement was another matter entirely,
and to avoid being ambushed in the dark, Hermione had ingeniously thrown in several barrels of hay
soaked in Muggle lighter fluid and set the entire room on fire.

They did receive a visit from the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes for this one.
Hermione and Severus had waved off the officials who had stopped by to investigate, informing
them that they were just "Spring cleaning." Raised eyebrows notwithstanding, they shut the door in
the Ministry's face on this one.

They returned to the basement an hour later to find the walls scorched but otherwise undamaged and
easily repaired. The room was beneath a single foot of ash, which was easily scourgified away, and
as soon as they installed torch brackets on the side for lighting, it was quite useable. Severus made it
his personal project to set up his own Potions lab, and Hermione nicked quite a few of his new tables
from the Room of Requirement.

While in the end, their summer project of making the house safe to live in was not completed until
after the first week of July, they were now only left with the much easier task of making it
comfortable by adding furniture and amenities. In one of Hermione's visits to Dumbledore, he
offered her two cozy red chintz armchairs for the living room, which she gratefully accepted.

Severus took one look at the armchairs and jabbed his wand at them, charming them dark green
before he allowed Hermione to help him decide where to place them.

Lucius Malfoy, in a show of apparent goodwill, had two of his house-elves drop off a new kitchen
table that he claimed he had found in the wine cellar of Malfoy Manor. It certainly smelled of wine, though it looked nice enough that Hermione made no protest when Severus replaced the old table with the new one. Hermione stopped by Diagon Alley several times to browse through new rugs for him, returning with one that was in dark jewel colors. They placed it on the floor of the living room, a blood-red and black diamond-patterned one that Severus allowed to remain since the colors were tasteful enough.

Cheap but comfortable four-poster beds were acquired, though Severus enlarged the one for the master bedroom into a double. New furniture was collected on a daily basis, and now that the house was clean and safe to roam around in alone, Hermione took what had been Severus's old room as a child while he took the master bedroom. She was finally able to fully unpack her trunks and store her clothes in a dresser and her odd ends and things in a closet, and was grateful for it.

The house was still sparse, but it was starting to feel more welcoming and more like a home than a dilapidated lair, though the color scheme was a bit dark. Still, there was plenty of light afforded in the bookcase-hidden rooms by lamps and windows with open drapes.

Hermione had spent the entire month and a half on good terms with Severus, becoming quite comfortable in their relationship. They rarely fought, if ever, though there were certainly a few near-disasters, such as the one wherein Hermione hexed Severus after the first time he had returned from being summoned. In fact, without schoolwork to dictate their lives, they actually got along with more ease, able to dedicate their time to the discussion of other topics of interest. In addition, while Hermione never tried to dictate Severus's choice in furnishing his home, he often listened to her suggestions, even if he did not admit it outright. It was astonishing how well they got along—where Hermione had been worried that they would be snapping at each other at every turn, much as she and Ron sometimes had, they rarely found themselves in serious disagreement.

Without the added stress of exterminating pests, and given the rarity of Severus's summonings, the two of them had a great deal of time to spend together. Often, to get out of the house, they would stop by Diagon Alley to visit the bookstore or Fortescue's. Other times, they would Apparate to Hogsmeade for a visit to The Three Broomsticks, where they would find a booth together, pull out whatever they had brought to read, and relax over a hot drink, despite the fact that it was still summer. Despite the season, the temperature had dropped one week into the mid-sixties; the English summer was fickle, and a spot of something warm at those times was much-warranted. Other times, Severus would shut himself up in his Potions lab to be alone, and Hermione would entertain herself with the newly-restored library.

Throughout their time together, Hermione had become more exploratory and certain in regards to their relationship. Thus, kissing had progressed to bouts of full-on snogging, with added instances of groping. Sometimes, Hermione would be standing in the library, browsing for a book, and Severus would come up from behind her and wrap his arms around her waist, pulling her to him and kissing her neck. On one particular, memorable instance, he had murmured things into her ear that had gone straight to her groin while his hand unzipped the front of her jeans enough to slip inside. He had tugged aside the crotch of her knickers, and drew a single finger along her seam in a way that had her moaning and panting rather wantonly before he went one step further and pressed a finger into her, while the other hand moved to cup her breasts, squeezing them through the fabric of her shirt.

He had never done anything quite like that before. There had been exploration, yes, but never anything so bold, and Hermione found she loved every minute of it. As soon as he had withdrawn his hand, examining the moisture on it and giving it a sniff before placing it in his mouth—and deciding he quite liked it—Hermione had turned around and grabbed the crotch of his trousers, where a slight bulge had already made itself visible. He nearly choked on his finger at that moment, and Hermione used the opportunity afforded by his surprise to return the favor and take apart the
placket of his trousers.

They had not gotten further than that, for at that moment, there had been an untimely Floo-call from the living room. Swearing profusely, Severus had quickly pulled away, making himself presentable before striding out to see who had the audacity to disturb him. It was Lucius Malfoy, as it turned out, and as Hermione watched from behind the doorway, she could tell it was taking all of Severus's self-control not to hex the blond man.

His message, however, had been important.

"I just thought I should warn you that the Dark Lord is holding a gathering of the inner circle," Lucius had told him conversationally. "Make sure you have no plans for July 31st."

After that, Hermione had been busy bringing her record of their conversation to the Headmaster and discussing the implication of such a gathering. She did not return until very late, and she was too exhausted to do more than kiss him good-night.

"Sleep with me tonight," Severus coaxed her, running his hands along the curve of her shoulders as she undressed for bed. "Keep me company."

"Not tonight, Severus," Hermione said tiredly, thinking he would want more than just her company. She simply wasn't up for it tonight.

She was grateful when he did not argue, but slowly turned her around to face him and dropped a kiss on her forehead before leaving for his own room. The next morning, however, he woke her up with a kiss on the cheek, an uncomplimentary remark about the tangled mess that was her hair, and the suggestion of getting downstairs for breakfast before her toast turned cold.

As it turned out, her toast was cold by the time she got down; getting dressed had been quite difficult, thanks to the fact that Severus didn't seem to want her to. She was forced to laughingly bat his hands away as she tried to clip her bra on, and pulling on her shirt was quite difficult to do while trying to prevent his fingers from undoing her pants while his lips kissed her neck. He had even had the temerity to grind himself slightly against her hip, subtly dragging the waistband of her jeans down a bit. Smirking infernally with amusement at her predicament, he nevertheless allowed her to make it down eventually.

"You are an arse," she told him, laughing, as she took the stairs.

Later, she returned the favor by making lunch and then knocking on the door of the basement to let him know. He didn't come up until some ten minutes later, and when he finally emerged, she tackled him. He let out a grunt of surprise as his back hit the door, but was standing upright a moment later, running his hands under her shirt while she had her arms wrapped around his neck, suckling on his earlobe in a way that made him involuntarily groan.

Hermione pulled back to smirk up at him victoriously, and was about to pull away and return to the kitchen when she found herself being pinned to the floor, and peppered with kisses, with something familiarly hard pressing against her thigh. Not at all fussed by this turn of events, Hermione responded eagerly, burying her fingers in his hair and pulling his lips down to hers. His hands had begun working insistently on her shirt, and she let out of a muffled yelp of protest when she realized he had gotten impatient and was now tearing it off, ripping it in half with both hands in short, quick, jerks. He did the same to her sleeves, and then yanked the entire thing off of her.

Hermione beat him to her bra, pushing him off for a moment so that she could sit up and reach behind her back to undo the clasp. She slid it off, and he tossed it aside before turning his attention to
her breasts, burying his face between them before taking the tip of one in his mouth. Hermione found herself squeezing her eyes shut and arching underneath him as he suckled, licked, and swirled. Her eyes snapped open when she felt him retreat, his hands moving down quickly, impatiently, eagerly toward the waistband of her jeans. Hermione allowed him to unzip them, wriggling out of them of her own accord before turning the tables on him and attacking his shirt. Eager to leave his clothing intact, at least, Severus pulled back and quickly shrugged out of his half-sleeve black cotton shirt, and then began working frantically at his trousers.

It was at that moment that Hermione realized how far he was planning to go. She watched him, using the brief interlude to ask herself if she really did want this—and when his hands returned their attention to her breasts, cupping and squeezing them, she decided that yes, she did. She most certainly wanted it. Satisfied with her choice, but now insistently eager to go through with it, she began pulling off her knickers, and let out a moue of surprise when he pushed her back down against the floor, attacking her neck with his lips. His hands were still at work stroking and pinching her breasts—she had long since pegged him as a breast man—and then her eyes opened in surprise when she felt him grinding against her.

It felt good, when he rubbed against her, but it did not last for very long. Without warning, he entered her, and Hermione's eyes flew open in surprise and she gasped for breath, trying to adjust to this new, foreign invasion. He stilled for all of one moment, his face curtained by his greasy black hair, and then he began thrusting.

It was as awkward as it was heated. Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and her legs around his hips, trying to adjust to the new sensations while also trying to meet his movements so that she could garner more friction and pleasure for herself, but Severus could not seem to do it. He was too lost in his own haze of pleasure to notice that she did not seem to be getting quite as much out of it as he was. His eyes were closed as he panted hard, holding her to him, pounding into her with such force that he seemed to think it was the last thing he would ever do. He was insensate to everything but the feel of her around his cock.

Hermione felt him tremble over her, shuddering as though someone had poured ice water down his back. His hips jerked out of rhythm for a moment, and then he slumped over her, winded. His hips jerked again, and she felt him softening inside her before he braced himself partially on his elbows, resting his cheek on her shoulder. She twisted her head to the side to glance at him, and found herself confronted with a look of completion on his face. He looked so relaxed, so calm, so thoroughly satisfied. And there was an underlying layer of greedy appreciation, satiation, and awe in his eyes as they locked onto her.

Hermione found herself to be pleased, but also severely disappointed. After all those weeks of pleasurable foreplay and teasing leading up to this, it turned out that those instances had been far more enjoyable than this one moment. She sighed and leaned back, resting her head on the rug and wondering when he was going to get up, because the rolls were certainly getting cold now, although the bacon sandwiches were probably still salvageable…

Her thoughts were interrupted shortly when her lover lifted up his head to look down at her, and wearing one of those trouble-promising smirks that reminded her so much of the time he had convinced her to sneak out of the school for his birthday, he very deliberately began grinding into her again. He had hardened again somewhat, and now Hermione could feel it as he deliberately stroked in her, watching her face with concentration that had been sorely lacking not ten minutes ago.

She blinked when she saw his face pinch into a frown, and then one of distaste, and for one ridiculous moment thought that perhaps she had done something wrong until he pulled out and coaxed her to her hands and knees. He pressed her back to his chest, nibbling on the juncture
between her neck and shoulders, while one hand came around her waist and slid down between her thighs, fumbling for a moment before he found what he was looking for. His other hand was busy stroking himself back to full hardness, and in the meantime—

Hermione let out the first real moan of pleasure of this encounter as his fingers began working on her clitoris, experimentally trying to find what got her off best. This seemed to please him, for though his expression became one of difficult, pleasure-distracted focus, the frown disappeared. He continued nibbling and suckling on her neck, before moving to the other side of her face to lick behind her ear, desperately trying to get another visible reaction out of her.

Hermione gratefully obliged, moaning and panting wantonly as sparks of pleasure that had only been random, chance encounters moments ago turned into a consistent build up, a cascade of lighting-shocked water waiting for enough momentum to break through the dam that held it back. He was grinding against her now, and then—

"Oh god," she moaned, when he entered her again, this time from behind. The angle felt quite good—different and new, though everything about this experience was new, really, but it touched more sensitive places inside her than—oh, that felt good… "Oh, yes, Severus, yes…"

His strokes this time were slower, and they hit deeper, and while the latter made little difference to Hermione, the fact was that now she could really feel him when he moved, truly enjoy the sensations, and coupled with the hand furiously playing with the tight bundle of nerves between her legs while the other was braced against the ground to keep himself balanced, she was just now getting an idea of how enjoyable sex could really be. The first time, it had been strange and new for both of them, neither quite knowing what exactly to expect, and it had been over too soon. Now, however, Hermione was doing a quick one-eighty on her opinion of it. Where some fifteen minutes ago she had thought sex would become a chore, she was now of quite the opposite opinion.

The build-up to climax was intense. Several times, Severus stopped moving, presumably to keep from coming early, while his fingers quickened and became more practiced and more knowledgeable about precisely what worked for her. Hermione found herself shuddering, squeezing him tightly within her walls in short, uncontrolled spasms, and just as she was teetering on the edge of something much bigger than before, something very promising, he would start moving again, changing the rhythm of his fingers and causing Hermione to cry out both in pleasure and protest. Eventually, his pace quickened, returning to the point where he was pounding near-insensate inside her, and this time, Hermione was the first to shudder and let go.

Light danced and pulled at her eyes, forcing her to squeeze them shut and clench her teeth together as her body shook and trembled with orgasm. Her arms and legs gave way, and she would have slid to the floor had Severus not held her up. He finished again moments after her, and this time, he pulled out almost immediately, rolling her over onto her back to examine her face closely. He seemed to like what he saw, for after satisfying himself that the expression on her face was one of lassitude and post-coital bliss, he flopped down to enjoy his own, eyes half-shut with lazy satiation.

Hermione felt her breathing slow gradually, and she moved her fingers to wrap in his hair as soon as she had gathered up the strength to move her arms. Despite the fact that they seemed to have the consistency of jelly, she was able to pull his head to hers so that she could angle her lips with his in a lethargic, indolent kiss. She let go after a moment, resting her head against the floor again, and sorely tempted to simply fall asleep there when she felt Severus drag himself away and stand, pulling her to her feet as well.

"I suppose lunch is ruined now," he murmured silkily.

"The rolls are probably a bit hard, but the bacon sandwiches…” Hermione swayed for a moment as
she regained her balance, and then flushed red when she felt something warm, wet, and sticky leaking out of her and clinging to her thighs. "Why don't you check to see if you still find them edible while I go clean up?"

Severus gave her a leering smirk. "Don't clean up. Just get dressed."

Hermione swatted his rump, but reached for her clothes instead of seeking out her wand for a Cleaning Charm. "You are an arse."

Severus's expression twisted into one of smug, self-satisfaction.

~o~O~o~

It wasn't until an hour later that Hermione finally remembered to ask Severus to brew a Contraceptive Potion. When the idea had hit her that she had forgotten it, she spent all of three minutes in a panic attack before Severus lazily told her that he already had—and had taken it himself.

Hermione glared at him, secretly pleased and quite visibly irritated by this. "You planned this," she accused.

He raised a single eyebrow at her before returning to the potion he was brewing. His face had turned expressionlessly blank, as it always did when he was either attempting to hide his thoughts or shoring up his defenses. "Of course I did," he said smoothly, tapping his stirring rod on the side of the cauldron once to shake off drops of a thick orange brew before setting it down beside his other implements. "I started taking it before you arrived. Don't mistake common sense for cunning," he quipped back at her.

Hermione covered her eyes with her fingers, silently trying not to laugh, but failing to hide her smile with exasperation. "Unbelievable."

His lips curled into a smirk, and then he returned his attention to the potion. "I'm taking over Slughorn's teaching schedule. The Headmaster was kind enough to send me his notes, but the man was so ridiculously disorganized that he never wrote down his lesson plan for first-years." He peered down into his cauldron to examine the thick paste that was forming at the bottom, and then began scraping it out into a jar. "Do you reckon burn paste is too complicated for them?"

"You can hardly find a simpler potion," Hermione pointed out. "They have to start somewhere."

Severus grimaced. "They'll be melting cauldrons left and right, the little buggers."

Hermione gave him a wry smile, thinking of Neville. "You're probably right."

"I know I am. It was a constant occurrence until half the class was able to drop the subject." He sneered down at the burn paste, and then set the spatula he was using to scrape it out aside. "Potter and Black took great pleasure in sabotaging my potions at every opportunity. I might have failed the class if it weren't for the fact that they often did it right in front of Slughorn, so he'd give me another chance to finish the potion with full marks—though they did stop sometime around the end of sixth year," he muttered. "I suppose I should be grateful for that."

"At least they stopped after that time I had to help replace your Transfiguration notes," Hermione pointed out. "There's no point in dwelling on it anymore. James and Sirius are completely different people now than they were then—and so are you, I might add."

Severus snorted. "It doesn't change the fact that they made my life at Hogwarts a living hell."
"I won't contest that," Hermione said with a sigh.

"They may be your friends, Hermione, but they are not mine."

"I don't expect that to change, either," Hermione told him, "but I would like to remind you that James Potter did stop Sirius from letting his prank go too far—"

"By asking you to do his dirty work," Severus snapped. "Why do you keep defending them?"

"For the same reason I always defended you to them," Hermione responded coolly. "Because they're my friends, and perhaps it's a fault of mine, but I happen to see the good in them—and in you."

Severus muttered an oath under his breath, and sealed up the jar of burn paste, setting it aside. He was about to clean up his things when he suddenly gripped his arm, hissing in pain.

Hermione was on the ball in an instant. "Go," she ordered, collecting his knife and stirring rod and moving to put them away after casting a silent Cleaning Charm on them. "I'll take care of this."

Severus gave a stiff nod, and strode quickly up the stairs, still gripping his arm.

~o~O~o~

In the two weeks leading up to July 31st, Severus received an almost daily summons. It was then that Hermione began to adhere to Dumbledore's orders regarding such a routine, and had her notebook ready to take his post-summons report before leaving to notify the Headmaster. Severus always returned unhurt, but deeply disturbed. The Dark Lord spent the majority of his time ranting, and twice Severus had come face to face with a pair of cold red eyes snarling in his face. He was not the only one, however. Voldemort was still human, though there were changes that were distinctly noticeable and would later be exacerbated by his resurrection, and his appearance was frightening.

He demanded information on the Potters and Longbottoms, information Severus did not have and that many of his followers simply did not know.

"Which one?" Voldemort would hiss, pacing, putting every present Death Eater's teeth on edge. "Which one is it?"

Severus began to distance himself from her at times, shutting himself up in the basement to do his private projects. Hermione gave him his space most of the time: he was carrying a lot of guilt, the majority of which was intensified by the increasing insanity and obsession Voldemort was displaying in regards to killing Lily's unborn son—as well as Alice's—not to mention the fact that when Hermione had the opportunity to check up on Lily a week before she was due, she did not look happy. She was cooped up in a safe house, and would not be going to St. Mungo's. She and Alice would only have an Order member on hand who was a certified healer, but that was not quite the same, or possibly enough. It was simply stressful, and Severus brooded silently in the basement about how it was all his fault—his fault.

When he emerged, Hermione would sit him down and force him to talk to her about it. He had his space, and now he needed to let her do her job and handle him—and his fragile psychological state. At first, he was largely uncooperative, and they would sit in long silences in front of the fire without a word being said between them. Then, eventually, he would talk. Short, to the point, and clearly, teeth-gnashingly irate. All of this had happened in the short space between when they had first been intimate and while they were waiting for the arrival of the yet-unborn but so very important little people. It meant that where Hermione might have otherwise joined Severus in bed and continued to engage in sexual activity with him, the two became too emotionally distant for that to happen.
He wanted to see Lily. He wanted to see her son, when he was born, and tell her that he was sorry. He wanted her forgiveness even at the risk of her forever condemning him instead. He wanted Hermione to let him stew in silence, and he wanted the Dark Lord to do them all a favor and go off himself.

Hermione spoke of the doable requests to the Headmaster, who sat quietly at his desk for a long time before he muttered thoughtfully that it, "Might be possible." These tidings cheered Severus up somewhat, and when the news arrived that Lily had given birth to a baby boy— quite soon after Alice gave birth—he was insistent.

To Hermione's surprise, the Headmaster allowed it. He himself Flooed to Spinner's End, and brought Hermione and Severus to the safe house where Lily was staying until she had recovered. James, who was sitting in the kitchen on a stool, staring into the fire, had jumped up in surprise—first when he saw Dumbledore, then when he saw Hermione, and then a third time when he saw his most hated schoolboy enemy.

"Professor—Hermione—Snape!" He had spluttered, his wand drawn, and uncertain of what to do. "What—?"

Hermione put her hands up. "Just so you know it's actually us and not a couple of imposters, my name is Hermione Jane Granger and I'm the one you came to when you realized that Sirius was pulling a fatal prank involving Severus and Remus." She smiled wryly at him. "You snuck into the girls' dormitory to do so, and practically dragged me out of bed while I was still half-asleep."

James lowered his wand a fraction of an inch. "Only you would know that," he admitted. But then his attention turned to Severus, and he threw the greasy-haired man a dirty, distrustful look. "But why is he here?"

Hermione and Dumbledore both turned to look at Severus. He took a deep breath, and then spoke.

"I'm here to see Lily," he said quietly.

James lost it.

"No you don't!" He roared, wand up again and ready to hex. "You bastard—I'm not letting you anywhere near her! Headmaster," he pleaded, turning to Dumbledore, "Why would you let him? He —"

"Severus has my full trust in this matter," Dumbledore interrupted, his voice calm. "He wishes to see how she is doing, and he has something to say to her. He has something to say to you, as well, but I think that he should speak to Lily first. That is," he continued cordially, "if she is awake?"

"It had better not be a love confession," James growled, but Hermione could see the fear and confusion in his eyes. "If he's got something to say, he can say it to me now, to my face."

Severus sneered at him, about to speak, when Hermione shushed him. She stepped forward to James, and placed a hand on his shoulder.

"James, do you trust me?" she asked simply.

"Of course—"

"Then sit. Down."

James sank slowly back into his chair. Hermione pulled out a chair beside him, and took a seat.
"You trust Professor Dumbledore too, right?"

"Yes, but—"

"James, do you really think either of us would bring Severus here so that he could try to hurt or steal Lily from you?" Hermione asked carefully.

James threw one last glance at Severus, and then shook his head. "No," he admitted.

"Then please let him see her," Hermione said, taking his hand in hers and giving it a friendly squeeze. "I promise it's not a secret from you. You'll get to hear what he has to say from him, too. But let him have his moment with Lily."

"He still—"

Hermione cut him off with two quiet words in response: "He doesn't."

James gave her a long hard look, his face pale and drawn from stress and tension, and then he reluctantly turned to Dumbledore, refusing to look at Severus.

"Fine," he said tonelessly. "Go on up. She's awake with Harry—that's what we've named him," he said, his eyes flickering between the three of them. "Harry… Harry James Potter." He gave them a thin smile. "Lily got to pick out his name, since she's the one who had to carry him around for nine months."

Hermione was grateful that Severus merely disappeared through the door leading to the stairwell without another word, followed by Dumbledore. He had worn robes for this occasion, and when they flapped behind him, Hermione was momentarily reminded of him as her professor: tall, dark, intimidating, with his robes weaving dramatically behind him when he walked.

The door closed behind them, and as soon as their footsteps died down, James buried his face in his hands. Hermione grabbed his shoulder and pulled him to her in a comforting hug.

"I know you must be miserable, locked up every hour of the day," she said quietly, trying to be comforting. "I'm sorry that you have to deal with this—you and your family."

"Were you telling me the truth?" James croaked, without looking up. He rubbed at the stubble on his chin with one hand, looking tired and haggard. "He doesn't like her that way?"

Hermione considered best how to answer his question.

"James, how do you see me?" Hermione asked. "Did you ever like me?"

James's eyes flew open. "No! Well, I mean, when I first met you, I admit I thought you were cute—you were pretty, even when your hair was a bushy mess." He eyed her warily. "But I've never—I don't know. I've always thought of you as a little sister. I don't think I could ever see you as anything else."

"You nailed it," Hermione said, squeezing his shoulder. "That's how he thinks of Lily, too. They were friends for a long time, and even if she's not, he still cares for her like one. He doesn't have any interest in her. I certainly wouldn't bring him if I thought that were the case. Dumbledore wouldn't, either, and we both know how perceptive he is about other peoples' intentions."

James looked at her anxiously. "How do you know? Did you just take his word for it? Dumbledore's?"
Hermione cocked her head to the side for a moment to think. "Well," she began thoughtfully, twirling a lock of her hair between two fingers. "I suppose I know much in the same way you know how Lily feels about you."

James looked at her in confusion for a moment, and then it dawned on him. His expression turned into one of horror.

"No!"

"Keep your voice down!" Hermione hissed, glancing at the door.

"We're the only ones here—besides Snape and the Headmaster." James looked at her in distress. "Hermione, tell me you're joking—please. I don't—I can't imagine—Snivellus!"

Hermione smacked his shoulder playfully. "Get that image out of your head! I don't want you thinking about the two of us together. That's our business."

James gaped at her. "Oh, Merlin. I think I'm going to be sick."

Hermione glared at him. "I would think you would rather be relieved at the idea that his romantic interests are otherwise taken."

"Did he force you?" James demanded. "Did he slip you something? Blackmail? Did he… you know… come onto you, and you couldn't say no?"

"No, James!" Hermione snapped wearily. "We're together because we like each other. It's mutual." She raised an eyebrow at him. "That's how relationships work, you know."

"Still… I can't believe… Snape, of all people…" James stood up, still muttering under his breath. "I guess you're staying at his place, this summer? No wonder you didn't want us visiting…"

"Kindly keep this to yourself," Hermione warned, getting to her feet.

"I won't tell anyone else," James promised. He rubbed his face tiredly for a moment, and then headed for the door. "We can finish this conversation upstairs. I want to hear what they're saying."

"James—"

"He's talking with my wife, and you promised that I wouldn't be kept out of the loop. I won't interrupt," James said, stalking up the stairs to reach the second-floor hallway. "I just want to know what they're saying."

Hermione made no more protest, and followed him. They found Professor Dumbledore sitting quietly on a comfortable armchair at the far end of the hallway, reading a Muggle knitting magazine. He barely glanced up at them as they slipped quietly toward the door, where Lily and Severus's voices could be heard faintly.

"I can't believe she agreed to see him," James muttered as their conversation filtered through the door.

"…happy," Lily's voice concluded softly.

"That's good," Hermione heard Severus respond, his tone blank. "I'm… I confess that I still hate him, but if you're happy…" the last word was said with a slight sneer, but Hermione imagined Lily wasn't taking it at face value. "I suppose I'm thankful for it."
There was a pause, as though they were filling an awkward moment with something mundane to distract them from the topic at hand, and then inevitably returned to it.

"I know I never defended you enough in school," Lily responded thoughtfully, her words barely audible. She said something else, but it was unintelligible to the two eavesdroppers, and was promptly cut off.

"Potter and Black chose to make my life a living hell, Lily. Not you. You could hardly be expected to control them when you were barely on speaking terms with them."

"Even then—"

"No, Lily." Severus's voice was smooth, firm on this matter.

"I should have been a better friend." The red-haired woman sounded somewhat unhappy.

"Damn it," James hissed. "He's pulling her on a guilt trip, the bastard—"

"I said no," Severus snapped. "I'm the one who lost his temper. Don't forget it."

"Just because we weren't friends anymore was no excuse for how I treated you," Lily responded calmly. Hermione heard James breathe a sigh of relief, his fears from moments before alleviated by Severus's response. "I hate to admit it, but I spoke rather badly of you to the one person who showed you any kindness. It was Hermione who told James and Sirius to back off, not me."

"What reason would you have had for defending me after what I did?"

"Don't make excuses for me, Severus," Lily bit out. There was a pause, and then she responded quietly, "We both made mistakes. Grave ones, and for the ones I am responsible for, I am sorry."

There was another pause, longer this time, and then Lily broke it. "I'm glad you have Hermione. She's always been there for you, even before you were friends—she's the kind of person who commits to something and sticks it out to the end. I'm thankful that even if we can't be friends again, we'll always have her as a sort of—connection. A reminder, I think."

"I'm afraid it's my turn to apologize and say friendship isn't possible," Severus responded darkly, "but I'm afraid that if the Dark Lord got wind of such a thing, he would use me—or Hermione, even—as a means of getting to you. Your son, particularly." Hermione heard the faint sound of a baby stirring, and heard Lily making soothing shushing sounds before Severus continued. "Not until the Dark Lord has fallen, at least."

"I understand." There was an audible sigh, and then— "Sometimes, I wonder why you give me so many chances to try and turn things right between us. I probably don't deserve them."

"Considering that it is my fault your family is currently at risk—"

"I've already absolved you of that," Lily argued. "You couldn't have known."

"I should have known to keep my mouth shut!"

"Wait," James said, unable to contain himself as he barged open the door. Severus was sitting on a hardwood chair next to Lily's bed, in a room that was rather sparse with bare walls and wooden floors. "Your fault? What do you meant this is your fault?"

Hermione grabbed James by the arm, holding him back. "Give us a chance to explain—"
"I want an explanation now, Hermione! I've waited long enough!"

"James," Lily said, her tone commanding and imperious. Hermione saw her shift Harry in her arms, who was otherwise sleeping peacefully, wrapped in a red baby blanket. "Sit down. We'll discuss this like rational people for once, and that can't happen if you're waiting for a chance to break his nose." James didn't move, and Lily repeated, "Sit!"

Reluctantly, James summoned himself a chair and took a seat on the other side of the bed, glaring murderously at Severus, who didn't seem at all inclined to defend himself. Hermione moved to stand next to him.

"I'll explain," Hermione began, but Severus cut her off.

"No. It's my story." He sat up a bit straighter, his young and otherwise unlined face looking a bit too weary and resigned for his age. "I'll tell it."

"Severus—" Lily began.

"As you have probably guessed, I work for the Dark Lord now," Severus said, rolling up his sleeve. She saw Lily flinch at the sight of the tattoo, and James looked as though he were about to fly out of his seat. Only the fact that he would have to plow through his wife, son, and her bed to reach his adversary seemed to be stopping him. "He knew that Professor Dumbledore would be visiting the Hogs Head for an interview, and ordered me to make use of the opportunity to prove myself."

"I eavesdropped on him. He was interviewing a prospective teacher for the subject of Divination—and at one point, the old fraud actually made a real prediction." Severus shoved his sleeve back down. "It was an obscure reference to the Dark Lord's downfall, with constraints that two Order members, unfortunately, fit. Naturally, I reported my findings back to the Dark Lord, who spent many months placing his energy and focus into finding the person destined to dethrone him before his attention turned to your family and the Longbottoms'. This prediction was made before either of the children in question were even conceived, and thus, I had no inkling, absolutely none…" he trailed off, and glanced at Lily, who nodded, signalling for him to continue. "When I realized that the Dark Lord was planning on targeting your family, I… I defected."

For a moment, the room was dead silent, saved for the sound of tiny Harry snuffling in his sleep. Then James slowly stood up and walked toward the center of the room, shaking with rage.

"Let me get this straight," he said, removing his glasses and trying to polish them with the hem of his shirt. "You joined You-Know-Who and did his dirty work. You then heard a—a prophecy made by a batty old woman, and heedless of the fact that you were consigning the person mentioned in it to literal witch hunt by your master, you reported it to him. And now you come here to tell me that you're the reason You-Know-Who is out to kill us, the reason why he wants my son, the reason why my son will grow up with a madman's wand searching for his throat!"

Hermione saw Severus swallow visibly, as he got to his feet. "Yes," he responded blankly.

James froze for a moment, and then faster than Hermione would have believed, he took a single step forward, balled his hands into fists, and struck Severus across the face. Hermione lunged forward and grabbed the front of James's shirt, pulling him away before he could strike another blow.

Harry, disturbed by the commotion, had begun to wail. Lily tried to quiet him while also trying to entreat her husband not to go in for another punch, which was what he seemed to be trying to do, but could not for the moment as Hermione was clinging to him.
"James, stop!"

"Hermione, let go—that bastard—!"

"James—!" Hermione grunted, trying to hold him in place.

A strong, imperious voice suddenly cut across the room.

"Enough."

James stopped struggling. Hermione, who had been half-dragged off the floor trying to handicap him, scrambled to her feet. Lily immediately turned to Harry, who had gone very quiet at the command, but now looked ready to start up again. Severus, who was sitting up on the floor and cupping one side of his face with his hand, squinted up at the issuer of the order through a haze of pain. Albus Dumbledore strode into the room, his demeanor serious and—quite possibly, Hermione thought—disappointed.

"I brought Severus here tonight so that he could inform you in person," the Headmaster stated, summoning several chairs and placing them around the room with a single flick of his wand. "This was intended to be an adult discussion, James, not a bar fight." Hermione pulled Severus to his feet and helped him into the chair he previously occupied, and James slowly took a seat on the edge of Lily's bed. "Let us begin again, shall we?"

Hermione swallowed, unable to speak as she pulled out a chair for herself.

"James, because of the terrible mistake Severus has made, he opted to switch sides at a great personal risk," Dumbledore said, his voice restoring calm and order to the room. "He is now a spy for the Order, and Hermione is his handler."

James and Lily both turned to look at Hermione, their mouths agape, but the Headmaster's next words returned their attention solely to him.

"Together, their work has saved the lives of a number of Muggle and wizarding families," Dumbledore continued, "Including your own. There is no guarantee that your family would have remained safe without the existence or report of the prophecy, but it is guaranteed now that you and your son are well-protected. I think it rather poor repayment to hit the man who has worked so hard to repair his error of judgement."

"Don't make excuses for me, Albus," Severus snarled, drawing his hand away from his face. Hermione saw a trickle of blood running down the side of his face from where James had struck him, and a purplish bruise was darkening just above his left brow. "I bloody well deserved what I got."

Hermione saw James staring at Severus as though he had never seen him properly before. Lily looked as though she wanted to speak, but Harry had begun to fuss again and looked on the verge of screaming. As though by some hitherto-unrecognized instinct, Hermione found herself standing up and walking over to the bed, holding out her hands to Lily.

"May I?" she asked.

Wordlessly, Lily handed Harry over. Hermione adjusted him into her arms and peered down into his green eyes, noting the lack of a lightning-bolt scar, and ran her fingers gently through his black, downy hair before reaching for one of her own curls and offering it to him. Now diverted by something rather more exciting and less disturbing than the yelling that had been going on earlier, Harry grabbed the curl in a tiny fist, no longer interested in wailing. Satisfied, Hermione slowly began to walk around the room, giving Lily the window she needed to lean forward and speak her
"James, Severus and Hermione have been working together to help us," Lily said, placing a hand on her husband's arm. "They're entrusting us with the knowledge of what they're doing—if You-Know-Who found out, they would both be killed. Can't you see what they're doing for us—for everyone else they've helped?"

James gave her a weary, anxious look. "I just don't understand it," he said. "Hermione, I could understand—she's our friend, and she's always stuck by our side, but—Snivellus?"

"Believe me when I say I am not doing this out of the goodness of my heart for you," Severus sneered, glaring down at the bit of blood clinging to his fingers from where he'd held them against his face.

"Then tell me," James demanded, almost desperately. "Why?"

"For Lily," Severus snapped.

"But you don't—Hermione—"

"If you believe for one moment that the only reason I would try to save someone—"

"You and Lily haven't even been on speaking terms for the last four years!"

"James, I already explained this to you downstairs," Hermione said testily, turning around to face him.

"I need to hear it from him!"

"I have the perfect corollary for this," Severus sneered, getting to his feet. "Imagine you said something to Hermione that made her decide to cut off her association with you. Would you still stand by and watch her die if you knew she would be killed because of you?"

James gaped at him. "But…"

"I think James is working under the delusion that anything Severus does it purely in self-interest," Hermione observed dryly. Dumbledore nodded sagely at this.

"Of course—he's a Slytherin!" James protested weakly. He looked tired and drawn, and it seemed to Hermione that to James, the very idea that the person whom he had always hated, and who hated him back with equal vitriol, was capable of human decency had shaken him.

"And of course, you're a Gryffindor," Severus drawled bitterly. "I must automatically assume you will stick your neck out and get yourself killed every time you step outside to buy groceries. However, if that were true, I would most fortunately be rid of you by now."

"Severus, you're not helping," Hermione snapped. Lily had placed one hand on her face in exasperation, and Hermione could quite keenly feel her pain. They were dealing with two wizards who were as different as night and day—one reveled in the dark arts, the other despised it—and were very powerful in their own right, with quite a number of attitude problems to boot. And, Hermione thought dryly, a little too much testosterone.

James's behavior was understandably predicated by his protective instincts and possessiveness toward Lily as his wife and the mother of his week-old son. As was his former prejudice and discrimination against the raven-haired Slytherin. Severus's behavior was based on protectiveness.
and a desire for acceptance from a person who he felt responsible for, and who he felt his relationship with was, now and in the past, being threatened by the Gryffindor standing in front of him. They seemed quite ready to go for each others' throats.

"Look," Lily said, pinching the bridge of her nose, eyes closed and one hand in her lap as she tried to be the one more calm and rational person in the room, in addition to Hermione and the Headmaster. "James, Severus cares for me because we were childhood friends. He's doing this for us because he cares. And even if you don't trust his intentions, I do. Hermione and Dumbledore both trust him, and if we can't trust them, then who else can we trust?"

That seemed to stop James cold. He had been standing nose to nose with Severus, both of them looking as though they were quite ready to bite each others' face off, and at this stark statement, he withdrew. His shoulders slumped, and he returned to his seat. Severus hesitated for a moment, until a tug on his sleeve from Hermione made him do the same.

"Now that we've come to an understanding on the matter," Dumbledore stated matter-of-factly, "I would like to discuss what is expected of you—all of you—after the fact."

They all turned to give the Headmaster their undivided attention.

"James, Lily, you will not speak of anything that was spoken here tonight to anyone else," Dumbledore said warningly. "Not even to your friends. Not even Sirius," he clarified, seeing the despondent look on James's face, and continued upon seeing the questioning one on Lily's: "Nor Alice Longbottom or Marlene McKinnon. I have no doubt as to their loyalty and trustworthiness, but it is Hermione and Severus's decision to decide who to reveal themselves to. The more people who know, the more they are put at risk of being discovered and killed. If that happens, we lose our only spy and two valuable Order members."

James sighed, and slumped onto the bed. "I understand, sir."

"Severus will not be able to visit again," Dumbledore continued, addressing Lily in particular, "for the reason he explained earlier. Hermione, however, is free to come and go as you wish her to. You mustn't forget that she is your friend."

James nodded, and then swallowed hard. He did not seem capable of speaking; at the moment, he looked rather exhausted. He didn't look like the James Potter Hermione remembered from school; in fact, he reminded Hermione quite a bit of Harry, when she first saw him after he had come out of the maze clutching Cedric's dead body. Hermione carefully walked up to him and held eight-day-old Harry out to him. James took him with care, looking down at his son's face, and Hermione place a hand on his arm.

"I know you and Severus will never get along unless you have a common enemy," she began quietly.

Severus snorted.

"Not helpful, Severus," Hermione sighed without turning around to look at him. James cracked a smile—the faintest of smiles—at this, and Hermione continued. "But the two of you have a common enemy now, and even if you never become friends, I think you should recognize that you're on the same side." Not unlike when Severus had to shake hands with Sirius, back in the Hospital Wing at the end of fourth year, she thought. "Even if you still doubt his intentions, at least remember what you know of what you know of his past actions, and remember that until You-Know-Who is dead, you are both working to protect the same people. Remember that," she insisted.
James bowed his head. "Fine."

"Thank you," Hermione breathed.

"And—"

"Severus," Hermione said warningly, glancing back to give him a pointed stare.

With one hand pressed against his face, barely covering the purplish bruise that had formed there, it was astonishing how expressive he could be. Particularly when he raised an eyebrow at her. Hermione strode over to him and placed her hand on his arm, facing him so that she had to crane her neck around to look at the Potters once more.

"We'll be going now," she said, wrapping her arm around Severus's as she prepared to leave, so that she was resting her cheek against his chest. "But if you ever want me over, just send a message. I promise I'll make the time to see you, if you'll have me."

Knowing that Dumbledore undoubtedly had more to say to the couple, Hermione gave him a nod in farewell before Severus placed a hand on her shoulder. He glanced down at her once, before lifting his eyes to meet James Potter's as if in a silent challenge—and then with a loud crack, the two of them Apparated away.

~o~O~o~

They landed in the kitchen, where Severus let go of her, pulled out a chair for himself, and took a seat. Hermione set about creating a temporary ice pack for him to help lessen the swelling. He extracted himself from his traveling cloak and set about pulling off his robes so that he was in nothing but his preferred black cotton half-sleeve shirt and trousers. Hermione was beside him a moment later, ice-pack in hand, and he silently accepted it.

"I'm going to see if we have anything down in the lab that might help that," Hermione said, summoning a towel to dab gently at the bit of blood that had caked itself around the part of the bruising that wasn't covered by the ice pack. James was a strong man, and he had hit Severus quite hard; Hermione was genuinely surprised that Severus had not ended up concussed. As it was, he had a thick bruise now well-formed over his left brow, and judging by the way he winced at her touch, she was certain it hurt quite a bit.

"Bring some Murtlap Essence," Severus muttered, leaning back in his seat. "A Headache Potion wouldn't go amiss, either."

Hermione frowned, pressing her hand to his forehead. "A headache could be a sign of concussion," she suggested.

"You're a witch," Severus snapped irritably. "You do something."

Hermione ran a list of spells through her head, and pulled out her wand, running the charm through her head once more before tapping the side of his head with the tip of the vinewood. He flinched from the touch, and then his eyes crossed together in a dizzying manner, before he blinked, restoring his eye positions to normal.

"How do you feel?"

"The Headache Potion may no longer be necessary," Severus allowed, glancing at her wand.

"I'll be right back with the Murtlap Essence," Hermione said, satisfied with her work. She left the
kitchen, stowing her wand in her pocket as she did so, and returned several moments later with jar of yellow liquid. She summoned a small wooden bowl, a second towel, and poured out the contents of the jar before dabbing the towel into it.

"You know," Hermione said as she lifted out the towel and gave it a squeeze before removing the ice pack from Severus's face to replace it with the Murtlap-dampened cloth. "You could have been a bit more helpful in there, when I was trying to talk to James."

"There's no point in reasoning with Gryffindors like him," Severus spat bitterly.

Hermione's eyes flashed at this, but her face merely turned taut as she responded. "You carry the same prejudice he does. He believes you incapable of human decency, just as you believe him incapable of common sense. Besides," she continued, as she pressed the Murtlap Essense onto his bruise, "If you truly believe that, why do you waste your time with me?"

"You should have been sorted into Ravenclaw," Severus responded, his tone slightly defensive.

"That doesn't exclude the fact that I am a Gryffindor," Hermione responded softly. "Do you think there's no point in reasoning with me?"

Severus fell silent. Hermione did not press the point, but merely continued dabbing at the bruise with the wet cloth. At last, he spoke:

"It's been stressful," he said, his eyes flickering across her face as she worked.

"That's a fair assessment," Hermione agreed.

"I apologize if I have been… precipitous as of late."

Hermione smiled at him as she pulled the cloth away to re-soak it. "Apology for undue crankiness accepted."

He snorted, but did not contest it.

Twenty minutes later, when Hermione had done all she could do and had put the excess Murtlap away, Severus slowly stood up and pulled her to him, pressing their foreheads together. They stood there quietly for several minutes, and Hermione realized, as she relaxed into him, that the effect of his presence as a means of making her feel secure and protected had not vanished even after their few weeks of deficient communication. They had not slept together, in the literal or metaphorical sense, since the day he had taken her virginity on the floor of the living room, just outside the door to his lab. Their intimacy had come to a halt as a result of the increasing summons and the escalating risk of Voldemort attacking the Potters and Longbottoms as Lily and Alice's due dates had approached, but now that it was over—now that things had returned to a kind of calm—they could reconnect.

"Come to bed," he suggested silkily, his hands sliding over her hips.

Hermione considered it. "Under one condition," she responded, pulling away slightly so that she could look up at him, certain that she had his full attention.

His eyes flickered uncertainly. "What?"

"Next time we run through difficulties—whether it's You-Know-Who or your concerns about Lily or something else—you don't push me away," Hermione told him firmly, pressing a finger to his lips so that he wouldn't interrupt her when he parted his mouth to speak. "You don't just withdraw and refuse to talk. There are times when you'll want to be alone and have some privacy, and I will most
certainly grant you that— but you can't suddenly turn unresponsive and then expect me to be waiting here as though nothing has happened." She pulled her finger away, and slid it down his throat, stopping to splay her hand against his chest. "Are we agreed?"

She watched him work his jaw for a moment, and then he nodded.

"In that case," Hermione said, kissing him. "Let's go to bed."

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione spent the night in comfortable bliss. The summer was drawing to a close now that it was mid-August, and the weather had changed to allow for refreshingly cool nights. Cool enough that they could sleep together under the covers, with Hermione snuggled up against Severus's chest, preferring to bury her face in the crook of his neck while they slept. She awoke before he did, and simply lay there pressed against him while mentally going through a checklist of things she planned to do that day, enjoying the moment with him while she did so.

When he awoke, it was with the fluidity and determined focus of a panther. His arms, which had been wrapped around her in sleep, tightened in warning before he promptly flipped her over onto her back and, with her encouraging response, began laying a trail of kisses and nips down her neck. He had a morning erection, and chose to take care of it in the most convenient and enjoyable way possible.

"Oh, yes," Hermione found herself moaning as she arched into him. "Oh god—Severus…!"

"Hermione—yes, Hermione…"

The man had turned into a beast overnight, and Hermione absolutely loved it. He had taken double helpings on the first serving, and now that he had her back and in his bed—this time quite literally—he took and gave liberally. He had a voracious appetite and a lot of needs, and it seemed that he rather preferred to satisfy them before giving any consideration to more mundane things like breakfast.

When Hermione finally did make it downstairs to begin breakfast, she paradoxically felt as dry as a desert while also quite wet with her juices and his semen clinging to her legs, and there was nothing she could quite use to describe her state of being. She was completely satiated; sore, but refreshed and feeling quite remarkable. Severus had not allowed her to get dressed, insisting she go down in nothing but her bra and knickers if she had to wear something.

Severus came down a few moments after her, fully dressed, much to Hermione's consternation when she turned around to serve him toast—though she was quickly overcome with curiosity and then vague understanding when she saw he was wearing full-length black trousers and a white button-up shirt with cuffs.

"What's this?" she asked, setting his food on the table before checking their icebox for pumpkin juice.

"The weather's cooled a bit," Severus responded seriously, adjusting the cuffs one more time before taking his seat. "School will be starting up in two weeks, and I can't very well teach students while looking like one myself. Of course, I'll have to find something a bit more severe than this," he added,
scowling at the thought. "You could probably help me."

Hermione placed a hand over her mouth.

Professor Snape.

"Well," she said, pretending to be thoughtful as she tried to recall what her Potions professor had looked like in her first to fifth years. "You could always wear a frock coat on top of what you've got now, and wear it all underneath your teaching robes."

She was almost sorry when she discovered he had actually taken her advisation under serious consideration.

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The week before school began, Hermione and Severus took care of emptying the house of food and making sure the basement was warded securely and otherwise prepared to be left unattended for an extended period of time. It was possible they would be back for the holidays, but Hermione was not certain, and in the interim, it needed to be magically protected from becoming a shabby motel for magical pests. Hermione considered that they might send a Hogwarts house-elf to check in on it once or twice a year, just to ascertain it remained in good order. They had put a lot of hard work into it, and wanted to keep their efforts from being wasted.

Hermione also wondered how Professor Dumbledore was doing in regards to restoring her time-turner. She had never heard of someone using a time-turner to travel forward in time, but if it could take her back in time—by twenty years, in fact—she was certain it could be persuaded to send her at least as far forward in time as she herself had lived. She was in no hurry to leave Severus or abandon her friends, but her situation was not one that she could afford to ignore.

Thus, it was when they arrived at Hogwarts that Hermione requested a private audience with the Headmaster before anything was decided.

"I'm afraid that while I've done considerable research and pulled quite a few strings to find out how time-travel to the past is achievable, I'm afraid everything I've examined suggests that time-travel to the future is a logistical impossibility," Professor Dumbledore told her kindly as Hermione circled around his office, glancing out the window as she made a turn past it to see the lake and the Forbidden Forest in the distance. "I have not stopped searching, of course, and the faster we return you to your time, the less damage control we will have to do—but I'm afraid that as of right now, and perhaps never, there is no way to return you to your original timeline."

Hermione sighed. "I understand, sir."

"I have, however, begun devising a back-up plan, so to speak," Dumbledore told her thoughtfully as he came to stand by the window next to her. "I will not reveal the details just yet, but if we have no means of returning you to your proper time, there will be a way to mitigate things when the year of nineteen ninety-six rolls around naturally."

"Thank you," Hermione said, grateful that he had kept her situation in mind despite the other important events that were concurrently taking place. "I appreciate it."

That avenue of discussion closed for now, Professor Dumbledore led Hermione and Severus down to the dungeons, in the direction of his quarters.

"You will be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts, but of course, you are not required to take the quarters that go along with the post," Dumbledore told them as he revealed what had once been
Slughorn's rooms. The furniture had been removed, and it was apparently up to the teachers to decide individually how to keep their quarters, for at the moment, there was nothing more in the single-bedroomed flat than an old, beaten desk.

"Hermione will be staying with me," Severus said, echoing a decision the two had unanimously made earlier.

"That's settled, then," Dumbledore said cheerfully, clapping his hands together. "If you are in need of anything, I am certain the house-elves will be more than willing to service you."

True to his word, they were. The elves, who the Weasley Twins once claimed would bring them a roast ox if they merely mentioned that they were a bit peckish, were almost overeager to bring in the requests for new furniture. The two professors found they had to be very specific in order to get what they were actually asking for, or they risked being handed overkill.

When they had asked for a bed, they did not mean a queen-sized bed with five layers of flowery quilts. They wanted a bed. A simple four-poster big enough for two people, and nothing more. Severus had been ready to strangle one of the little blighters when, having apparently not made himself clear enough, the elf in question had delivered a four-poster covered in a garish pattern of purple and orange stripes. Hermione had quickly charmed it a more tasteful color of dark green, double-checked that the sheets underneath it were plain white—they were not, and had to be changed as well—and then triple-checked that the mattress, too, was white. A third charm later, they were finally satisfied with that one piece of furniture.

Then came the replacement desks. The armchairs. A couch. The drapes for the enchanted windows that gave them an admittedly spectacular view of the lake. The rug for the living room. The absurd loveseat that Severus, nearly purple with rage, threatened to use as a means of playing whack-an-elf if it was not immediately removed.

The elves argued with them over everything. They had clearly enjoyed absurd tastes under Slughorn's lenient hands, and Severus—and Hermione too, at this point—would have none of it. They ended up with a single corner desk that they would share together, plain and functional with separate drawers for each of their purposes. The couch and armchairs were charmed dark green to Severus's tastes, and Hermione made the final decision on the drapes, choosing to make them ivory. They opted for a simple maroon rug for the area in front of the mantle, something Severus did not particularly mind, and which Hermione thought looked quite nice when the fire was lit.

They didn't even bother asking the elves for help in the bathroom. It was a large enough tub for four, sunk into the ground, and with a showerhead above the entire thing in case they should prefer that instead. They summoned and charmed their own color preference for towels, and Hermione spent several minutes setting up her things in there before joining Severus in the living room to have a last look-around.

"I'm satisfied," Severus rumbled, glancing into the fireplace as it sprung to life of its own accord.

Hermione wrapped her arms around him from behind. "I admit, it's actually quite nice."

One bedroom, one bathroom, and a living room. This would be their own, private living space for the entire year—and for at least one of them, a good time longer.

~o~O~o~

Hermione later sat in the Headmaster's office as they reviewed the teaching contract. Hermione had not signed hers when Severus had, and preferring to wait to do so at the last minute. When Professor
Dumbledore pulled the DADA teaching contract out of his desk and placed it in front of her, Hermione took a moment to read it through carefully.

"Is this the same contract you use for all the other Defense teachers?" Hermione asked curiously as she examined it.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said with a nod.

A thought suddenly occurred to Hermione. "Professor—I mean, Albus," she said, correcting herself. Since she was now a teacher rather than simply a recent ex-graduate, she had been invited to call the Headmaster by his first name. "Do you just duplicate this every year for each teacher, or do you write up a new one?"

She saw Dumbledore's eyebrows contract for a moment, and then quickly rise up to his hairline. "Do go on," he prompted.

Hermione pushed the contract away.

"Sir, has it occurred to you that if the job is indeed jinxed, that it may be the contract?"

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, stroking his beard thoughtfully. "Your theory makes a great deal of sense, but how would Tom Riddle have gotten his hands on it?" he murmured.

Hermione sat back in her seat, examining her flaw for a moment, before her eyes lit up with clarity. "This contract—one each you duplicate, you keep a copy for yourself and a copy for the teacher. But you also keep a Protean Charm on them so that it can't be altered without your knowledge—am I correct?" A nod from the man sitting across from her, and Hermione sat back in her seat triumphantly. "All Voldemort would have needed to do is drop by to see old Professor Merrythought right before he retired and somehow get his hands on the Professor's version of the contract. If he enspelled it, the jinx would have been transferred to the other copy—the very same one you keep duplicating and wiping blank for each new teacher."

Dumbledore leaned back in his chair as well, looking quite impressed. "I must say, Hermione, that in the last thirty-six years, I have never come across a theory quite as likely as yours. I have, of course, put much examination into the problem, and there have been multiple scourings of the classroom itself to see if an object had been cursed to carry the jinx—a vase or a book, perhaps, or even the door—but to think that it could have been the teaching contract itself..." he beamed at her. "That is an idea, Miss Granger."

"I don't know if that is it or not," Hermione said, folding her hands into her lap, "and in my own timeline, none of my Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers have ever lasted more than a year. My suggestion, sir, is that we test my theory by drawing up a separate contract, but if and when I retire from the post, you give the presumably jinxed contract to the next teacher."

Dumbledore nodded, pulling the old contract away and placing it back into the drawer of his desk before drawing out a new slip of parchment. "Let us see, shall we?" he asked, blue eyes twinkling.

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Hermione received a letter from James and Lily, asking for her to visit the day before the students were to arrive. Hermione, who had been busy reviewing the lesson plan she had painstakingly written out for the year, was unable to visit immediately. She opted to exclude herself from attending the Welcoming Feast, instead leaving with Dumbledore's permission to pay a visit to Godric's Hollow. She Flooed in with little trouble, having finally mastered how to do so without getting dizzy.
enough to topple over, and stepped into their living room, brushing soot off her robes.

"Hey," James said, offering her a smile as she stood next to the couch. Hermione stepped forward to hug him, and then turned to Lily, who smiled up at her gratefully. "Glad you could come."

A voice broke through from the kitchen: "Oi, is that Hermione?"

"She's here," Lily called back as she held Harry closer to her chest.

Sirius appeared a moment later, wiping his hands with a dishrag. "So she is. How've you been?"

"Great," Hermione said, moving to hug him as well. "I'll be teaching at Hogwarts now. So," she said, stepping back and glancing around the room, "what are we here for? I assume this isn't just a friendly visit, or I would have brought butterbeer for the lot of you."

James chuckled, while Sirius barked with laughter. "No. We asked you here because we had something serious we wanted to ask you."

Lily took a deep breath. "We've already asked Sirius to be Harry's godfather. You've been such a good friend to us—more than we could ever possibly express—and we would like you to do us the honor of being our son's godmother."

Hermione's jaw nearly dropped. She spluttered for a moment, unsure of what to say, when Sirius placed a hand on her shoulder, having come to stand beside her.

"James already told me that things are complicated," he started.

Hermione whirled around to look at James. "You didn't!" she accused.

James threw his hands up quickly. "I haven't told him anything, Hermione! I swear!"

"But—"

"I only told him that things were complicated," James said hurriedly. "Lily was there when we had him over to talk."

Hermione turned to look at Lily, who was nodding firmly. "Sirius doesn't know anymore than he should, Hermione," she promised.

"Wait," Sirius said, his head whipping around to face Hermione. "What am I not supposed to know?"

Hermione smacked her face with her hand. "Nevermind," she stated.

"Hermione…" Sirius pressed.

"Just—just forget it, alright?" Hermione said, staring down at the floor. "I'm sorry—it's just, things have been busy, and…" she sighed, closing her eyes. "I'm sorry for going off on you like that. You were saying?"

James let out a snort of laughter, removing his glasses to rub at his eyes. "As we were saying," he said, "we want you to be Harry's godmother, and even if things are complicated in such a way that you might not always be around to fulfill you duties as one, we would still like you to."

Hermione bit her lower lip. "That's a big decision to make," she said carefully, trying to turn this around in her head in a way that made some sort of sense. "Especially since you don't know about all
of the details of my—my situation."

"We know enough," Lily stated firmly. Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but Lily put up a hand. "We don't need to know everything about your situation, but we do know enough about who you are as a person. You're the only person we would ever ask, Hermione."

Hermione gazed into their faces, knowing that they were being completely honest with her. They had no inkling of the truth about her past, but they apparently did not care. If their only basis for asking her was their experience with her as a close family friend, then she felt comfortable in accepting their request, knowing that she was not obscuring some necessary fact from their decision-making—not directly…

"In that case," Hermione said slowly, curling a lock of hair between her fingers, as she smiled at them, "I would be honored to be Harry's godmother."

Lily beamed at her. Sirius pulled her into a bear-hug, before patting her on the back with enough force to send her stumbling in James's direction, who quickly pulled her into another hug.

"Thank you," he whispered into her ear.


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Afterwards, when Hermione went to the kitchen to grab a fresh plate of crackers, Sirius followed her, questions brimming on his lips.

"Hermione, earlier you mentioned something about how your situation was complicated," he stated.

"James and Lily obviously know."

Hermione turned around quickly from where she had been slicing some cheese to add to the plate, startled for a moment, before she returned to her task. "I can't tell you, Sirius," she responded simply.

He gave her a look of frustration and exasperation. "Why not?"

"Because it's dangerous," Hermione responded simply. "It's sensitive information in regards to this war, and the more people who know, the more it puts the people it concerns at risk."

Sirius examined her profile carefully. "What if I offered to take an Unbreakable Vow to hold my silence?"

Hermione turned to give him a curious look, appearing as though she were almost considering it for a moment, but then shook her head. She was Severus's handler, and therefore had seniority in deciding who could be allowed to know certain details about their operation, but it was Severus's life on the line more than hers—therefore, she felt, he should have an equal say in who to include in their circle of information.

"It's not just about me," she told him gently, willing him to understand. "There's someone else I'd have to discuss this with before I can tell anyone else."

Sirius gave her a deep, considering look, crossing his arms thoughtfully for a moment before he spoke again. "I always knew there was no way Dumbledore would just put you on organizational duty."

"I—what?" Hermione said, taken aback.
"You're simply too smart and too clever to ever just be delegated to making sure everyone's got their shoelaces tied and heads on straight," Sirius said seriously, leaning against the counter. Elaborating, he continued, "There are a few Order members who have family ties to Death Eaters and use them as a means of gathering intel for us. Naturally, no one in the Order knows who all of them are except for Dumbledore, and he's the one who makes decisions on who gets to know what. Am I right?"

Hermione simply gaped at him. He was too close to the truth, though still quite a ways off. Sirius put up his hands in a gesture of surrender.

"I won't ask any more, I promise," he stated, lowering his hands. "But I just want you to know that if you ever need my help with something, you can always ask me. I'll try not to ask too many questions."

Hermione's fingers shook as she set the knife down. "Thank you," she said shakily, turning around to look at him, "but the best thing—the best thing you could possibly do is to either try to forget all you've said or—or swear to me that you will never tell anyone that you suspect my duties for the Order to be anything other than simply administrative, or whatever else we tell the others."

"I will," Sirius promised, stepping forward and grasping her shoulders with both hands to soothe her tremors. "I promise that I will never speak a word of this to anyone—except for James and Lily?"

Hermione took a shuddering breath. "No. Please—not even to them. They know everything—or mostly everything that can be said, but I don't..." she shook her head. "Just take it to your grave, Sirius, or wait until You-Know-Who meets his. Then you may talk freely."

"Alright," Sirius said, giving her a friendly, trusting smile before pulling her into a hug. "I promise. You have my word, Hermione."

"I know," Hermione said, closing her eyes gratefully. "I trust you."

He clapped his hand on her shoulder, and Hermione recomposed herself before gathering the tray of cheese and crackers and carrying it back out to the living room.

The rest of the evening was spent with them in front of the fire in the living room, talking animatedly. In fact, Hermione was wonderfully reminded of their conversations in front of the fire in the Gryffindor Common room, when they had all been students together. They all had their turns holding Harry, who Sirius joked was the man of the hour. The baby in question spent most of the time sleeping in his mother's arms, and Hermione knew that she would look back on this moment with fondness years from now.

Conversation drifted over to the welfare of the Longbottoms, who had gone into deeper hiding. Alice still wrote to Hermione once a week, but could neither tell them where they were nor any details about their surroundings or overall situation. Alice could only tell Hermione that Frank's mother—who she admitted was quite a formidable woman—was their secret keeper. Hermione burned that part of the letter as soon as she had read it, and assured Alice in her next correspondence that she had done so. But still it was a relief to know that someone trustworthy was taking care of them.

Conversation turned to other matters of interest. Sirius was considering asking Marlene to marry him. James wanted to know how Hermione planned to teach the upper years, and joked to Sirius that she was probably going to wipe the floor with them.

When the hour had begun to grow late, Hermione reluctantly made her departure, citing that she had classes to teach tomorrow. She was pulled into two separate, brotherly bear-hugs, laughing as she kissed them on each cheek before moving to do the same to Lily. Harry received a kiss on the
forehead and a fond look, and then Hermione pinched some floo powder and, with a promise to visit when she could, left.

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Severus was waiting for her when she arrived in their quarters, stretched over the length of the couch with a book. He looked up at her when she slipped into the room, and set his reading down.

"You're back," he stated, sitting up. "How was your visit?"

Hermione did not reply immediately, but tugged off her traveling cloak and kicked off her shoes, making short work of her robes before she moved to join him, sitting in what little space she was afforded when he drew up his knees to make room. "They asked me to be Harry's godmother."

Severus stared at her silently for a moment, and the leaned forward and pulled her over to him, and they shifted for a few seconds, adjusting themselves until Hermione was lying flat on her belly, on top of him. "And you accepted?"

Hermione closed her eyes, resting her cheek against his shoulder as his arms came to wrap around her, his hands sliding down to massage her bum appreciatively. "Yes."

She heard Severus exhale sharply. "I should have known you would."

"You didn't even know what they were asking me to visit for in the first place," Hermione retorted with a teasing smile. "But enough of that. What's done is done, and I've made my decision regarding the matter."

Severus brought one hand back to lift her chin up so that he could meet her eyes with his. Hermione found herself gazing into them, drawn into what seemed to be dark, black pools—and then a moment later, she found herself actually being drawn in as Severus slipped seamlessly into her mind. Hermione's Occlumency shields went up immediately, and Severus merely circled them for a moment, before pressing firmly against them. Hermione pushed back, determined to hold him out. Their minds remained locked, each trying to push and maneuver around the other, before Hermione's concentration was suddenly broken by Severus grinding his hips against hers.

Hermione quickly discovered that he was not searching for hidden information or important secrets, when the memory of them dancing together at one of Slughorn's suppers hazily swam into view—the one where she had worn the dark red dress robes Marlene and Alice had made for her. The one where he had spent a good deal of time staring at her breasts, quite fascinated by the way the fabric shimmered invitingly over them. But it was still a point of pride that she was able to keep him out, so she thus concentrated all her mental resources into doing so, even as he skillfully distracted her from succeeding. Her shirt had been removed, and her jeans were being pulled down her legs even as another memory sank into view, one of them dueling in the dark, spells flashing, before he managed to pin her to the ground. Just as he was now pinning her to the rug, in fact. Hermione struggled in response, her eyes still locked imperiously to his, and she suddenly became very aware that he had grabbed one of her hands and was pressing it to his groin, where she could feel the evidence of his growing erection.
"Get—out—" she panted, writhing underneath him even as she squeezed him gently in the way she knew he liked it. It was simply too much for her to focus on—the memories, the sensations of the fire dancing across her bared skin even as cool air brushed over other parts, the fact that he was now undressing… she couldn't hold it together. Her Occlumency was powerful enough to keep him out, and were she ever in such a similar position with someone else, she would have methods of holding her concentration together or even overpowering them. But in this moment of intimacy with the person she trusted most, it simply was not possible. She wasn't about to flip him over onto his back and hex him, despite the fact that more and more of her memories were beginning to bleed through. "Those aren't for you to see…"

Severus bent his face to hers, smirking as he undid the cuffs of his shirt and pulled his arms out of his sleeves. "But I want to."

Hermione shook her head slightly, still unable to pull her eyes away from his. They quite literally demanded her attention, and she didn't seem capable of gathering enough brain cells together to commence in pulling her gaze away. "What are you looking for?" she said, her breath hitching as she felt him press his clothed erection against her knickers.

"Something, something…" he responded with a silken purr, kissing her even whilst never taking his eyes off of hers. He had begun unbuttoning his trousers, wriggling them down to his hips before reaching for his wand to wordlessly magick them in a neat, folded pile with his shirt on one of the armchairs. "You'll see…"

More memories swam into view, but they were all sexual in nature, at least from Severus's perspective. He was not burying deeper for her other secrets. Her hanging upside-down, tearing her robes off so that she could hex him properly, revealing that she was lacking a shirt of any kind. Her responding to him as he kissed her for the first time. Her lying in her bed, the hangings closed despite the fact that she was alone, leaning back with her fingers working themselves furiously between her legs—just like his were now, pulling the crotch of her knickers aside and teasing the little nub of flesh that nearly shattered her concentration entirely.

And just like in the memory, Hermione found herself moaning his name. "Severus…"

She saw him grin wickedly, a victorious sneer. "I always thought you might have masturbated to thoughts to me…"

"Only after you kissed me," Hermione breathed in protest, even as she trembled in response to his fingers. She felt the tap of his wand against her hip, and knew that her knickers had been summarily taken hostage. "Don't try and tell me you didn't, either."

His fingers were replaced by him pressing his erection against her, hot and throbbing against her clit, and she ground herself against him helplessly, wanting more. "Of course I did. Even before I kissed you, I wanted you—I wanted you enough that after you nearly choked me during your final exam, I returned to my dorm and wanked myself to thoughts of you." He was panting now, trying to hold himself still as Hermione began working herself into a frenzy. "I fantasized that had it not been an exam, had we been alone, I could have seduced you and then taken you on the floor and had you…"

Hermione was barely cognizant of his words as more memories swam to the forefront of his mind, dragged along by his legilimencied probing. How he was managing to retain enough focus to control his search, she had no clue, but she still managed to string her words together. "Like you had me on the floor of the living room?" she quipped with vocal difficulty as his hands came to cup her breasts, squeezing them appreciatively.

"Yes…" He was trembling now with the effort of holding himself back as Hermione's hips grinding
against his erection became more insistent. "And when I nearly convinced you, the first night you stayed at Spinner's End—gods, that had been so close… after you left, I masturbated to thoughts of taking you then, too…"

Hermione laughed weakly. "I knew that if I gave in to that, we would be having sex in less than a week."

"Would that have been such a bad thing?" he demanded, now grinding himself against her with more insistency.

"No—no, not at all," Hermione breathed, her words broken by an involuntary moan. "But—too fast, too soon… hadn't really seen you much before then…"

"Understandable," Severus muttered, finally pulling his gaze from hers, and though his legilimency attack did not end, the strength of it was lessened by the lack of eye contact.

Hermione was finally able to squeeze her eyes shut, and she did so, arching and moaning into him as he began and nip and suckle at the column of her neck. Another memory swam into the front of her mind even as Hermione marshalled her forces to start pulling more of them behind her walls: her standing in front of a bookcase, her back to him, as he pressed himself against her and slipped a hand into her jeans and between her legs. The memory itself sent tremors of want through Hermione, and it was all she could do not to give out and let herself shatter.

Severus suddenly thrust into her, and Hermione did shatter right then. Her Occlumency walls broke shamefully, breaking like glass as Hermione pulsed around her lover, white-hot pleasure clenching in her belly and jerking her legs, sending terrible tremors through her body that she was helpless to suppress. That she didn't want to suppress. She let out a cry that was promptly muffled by Severus's lips covering hers, drinking them in, and she wrapped her hips around his as he set his pace, pounding into her through her orgasm.

She knew Severus could hear her thoughts even as he took her. They were hardly well-thought out, but they seemed to be what he was after, for he took them regardless of their incoherency. They were along the lines of Oh god, Severus!, Sweet Merlin, and Fuck me, the latter seeming to be the one he took to heart the most, for he did exactly that.

He collapsed on top of her several moments later, spent, and Hermione found herself shaking slightly from the tremors of post-climatic bliss. Her eyes were closed, her hair a sweaty and wild mess around her head, as she found herself idly wondering once her braincells began functioning properly—as well as her Occlumency shields since Severus had not been able to hold onto his Legilimency throughout his own orgasm—if she would ever be able to walk again.

"I know your weakness now," Severus murmured into her ear, grinding his pelvis against hers for emphasis. "You will never be able to keep me out again."

"Fat chance," Hermione responded breathlessly. "I'll just get better."

"As will I," Severus purred, dipping his head to nuzzle her face. "You are mine, Hermione, and I will never let you go."

Hermione felt another trickle of warmth add itself to the mess of already-existing juices and his come. He had not left her yet—something that had become a trademark habit of his, to remain inside her even after he had softened until they absolutely had to pull apart—and she knew he would feel it, too. He had become too good at reading her body, her mind soon to be incuded at this point, for him to not know what kind of effect his words had on her.
"In that case," Hermione responded, dragging her hands up to his face so that she could pull him into a kiss, "I do believe I can now claim unlimited access to your heart."

"No complaints from me," Severus responded smoothly, moving to nibble on her ear.

"And your body, I suppose..."

"Quite," he agreed silkily, grinding himself against her again.

Hermione giggled, wrapping her arms around his neck. "And your library."

Severus's head shot up at this, and he gave her a pointed glare. "Don't be cruel, Hermione."

His lover underneath him grinned mercilessly at this, and then ground down against him in obvious emphasis of her own.

"It's cruel to deny a bibliophile," she purred, giving him a wanton look. "Now, are we done for the night, or was there something else you wanted to do?"

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The first week of classes went about as well as Hermione could have expected. Remembering what she had liked and disliked about her last two teachers in this subject, she set about making it very clear to the students what kind of teacher she would be. Many of them knew her already, given that she had been a student less than a year ago, and it was clear that many of them initially expected some kind of leniency. Hermione had taken a leaf out of Severus's book in regards to attire, and wore a simple white button-up shirt underneath her robes, with a plain black knee-length skirt in lieu of trousers, her hair restrained in a chignon that gave her a very no-nonsense appearance despite her youth.

Hermione started off by assigning them all year-appropriate spells to practice after treating them to a lecture very similar to the one Harry had given the members of the D.A when they first congregated.

"Defending yourself against the Dark Arts isn't just memorizing a list of spells and knowing when to pull them out of your pocket," Hermione told her first class, striding up the rows of desks as she spoke. "Dealing with the dark arts requires creativity, innovation, and the need for you to be quick on your feet." She turned around and began walking back toward the front of the room, glancing out the window this time as she continued, "You all know that You-Know-Who is out there—and even if he weren't, there are others just like him, only less obvious. Some of you have friends and family who have been abducted or killed by them." There was a sniffle from the back of the classroom at this, and Hermione finished, "Spellwork alone won't save you if you don't use your head. Knowing when and how to use spells is just as necessary as knowing how to move, how to act, and most importantly, when to run and when to defend." She whipped around to face them. "That is what I'm going to be teaching you this year."

In some of the classes where the students were older, she had earned derisive laughs or disdainful stares. Some of them had known Hermione personally, though nowhere on the same level as she had the Marauders and future Order members, and knew how skilled she was, but thought she was still reaching rather high in her speech. She was only nineteen: exactly how much did she expect them to believe she had experienced in the three months since she had graduated?

As it turned out, quite a lot. In every class between fifth and seventh-year, where at least one person had expressed disbelief, Hermione had coldly ordered them all to stand and push their desks aside, stacking them against the wall at one end of the room. They stood awkwardly around the room,
uncertain of what she was about to do, when she explained to them that if they had any doubts about her qualification to teach—something that had rarely, if ever, come up with any other teacher, and which she was only facing because she was a recent graduate—they were free to challenge her.

They all jumped in. Hexes, jinxes, and curses flew indiscriminately around the room, and Hermione found herself spending more time ducking than doing any sort of spellcasting: their aim was unpracticed, their movements slow and often clumsy, and many of them took down more of their fellow classmates than they ever managed to get anywhere near her. When Hermione did cast, she did so silently, wordlessly immobilizing them in some capacity. The few students who had not joined in stood off to the side, eyes wide as they watched Hermione engage their classmates with something akin to grim amusement.

As soon as the status quo had been set, Hermione had little problem keeping their attention. The sixth and seventh years were ordered to work with nonverbal spells, much to their consternation, and Hermione informed her fifth years that they would be practicing it as a preparatory lesson before their preceding years.

One sore fifth year, still on the floor and rubbing his neck from where Hermione's Choking Curse had gotten hold of him, snidely remarked that she sounded as though she actually expected to last the year.

"Don't be so surprised, Davis," Hermione told him lazily, flicking her wand at him and causing him to be hauled to his feet by an invisible force. "I very well might."

And with that, she set them to work. She knew what spells most of them already knew, and put them through their paces to check their capability in casting them before assigning a new spell. Those who did not succeed in casting it at the end of class had it assigned as homework. She received complaints and groans of protest at this from the classes in which it occurred, which she silenced immediately by slamming her hand on her desk.

"If you lot can't cast a simple Stunning Spell by the beginning of next class, points will be taken off!" she snarled at her fourth years.

Hermione was not joking, and she was not lenient. She had no intention of abusing her students as Welk had done, but she had other burdens to carry on her back aside from listening to the complaints of whining students who were hoping for a bit of free time to goof off, and she was having none of it. She had been trained by two experienced Aurors, tricked a Death Eater into going on a wild goose chase, blatantly defied Voldemort, held her Occlumency barriers even against Unforgivables during intensive training, fought and watched her back while still a student at Hogwarts, and was the handler of the Order's most important spy. The Hermione of old would have been kinder, gentler, more understanding and sympathetic to the petty cares of her students—but she would have also been incompetent as a teacher, reduced to frustration and tears while trying to regain control of her class.

Hermione had not lost all of her touch as a sympathetic and caring person, but she was harder now out of pure necessity. Her students would not get unmitigated leeway from her, and the quicker they learned that, the better it would be for all of them. She had learned from Moody that mollycoddling led to poorly taught lessons, from Faulkner that a firm but fair attitude won good results, and from Welk that she should not be too heavy-handed. Thus, the culmination of those experiences was what guided her methods.

Severus's experience was similar to hers, though he had let his temper come through rather quickly, and he handled dissension differently. The students, particularly the Slytherins, expected leniency from him. They treated him like an old pal at first, and joked around in class at the start. Severus had
glared at them coldly, snarled, ordered them to do their work, and made it abruptly clear that he didn’t give a damn if he had been their former housemate. He was the Head of Slytherin, but he quickly shattered their illusion that he was their equal—or rather, that they were his.

Hermione had been surprised to hear this, wondering when his favoritism would start, but was at the same time not particularly shocked. Severus was a man who demanded respect, and when people he was supposed to have authority over began treating him as though he were their classmate and not their teacher, Hermione could very well imagine him losing his temper. Every class he had that week left looking somewhat shell-shocked, some students came close to tears. They had been used to Slughorn's genial behavior, his social and friendly demeanor as well as his willingness to allow students to chit-chat amongst themselves and with him, and Severus was a drastic change from that.

First week in, Hermione was grudgingly considered one of the most interesting teachers, given how alike her teaching style was to Professor Faulkner's, and Potions had become the most dreaded class in the castle. Even Professor Sprout's venomous tentacula and other unwieldy plants could not hope to hold a candle to how horrible Professor Snape was to the students.

To be fair, they had not taken him seriously at first. If they had, Hermione suspected he would have merely been strict, if somewhat snarky. But when they had not taken his warning signs, merely attributing it to him bluffing or even joking, he had gone from zero to sixty in the space of ten seconds, and had not gone back. He also did not care which class was responsible for his bad mood. Thus, they all suffered.

By the second week in, the students had settled into something of an understanding with the new teachers. Professor Granger expected the assigned work to be handed in, correctly and on-time, and for them to push themselves. When they did, they were rewarded with points and a nod or word of acknowledgement. When they missed their homework twice, or demonstrated blatant instances of disrespect to her, they were given detention or docked points. She was noted as being fair, and some of the students even came to enjoy her class, given that she soon warmed up to the subject and taught it with enthusiasm that was somewhat contagious.

They also learned that Professor Snape expected three things: Silence, obedience, and attentiveness. Those three virtues would get you through his class in one piece, perhaps even with a point increase for your house if your potion turned out well and you were not a Gryffindor. If you lacked one of those three things, points were taken liberally. Sometimes it seemed to them that he relished in every opportunity to torture a student; he keep them on their toes, either by threatening detention if they missed a single homework assignment, or by deducting points if they were careless with their classwork.

The advent of his blatant favoritism, however, became clear to Hermione one evening when they received a floo call from none other than Lucius Malfoy, who strode into their quarters like he owned them. Previously, Severus had merely gone out of his way to pick on Gryffindors, out of sheer spite. The two of them had been sitting in their armchairs, focusing in grading the papers they had assigned when Malfoy had come in. He did not come without invitation, of course: the flames turned green, and Hermione had sat up quickly, torn between leaving and staying when she heard Lucius's disembodied voice request that Severus let him through. She exchanged glances with him, and then casually leaned back in her chair, sitting up straight before resuming her grading, making it clear that she would hold her ground.

"Good evening, Severus," Lucius said, greeting his friend as he wordlessly magicked soot off his robes. He had a cane now, a distinct change from before, and if anything, his demeanor had turned even more supercilious and aristocratically disdainful. "I hope you're not too terribly busy."
"You wouldn't care if I was," Severus snarked, setting his grading aside. "What do you want?"

"Just a little talk," Lucius said, eyeing Hermione with a sneer. When Hermione didn't respond, he prompted, "You're both teaching here, I see."

Hermione looked up from where she was marking an essay in red ink. "Defense Against the Dark Arts," she stated unnecessarily. "Severus is teaching Potions." Making her expression blank and her tone falsely cordial, she asked, "Is there anything we can help you with, Mr. Malfoy?"

"Ah, yes," Lucius said, stroking his chin as he moved to lean against the mantlepiece. "I believe there is something you can help us with, Severus. You see, word of your… teaching methods has gone around a bit."

"The students are irritating little blighters," Severus snapped, glaring down at an essay that appeared to be bleeding red ink from very orifice. "They are incompetent, lazy, and refuse to apply themselves unless I force them to."

"That's all very well," Lucius said, waving a hand dismissively, "but the Dark Lord is bit concerned about how you're handling your teaching and Head of Slytherin duties."

Severus's face became smooth and expressionless. "Do tell."

Lucius cast Hermione a supercilious look, and then turned back to Severus, who merely raised his eyebrow. "You are a Death Eater, Severus. Many of the Slytherin students here are the children of our brothers-in-arms, and how you treat them reflects upon the Dark Lord. He wants them well taught, but they should be raised above all others, as their parents would wish them to be in answer to their service. Does that not seem reasonable?"

It suddenly made sense to Hermione. Death Eaters expected preferential treatment from their lord and from their own, and their children were entitled to receive the same.

Severus leaned back in his chair, sneering. "Tell the Death Eaters who have complained that they are to send letters to their offspring ordering them to behave and apply themselves. In return, I will give all of Slytherin house my undivided care and preference."

Hermione sat frozen in her seat, unmoving. She might as well have been a statue. This was simply unbelievable—this was more of a business exchange between Slytherins, with her as a silent witness, than anything else.

Lucius raised an eyebrow at this, and then smirked. "Excellent. The Dark Lord will be pleased, and I will pass your message along." He glanced over at Hermione, who remained unmoving, and turned to give Severus an incomprehensible look before he collected a bit of floo powder from the mantel and took his leave.

The flames whooshed emerald green behind him, and then he was gone.

Hermione inhaled deeply before she spoke. "Severus, how did you explain my presence to the Dark Lord?"

Severus had returned to his work, and did not look up at he replied: "The Dark Lord had reason to believe that you are a pureblood pretending to be a Muggle-born, which is why he had shown you such leniency."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at this. "Why would he care about my heritage if at best it would make me a blood traitor?"
Severus crossed something out on the essay he was grading, and then flipped it over to the other side. "He does not care for most blood traitors, but you have shown exceptional magical skill and talent. He believes killing you to be too much of a waste, if you can otherwise be put to good use."

Hermione waited for him to continue, but he did not, and thus prompted, "Good use how?"

Severus sighed, and finally looked up at her.

"Breeding stock," he said shortly. Hermione gaped at him, and he held up a hand to silence her. "The Dark Lord believes you to be controllable, despite your open allegiance to the Order of the Phoenix. You have never participated on the front lines, and with you presumably under my constant supervision, he is content to let me keep you, so to speak."

Hermione leaned back in her chair with a sigh, pinching the bridge of her nose. "Essentially, he has weighed the pros and cons of keeping me alive, and has decided that the benefits of having children he believes will be powerful three-quarter-bloods outweigh the risks of me trying to wring his scrawny neck?"

"Essentially," Severus responded carefully.

"Has he considered that I might not allow that?"

Severus leaned back in his chair, pausing to think. "He expects me to work it out with you, in some capacity. He knows that I have no interest in having children now, and I believe his plans are for him to take over the Ministry of Magic and institute his reforms before he insists that such a thing happen. We are not the only ones, Hermione," he cautioned. "His followers are encouraged to find worthy spouses for carrying on the next generation." A pause, before he continued, "You may remember Bellatrix Black—she's a good example of this rhetoric, given that she is now Bellatrix Lestrange. She only married to earn the Dark Lord's approval." His expression contorted into a sneer. "For now, I believe, he is content for me to restrain you—though the both of us know very well that that is not the case."

Hermione sighed, grateful that such a scenario would never occur before her timeline could be reached. "He is a bloody nutcase."

"Would you ever want children, Hermione?" Severus asked cautiously, not looking up at her as he skewered yet another essay.

Hermione measured her response carefully.

"Someday, yes," Hermione admitted, turning to look at him. "And with you—absolutely. But not right now."

Severus seemed more than satisfied with her response, and set his most recently graded work aside to move onto attacking the remaining essays with red ink. "In that case, it seems the situation is resolved."

Hermione nodded in agreement, but spent the rest of the evening turning over their conversation in her head while they worked, unable to help being insulted by the assumptions Voldemort had made about her, and in a state of mid-disbelief that Severus was not adverse to the prospect of a family.

Though they were certainly in agreement on one thing.

While Voldemort reigned, there would be no family.
Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Seventeen

This is one of those chapters where I am giving my readers fair warning on disturbing scene(s).

Enormous gratitude to my wonderful beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review.

The Yule holidays were upon them soon enough. On the last day of classes, Severus had requested that Hermione stop by the potions classroom just before lunch. Hermione had a free period, given that her students were in the library doing an in-class research project, supervised by Madam Pince, and Severus had decided to take advantage of it.

This was why she found herself sitting on his desk, naked except for her shirt which had been unbuttoned, and shivering slightly due to the fact that the air in the dungeon was freezing cold. She was still not entirely clear on how he had managed to convince her to do this; for some reason, the details were a bit fuzzy. One moment, she was walking into the empty classroom and being greeted with a kiss by her lover, and then the next…

"Severus…" Hermione moaned.

"Shh." He teased himself against her folds, leaning forward to take a pert nipple into his mouth.

"This isn't a good idea…" Hermione tried, but failed when he slowly pushed himself into her, forcing her to tighten her grip around his neck and bury her face in his shoulder. "Students come in… any moment…"

"Door's closed," Severus responded shortly as he gripped her hips and began thrusting in earnest. "Locked. Class doesn't start for another ten minutes, and I have not seen you all day."

Hermione shuddered, lifted her head and biting his neck to keep herself from crying out too loudly as he stroked her in all the right spots, adding the grinding of his pelvis against her clitoris into the mix. Hermione shook her head as she tried to regain her wits. He was the single most randy man she had ever met, though she had heard Lily complain more than once about the lip-locked couples she had been duty-bound to separate and send away in the halls. Unfortunately, he was also quite likely the only one who could ever seduce her into doing something that, in Hermione's mind, had the words bad idea scrawled across it. In his very own spiky handwriting, no less.

"Y-you saw me this morning," Hermione moaned, pressing her lips against his neck and squeezing her eyes shut as he began to move faster, his hips jerking. She was having difficulty stringing her words together. "And—and it's just—just four more hours until class ends… one hour until l-

"Don't care," Severus growled. "Now hush."

Hermione did not exactly have a choice in the matter. She certainly stopped protesting then, as her words became unintelligible, but quiet she was not. She buried her face against his neck again, trying to muffle her moans and cries, with little success. When she finally spiraled down from her high,
feeling rather lightheaded, Severus pressed a kiss to her forehead and then pulled away.

"Get dressed, love," he said, smirking at the dazed look on her face. "You have three minutes to get out of here before the students see you in this state."

"You are an arse," Hermione muttered unconvincingly as she slid off the desk on unsteady legs. "I'll have my revenge, just you wait."

Severus's responding sneer was her only reply, and Hermione knew she was going to have to find the actions to back up the words at a later date.

Once classes were over, however, the two of them lay sated on the threadbare rug in front of the fire in their quarters, discussing the possibilities for the holiday.

"The Dark Lord expects me to be available," Severus told her seriously, resting his head on her shoulder even as he braced most of his weight on his elbows. "We either must stay here or go to Spinner's End if we are not staying with the Malfoys."

"Well," Hermione responded slowly, tracing circles on his back with her fingers. "I was thinking that it's possible the Order might be holding a Christmas Party at Headquarters. If that's the case, I might go to that."

"If nothing else," Severus said, expression turning to distaste, "I will most certainly be spending a great deal of time at Malfoy Manor, if I don't end up staying there for the duration."

Hermione grimaced. "We need to have a way to remain in touch in case you're summoned."

"It would seem suspicious if I refused the invitation," Severus pointed out.

"I am not staying at Malfoy Manor for Christmas," Hermione snapped.

"This isn't an issue of our own comfort anymore," Severus pointed out sourly. "This is us doing our jobs. Until the Dark Lord is gone, we have very little to ourselves."

Hermione shut her eyes. "I doubt doing my job includes placing myself in unnecessary danger," she responded flatly.

"You're under the Dark Lord's protection," Severus reminded her. "The Malfoys will not ignore that."

Hermione forced herself to set aside her own repulsion and the instinct to keep herself as far away from the Malfoys as possible as she considered the situation from all angles. "The Dark Lord could visit Malfoy Manor," she pointed out at last.

"It's a risk, and a distinct possibility," Severus conceded.

Hermione shook her head. "I can't come in direct contact with him," she said firmly. "It's far too risky, and not enough gain."

"In that case," Severus stated, "any information I receive in that time will have to wait until the holidays are over for you to record and report."

Hermione bit her lower lip. "Tell me right now—is the Dark Lord planning any… festivities? I recall your last report indicating it was a probability, but you had nothing solid."

"There is still nothing solid on that," Severus said, frustrated. "I cannot turn down the Malfoys or I
put myself and my position at risk, both in their good graces as Draco's godfather and in the Dark Lord's as a loyal Death Eater. Separation is also not an option in this case, due to the complicated issue of the Dark Lord's expectations concerning my handling of you, and Dumbledore's expectations in regards to your handling of me."

"The irony," Hermione said dryly. "We're each others' handlers."

Severus snorted with amusement, and then his expression turned serious once more. "You will have to come to Malfoy Manor with me."

Hermione closed her eyes. "Bad idea," she said.

"At this point, everything short of cutting off my left arm and running away to Australia seems like a bad idea," Severus sneered disparagingly.

Hermione opened one eye to look at him consideringly. "I happen to think that's a bad idea, too."

"Then let's stick to this one," Severus said, rolling over onto his side so that his back was to the fire. Hermione could see his face clearly now, and it showed a tired, if slightly pained expression. "It's a week—I'm not expected to arrive for four days, and we're only expected to remain until three days before term resumes. A week at Malfoy Manor isn't too terrible."

Hermione sat up and curled her arms around her knees, her curly hair obscuring her face as she fell deep into thought.

"Seven days," she finally repeated, her face weary. "We need to speak to the Headmaster."

~o~O~o~

Hermione closed her eyes as she found herself standing in the courtyard of Malfoy Manor, surrounded by strutting white peacocks and willing herself not to do something stupid like running—or in her case, Apparating—away.

The courtyard was blanketed by snow, yet somehow the peacocks appeared to be unaffected. It mattered very little to her either way. Hermione was waiting out in the cold, wearing a black woolen hat with her gloved hands stuffed in her pockets, while Severus and Lucius had gone inside, probably to sit in front of a fire in some fancy armchairs for an even fancier Malfoy glass of wine. Or something of the sort.

Hermione knew Narcissa's eyes were glued on her, and she was alert, but did part particularly fear the woman. She did, however, know that her statue-still presence was putting the woman on edge. People simply did not stand in the snow, still as a stone, and remain unmoving for such a long amount of time.

Seven-month-old Draco Malfoy was sitting on a part of the cobblestone courtyard that had been cleared of snow, bundled up and playing with what looked like a three-tailed jack russel terrier, though Hermione knew it to be a crup. His mother stood less than three feet away from him, smiling thinly as she watched. Hermione knew she was the reason for the blond-haired woman's sour expression, and she did not comment.

Hermione was standing ten meters away from them, perpendicular and only able to see them out of the corner of her eyes.

When the crup bounded over to sniff at her feet, Hermione didn't respond. It let out a low whine, but Hermione merely glanced down at it with such a cold look that the animal eventually slunk away,
looking quite hurt by its less-than-warm reception.

The hour grew dark very quickly, and Hermione saw Narcissa pick Draco up—and then, to her surprise and dread, walk over to her. Hermione turned her head only a fraction of an inch to look at the woman once she had approached.

"You should come inside," Narcissa said, sneering, her expression disdainful, as though Hermione were dung under her nose. "It's not wise to stay outside for too long."

Hermione did not respond, but merely turned around, hands still stuffed into her pockets, and walked back to the house. The less said, the better. Narcissa followed a moment later, the crup padding loyally at her feet.

When the door closed behind her, Hermione felt as though she was a rat that had been shut up in a prison maze.

~o~O~o~

Hermione found herself to be grateful that the Malfoys rarely spoke or addressed her. In return, Hermione was quiet, near dead-silent for the first three days she was there. She did not return to the courtyard, but instead followed Severus like a quiet shadow, untalkative and uncommunicative. The two of them had agreed that the less she said, the better. Lucius made a pointed barb at her once or twice about her being submissive now that she was not directly under Dumbledore's protection, but Hermione did not rise to the bait, merely turned away and directed her attention to the nearest window or bookshelf, appearing mute and bored.

Severus's entire demeanor, the moment they arrived at Malfoy Manor, changed distinctly. His expression was often blank, cold, sour, or disinterested—though Hermione did see his expression soften somewhat toward Draco, which she knew went a long way with Narcissa, and by extension, her husband. Lucius, who was under the impression that Severus had Hermione tamed to his hand, seemed to think that it was therefore safe for Hermione to be overseen by his wife, as though she were a tamed lion that needed someone to watch her, and prevent her from attacking his prized peacocks.

In a way, she was. Hermione knew that deep down, Lucius feared her. He had nothing to fear from Severus, whom he knew to be superior in magical prowess but inferior in status—but Hermione was neither his friend nor did she ever acknowledge his idea of status quo. Thus, without any hand of control over her other than his own proficiency at magic and his faith in Severus's ability to keep her in check, she was a threat to him.

On the third evening of their stay, Hermione found herself in the east wing, staring out at the courtyard and wondering if she could sneak out for some fresh air, while Narcissa sat on a nearby armchair with her son. Her musings were interrupted when Narcissa broke the silence for nearly the first time since Hermione had arrived for another reason other than to direct her to do something.

"Why do you hide your pureblood heritage?"

Hermione did not turn around to reply, and her response was expressionless and blank. "What makes you think I'm a pureblood?"

"You have obvious magical talent," Narcissa responded archly. "Exceptional, according to Severus."

"Lily Potter is a Muggleborn witch with more power in her than some of your husband's associates have combined," Hermione replied coolly.
"Accident of nature," Narcissa stated, lowering the temperature in the room with the coldness in her tone. "Abominations happen."

"Then perhaps," Hermione responded with a mirthless laugh, "I am just another abomination, as you put it."

"I find that unlikely," the other woman countered.

"Why?" Hermione asked, finally turning around to look at her companion.

"Because no Mudblood would ever admit such a thing in this house," Narcissa responded with a tight smile.

Hermione smiled thinly in response, and then turned away, gazing back out the window. "That does hold some measure of logic."

They lapsed into silence for several minutes, before Narcissa opened the conversation up again with a statement that took Hermione slightly off guard.

"You have proved to be far less troublesome than I would have believed."

"How so?" Hermione queried, her attention still on the courtyard where she watched someone lead out a great, Aethonan horse for a turn around the courtyard. Its wings were pinned to its sides with a harness.

"You have been rather… quiescent."

"Did you expect me to be noisy?" Hermione quipped half-heartedly as she watched the chestnut horse toss its head, jerking his groom forward and literally pulling the man off his feet for a moment.

"I expected you to be a Gryffindor," Narcissa stated calmly.

"You consider my capabilities for success might not have been so repressed," Narcissa suggested airly. "You could have been great in Slytherin, with talent, intelligence, and discipline like yours."

Hermione laughed coldly. "I'm afraid it took a long time for me to develop much of the latter."

"You should have been sorted into Slytherin," Narcissa observed, adjusting her hold on Draco.

"Would it have made any difference?"

"Perhaps your capabilities for success might not have been so repressed," Narcissa suggested airly. "You could have been great in Slytherin, with talent, intelligence, and discipline like yours."

Hermione laughed coldly. "I'm afraid it took a long time for me to develop much of the latter."

"Still," Narcissa pointed out, her posture regally relaxed as she leaned back in her chair, "You could have enjoyed the benefits of being a pureblood, had you embraced them."

Hermione made a sound in the back of her throat. "I don't judge people based on their parentage."

"Parentage tells a lot about the person," Narcissa said warningly.

Hermione glanced down once at Draco, before looking back at the window. "Of course, parents who are immensely rich may bring up a spoiled and undisciplined child," she said casually. "But
there are also children who come from wealthy families who turn into disciplined, hardworking, and generous members of society."

Narcissa raised an eyebrow at this. Hermione continued:

"A person whose parents are Muggles may very well turn out to be a Muggle themselves, but there is also a chance that they will not. On the corollary, there are children whose parents are magical, but turn out to be less than half as magically powerful as either parent—or even squibs." Hermione watched as the winged horse in the courtyard was led away, and then finished: "Parentage does not necessarily guarantee the magical prowess or temperament of offspring."

"So what would you have us witches and wizards do?" Narcissa asked icily.

Hermione shrugged. "Diversify. That doesn't necessarily mean marrying Muggles, but it does include Muggle-borns and half-bloods who show an aptitude for magic that would help strengthen the bloodline."

"Powerfully magical Muggle-borns don't exist," Narcissa said dismissively.

"Lily Potter," Hermione said.

"Abominations of nature," Narcissa insisted coldly.

Hermione cracked a smile, even as she knew the conversation was over. *That's what you think.*

~o~O~o~

Hermione managed to sneak a visit out to the courtyard two days later, where she stood in the snow, watching the peacocks fluff themselves up and strut about. Twice, the groom returned, with a different horse each time. Lucius apparently kept quite a collection, for next two horses to be taken around the courtyard were large, wild-eyed Abraxans. Hermione did not speak to the man, nor did she make any move to indicate that she was watching the horses for their workout, other than when they passed her line of sight.

The crup came out a few moments later to sniff at her feet before wandering off to chase one of the peacocks, causing the groom to let out a curse as the birds began panicking. His reaction startled his charge who began galloping around the courtyard, rope flying after him as the groom tried to chase the three-tailed dog back inside.

"Catch him, girl!" The man ordered as he grabbed the crup and locked him behind one of the gates leading to the stable. The crup yipped excitedly at this. "For Merlin's sake, *grab him!*

Hermione turned to look at him coldly, before glancing back at the horse, who was now bucking, trying to rid himself of the harness pinning his wings.

"I don't know," Hermione said after a moment, cupping her cheek with one hand, trying to look thoughtful. "I think that's your job."

With another curse, the man ran after the Abraxan, and did not manage to get it back under control until twenty minutes later. As he led the horse away, Hermione heard footsteps behind her, and saw three men approaching—one of them Severus, standing on the left. Lucius was on the right. Hermione did not know the man in the middle.

She and Severus shared the same room, but in this house, Hermione was as cold to him as was to their hosts. She slept curled up next to him, kissed him and allowed him to kiss her—but no further.
It frustrated Severus that she had become so unreceptive, and he had even accused her of trying to punish him for bringing her here until Hermione, it a fit of pent-up anger and frustration, told him that it wasn't so. When he understood that it was not him, but the Malfoys, he relented, though he was still somewhat sullen about it. He did not, however, press her now that he knew her reasons, for which Hermione was grateful.

Still, while they were at the manor, Hermione kept her distance from him, allowing him to spend more time with Lucius. When Narcissa brought Draco to see her husband and his best friend, Hermione would retire to the quarters they had been given until a house-elf informed her that her presence was asked for. Hermione had said and spoken very little to Severus over the last seven days, and was greatly looking forward to going home.

She turned away from the three approaching men and resumed staring at the peacocks like a barely-sentient gargoyle.

When Severus laid a hand on her shoulder, Hermione turned to face him before she leaned against his arm, looking up at the two men with a silent, baleful stare that was most unlike her normal personality. It was her job to be cold, submissive, and subdued while at Malfoy Manor. Severus had not initially realized what such an act would entail—namely, cut-off access to intimacy—but the two of them had eventually agreed that it was the best impression for her to give.

The third man, who looked to be in his late forties, was tall with short, sleek dark hair and a dark, piercing stare. His skin was so pale that it was almost translucent. His face was long and his gaze unfriendly, but he smiled down at her in a way that reminded Hermione distinctly of a snake. And then, quite alarmingly, he laughed.

"I quite see what you mean, Lucius," the man said mirthlessly as he looked down at Hermione. "She is rather quiet."

Hermione blinked disbelievingly when she saw a flicker of red behind the man's otherwise dark eyes, and then it suddenly dawned on her. She tightened her grip on Severus's arm.

For some reason, she had been expecting Voldemort to look much as Harry had described in her fifth year—bald, grey, with a slit for nose and snake-like eyes. She had almost forgotten that the man had, at one point, looked human—and that his overall serpentine appearance was attributed to his resurrection, not his original body. Thus, this was a bit of a shock.

"So," Voldemort addressed her, his lips curling into a serpentine smile, "do you talk?"

Hermione cleared her throat, willing it to work. "Occasionally."

"She speaks incessantly, my lord," Severus said, glancing at her. "When she wants to. She can be quite impossible to silence at times."

Hermione turned to give him a glare. Voldemort laughed again; it was not as high as Hermione recalled from Harry's description, but it was certainly cold and unfriendly.

"I hope you are enjoying my hospitality," he said, dark eyes flickering red. "The festivities will begin soon. His eyes narrowed into half-slits as he stared at her. "Surely you will do us the honor of attending?"

Hermione swallowed. Her throat felt paralyzed with fear. Festivities? She was not certain that her ideas and the Dark Lord's tastes in festivities were the same.

But would he kill her for begging absence from the event? Would he actually turn his wand on her if
she claimed she was too tired, or not feeling well and would very much rather go to bed early?

Hermione tried to speak, but the animal in her throat seemed to have curled up into a tight, hedgehog-like ball, and refused to budge. Hermione could do nothing but nod shakily.

"Excellent," Voldemort said, clasping his hands together, his expression one of cruel delight before it turned bored and dismissive, signalling that he was clearly through with the proceedings. He had taken his fun in tormenting Hermione, and now had other things on his mind. "I look forward to your company tonight." Striding away, he called over his shoulder to Lucius, "Come—we have other things to discuss." Severus moved to follow him, but Voldemort laughed and sent him back. "No, no, Severus—stay and entertain her. I'm certain she won't mind."

Severus dipped his head, and as soon as Voldemort and Lucius had disappeared, he turned around to look at Hermione. Hermione stood stock-still, save for the trembling of her body. A moment later, her legs gave way, and she fell to her knees on the hard cobblestone, cushioned slightly by the snow.

"That was him?" she whispered as Severus knelt by her side, wrapping his arms around her shoulder.

"Yes."

Hermione closed her eyes.

"How do you return to him each time?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

Severus stroked her hair, before moving to help lift her back to her feet.

"Because I must," he stated. Hermione's knees buckled underneath her again, and he hissed, "Get up!"

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, trying to force herself to obey.

*You're Snape's handler,* she could practically hear Moody growling into her ear. *He's your spy, girl! Toughen up and get up!* She steadied herself, as the voice continued to berate,*Yes, the Dark Lord is terrifying—which means you need to apply constant vigilance, not fall to the ground trembling like a bloody kitten in his wake!*

She could imagine Kingley's smooth, calming voice intervening. *Take a deep breath, Hermione. Recall that you are on the job. Take inventory and then pull your act back together. You have to be strong for this. War is not pleasant. Being behind enemy lines is not fun. Knowing you could be killed at any moment will not let you sleep well at night—but you knew what you were signing up for. Remember what you're working for.***

Hermione looked at Severus, her expression becoming smooth and mask-like once more. She got to her feet, brushing off her robes, and took in three deep gulps of air before pulling her act firmly back into place. She gazed at him. He was counting on her to pull her weight in their partnership, to be strong even when she wanted to collapse, shaking like a schizophrenic patient in the long-term ward at St. Mungo's.

"Let's return to our quarters before the festivities start," she said calmly. "A nap before then might not go amiss."

Severus's eyes looked her over carefully, silently trying to figure out what she was thinking, without invading her mind. Hermione took hold of his arm, and returned to staring at the ground in a façade of submissiveness, while allowing Severus to lead her back inside.
They returned to their rooms, which Hermione did not trust for its privacy despite being a floor and several halls away from where the Malfoys usually spent their time. There were perfectly subtle ways of spying and scrying someone if they had been set up beforehand, and neither Hermione nor Severus trusted that they were not being watched—another reason why Hermione had refused Severus intimacy while they were there.

Hermione retreated to the bed and curled up under the covers, closing her eyes. She felt Severus place a hand on her forehead, as though to check for temperature, and she wondered if perhaps the Dark Lord might simply forget her and let her sleep the evening away.

But she knew that wouldn't happen.

Besides, she had her job to do.

~o~O~o~

Hermione was shaken firmly awake several hours later. She took a moment to orient herself, closing her eyes to ascertain that her Occlumency barriers were secure and that she could play the part that she had been upholding all week—it was more imperative than ever that she not break character, specifically because of Voldemort's presence. She then got out of bed and changed into fresh clothes. Severus indicated she should wear something nice for a casual evening, though his expression twisted into something between distaste and disinterest at the notion. The two of them were walking down the halls to the dining room in short order, and in utter silence.

When they reached the dining room, Hermione stopped at the door. The room was massive, much larger than necessary for the dining table, and it was far from empty. The dining table was close to the wall near the door, but a far distance from the wall at the opposite end, thereby creating an open space.

An open space for what Hermione assumed was supposed to be tonight's entertainment. But as she took her seat, sitting at the end of the table between Severus and a man Hermione had never seen before in her life—unfortunately nowhere near as far from Voldemort as she would have liked—she realized that there was a row of empty chairs lined up against the other wall. Hermione stared at her plate ominously, wondering exactly what kind of meal this would be.

When the food appeared on her plate, she picked up her silverware and began to cut it, moving it around her plate to make it look like she was eating. She even took a few nibbles every now and then, but that was about it. She was not hungry, and despite the fact that her plate no longer quite looked so neatly arranged, she was certain anyone who looked would be able to tell that she had hardly touched it.

The fork-tailed crup came nosing up to her half-way through the meal, and Hermione managed to slip a few tidbits of chicken underneath the table, to help the food on her plate disappear faster. Severus hardly threw her a glance at this, his attention duly focused on the tall, authoritative figure of Tom Riddle, who had taken his place at the head of the table. Bellatrix Lestrange sat opposite of Severus, and opposite of Hermione, was Barty Crouch. He looked up from his food every once in awhile to grin nastily at her discomfort before ripping a bit of chicken into his mouth, and if Hermione had had any appetite before then, it quite quickly withered and died.

Rowle was three or four seats away from Hermione, and she could feel the dirty looks he sent her, could practically feel his desire to grab her in those thick, body-building hands of his, and smash her through the table to exact his revenge on her. The man next to her had dark, slightly curly hair, with grey eyes and pale skin, who Hermione believed was named Antonin Dolohov, if what his fellows called him at the table was anything to go by. It was at this point, that Hermione realized everyone in
the room was pale-skinned. When she glanced down at her own fingers, in the sharp torchlight offered by the walls, they seemed bone-white.

Dinner progressed. Voldemort paid more attention to his followers than he did her, for which Hermione was grateful. In fact, he had not spoken a single word to her since the meal had started. It seemed that being a blood-traitor in perceived status, however useful her blood might be, still ranked her as the lowest of the low among them.

The meal was nearing its end when the crup, who had been nosing about for food scraps, suddenly became alert, cocking his head in the direction of the chairs. He sniffed the air with curiosity, and then innocently padded over to them, pausing to sniff at the wooden legs. There was a sudden yelp and a slight flash of shimmering movement, whereupon the dog jumped back in surprise, having been kicked in the nose by something that was very much occupying the chair.

Hermione saw Narcissa whisper something into her husband's ear and then stand up to leave, taking Draco with her. She gave Voldemort a deferential nod and a bow, making her excuse that it was past her son's bedtime, and that he needed to be fed and put to sleep. The Dark Lord lazily waved her off, and Hermione watched her go, wishing she had some kind of excuse to follow and not have to witness what would surely be coming next.

The crup let out a rumbling snarl, a high-yipped bark, and then began tearing at an invisible leg.

"Lucius, remove your dog from tonight's entertainment," Voldemort ordered lazily.

"Certainly, my lord," Lucius said, turning his chair around slightly so that he could glance back at the crup. "Colonel, come!"

The dog let out a whine, wagging his forked tail, and padded away. The chair he had been fussing at let out a thud, as though someone had kicked the chair leg in a desperate attempt to make some noise, and the crup, unable to contain himself, whipped around and reattached himself to it.

Voldemort stood up, pointing his wand at the dog.

"Avada Kedavra!"

Hermione let out a gasp of horror as she watched the hapless crup keel over, legs splayed on the ground, jaws still limply attached to the invisible limb that he had been playing with. Hermione swallowed with difficulty; Tom Riddle had just killed an innocent animal for not obeying his master the first time around. She saw Lucius stiffen visibly at this, his eyes widened near-imperceptibly as he finally registered the death of his pet, and then to add to her horror and rising nausea, he sat back, looking quite unconcerned.

"Dobby!" he snapped, summoning the much-abused house-elf. Hermione turned her eyes to her plate, not daring to move a muscle as the poor, pencil-nosed creature was ordered to remove the body.

The dead crup was taken from the room, and then everyone stood up, Hermione following suit when she realized that it was what was expected. Voldemort lazily flicked his wand at the chairs, and to Hermione's horror, twelve bodies that had otherwise been invisible were suddenly revealed, bound tightly with painfully thin, whip-like steel cords. They were all women—Muggle women, Hermione guessed—who looked like college students who had been plucked off the street.

Hermione, who had not been feeling well that evening to begin with, tried to suppress the wave of disgust and nausea twisting and roiling threateningly in her belly.
"Tonight's entertainment, gentlemen," Voldemort said, his eyes shadowed with flickering red as he gave them all a cruel, mirthless, snake-like smile. "Filthy Muggles that Rowle and Dolohov graciously picked up off the streets of London for us tonight." His face was alight with calm, sadistic delight, though his attitude was one of grandeur. "Get a bit of wandwork done, if you will."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut as she watched everyone—everyone but her—approach the bound Muggles. Suddenly, however, the man next to her—Dolohov—grabbed her arm, pulled her roughly out of her seat, and took hold of her chair. Hermione moved to yank away from him, but Severus had reached out, grabbing the man's wrist in a tight, claw-like grip.

"She's mine," Severus drawled.

With a nasty smirk, Dolohov shoved Hermione at him, and a moment later, she found herself and her chair being dragged a few feet in front of the table, into the middle of the room. The chair was placed first, and then she was forced firmly into her seat, where she now had a completely unobstructed view of the entire proceedings. Severus's eyes stared pitilessly into hers as he turned away, striding toward the one Muggle woman who had not been taken yet. Hermione watched as the woman—a brunette, probably no older than Hermione herself, with pale bluish-green eyes—stared up at him with fear and horror, tears running down her face, silently wording pleas at him.

This was not rape. No, the Death Eaters apparently considered themselves too good for the likes of consorting with Muggles in such an orgy-like fashion, even if they planned to use and dispose of them afterward. No; they were unbound and thrown to the floor, to be used as target practice and torture, purely entertainment. Hermione gazed, petrified with horror, at the sight that unfolded before her. Blood—so much blood appeared, and moments later, the Silencing Charms were removed, and the screams could be heard, so loud and so pained that Hermione thought her ears would bleed. Her nails dug into the sides of her chair.

She wanted to stand up, whip her wand out, and kill them all. She had never felt such sickening, murderous rage in her life, and it was all she could do to keep herself in her seat—as the Dark Lord apparently intended her to do—and not test out whether she had enough hate in her heart to cast strong enough Killing Curses.

But she couldn't. She could not afford to be the Gryffindor right now, to jump in and try to save these Muggle women—most of whom were by now so badly injured that even if she had the means to save them, they would be dead before she could heal them. Her eyes flickered between them all—the petite blond who screamed as her chest was cut open, the curly black-haired woman with tanned skin who was thrown onto her stomach and pinned with invisible bonds as she writhed in pain before having her spine sliced into—

Focus on your job, girl! Moody's voice roared in her mind. Remember why you're here!

She tore her eyes away, turning to look at Severus, and her eyes widened imperceptibly as she realized that the woman he was torturing—or supposed to be torturing—was already dead, no longer aware of or able to respond to the ghastly marks his spells left on her body. He must have killed her before or just after he began. A mercy killing, Hermione's mind razed through frantically, as she tried to keep her expression under control. He killed her quickly out of mercy—look at the rest of them, saving the vital bits for last—gods, I'm going to be sick…

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, her fingers biting into the wood of her chair even harder; there was an inaudible crack as a nail broke. The screams and cries rang through her head like torturous, moaning bells being rung. Each new scream was a sharp, high-pitched, announcement of pain, though they were gradually reduced to incoherent and unintelligible moans, pleas for death, for mercy, for it to stop…
Hermione kept her face frozen in a rictus of horror, pale as death with eyes shut tight with barely-perceptible emotion; she was otherwise unmoving. When the last gurgling moans died away, Hermione realized that she was not breathing—that she could not breath—and with a cry of desperation, she gasped for air, nearly breaking the cold mask she had worn throughout the grisly performance. Beads of sweat she had not been aware of dribbled down the side of her face, slipping into her eyes and stinging them.

A familiar hand placed itself on her shoulder.

"I think she's seen enough," Severus sneered, pulling her to her feet. "If you'll excuse me, my lord, the hour grows late, and I think we had best be getting back to Hogwarts…"

Hermione did not hear the rest of it. As though in a dream, or a nightmare for that matter, she felt herself being led away. She could not remember much of what happened after that, only that out of the corner of her eye, as they ascended the stairs, she saw Narcissa's pale, frozen face as they passed her.

~o~O~o~

Hermione managed to hold it in until they had flooed to their quarters at Hogwarts, she herself barely conscious. She was dizzy with nausea and, she vaguely heard Severus mutter into her ear, fever. Her face was sweaty and pale, and it wasn't until Severus coaxed a Wit-Sharpening Potion down her throat that she was coherent enough to pull away from him, stumbling toward their bathroom, where she bent over the sink and vomited. She had eaten practically nothing, and what she had eaten came up immediately—everything else was stomach acid, dribbling down the corner of her mouth as she tried to expel it, feeling as though she was trying to force her guts out.

Severus stood by her, holding her hair out of her face while trying to soothe her, but to no avail. As soon as Hermione could speak, wiping vomit off the corner of her mouth, she croaked, "Get away from me."

"Hermione—"

"Get away!"

Severus gripped her arm, holding her in place. "Hermione, listen to me—"

"I said get away!" Hermione yanked herself away from him, stumbling, leaning onto the bathroom counter for support. Severus's expression revealed one of hurt and pain, before melting into mask of smooth, imperceptible blankness. He took a single step back, and Hermione dove for the sink, turning on the water to rinse the acrid taste from her mouth.

Her mind was like a jigsaw puzzle that had fallen apart. It was all over the place, and it felt as though it were a potion—no, several potions—that had spilled all over the floor, swirling with undissolved ingredients, and she needed to put it back together. An utter, incomprehensible mess. But by the time she did, she might have forgotten the important stuff, and it would be too late…

The notebook! Hermione lurched away from the sink, and ignoring Severus's exclamation of surprise, disappeared through the door and staggered her way over to the desk—their desk—and went through her bottom drawer, retrieving the object in question a moment later. She fished around for a quill, slid to the floor, and opened up to a blank page. She ignored the sound of Severus's boots as he walked toward her, focused only on writing down what she vaguely knew had to be put into her report. Her handwriting was shaky, some of her words disjointed by the flashes of memories of what had happened earlier that night—those Muggles—that crup—Dobby— the brunette her mind
pieced together a memory on, of Severus grabbing her by the throat and jabbing his wand at her heart, his expression blank…

Severus's hand came to grip the wrist holding the quill. "Hermione, stop."

"Let go—I have to write—"

"I know you do, but you'll end up writing nothing but nonsense if you don't get a grip on yourself," he said, rubbing his thumb soothingly over the pulse point on her wrist. "Take a moment to compose your thoughts. Twelve Muggles dead, all female." Grasping for the lifeline he had just given her, Hermione started a new line and began writing, her hand still shaking. "According to the Dark Lord, they were picked up by Rowle and Dolohov in London. They were tortured before they died." A second, sudden wave of nausea rose in Hermione's throat, and she lurched to the side, away from him. Severus let go of the loose hold he had taken on her wrist, instead moving to grab her shoulders and keep her upright.

"You… I saw… you…"

Severus grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him. Her eyes were wild, the pupils dilated, and he examined her for a moment before he said, "I killed her instantly, Hermione. Whether or not I had been there—whether or not you had been there—those women would have all died."

"They picked twelve—they picked twelve—" If they had only needed eleven, one more life would have been spared, her mind thought frantically.

"If I had not been there, the Dark Lord would have taken my place," Severus snapped. "Those women's deaths are not our fault. There is nothing we could have done—nothing I could have done, except for give her a quick death before making it look like I was enjoying the torture as much as the rest of them. You could not have saved them, Hermione! I spent the whole time praying you wouldn't try!"

But it was no use. Hermione was doubled over now, the quill dropped from her fingers, the book sliding off her lap. Painful flashes of memory—of frantic hands clawing for freedom, blood spurting from wounds on their bodies, one of them held upside-down before being subjected to the Cruciatus, of them all pleading silently for mercy until the torture began, and then their Silencing Charms had been removed, and all that had happened next was screaming and crying—

"You should go see Poppy," Severus suggested, his voice low.

"No," Hermione said, her voice coming out as a near-pitiful moan.

"You should go to bed then," Severus said, taking hold of her arm, and looking relieved when she did not pull away. "You need to sleep."

"I won't be able to sleep… nightmares…"

"I can procure some Dreamless Sleep for you—"

"I don't want it."

"I will see that you take it," Severus snapped, hauling her to her feet. "You cannot—"

At that moment, Hermione yanked her arm away, leaning back against the wood. "I'm in charge here, Severus. My word is final!"
"Then act like it!" Severus hissed, slamming his fist on the desk behind her, causing her to flinch. "If you are not acting like a handler, then I cannot trust you to do what is necessary! Breaking down after returning will neither help nor change what happened, and that seems to be all you're capable of!"

Hermione broke.

"I just watched twelve kidnapped women be tortured and killed in the most painful, terrifying way possible all because your Dark Lord wanted entertainment!" she shrieked, getting to her feet. "I sat there unable to do a thing to help them—I sat there and listened to their screams!" Tears were rolling down her face. "I listened to them screaming, begging for help, for mercy, in pain, and I—I heard their last gurgling cries... and I heard your cohorts laughing!" She turned around and slammed both her hands down on the table, letting out a whimper when the impact cracked her knuckles. Stunned, she lifted her hands up to her face for inspection, and her voice cracked with the shock of the pain and the memories she was still trying to process in her mind. "I couldn't do a thing to help them... I was just as helpless as they were... I sat there and watched them—these Muggle women I'd never met before, but I could have easily been one of them—and I was just as bad as the Death Eaters who were torturing them!"

She turned to glare at him, her eyes wet with tears. "So forgive me, Severus, if I'm—if I'm—" she turned away and stared down at the table, her breathing coming out in uneven gasps. "Oh, god... I'm just as bad as they are..."

"Hermione," Severus breathed, taking hold of her cheek and turning it so that she was facing him. His tone then turned flat, serious. "You are not. That's what the Dark Lord hoped you would believe—that's what he wants you to think. Why else would have he forced you to sit there and watch?"

Hermione stared at him, wide-eyed and silent, and he continued more forcefully, "Your presence as my handler is supposed to be an invisible one, Hermione. You are not supposed to be the brave Gryffindor charging in to save everyone, risking your neck to do so. You're supposed to be the one brave enough to sit through it all and come out stronger for it, to find a way to get justice for those you couldn't save—that's why you're my handler. Because you're smart and courageous enough to do what needs to be done, no matter how abhorrent you find it. You don't—you rarely let your emotions control your actions when they count the most, like they did tonight."

Hermione let out a shuddering breath, steadying herself on her feet, becoming more and more aware of the pain in her knuckles by the minute. She could practically hear Moody's voice in her head again, mentoring her, chastising her for her weakness—if, in fact, anything Moody did could be called mere 'chastising.'

Get a grip on yourself! He roared in her head. Constant Vigilance! Wibbling like an injured kitten when you've got work to do isn't helping anyone, and it sure as hell isn't doing a thing for those Muggle women you watched die! Remember your job, and don't forget how you must act—and don't lose yourself to the acting, either! You are neither weak nor stupid, and you had bloody better remember that!

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes, recollecting her Occlumency walls and forcing the night's events behind them. It was painful, and she knew there would be backlash later for bottling it up and putting it aside, but it had to be done now. She opened her eyes, and stoically turned to look at her partner.

"I need to see the Headmaster," she stated calmly, as she stared down at her hands. Too calmly. "And then ask Poppy to fix my fingers—I—I think I fractured them."

~o~O~o~
After Hermione had delivered her report to Albus and visited Poppy briefly to repair her knuckles, she headed back down to the dungeons with Severus and went to bed. The Headmaster had had the nerve to remark upon her state of mind, and Poppy had wanted to keep her overnight when she saw just how jittery and shaken Hermione was, but Hermione had cut them both off, keeping her visits short and pointed.

Severus slid into bed after her, his belly pressed against her back. Hermione was curled up and staring blankly at the opposite wall, finally able to lose herself in her thoughts and the jumbled, toxic mess of negative and horrible emotions that were coursing through her like poison. When Severus wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close to him and attempting to whisper something into her ear that was clearly meant to comfort, she hardly registered it.

She woke Severus up several times that night, thrashing in her sleep and crying out, trapped as she was in nightmares; when she finally did awaken on those instances, she either could not recall the specifics of what she had dreamed or did not want to discuss them. After, she would fall silent again. Severus had expected to be awoken several more times that night, given the pattern that had begun to appear, but he found her still, silent, pale form to be just as disconcerting, if not more. When he awoke the next morning he found her body rigid and tense, her face and back burning with fever from a cold she must have contracted from standing out in the snow for so bloody long at each opportunity, and he could not shake her awake.

Hermione slept until the afternoon, unaware of the fact that Severus spent the day sitting on the bed next to her with a book, placing cool washcloths on her forehead when he felt they needed to be changed, and trying to coax some Calming Draught down her locked, unconsciously protesting throat. What did make it down worked; she relaxed gradually, her face becoming less pinched and tightened with fear and pain. He stroked her cheek and the curls of her hair, and she seemed to find relief in the contact, for she eventually let out a sound that was not, for once, one of agony or distress; it was rather a bit of a 'hmm,' followed by her twisting over on her side so that she could cushion her head on his leg.

When she finally did awaken, however, her eyes were dull and her appetite sorely lacking. She did sit up though, and he was able to coax some water and toast into her, but she spent her time awake lost in her thoughts, her eyes glazed over as the events of the previous night replayed themselves in her head like a twisted, kaleidoscopic reedition of a grisly horror film.

When Severus managed to get her attention, he said, in rather clipped tones, "I think that you should see the Headmaster."

Hermione, having no fight left in her, capitulated. She slid out of bed, stumbling from the lack of energy and will to move, and slowly, with cumbersome movements, pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater. Severus seemed relieved that she did not argue with him on that front.

When she Flooed into Dumbledore's office, it seemed that he had been waiting for her. He indicated that she should sit down, and after offering her tea—in lieu of a lemon drop, which would have likely motivated Hermione into gearing up the energy to strangle him with his own beard—took them straight to the point.

"Severus tells me that you are not handling the events of last night very well," he observed gently.

Hermione swallowed, staring down into her mug of tea before taking a tiny, moroseful sip.

"I—I know that what—what happened last night was not my fault," she said slowly, her eyes heavy and her mind fuzzy with exhaustion and a hunger. As though the elves had been waiting for her mental acknowledgement of her lack of nutrition, a plate of sliced turkey sandwiches appeared, and
Hermione reached out for one and began nibbling on it. "But… but I can't forget what I saw—I can't silence the screams in my head."

Dumbledore nodded understandingly. "Do you feel that you should not continue your job as handler?"

That sparked some life out of her, and she took a fierce bite out of her sandwich, chewing and swallowing before she spoke. "No. I—I have to do this. I knew what I was getting into—I just—I just have to—to get used to it."

"Your handler duties do not normally include going out into the field with your partner," Dumbledore pointed out. "I believe allowing you to go was a mistake. You are a strong, independent individual, Hermione, but requiring you to sit and watch the torture and murder of a dozen Muggles without taking action was, in my opinion, unnecessary and too far."

"Severus…" Hermione began.

"Severus was right when he knew that Tom Riddle would expect you to be present, or at least on hand," Dumbledore acknowledged, "and you have very probably helped him solidify his position among their ranks through the magnificent acting skills you employed while you were under Voldemort's watch. But I believe that we used you the wrong way, in this case."

Hermione closed her eyes. "Nothing done last night was magnificent," she whispered. "I just held on and tried—tried to stay where I was, hoping it would all end quickly."

"Nevertheless," the Headmaster stressed, "I am proud—and grateful—that you maintained your composure under such duress. You only broke down, according to Severus, once the two of you had returned to Hogwarts."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut tighter. "Your accolades are appreciated, Headmaster, but they do not help me."

"If I may make a suggestion," Dumbledore said, standing up and circling around his desk until he was standing beside her, "I believe that perhaps altering your memories of last night may help."

Hermione's eyes flew wide open, and she gave him a wild, wary look. "No," she insisted.

"I am not planning on removing them," Dumbledore told her, placing a hand on her arm.

"But—"

"I am only planning on taking the edge away," Dumbledore told her gently. "You will remember what happened, but the details will not be as clear."

Hermione swallowed. "You won't make me forget."

"No," Dumbledore said with a weary sigh. "I am afraid that making people forget things rarely helps them face it again in the long run. No," he repeated, "I'm afraid my intent is for you to remember it, but for the memories to be less, shall we say, vivid."

Hermione glanced up at him briefly, and then looked down at her hands. "Very well. Please, sir."

Dumbledore's wand was slipped out of his pocket, the tip placed just above the bridge of her nose, and Hermione closed her eyes.
When Hermione returned from the Headmaster's office, feeling significantly better, well-fed and well-watered, she returned to find Severus eyeing her warily, as though she were an experimental mental patient who had just come back from the doctor's office with new medication, and he was not certain whether the new dosage would help her or send her flying to pieces.

To his surprise, Hermione walked by him to find her notebook. She opened it up to a fresh page, and as he slipped behind her to watch over her shoulder, she wrote down the day's date—which slowly bled into the page, now invisible to his eyes—followed by a single line.

*Albus took the edge off,* she wrote. *I can think again, without hearing screams echoing inside my head.* That was all she wrote, setting the quill down and stretching her arms for a moment. Someday, when she read back over her log, she would remember this moment. She would reread the stuff she had written before Albus had gone through her mind, and would then read that simple sentence, and be glad for the difference. She looked it over once more before turning around in her chair to look at him.

He met her gaze silently, waiting.

She stood up, and to add to his already-existing surprise, pulled him into a hug.

"Thank you," she whispered.

He hesitated for a moment, his eyes glancing down at the words she had written, which were already nearly-faded to his eyes, and then without further restraint, wrapped his arms around her.

"Do I have you back?" he whispered.

Hermione nodded against his chest.

"Thank Merlin," he exclaimed before pulling her against him, burying his face in her hair. He inhaled deeply, and when Hermione craned her neck up to kiss his cheek in what was her turn to be calm, soothing, and reassuring, he repeated: "Thank Merlin."

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**Please review!**

~Anubis Ankh~
Three days later, Hermione woke up in Severus's arms, kissing him awake with soft, searching brushes of her lips against his before she sat up, intending to get dressed, when Severus pulled her back against him.

"Stay," he whispered, suckling on her neck before his head dipped lower to nuzzle at her breasts. Now that he finally had her back in his bed, after a near-torturous week—one that had ended in disaster—he was reluctant to let her leave.

Hermione knew there would be an Order meeting at Tine Cottage later, the attendees' absences from their normal walks of life explained by the fact that it was New Year's Eve. Parties were expected. She glanced down at her watch, calculated how much time she had between now and noon, and shook her head.

"I need to get up," she stated, but then paused to give him a faintly mischievous smile. He raised an eyebrow expectantly, and she leaned forward until she was lying against his belly, nose-to-nose with him. "But I have a few minutes."

His eyes glittered strangely at this. "Only a few minutes? I'm certain I could persuade you to give me more."

Hermione's head dropped to his chest, and to his surprise, she began shaking with laughter. "Unfortunately, I'm afraid you're right. You've always been able to smooth-talk me into nearly anything." She looked up at him now, grinning. "Whether it's sneaking out to Diagon Alley for your birthday or convincing me to start seeing you at Slughorn's parties so that we could go off for a bit of a snog…"

Severus stroked her hair for a moment, curling it around his fingers as he gave her an inscrutable smirk; and then very deliberately, very insistently, ground his morning erection against her belly. "I don't suppose I could, to put it in your own words, 'smooth-talk'—"

Hermione was very tempted to smack him over the head with one of the nearby pillows for that, but when she found herself flipped over and pinned to the bed, she was far more inclined to dig her fingers into his greasy black locks and pull him into a kiss.

When she left the bed fifteen minutes later than she had ever intended to, there was no ignoring the smug, if sated, smirk that Severus wore even as his gaze followed her body with a rather appreciative eye as she dressed.

~o~O~o~

"Merlin's beard, Hermione, you look just like a teacher!"

Hermione smacked Sirius on the back of the head, even as his remark elicited laughter from the rest
of the room. "That's because I am a teacher, you prat!"

"But still," Sirius said with mock-horror, gesturing at the white button-up shirt she wore tucked into her black trousers, which she had worn instead of a skirt because it was simply too cold. It was unreasonable to go walking about in the dead of winter in a skirt. She had done away with her robes the moment she had arrived at Tine Cottage, as the place was far too warm for her to endure the teaching robes and heavy winter cloak she had been wearing, and they were hung up on a peg near the door, along with her boots. "You look like—you look like a bloody—I don't even recognize you!" He placed one hand over his heart, grinning. "Are you certain you're Hermione Granger?"

"Would a second smack on the head confirm my identity for you?" Hermione asked him dryly.

"There a number of people who would probably love to smack me," Sirius responded with a straight face.

Lily had placed one hand over her mouth and was laughing uncontrollably, even as she tried to break them apart. "Sirius, please…"

"You know," Frank quipped, "I heard Snape's gone to teach at Hogwarts, too. You look just like him now."

Hermione saw James and Lily suddenly stiffen, even as Sirius, Remus, and the rest of the table broke out with laughter.

"I do not!" Hermione straightened the collar of her shirt. Two spots of pink had appeared high on her cheeks. "How would you even know that?"

"His partner at the Ministry has a son who goes to Hogwarts," Alice said, grinning. "According to him, he complains quite a bit."

Sirius feigned outrage, though Hermione was not sure how much of it was play-acting and how much of it was genuine dislike. "Don't tell me you're still friends with the greasy git!"

"Of course I am!" Hermione said, her entire face flushing red. James and Lily were grinning now, against their wills, if still somewhat uncertainly. "We were friends in school, even if you never got along with him—what makes you think we'd stop now?"

"Because one can always hope you would develop better taste, I suppose."

Hermione affected an offended look reminiscent of McGonagall. Adjusting the collar of her shirt one more time, she said in rather clipped tones, "Now if you would kindly stop poking at my sartorial choices…"

Sirius choked.

"Remus, help me," he said. "She's even starting to talk like a professor!"

And for that, Hermione did smack him, and wrapped her arms around his neck in a mock-attempt to strangle him—just in time for Albus Dumbledore to enter the room, followed by Moody, Kingsley, and two red-haired men that Hermione almost mistook for the Weasley twins, but then came to recognize as Gideon and Fabian Prewett.

"Hermione, Sirius, act your age!" The Headmaster's voice was stern, but his blue eyes were twinkling with amusement. Hermione released Sirius, and the two immediately found a seat, leaning on the table so that they were practically sitting on it. Hermione noted that Molly was missing from
the table, though she had caught a glimpse of the woman earlier, and knew that—combined with the absence of Harry and Neville—she must have volunteered to look after their younger charges upstairs while the meeting commenced.

Hermione did not know why Molly had never mentioned to any of them that she had known Harry as a baby, but she pushed the thought away for another time.

"—thank you," Dumbledore stated as the room settled down. "First off, I would like to wish you all a Happy New Year. I have no doubt there will be celebrations later, and hope you all find the time to open a bottle of Ogden's Finest. I must say, it goes spectacularly well with Chocolate Frogs." His face then turned serious, unsmiling. "Secondly, we have some news, much of it somber, to share."

The Prewett brothers stood up together. Hermione could not tell which was Fabian and which was Gideon, but the one on the right spoke first. "Caradoc Dearborn has gone missing, and is presumed dead. We last had contact with him in Wiltshire county six days ago." He swallowed. "We think he was on his assignment in the area, and was discovered and killed."

Hermione's eyes widened. There were several gasps, tight-lipped murmurs, and the sound of grinding teeth as the rest of the Order took in the news. The Prewett brother on the left continued: "His body hasn't been found yet, but if you happen to see him walking around, check his identity first. We think it's possible that the Death Eaters might try polyjuicing him, to get the drop on us..." he shook his head. "We don't know. All signs point to him being dead. Just be careful if you see or hear anything from someone claiming to be him."

There was a sound similar to the honking of an enormous horn; in the corner of the room, Hagrid blew his nose.

"The usual precautions, then," Moody growled. "Constant vigilance, you lot! We still haven't found his sister's body, either. Be on the lookout for the two of 'em, and check that they're who they say they are if you do happen to come upon them." He harrumphed. "More than likely, they're a part of You-Know-Who's inferius army."

"Moody!" Lily protested. "That's a horrible thing to say!"

"It's probably the truth, though," the Prewett on the left agreed desolately. "If they haven't shown up yet, even in disguise, chances are they're either both dead or animated."

The room fell into a moment of silence at this, as though in mourning, and then Moody continued: "Pettigrew is still on his assignment in Diagon Alley, but when we last checked on him, he appeared to be fine. You all probably heard about what happened to the Bones family three days ago—Edgar and his family, all murdered in their homes."

"No!" Marlene said, covering her hand with her mouth. "Edgar and Nancy—they could have handled any number of Death Eaters! That's just not possible!"

"The bastards got them while they were asleep," Moody growled. "The attack was in the dead of night. And then shortly after, we got word that twelve Muggles were picked up in London—"

Hermione covered her hand with her mouth, not in shock, but to try and repress the sudden reappearance of nausea that had risen up again. Dumbledore had done exactly as he had promised, and she no longer staggered through the day, haunted every waking moment by a rendition of screams, but when recalled, the memory itself still triggered a powerful reaction. There was no forgetting what had happened that night, for the rest of her life. Over the past few days, she had tried to move on, to focus on her work, to move forward with her relationship with Severus— but some
things were not easily set aside. It was not that Hermione wanted to forget the Muggles who had
died, but that she could not afford to let it tear her life apart, and now—and now—

"—were taken to Malfoy Manor, probably what got Dearborn killed if he saw them and tried to
rescue 'em—"

Hermione shut her eyes, which in hindsight probably only made it worse, as the image of the tortured
and dying Muggles flashed across her memory again.

"—were all tortured and killed, according to our source—"

Hermione stood up, almost tripping over someone else's chair and knocking them over as she made a
dash toward the sink. She lurched forward, having the presence of mind to be glad her hair was
pulled back in its usual chignon so that she wasn't vomiting all over herself.

"—and their bodies were found dumped in front of the Muggle Ministry," Moody finished. "It's all
over the Muggle papers."

Sirius and Remus had quickly disentangled themselves from the table, and were now on either side of
her, clutching her shoulders and trying to get her to answer them. Dumbledore finished up the
meeting with a quick word, though it was quite unnecessary; everyone who had cause to be
concerned about Hermione was either up or asking about her. The meeting had effectively ended.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" Remus pressed.

Hermione shook her head, reaching for a paper towel to wipe her lips even as she turned the sink on
to rinse her mouth. "Sorry—must've eaten something bad—for breakfast—"

"Please tell me you're not pregnant," James said, coming up behind her, his voice full of concern.
"Because that's what it looks like…"

The memory of the dying Muggles, followed by the realization that, in following Severus's request
that she not clean herself up after sex, she still had his semen coating her thighs—dry now though it
was—that she had a Death Eater for a lover, a Death Eater who she had watched kill one of those
women… another blur of thoughts made her slump against the counter, breathing heavily as she tried
to shove it all away.

"Don't be ridiculous, James," Sirius snapped.

"I'm not pregnant," Hermione confirmed testily. She lurched back up, leaning against the counter
with one hand. "But the idea of what happened to those Muggles—"

She saw James and Lily's mouths drop open in understanding, and then shut very quickly. This
move, however, did not go unnoticed by the rest of her friends who had gathered around her.

"Hermione, did you see Dearborn get killed?" Alice asked gently, pulling her away from the counter
and sitting her down in a chair, much to Hermione's relief.

"Does this have something to do with your—your assignments for the Order?" Remus asked
carefully, as he went through the cabinents to fetch a glass and fill it with water for her.

"No—I didn't even know about Dearborn," she said weakly, reaching for the glass her werewolf
friend offered her. She took a sip, relieved by the refreshing tastelessness. "But I saw—I know what
happened to those Muggles. I had to watch it. Yes, it was a part of my assignment—"
"But that would have meant a Death Eater would have brought you to Malfoy Manor to watch it," Sirius exclaimed. And then, at once, something dawned on him. "Snape—Snape's a Death Eater, isn't he? You're still chummy with him—did he take you?"

Hermione shook her head quickly. "Severus isn't a Death Eater," she snapped, and at that moment, she knew it to be true. A suffocating burden suddenly lifted itself from her chest, and she was able to reply more calmly, "It was something else, but in the end, I had to watch those twelve women die."

Alice pulled her into a hug, squeezing her comfortingly. Marlene placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, I'm sorry."

"All right, that's enough," Moody's voice cut through. His claw foot clanked along the stone floor, growing louder as he approached. "Budge along, you lot—I need to have a word with Granger here."

"Right, of course," Hermione responded instinctively, setting her glass down. Of course Moody wanted a word with her. "I forgot you wanted to go over those plans…"

Moody looked faintly gratified, his grizzled face tensing less as he hauled her to her feet. "Thanks. Don't worry," he said, turning to her friends, who all seemed quite alarmed at the abrupt kidnapping occurring in their midst. "I'll bring her back in one piece."

They left the room, clanking along upstairs, and the sound of a heated discussion starting up echoed behind them.

"Nice maneuver there, Granger," Moody said as they made their way down the hall. He pushed open one of the doors, and they entered a bedroom that looked as though it were being shared by Gideon and Fabian, judging by the name PREWETT inscribed on their trunks. "Thanks for keeping this discreet. Wouldn't want you announcing to the world that I want a talk with you to check on your sanity."

Hermione snorted, one hand pressed to her right temple as she came in and sat on top of one of the trunks. "I suppose that would be a bit awkward."

"I imagine so." Moody took seat on the edge of the bed. "Did Albus modify your memories, Granger?"

"Yes, thankfully," Hermione said, leaning against the wall and crossing her legs. She closed her eyes and let out a sigh. "I'm certain that if he had not, I'd have gone rather mad by now."

"But you're still affected by what you saw, and in all honesty, I'm not that surprised," Moody stated. "You did well when you were at Malfoy Manor, Granger—better than anyone else here could have done, 'cept for me of course, but I'd never be invited there for anything else other than to lock 'em up —" Hermione let out a snort of amusement at this, and Moody's scarred face twisted into a kind of half-smile. "So I've got to hand it to you, Granger, but you did well. You handled yourself like a pro, and you didn't break down until after the act was done."

Hermione nodded.

"But once you break down, you've got to pull yourself together again quickly," Moody growled. "A breakdown after a harrowing experience is fine—I've done it myself—but it has to be the once, and then you got to get up and keep going. You're handling our most important spy, Granger—you have to learn to quickly stitch yourself back up after you fall apart so that you have enough time to do your job."
"I understand, sir," Hermione said, rubbing her feet, which were starting to get cold, despite the fact that she was wearing thick, black woolen socks.

"Granted, this was your first time, but you've got to make this first time count for something," Moody said roughly. "This hopefully won't be a regular occurrence for you, because you're not cut out for that, but when it does, you need to be able to handle yourself. Constant vigilance!" He barked, and laughed when Hermione didn't jump. "You did well, Granger. You did well. But your spy still needs you, and he can't be the one taking care of you when he needs you to do the same to him."

"Right," Hermione said, with a swift nod.

"That's it, then," Moody said, getting to his feet. He held out his hand to Hermione, who took it, and allowed him to pull her up. "Just don't forget that when you're in the field as his handler, you're acting, girl—and don't lose yourself to the acting. You're stronger than you look, but it can be tough to remember that if you have to play a weak part."

Hermione blinked. That was exactly what she would have imagined him to say, and now it solidified and internalized itself more clearly in her mind. She nodded again. "Thank you, sir."

"You're new to this," Moody said, as he clunked his way toward the door. "Being a handler is a difficult job, and you're liable to forget yourself sometimes." He gave her a grizzled grin. "We'll be here to remind you for as long as it takes."

He opened the door, and allowed Hermione to walk through first. "Now get on back downstairs, Granger, before your friends send up a rescue party."

Hermione gave him a quick salute, eliciting a bark of laughter from her mentor, and then turned and left to check that a fight had not broken out downstairs.

~o~O~o~

By the time Hermione had returned, most of the Order had left. Only her close friends—the Marauders, along with Lily, Marlene, and Alice, remained behind, clearly waiting to talk to her. Frank had gone upstairs to check on Neville and help Molly, leaving the seven of them with privacy and ample room to sit at the table. Hermione pulled out a chair, feeling much calmer and more relaxed, more in control and assured of herself, and took a seat between Alice and Marlene.

"I'm glad to see you didn't destroy the kitchen while I was gone," Hermione said, eyeing the walls. "That was quite an argument you started up just as I left."

Sirius was rubbing the back of his neck. "I know there are some things you can't tell us, but the only way James would even think to ask—"

Lily wrapped her arms around Sirius's neck and not so subtly clamped her hand over his mouth.

Hermione sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "No, Sirius. I'm not pregnant, and if James had learned to prevent himself from asking the first thing that comes to mind without thinking about the bloody consequences..."Rather like Harry, to be honest." Well, let's just say it's none of your business."

"Unfortunately," Marlene murmured into her ear, "now we're all damn curious about it."

Hermione glared at them. "You lot are unbelievable."

"It's Snape, isn't it?" Sirius said, his voice full of accusation. He did not sound particularly mad,
really—more shocked and disbelieving, perhaps even a taste reviled at the thought, if anything. He had long since come to terms with Hermione's friendship with the Slytherin, even if his hatred of him had not abated. But his intense and ingrained dislike for him did not include taking it out on Hermione, as a general rule. "Even if he's not the one who took you to Malfoy Manor, you're still close to Snivellus, and—well, I hate to say it, but after he managed to convince you to sneak out to Hogsmeade in our seventh year…"

Hermione's face turned slightly red at this, but she covered it quickly, and leaning back in her chair and trying to act casual. "Actually, we snuck out to Hogsmeade and went to Diagon Alley."

It was worth saying that just to see their jaws hit the table.

Hermione grinned, glad to find an opportunity to divert their attention. "It was his birthday, so we went to Fortescue's for ice cream."

"Merlin's beard, Hermione!" Remus's jaw dropped, if at all possible, even further. "How on earth did he manage to convince you to do that?"

Hermione started laughing. "I'll admit that it took some persuasion, but eventually, I was all for it. Fortescue's ice cream was worth the month of detentions."

"And now she's a teacher," Marlene moaned, pressing her fingers to her temple. "Unbelievable."

"So, that's it?" Sirius remarked, leaning back in his chair and crossing his arms. His brow was furrowed into a frown, and Hermione had the sense that he was still digesting the situation. "You've been dating since our seventh year?"

"Actually, we didn't start until after he'd left school," Hermione said calmly, twisting her watch around her wrist. "And it wasn't a proper relationship until after I left, too."

"You could do much better," Sirius said disgustedly. "I'm sorry—I know you're chummy, and you've been friends since you arrived in fifth year from Merlin-knows-where, but I think your taste has fallen pretty far if you're going for the greasy oddball."

Hermione sighed. There was really no point in telling Sirius off for namecalling. It was the only way he managed to keep his temper in check, by feeling as though he was attacking Severus—who was not exactly present and aware at the moment—rather than verbally attacking Hermione herself. She had grown used to it, even if she never liked it.

"My taste is my own," she told him, reaching forward and nicking an orange from the fruitbowl at the center of the table, where she began peeling the skin off with her nails. "And if I want Severus Bloody Snape, I'll have him, whether you like or approve of it or not."

"I don't approve, but you're the girl that every guy with a pair of balls feared back in school," Sirius snorted. "It's not like I have much say in the matter."

"Thank you."

"It didn't take a lot of imagination to figure out why he was limping—"

"Thank you, Sirius."

Remus buried his face in his hands, though whether his shoulders were shaking from laughter or despair, Hermione was not certain. She suspected the former. James and Lily were silent, but they both actually seemed quite relieved that this discussion had not devolved into a brawl where they
would both be forced to choose sides against their best friends. Alice and Marlene seemed to be 
taking all of this in rather calmly.

"To be honest," Alice said, as Hermione handed her a slice of orange, "I don't think it's that big of a 
deal. I certainly never liked Snape, but he's Hermione's friend, not mine, and it's not as though any of 
us have to deal with him on a regular basis."

"True enough," Marlene agreed, as Hermione handed her five slices, which she passed onto the rest 
of the table. Only Remus declined, given he was not particularly fond of fruit. "I agree with Sirius 
with the remark about your tastes, but if as Sirius put it, you want the greasy oddball..."

Hermione snorted. "Marlene, if you want the dog, you can have him— but I haven't made any 
remarks up until now about how much fur there must be on your couch, so I'd appreciate it if you 
extended the same courtesy."

The table exploded into giggles, and James almost choked on his slice of orange. Sirius placed his 
hand over his eyes, leaning back in his chair, as even he unwillingly smirked at this.

"I think this conversation is done now," Hermione said, grinning sheepishly. "So tell me—what have 
you lot been up to while I've been teaching?"

~o~O~o~

When Hermione returned home that evening, it was to find their quarters empty. Hermione knew it 
would be, when she saw his teaching robes tossed over the back of the couch, and when she walking 
into the bedroom and checked the wardrobe, she saw his Death Eater cloak and mask were missing.
Soaking wet from melted snow, Hermione hung her winter cloak to dry near the door and then sat 
back on the couch in front of the fire. She let herself warm up for a few minutes, before bending 
down to unlace her boots and peel her icy wet socks off.

They had started a snowfight back in Tine Cottage, in the kitchen no less. As usual, it was Sirius's 
fault, and Hermione still had no idea what spell he had used to summon snowballs from the sink tap. 
Fabian had come down four minutes later, narrowly avoiding being smacked in the face with a ball 
of wet ice, to order them all outside.

Hermione had served Padfoot a faceful of cold revenge, and did not regret it one bit.

With a sigh of contentment, Hermione leaned back in her chair and swung her feet forward so that 
the warmth of the fire would dry them off faster.

The door slid open, and Hermione twisted around in her seat to see Severus's familiar face appear, 
Death Eater mask in hand. He tossed it aside, reaching for his robes to undo them, and then 
shrugging off the frock coat underneath.

"I don't think you'll be able to wear that coat come summer," Hermione noted, standing up as he set 
it aside on the back of the chair to his desk.

"I won't wear robes then," he returned, his face still blank as he knelt down to reach into Hermione's 
desk, withdrawing her notebook and a quill before handing it to her. Hermione resumed her seat, 
opening the notebook to a blank page as he made his verbal report. "The Dark Lord was pleased 
with the publicity his stunt four days ago elicited from Muggle and Wizarding newspapers—the one 
you were unfortunately made to watch. He also informed us that the reason Karkaroff was absent 
that night was because he had detected someone spying on the premises from a distance of about 
fifty meters from the Manor."
"Describe him," Hermione said in the calmest and most controlled voice she could muster, trying to ignore the clenching of her gut as she once again recalled the brutal murders. "Did Karkaroff kill him?"

"Tall, with rectangular wire glasses, short brown hair and grey eyes," Severus said, kneeling down to remove his boots. "No, Karkaroff did not kill him. He was brought to Malfoy Manor, and the Dark Lord dealt with him the next day."

"Do you have any word on Dearborn's sister—- Caelia Dearborn?"

Severus worked his jaw for a moment. "Thin woman with curly brown hair and brown eyes?"

Hermione nodded.

"It turns out the Dark Lord ordered her to be kept prisoner in Malfoy Manor for two weeks," Severus responded shortly. "She was killed with her brother, when they brought him in."

"Did you find out about anyone else?" Hermione pressed, feeling a sense of rising dread at this news.

Severus shook his head. "I know for a fact that there must be more prisoners down there, in the cellar, and I may get a chance to see for myself—but I haven't got a clue as to whom or how many."

Hermione nodded, finished writing, and then set the quill aside.

"I'll be right back," she said, standing up. "I need to report to Albus."

Severus inclined his head, leaning back onto the couch, and Hermione fiddled with her watch for a moment before being Portkeyed away.

When she returned, it was to find him stretched over the couch, his head pillowed on his arm against the armrest, and the other pressed down on the cushion to keep him braced up. His eyes were closed, and he might have appeared to be sleeping if Hermione did not know him so well. She put her notebook away and walked over to him, hesitating for a moment before digging her fingers into his hair.

Truth to be told, it was greasy. She could see it, not to mention feel it on her fingers. Sirius and Marlene were right when they pointed that out, but to be honest, Hermione didn't care. It wasn't that she had never noticed, for it was very difficult not to, but it was simply that she paid it little to no mind. Marlene and Sirius were magically powerful, handsomely made, and naturally well-disposed people; Hermione could not find fault in them for that, except for the fact that she felt this made them somewhat shallow in regards to how they judged people.

Hermione was no beauty queen like Marlene. She knew that. She loved her skin for being smooth, not a trace of acne or blotchiness, but her face was plain, and she was well aware of it. Her hair had eased with age, and with Marlene and Alice's help in learning how to tame it—something Lavender and Parvati would never have succeeded in doing—and with it being pulled back in a loose, curly chignon, it had become far more manageable. And she certainly had not forgotten the buck teeth she had been forced to live with for fifteen years. She didn't have Lily's striking green eyes, or natural but exaggerated curves that had caused many boys, not just James and Severus, to look at her with lust.

In short, she liked who she was. Her body belonged to her, and it was comfortable and nice. She was pretty, pretty enough to have caught the eye of a famous Quidditch player in her fourth year—something she still took pride in, even if she and Victor had only ended up becoming very good penfriends—and even if she simply did not share some of the prominent features of allure that Lily
and Marlene did, she was very pleased with what she had.

And who she had.

She had felt dirty, embarrassed, and distinctly unclean when she had recalled his semen still sticking to her thighs back at Tine Cottage while listening to Moody rattle off the news. Severus played the role of a Death Eater, but he was certainly no Death Eater, and though they had to do and accept terrible things—the both of them—Hermione still loved him. She had to differentiate between when he was Severus and when he was Professor Snape—two very different people, playing two distinct roles—and learn to accept that the world was not entirely in black and white.

Satisfied with her thoughts for now, Hermione massaged his scalp for a moment, eliciting a groan of pleasure from him, his eyes fluttering for a moment before remaining closed. She worked her way down until she was at his neck, where she continued, smiling at the reaction she received from him. Moving away, she came to stand in front of the fire, her back to him, and began unbuttoning her shirt. It was a moment before he opened his eyes to see what she was doing, but by then she had undone most of the buttons, and had shrugged it halfway down her shoulders, moving to take care of the cuffs.

He let out a moan of appreciation at the sight she presented before him, and Hermione smiled, her face angled away so that he couldn't see. Oh, yes. This was the man she loved—who appreciated every inch and side of her. The man she felt comfortable and confident with.

Keeping her shirt as it was, still half-on, Hermione moved to take care of the buckle of her belt, sliding it off with a deliberate hiss that coincided with Severus's before fingering the buttons on her trousers, and for a moment, she wished she had worn a skirt. She shrugged them down her hips a few inches before turning around, arms tucked behind her back to look at him.

He was sitting up now, having hurriedly unbuttoned his shirt sometime within the last five minutes so that it hung open, and had one hand pressed to his groin, squeezing himself as he watched her.

"Hermione," he breathed.

Hermione merely grinned at him, before reaching back underneath her shirt to undo the clasp of her bra. It came loose, and Hermione had to shrug off her shirt in order to remove the second article of clothing. Focusing on the glazed, highly aroused look on his face, as well as the hand that was pleasuring himself, Hermione slowly, teasingly worked her pants down her legs. She stepped out of them, before disposing of her knickers in a similar manner, leaving her completely naked.

She took two steps forward, climbed onto the couch so that she was straddling him, and allowed him to twine his fingers into her hair and pull her down for a kiss.

"Seductress," he muttered into her ear, when they pulled away.

"Yours," she countered.

"Mmm. Yes."

Hermione leaned forward, brushing her lips teasingly against his. They lay there on the couch, Hermione resting against Severus's chest, kissing and nibbling until he pushed her away for a moment so that he could shift into a more comfortable sitting position.

"When… when all of this is over…” He struggled to sit up for a moment, shaking his head as though to clear it. "When the Dark Lord falls… will you marry me? Will you be my wife?"
Hermione folded her arms, her nose level with his. She was sorely tempted to make a joke about her earning a marriage proposal with a strip-tease and a snog, but let it slide—this simply did not feel like the right moment to make such a jest. Instead, she smiled warmly at him, her expression thoughtful. "You already call me that, when you think I'm not awake," she pointed out, referring to the moments when she would wake up to find him pleasuring her in the morning, murmuring things that he normally would not say were she fully conscious.

"Is there any reason for you to say no?" Severus pressed, visibly becoming more alert now.

Hermione shook her head quickly. "I don't have any doubts about how I feel about you," she responded honestly, her expression warm before it suddenly turned sad. She disentangled an arm from underneath her to stroke his cheek. "But there are some things about my circumstances that would mean thinking this through carefully before saying yes."

He looked at her consideringly. "You don't love someone else."

"Anything I feel for my friends is nothing compared to you," Hermione told him earnestly. "They're the people I feel loyalty to, but you're the one I'd want for a life partner, the one I want to spend the rest of my life with, the one I would want to start a family with—" she ducked her head at this, flushing. "Even though I know you're not particularly fond of children, you're the only one I'd ever consider…"

Severus brushed his lips against her neck. "I want a family," he said quietly. "Not while I serve the Dark Lord—not while he lives. I've seen what his presence has done to the Malfoys, even if Lucius is blind to it." He suddenly scowled. "And I absolutely despise the students I deal with on a day-to-day basis. Most of them don't have the aptitude for potions—but they could still keep from getting on my nerves if they put in a modicum of effort more than it takes to chop up a flobberworm."

Hermione snickered. "I think that if you had your way, you'd be teaching them to put in more effort by making them believe that you would poison them if they didn't."

"That is an idea," he drawled.

"I wasn't serious!"

"Too late, wife." He nuzzled her cheek. "If there are no objections other than some circumstantial issues that need to be dealt with once the Dark Lord is dead, I don't see the problem."

Hermione sighed and rested her head on his chest, afraid that he would feel quite differently once she told him. She would have to tell him about her time-traveling, she was sure; once Voldemort disappeared for the first time, if she wanted to take her relationship with Severus seriously enough for it to work. Sadly, she did not know quite how he would react when he discovered that she had known of the outcome of the first war all along—that she had known Lily was slated to die.

She knew she couldn't be allowed to stop this. If she did, time would certainly be altered drastically, and if it was... Hermione had no guarantee that time would move forward so that she would get the time-turner in third year, and retain it into fifth. If that changed, then the version of herself that had gotten thrown back in time would disappear, and the whole thing would simply circle and reset. What would happen if Harry still had parents? What would happen if Voldemort were not defeated by Harry as a toddler; would he find a way to end up killing all of the Potters properly if given a second chance, not just James and Lily? She did not know, and she could not afford to take such a risk.

Severus was certainly over Lily. She had no insecurities about that. But he cared about her, and
Hermione refused to live out her life carrying the secret that she had known what would happen to the Potters and the Longbottoms from him. She imagined his reaction would be similar to hers if she had somehow found out that Harry had to die in order to destroy Voldemort, and no one who had been in a position to save him had even tried, but she staunchly maintained that in the end, she would give him her honesty.

"When the Dark Lord is gone, we'll sit down and discuss this," Hermione told him, willing him to understand that there was more to the future than met the eye. "If you still want me once we're done, then I will of course say yes. Quite thoroughly," she promised, kissing his cheek. "But I can't agree until that happens."

He stroked her hair. "Fair enough. But I can assure you—it would take a lot for me to change my mind."

Hermione snuggled against him.

_That's what I'm afraid of._

"I love you," she told him quietly, sincerely. "Don't ever forget that."

_____________________________________________________

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Nineteen

Big thanks goes out to my fantastic beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Did you know that reviewers are awesome people?

The students returned from their holiday, some looking faintly refreshed and relieved, others seeming quite somber. Tension had been high among them before the holidays, and grisly news had marred their vacations thanks to Voldemort's constant presence in the newspapers, adding constant stress to what was supposed to be an opportunity for them to take a break from school work and see how their families were faring. Some of them lived in London, and the news about the Muggles, as well as the Bones family, had shaken them badly.

The first week of January was peppered with news of more murders and disappearances. A wizard family in Dorset was brutally slaughtered, their eight and nine-year-old sons abducted after the attack—which had led the Order to suspect that, given the fullness of the moon, they had become werewolf recruits. Fenrir Greyback was well-known for his tendency to attack young children and take them away to be raised by other, more socially-ostracized werewolves, and it was this fate, Hermione realized, Remus had narrowly escaped.

Severus's birthday arrived, and though Hogsmeade visits were still on hold due to the presence of Death Eaters, Hermione and Severus nevertheless left the castle for a visit to Diagon Alley. They stopped by Fortescue's Ice Cream parlor, before climbing up to the bricked-in balcony over Flourish and Blotts. They sat together, shoulder to shoulder, and ate their ice cream in the below-freezing temperature amid snow that floated into the street.

"They don't let the owls out anymore," Severus pointed out sometime later that night. This remark was made two hours after the time the owls were usually released for a bit of fresh air; at the moment, the air was filled only with snow and the occasional bird which ventured from house to house to deliver letters. "They're afraid that if there's an attack elsewhere in Diagon Alley, the owls might get hit in the crossfire—they don't want to risk them."

Hermione winced. "That's horrible. They don't they ever let them out?"

"I've heard they'll let small groups of them fly around the shop during the daytime," Severus mused. "But that's about it."

Hermione rested her head on his shoulder. "Do you think they'll let them out again…?"

She knew Severus understood what she meant. They were outside the safety and security of the castle, which therefore meant that anyone could be watching them. It was best to keep their vocabulary as neutral as possible.

"I hope so," Severus responded quietly. He glanced up at the sky, filled with the full moon that had begun to wane. Fat, fluffy white flakes swirled down from the sky, landing on his nose, and he shook them off, bending over his ice cream so that his hair hid his face. "It suddenly occurred to me that I missed your birthday—it was back in September."

"I had other things on my mind," Hermione pointed out reasonably. "I think we all forgot about it,
really, what with everything that's been going on."

"And here we are, back to sitting on a bricked-in balcony over Flourish and Blott's to eat ice cream on my birthday, in the dead of winter," Severus returned dryly.

Hermione grinned at him. "Well, it is your birthday," she deadpanned, resting her head against his shoulder.

She finished her cone, and the two of them stood up to leave.

Hermione turned to glance down once at Fortescue's parlor, where the shop owner himself was standing outside, emptying a pair of rubbish bins before he closed for the night. He waved up at them with a smile, giving them both a salute before the two of them Apparated away.

~o~O~o~

Severus's Death Eater summons became a regular, scheduled, expected thing.

Once a week, usually on a Friday afternoon, he would be called away. Voldemort held regular meetings, and now that Severus had proven his worth to his master, he was a regular participant. The Dark Lord considered him too important to send out on raids on a regular basis like the rest of his colleagues. For one, he had information that Voldemort did not want to risk the Aurors getting wind of—the Prophecy, namely—should Severus be captured. Secondly, though Voldemort also acknowledged Severus's inherent skill and fascination with the Dark Arts, he thought Severus more useful as a private potioneer. Additionally, Severus was the only solid link he had to Dumbledore and the Order of the Phoenix, and Voldemort decided that he was far more useful as a spy than he would in any other active capacity.

Hermione found the meetings to be disturbing. They largely took place at Malfoy Manor, and the topics—as well as the language used—were vile, to say the least. On occasion, she would look through Severus's mind if she felt he had not given her enough detail for her report. The horrors she encountered there discouraged her from doing it regularly.

Severus participated in the murders of people, Magic and Muggle alike, who were brought in for execution or entertainment. Truth to be told, Severus did not simply murder—he killed with quick, sharp efficiency that both earned Voldemort's interest as well as consternation; such a cold attitude toward his victims was to be admired, compared to the hot-blooded response of his fellows, but the fact that he did not drag it out did not suit the Dark Lord's tastes. Voldemort was not particularly picky about how his followers killed, as long as they got the job done and displayed no remorse, but he remarked upon Severus's particular style once or twice.

But he did not actively seek out victims, and his behavior when he did kill made Voldemort reticent about giving him a go, for the Dark Lord thought his systematic methods were a perfect waste of good wand practice.

"You might as well practice on a rag," Voldemort had remarked drolly to him one day, and Hermione suspected he must have been bored out of his mind to stoop to such conversation. "For all the good your tactics do."

Severus managed his duties as a spy very well, and he and Hermione developed their partnership further as the semester progressed. There was no denying, however, that his deeds took a toll on his sense of self—and by Hermione's estimation, quite possibly his soul, though she never brought up such a suspicion to him. There were occasions when he would come back, unable to speak; those were the worst, for they were the times Hermione would be forced to use Legilimency on him in
order to get her report to the Headmaster promptly. There were also days when he would simply slump down in front of the fire, against the side of the couch, and stare morosely into the flames, unspeaking; at those moments, it was as though the weight of the realization of his actions finally hit him, and he was too overcome by it to do anything but hide behind the cold, smooth, and indifferent mask he displayed to the world.

Hermione learned not to make decisions for him concerning when he needed her and when he wanted to be alone. She respected his need for the latter; not everything could be solved by talking it out, and letting Severus stew through it on his own terms before discussing it seemed to be the best option at times. When he did need her presence, however, Hermione gave it wholeheartedly, wrapping her arms around him and holding him tightly to her while he sat in silence, finding comfort only in her presence.

Severus Snape was very human. And it seemed to Hermione that sometimes, even he forgot that.

For Valentine's Day, the two of them retreated from the rest of the school for an afternoon. Severus gave her a single red rose that he had nicked from one of the Herbology greenhouses, and Hermione knew that it was the very fact that he had stolen it that made him give it to her in the first place. She had found it both sweet and amusing, and she had summoned a glass vase to place it in before turning to give him the kiss that she felt was his due.

Professor Sprout had later confronted him and crossly demanded to know why he had felt the need to mangle her wards. He had merely smirked and side-stepped her without a word, striding off looking both unconcerned and very self-satisfied.

Despite the heavy burden of their responsibilities, both to the school and to the Order, the two of them were still very much a young couple in love. The war was taking an exorbitant toll on their lives, but it did not prevent them from enjoying what they could have, merely restricted and occasionally tainted it with fears and interruptions.

Sometime in mid-May, Hermione happened to flip through her notebook, examining the entries past, and was astonished to realize that she had filled in over two-hundred pages. And as she scanned through them, a feeling of great disturbance filled her as she realized that entries—entries that had caused her so much emotional distress—no longer affected her. Reports of werewolf attacks, deaths, abductions, tortures—she read and absorbed them, but found that she was numb to them. At that moment, and only for a single moment, she felt as though she had lost her humanity.

To add salt to the wound, she did not feel as though she had the energy, the will, or even the means to try to feel something. She found herself greatly saddened by what happened, but she also found that the things she wrote, the reports she read—both in her notebook and in the newspapers—only elicited about as much emotion from her as someone might expect if they were thinking about a pet that had just died. She had become so used to the daily rigors of the war that she was now rather desensitized.

In a way, such an outlook quite possibly saved her sanity, for if she broke down in tears of sympathy for every victim and incident she was made aware of, she would not last long. Furthermore, she heard far more about the war than the *Prophet* granted its readers. She had not only heard it, she had felt, witnessed, and suffered under it first-hand. She had been toughened, hardened on the outside out of pure necessity, and she kept her feelings locked away. Eventually, it would all come out. Until such a time, it would be business as usual. It had to be.

She was not the only one, and now that she looked back on it, it was quite expected that Severus should suffer in such a similar fashion. The only area of their lives where their faces were not drawn tight, in cold masks meant to prevent something from breaking their façade of normalcy, was in the
privacy of their quarters and with each other. Between them, there were few secrets, and absolutely none considering matters of their feelings for each other. While their emotional attachment to the outside world diminished through the pain of war, they clung to each other with such desperation that they might as well have cut their souls in two, switched halves, and then cast a definitive *reparo* on them.

That was not to say that Hermione did not care for the world beyond Severus, or even Hogwarts. She most certainly did, and with a fierceness that drove her to work hard and unrelentingly for the Order, taking on odd jobs within it to help where she could. But she felt numb, almost robotically programmed when she tried to examine her feelings for it, and felt that she could not have it both ways. If she broke down and let her emotions get the best of her, she could not do her job. If she did her job, she would have to remain distant and apart from the world, acting in its best interests while feeling aloof from it in the interim.

It was a state of conflict that Hermione had resigned herself to, so she pushed all of her concerns about it toward the back of her head as it neared the end of May. The students were taking their exams in a week's time, and Hermione assigned them review work that was meant to help them study. Despite what they knew about her, having had her teach them for all of nine months, the students still occasionally attempted to wheedle and whine their way out of being given extra work. Hermione had none of it, and coldly ordered them to either do the work assigned, or suffer the consequences of skipping it.

The students who had known Hermione when she had been an upperclassmen were no longer skeptical about her abilities as a teacher, but were rather frightened by the change they witnessed in her. She had been a helpful, protective, and sympathetic figure who had routinely gone out of her way to help her housemates. Now she treated them all as though she had never met them before, her demeanor formal, icy, and detached in the most disconcerting of ways.

As the year drew to a close, with the students finishing up their final exams, many of them wondered if Professor Granger would be returning. Nothing remotely ominous had happened to her during the time she had taught (as far as they knew), and it appeared as though she had every intention of staying on. Some of the students whispered that if nothing happened to her before the year ended, something would in the summer, and there were discreet arguments among the students, as well as circumspect bets and guesses placed on whether she would be following through with her words.

When exams *did* end, both teachers and students were almost equally relieved. Professor Sprout had already packed her bags, ready to join a summer expedition to the Amazons to examine magical plants, tagging along as an expert consultant. Flitwick had made reservations to participate in an exclusive wizard-dueling group, where he would be tutoring. The other teachers all had plans made—some equally exciting, others quite more mundane.

Hermione and Severus returned to Spinners End.

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Moments after the two of them had returned to Severus's home, while they had barely started unpacking and were still checking to make sure the house was, indeed, intact, Severus received a summons. Hermione was left to unpack alone, and set the house back in order with a few cleaning and freshening charms. The place was still in good order, but it had been left uninhabited for several months, and as was expected, there was a little dust to be taken care of. She levitated their bags upstairs, unpacked and sorted through their things with ease by means of her wand, and returned downstairs to start dinner.

Hermione had few preferences in regards to making food. Sometimes, she chose to use her hands.
Otherwise, usually when she was very busy, she preferred magic. Since she had time to kill, she set about preparing dinner manually. She finished within the hour, and had everything all set out on the table by the time Severus returned, Apparating into the kitchen as was his custom.

"Well?" Hermione asked with forced calm, as she set the boiled potatoes down on the table. This situation was almost a mockery of the life she and Severus wanted; he would come home from work to find his wife and food waiting on the table, after they both had a long day of doing something fulfilling, interesting, and engaging. Instead, she was the lover who could not yet allow herself to be his wife, who served food to her would-be husband after he returned from a meeting with a megalomaniac. And furthermore, she had to interrogate him about it. "Anything?"

Severus tore off his mask and snapped it between his fingers, vanishing it before making quick work of his robes. "Harry Potter and Neville Longbottom's first birthdays are fast approaching—in roughly two months' time. It has the Dark Lord on edge."

"Did he take it out on anyone?" Hermione inquired carefully.

"Not that I was present to account for," Severus returned, adjusting the cuffs on his sleeves so that he could roll them up, having disposed with his frock coat. "But I'm certain someone was punished for something. I'm lucky, I suppose," he mused after a moment, as he took his seat at the table. "I have yet to face anything more than his verbal displeasure, given that I've proven myself rather adequately, and have not yet presented him with any concrete form of failure."

Hermione nodded. "Essentially, there is nothing to report?"

"Nothing significant," Severus replied drolly. "Dumbledore has already increased the Potters' and Longbottoms' protection—this is not news to the Order."

Hermione actually felt quite relieved at this, for it would mean she would not be making a trip to see the Headmaster that night, in the middle of dinner. Business concluded, they sat down and ate, though the table was rather silent, as both of them had heavy things on their minds.

Severus eventually broke the silence, setting down his fork with a bit of a clatter.

"Would you like to go somewhere else tonight?" He asked, standing up to clear his plate.

Hermione blinked, standing up to take care of the rest of the table. "What do you mean? Where?"

"Anywhere." He swept his arm across the table. "We've been cooped up in the castle for too long, and now it feels like we've gone from one cell to another." He grimaced. "I'd just like to get out for a bit."

Hermione cleaned the dishes with a flick of her wand, and set them back into their cupboard, resting her hands on the counter for a moment as she took his words into consideration. Decision made, she strode forward, crossing over to where he stood, and then pulled him into a kiss.

He was surprised, for a moment, this was true. He had not been expecting it at that moment, for they were both too wound up, too tight, too stressed to give much consideration to such activities, particularly over the past few weeks when the tension had been running higher than ever. But they wanted to get out of the house to relax and de-stress, and he responded by pulling her closer to him, wrapping his arms around her, fingers skimming down to cup her bum.

And then they Apparated away.

~o-O-o~
"The nightlife of Diagon Alley is simply amazing," Hermione observed, as they walked along one side of the street. The daytime activity had petered out by late evening, but now that it was dark with the onset of night, the streets were once again busy and crawling with activity, particularly since it was no longer freezing cold as it had been during winter and spring. Bright lights lit up the street, making it an inviting place, though the mood seemed somewhat hampered by the fear of Death Eaters. "I mean, it's just so... you would think they would close down at night, but it only seems to get busier…"

"It's magic, Hermione," Severus said, striding forward with an air of confidence about him. "We can choose to flourish in the dark as well as the light—whatever our preference." He gave her a look that was, for a moment, like an empty, pitiless black tunnel that reminded Hermione horribly of Professor Snape as she had known him before. "Muggles have to restrict themselves to following the natural cycle of day and night, with the exception of the few who either do not fear it or find an alternate means of handling it."

Hermione pursed her lip, stopping to look up at him squarely. "Do you fear the dark, Severus?"

"Do you?" he challenged, his tone almost playfully tenebrous.

"Yes, with good reason," Hermione sniffed.

"You shouldn't," he purred, as they entered a quieter part of the street. He slipped into the shadows near one of the buildings, blending into it in such a way that it emphasized his next words. "The dark can be your ally as well as your enemy."

Was that how he saw Dark Magic? With such respect, such deference, that it was nearly worshipful? Hermione sighed inwardly. This was one of the main differences between herself and Severus. Before she had come to this timeline, the Dark Arts—and protection from it—had never been her strong suit, as evidenced by her third-year exam and the fact that she had asked Harry to teach the DA, despite the fact that she had come up with the concept in the first place. Now she excelled in it, though she was not fond of it—she performed Dark Magic and defended against it with the attitude of a respectful opponent, not as someone who took pleasure in battle. Her real talents lay in Transfiguration and Charms, formidable branches of magic in their own right that did not require ill intent to cast.

But where she merely respected and understood it, Severus both appreciated and reveled in it. It was an inherent, imbued part of his persona. He was not evil—whatever he was, it was not evil—but he was dark, and that occasionally frightened her. It was a side of him that would be forever mysterious and intangible to her, terrifying because she could not comprehend it. What made it even more terrifying than it had any right to be was the fact that she believed herself incapable of ever fully understanding it.

"You, perhaps," Hermione acknowledged, stepping onto his other side, where lantern-light kept the street well-lit. "But not me."

He gave her an almost boyish grin that was quickly turned into a sneer. "You teach Defense Against the Dark Arts, Hermione, but you don't understand it the way I do."

"So teach it," Hermione joked.

"Perhaps I should," he countered.

Hermione laughed, and was about to pull him down a different lane when she stopped, taking a few steps back to take another look at the shop window they had just passed.
"Hermione?"

She ignored Severus's query, and came to stand full-stop in front of the imported furniture shop that had apparently just been opened less than a month ago. It was not very colorful on the shop front, but the lights were on inside, and if Hermione had to say so herself, the stuff currently displayed did look quite interesting—

"We already purchased new furniture," Severus groused, having not quite enjoyed the experience as much as Hermione, especially after dealing with the fiasco of the house elves when they had been setting up their new quarters at Hogwarts. It was something he attributed to their gender-differences; he merely wanted something functional that would not tempt him to blast it with a hex in temper. She wanted to make it look nice—'like a home', to use her own words. "We don't need anymore."

The fact that he had said 'we' rather than 'I' faintly registered in Hermione's brain, particularly as Spinner's End belonged to Severus, but she pushed it aside for a moment. "I'll be right back. I want to take a look."

The look on Severus's face was one of deep-seated distaste and disbelief, and it was not one Hermione was a stranger to. It was similar to the one Hermione had seen on Harry and Ron's faces, when they had been forced to come to face with something that was peculiarly offensive to their senses, such as when they had been discussing Polyjuice in their second year. Or perhaps when they had first seen Hagrid's newly-hatched Blast-Ended Skrewts.

Hermione pushed the door open and stepped inside to take a look. Severus waited for a moment, before glancing behind him, and then back at the selection of rugs she was examining, before quickly disappearing. Hermione was momentarily concerned by this, but she guessed that he was probably using the opportunity to get some personal errands done, so she returned her gaze to the one item that had caught her now-undivided attention.

An off-white sheepskin rug that was amazingly soft to the touch, thick enough that if Hermione dropped an earring on it, she wasn't certain she would be able to find it again without her wand. She could just imagine laying it out in front of the fireplace, stretching from one side of the hearth to the other. Most of the things they had were rather spartan—the bare essentials and necessities, comfortable enough to live with, but nothing particularly luxurious. And this rug definitely qualified—if there was one thing Hermione found to be good enough to spend this many galleons on, it would be this rug.

She spent a good twenty minutes standing there, twining the strands between her fingers and rubbing her hands through it, musing how she was going to convince Severus to let her buy this and place it in front of the fireplace. Severus eventually returned, bearing gifts of ice cream. He handed her cone to her, placing a kiss on her cheek, and turned to look at the object of her fascination for the last near-half hour.

"A rug?" he said, his voice suddenly flat.

"A very soft rug," Hermione corrected, licking her ice cream thoughtfully as she turned to glance back at it again.

"It's expensive," he said, staring disdainfully at the price tag.

"I've got a year's pay that's almost untouched," Hermione quipped. "This will hardly put a dent in it."

"It looks ridiculous," he sneered. A pause, and then he muttered, "I would never have been able to afford something like this as a student. This is exorbitant."
Hermione tilted her head up at him, enjoying the banter, finding herself decidedly unconcerned with his reticence. She gave him a wicked grin. "I can afford it, and frankly, I don't care how it looks. That's subjective. Think about how it feels."

He raised an eyebrow at her, and reached out a hand to run his fingers down the length of it. Hermione pressed her advantage, taking another lick of ice cream to stop it from dripping down her wrist before making the final point of her case.

"Imagine what we could do with it," she said suggestively.

His expression went slack, almost blank for a moment, and then he turned to stare at it, assessing it for a moment before an odd look came over his face. It was one that Hermione associated with him whenever she did something unexpected but pleasurable, when he was still taking a moment to register it, and then he smirked.

"We'll take it," he said smoothly.

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Severus redirected the Floo in Spinner's End to the fireplace in the kitchen rather than the living room, for the obvious reason that he did not want some careless fool to have the misfortune of stepping on their new rug with soot-stained shoes. They made the decision to add a few bookshelves to the wall alongside the mantle, filling it up quickly due to their daily visits to Flourish and Blotts. They paid for their own books unless they both planned to share one, whereupon they would usually split the price between themselves. They were not particularly rich—well-off, but they had to conserve, and books were their mutual weakness. They reasoned that the way to stop themselves from book-buying themselves out of enough money for other necessities was to pay for what they bought individually, and for the most part, it worked.

Hermione set aside an over-estimate of how much she would need for the start of the school year, calculated how much they would need for groceries and emergencies, and finally came up with the amount she could set aside for books. Severus was a little less practical on this front, purchasing without much care given to how much he had left, but it worked for him; he spent more time at the bookshop reading rather than purchasing. The shelves in the living room filled up quickly through their combined efforts, and they ended up investing in yet another shelf.

Hermione decided to open an account for herself at Gringott’s, finally legally old enough to do so, and with the time and means to get it done. She had spent a great deal of time planning how she wanted to manage her account before she went to the Goblins to start it up, and the minute she had the paperwork done and the key in her possession, she invested everything she had left to spare in the two most successful Wizarding businesses in her time—though they were small and cheap shares now—and was understandably grateful that she had paid attention to such things as stocks and investment in the magical and Muggle world in her own timeline. She had an edge in knowing where to put her money, and it would pay off in ten years, if not sooner. She borrowed enough money from Severus to invest in another fifty shares in her name, though they both knew that if it paid off, it would belong to him, and the two were rather satisfied with how she was operating. Severus trusted her judgement in business affairs, and Hermione trusted the future as she knew it would be.

Summons from the Dark Lord surprisingly became fewer as the weeks wore on. Severus was called away only twice in the entire month of June, and neither expected it to suddenly increase without warning, and thus relaxed and enjoyed the free time that they had while they could. No students to teach, very little Order business to attend to—though Hermione visited Headquarters twice a week for updates and to help with organization and strategic decisions—and nearly all of their time to
themselves.

It was unsurprising that a good majority of their time was now spent in front of the fireplace, banked for the summer due to the heat, lying on the new rug with a book. Severus had quickly come to concede that the rug had been a good idea, as Hermione knew he would, and it became a central part of their lives. It was the single most luxurious thing they had bought for themselves, to share with each other, and they got good use out of it in the way of comfort and mutual enjoyment.

That was not to say all was well, or that they were complete at ease—either of them. Severus still maintained regular contact with the Malfoys, oftentimes invited for tea, and was forced to continue playing his role as the loyal follower. And Hermione was haunted by thoughts and considerations of a future that was rushing up too quickly on her.

Lily and James Potter would be dead in less than five months. Sirius would be thrown into Azkaban for a crime he did not commit. Peter Pettigrew would be spending twelve years comfortably as the Weasleys’ pet rat. Remus would be largely alone, ostracized even after all he had done to help protect the Wizarding community from Voldemort. Frank and Alice would be in St. Mungo's, unable to even recognize their son, a thought that brought tears to Hermione's eyes. She knew all of this would happen, and she felt like a coward for not trying to stop it.

It was all Hermione could do coldly convince herself of this. It did not, however, put her at ease.

On Harry’s birthday, Hermione went to visit. Her gift—and the other gifts that family friends had sent—went largely ignored in light of the tiny toy broomstick Sirius had sent, which one-year-old Harry zoomed around the house in with skill that, if Hermione had already not known he would be a Quidditch player, would have had her convinced of the fact. The family cat was nearly impaled twice, and finally hid under the couch, not to be seen for the rest of the evening. She had the opportunity that day to meet Bathilda Bagshot, who was an old but quiet, pleasant woman who Hermione found very interesting, even if some of the stories she told about Dumbledore made her think that the lady had gone a little senile in her dotage. Sirius himself had been unable to attend, but Hermione was certain Lily would be penning a letter to inform him of just how popular his gift had been with the birthday boy.

The smashed vase that Petunia Dursley had sent her sister was not missed.

She returned that evening to find that Severus had been summoned, and was alarmed when she found him sitting on a chair in the kitchen, nursing a bruise on his temple. The Dark Lord had demanded he find a way to track Hermione when she went to visit for Harry's birthday, and when he explained that she had already left, Voldemort had been enraged that he had let the opportunity slip between his fingers.

"But my lord," Severus had said, "I would not be able to find them even if I followed—the house is under protective wards, and I am not privy to them…"

Voldemort understandably did not take this as an appropriate excuse. His responding rant had included something about using Hermione's connection and trust with the Potters to get them to give her a note with the Secret written on it, which was arguably a possible plan, but one that was now rendered null and void. He had not injured Severus badly—conversely, he had gotten off quite easily, given that the Dark Lord had the sense become calm and suggest that such a plan would have been beyond Severus's means unless it had been planned in advance. And Voldemort had only
suggested the idea the day he had tried to implement it, a self-admitted tactical error that left Severus with only a cut on his temple from where he had hit the ground after being bodily thrown by a hex.

Hermione recorded all of this, and moved to refresh the ice pack and see what she could do about reducing the swelling of the bruise before she took the notebook to see the Headmaster.

She was surprised to find that Dumbledore was more concerned about the fact that Severus had been physically punished rather than the subject of Voldemort's targets. Surprised, and somewhat gratified deep down because Albus seemed to care, while being concerned about graver things.

"It is a sign that Tom's patience is running thin," Dumbledore said pensively, as he came to stand by the window of his study. "His self-control—and sense of control that he has over other people—is waning. His is becoming more paranoid by the day, and I suspect he expected to finish off either young Harry or Neville on their birthday, and was furious when he could not."

Hermione nodded. This made sense. Suddenly reminded, however, she dug into the pocket of her robes and pulled out a tiny flitterbloom plant in a plastic Muggle terrarium, setting it down on the Headmaster's desk. It had already started to blossom tiny, swaying purple flowers on the tips of its tentacle-like appendages, and looked quite pretty. She dug around for another moment, before pulling out a package of Droobles Best Blowing Gum and setting it down alongside the plant.

"I have no means of contacting Alice or Frank," she said, referring to the fact that the two no longer appeared at Order meetings. Indeed, only Dumbledore knew where they were hiding. "But it's Neville's birthday, and—I was hoping you could give this to them. With my regards."

"Of course," Dumbledore said, taking a moment to examine the flitterbloom cutting before setting it back down. "I'll bring it to them, certainly."

"Thank you, Headmaster."

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Hermione's stress and feeling of burden began to escalate over the next few days when she visited the Order headquarters for a meeting only to learn that Marlene and the rest of the McKinnons had been killed. At first, the shock had caused her to stand stock-still at the table in Tine Cottage as she realized why there were finally a few empty chairs. The Order had been decimated by the war, and this loss hit them hard in terms of advantage—but to Hermione, it hit her straight in the heart. Marlene had been her friend. A good friend. Her expression became frozen in a rictus of wide-eyed, cold-faced horror that gradually twitched down to merely looking icy and surprised. The shock hit her hard, and then she felt numb, as she dimly realized why Sirius was absent from this meeting. James and Lily were as well, and she had no doubt that they were trying to comfort him now.

She received her next orders with a sense of detached understanding, and left without another word. Her reaction had been quite contrary to the rest of the Orders'—many were in tears or sniffing quietly throughout the meeting.

It wasn't until Hermione got home that she sank to the floor, clutching her notebook and note-filled papers, and sobbing uncontrollably. It was where Severus found her, when he returned from an errand in Hogsmeade, and it took some time before she was able to convey to him the source of her distress. When she finally did manage to pull herself together, straightening up and pulling her face into an expression of forced calm and stony acceptance, it was shuttered. She looked quite lost and weary, and in her daze of pain, she did not seem to notice how it affected Severus to see her this way.
The following week was hell on earth. She mourned for Marlene even as she had a job to do, and her job came first. Mourning came second. Visiting Sirius at the Potters’ seemed to be a part of that, and it was not difficult for anyone to see that Sirius was taking the loss of his lover the hardest. Whenever Hermione saw him, he was a wreck, and it did her no good to see that other people were suffering.

Severus was summoned. She had to organize who would be deployed in which areas of Diagon Alley and Muggle London, cross-reference her notes and ideas with the Headmaster and several other Order members, and even more painfully, she was the one who had to turn her heart to stone and, at the next meeting, demand everyone to buck up and get their act together unless they wanted to be Voldemort’s next victim. It did not make her popular, but she was not out to win a popularity contest. Where she was not numb inside, she ached, and it was destroying her from within.

Severus found her standing in front of the fire one evening in mid-August, sock-footed and wearing a shuttered, blank expression as she stared into the flames. She did not turn around at the sound of his footfalls, nor did she give any indication of awareness. She appeared to be deep in thought, trapped in her own mind—perhaps she was reviewing some plans she had been going over earlier, perhaps she was thinking about the leak in the Order that was becoming more of a threat with every passing day. Her body stood in front of the fireplace, warmed by the flames, but her mind was elsewhere.

"Hermione," Severus whispered, coming up behind her.

She jumped at the sound of his voice, and turned around to look at him.

He stared at her appearance, taking in the shadows under her eyes and the pale, lonely air about her, and placed his hands on her shoulders. He cocked his head at her for a moment, as though thinking something through, before he said quietly, "Sit."

Hermione blinked at this for a moment, surprised by the command. Severus rarely ordered her to do something—it was she who was in charge, she who gave the orders and directed his strategies and movements within the Death Eaters. She was the one always giving directions, the one always in control—

She sank to her knees on the rug, feeling an odd sense of relief that it didn't take much thought to obey. The sheepskin was gentle to her, and she brought her fingers down to run her hands through it in a way that was oddly—very oddly—soothing. A moment later, Severus was kneeling next to her, and Hermione found herself being pulled into an embrace against him. She closed her eyes and went limp, feeling a sense of calm that was not forced, but borne out of giving up a burden. With the fire at her back, and Severus’s arms wrapped around her, and the thick sheepskin underneath her, she felt—warm. Warm and safe for the first time in months. Severus’s presence was an added sense of security to her, one that she had been numb to and distanced from due to her need to be the one in control—and control meant being the strongest, the one most able to deal with a situation and protect everyone involved—and right now, Severus had just taken that role away from her.

All she could feel was an overwhelming, cathartic sense of relief and release. She found herself inhaling deeply, breathing in his scent, and letting it out slowly in a way that relaxed her in a manner she had not allowed herself nor experienced in a long time. A moment later, she found Severus easing her down onto the rug, and she rolled over onto her belly, pillowing her head on her arms. Her shirt was removed with a flick of his wand—Hermione didn't care in the least—and a moment later, his hands had sought out the tight, coiled knots in her back. A moment later, she let out a groan that was somewhere between pain and relief.

Her eyes suddenly flew open. "Severus, I can’t—" She'd just remembered that Mad-Eye had requested she figure out who should work the Diagon Alley night shift, and she hadn't finished yet.
"I have to…"

"Shh." His fingers continued kneading into the muscles on her back, trying to loosen the knots. "Whatever it is, it can wait until later." His voice was silky, but firm on this. "Your next Order meeting isn't until the end of this week. You can take some time for yourself."

Hermione swallowed as she absorbed this. She had responsibilities—heavy ones, come to that—and for the past year, her entire focus had been centered on her job as his handler and the Order's primary organizer. It required control of self, control of her spy, and control over the people she was organizing—she hadn't dared let her guard down long enough to let someone else decide things, for a change.

She warred with herself for five full minutes, trying to convince herself that this was a bad idea—that she needed to put her focus back on the war, rather than personal gratification, and that she needed to maintain things the way they were at all costs—but by the end of those five minutes, she found she simply couldn't care anymore. She wanted Severus—wanted his fingers working their magic on her stress-tightened body, wanted his reassurances that there were some urgent things that could be made to wait, just wanted to go limp and let him do whatever he had in mind.

Let him take control of this moment, let him decide upon priorities.

She let out a sigh and her eyes fluttered, then shut completely, and she relaxed visibly, snuggling into the rug. After a few moments, his hands stopped, and Hermione frowned and blinked back to awareness to look up at him.

The expression on his face was a considering one. It was blank, but Hermione had known Severus for too long to know that when he was expressionless, his thoughts were moving faster than she could hope to track. Then to her surprise, his face morphed into one of curiosity, as though he had just found something interesting that he did not quite know what to do with.

Hermione glanced up at him. "Severus?"

He tilted his head at her thoughtfully for a moment, and then resumed his task. Hermione twisted her neck around to look at him, to inquire about what was on his mind, but one hand came to grasp the back of her head and press it back down against her arms.

"Relax," he said, stroking her hair before releasing it and returning to her shoulders. Hermione closed her eyes and obeyed, laying her head back down and allowing herself to go completely limp. His hands continued to rub and knead her muscles firmly, and though they hurt from being wound up so tight, the release of tension was wonderful, and Hermione found herself dozing off. Her mind, which was usually a swirling, jumbled chaos on the surface of the near-obsessive organization at the core of her thoughts, began to calm.

He took his time with her, and in Hermione's mind, it was glorious. Any sex they had managed to have in the past month had been a fast, furious affair, more for Severus's enjoyment than for hers. Stress made Hermione averse to intimacy, and neither of them had much time to spare in taking things slow and easy. Now his fingers were ghosting over her back, trailing down her spine, tugging her skirt down her legs a moment before his hands gripped the back of her thighs. She let out a contented little sigh and spread her legs a little wider, and he massaged her thighs for a moment before moving to squeeze her bum appreciatively.

For the first time in weeks, Hermione felt herself getting wet. She shifted where she lay, pressed against the sheepskin, and turned her head to the side to glance up at him with a warm smile.
"That feels good," she murmured, closing her eyes again.

Severus smirked, and then continued caressing her. His expression was smug, but there was a trace of softness in his features, as though Hermione's relaxed state of mind was the release he needed to drop his guard down, himself. He knelt by her feet, rubbing them, pressing his thumb into the arches before working his way back up. It was as if he had all the time in the world, and he chose to make use of it.

"You're too tense," he told her, skimming back up her body and returning to her shoulders.
"Whenever I look at you, it's as if you're a tightly-wound coil, waiting to spring—and when you do, something's going to break."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut tighter.

"Marlene," she whispered.

"Her death was not your fault," Severus told her seriously, pressing just a bit harder on her shoulders.

Hermione shook her head. "It's torn Sirius up—he's not the same." He voice suddenly turned sour. "I doubt you care but Marlene's death has just—it's changed him."

"I feel marginally sorry for the dog—"

"Don't," Hermione said bitterly, tears welling up in her eyes. "Just—don't. Don't go there. He's my friend, even if you hate him, and in addition to seeing him in pain, I lost friend when the McKinnons were murdered."

Severus was silent for a moment, and then she heard him sigh in complex mixture of frustration and capitulation. "I'm sorry. You're right—I shouldn't have said that." Hermione looked up at him in surprise, and he bent his head forward, curtaining his face as he spoke. "You don't need to deal with the—the issues Black and I have on top of everything else."

Hermione nodded miserably.

"You're under enough stress as it is," he added, helping her to her knees, and then pulling her to him. He was fully clothed, and she was not, but that didn't seem to particularly matter at the moment. "I'm concerned about you—you have more on your mind than just the war. What else is bothering you?"

Hermione shook her head. "I can't tell you."

"Can't or won't?" he prodded, resting his chin on her shoulder as he stroked her back in small, soothing circles.

Hermione was silent for several moments, and he stated, "Won't, then. Why don't you try me?"

She opened her mouth to protest, but Severus cut her off. "What do you have to lose?"

Her mind went blank for a moment as she tried to absorb his question. She was feeling fuzzy and light-headed from the massage, far too relaxed for her own good, frankly; it was for this reason that she managed to cobble together an answer that was nothing but honest. "You."

He looked very surprised for a moment, pulling away to look at her contemplatively. "What do you mean?"

Hermione bit her lower lip, and squeezed her eyes shut, burying her face in his chest. "I—there are
some things I'm concerned about—that I've been putting off—but if you knew…"

"There is very little you could do to make me not want you," Severus told her, his expression contorted into one of confusion. "It ought to be the other way around, truth to be told—"

"Look," Hermione said suddenly, sitting up straight. Her expression had become suffused with the same worried, shuttered look that had defined her features for the past few months, and the way she tensed up was unmistakable. "You can't understand—no one will know until after it happens—but I know it has to happen or something much worse will, and I just—" she made to stand up, but Severus grabbed her arms, pulling her back down. "It's driving me mad, I know it will, and I don't know how I'm going to live with myself…"

"Tell me," he insisted.

"I can't," Hermione whispered. Her eyes glazed over, and she looked down, lost in thought. Severus was sorely tempted to perform Legilimency on her, but feared that in this instance, it might do more harm than good, even if he got his answers. "It's just—I'm tired," she muttered. "I'm just so tired—so overworked—I can't think straight, and even though I know it will end soon, it feels like everything is just—just falling apart."

Severus pulled her back against him, insistent. She buried her face in his chest, gripping the shoulders of his shirt between her hands, and he uttered quietly, "Do you trust me?"

"Yes," she responded, her voice muffled. "More than anyone else."

"Remember your first Occlumency lesson—it was with Dumbledore, wasn't it?"

"I—yes."

"Let your mind go blank," he instructed, caressing the sides of her arms in his hands. "Think about everything you've been keeping under wraps—let it out for a bit."

Hermione's eyes shot up to his. If she did that—if she took down her walls—he could simply ambush her and see whatever he wanted. It was too risky, far too risky, if he planned to take advantage of that vulnerability.

And yet—she did trust him.

Choice made to obey him, she pushed her misgivings aside and inhaled deeply, slowly lowering the protections she had placed around the thoughts, ideas, and memories that were too sensitive to allow anyone to see. Sub-thoughts and faint inklings followed moments later, and she allowed everything to come loose.

It was comparable to placing everything in a glass display case, and then removing the glass and knocking the shelf over—utter chaos. Hermione's eyes crossed and she moaned, burying her face deeper into the linen of Severus's shirt as pain laced through her. It was not physical pain, but emotional and psychological agony. Things she had kept bottled up for weeks, months, even years now, hit her like the Hogwarts Express, and she fought to push it aside, to bring everything back under control again.

Marlene was dead. Sirius was a wreck and would soon be in Azkaban for a crime he didn't commit. James and Lily would be dead. Alice and Frank were doomed to a life in St. Mungo's. Harry and Ron—what was it the Order was hiding from the three of them, that summer back at Grimmauld Place? What had they been keeping secret from them all? The memory of that meeting, before her fifth year, now pressed down on her with full force. The Marauders—she knew their fates, she knew
the ruin they would fall into, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

James… Lily…

And Severus would hate her when he found out that she had known, all along, that Lily was going to die. She was afraid to lose him. So afraid. She sometimes wondered what she would do if she had a choice of stopping herself from going back in time, saving herself from the burden, the pain, that she had not had to handle in her own timeline, and she knew that the only thing that would ever stop her from doing so would be Severus. He was the center of her world—her anchor in this timeline, her anchor in any timeline.

Severus's words broke into her thoughts. "You're tensing up. Relax."

Hermione did. She tried to register everything that was coming through in small pieces before putting them aside, but it was difficult. Her mind was a whirlwind of thoughts, relevant and otherwise, and it was difficult to absorb everything. Her emotions had been iced over for so long that when she let those through, it was overwhelming. Guilt, misery, hopelessness, and depression were the prime contenders in her mind, given the things she was forced to deal with on a daily basis.

"Sometimes," he murmured into her ear, stroking her hair soothingly as she shuddered, visibly affected by what was going on inside her head. "When I go to the lab to be alone—I do this. It helps me stay sane. Among other things. At the very least, look at this from a Muggle perspective— the more you build up the dam, the stronger the torrent when it comes out…"

Hermione shuddered unpleasantly again, and then stilled. Her breathing, which had been erratic and short, began to even out, and when Severus craned his neck to look at her, her expression was calm. Not the forced, icy calm that she wore like a mask, but an expression of ease and lassitude. The tension in her face had disappeared, and for the first time in nearly a year and a half, she looked much as she had before, when she was a student: strong, aware, and confident, lacking the visible strain that so often marred her features.

She suddenly jerked back, her eyes flying open, and then she grabbed him in turn, pulling him to her instead this time. She buried her face in the corner of his neck, wrapping her arms around him. She was silent for a moment, and then began laughing, albeit in a way that was slightly hysterical.

"I should be the spy and you the handler," she choked out. "I'm not made for this. You're the only thing stopping me from going mad— and here you are, telling me what to do, when it should be the other way around."

Severus shook his head, though his grip on her tightened. "You keep me focused on the task at hand every time I come back."

"By forcing you to look after me, you mean?" Hermione quipped tiredly.

"Yes."

Hermione blinked, having meant it entirely in jest. Severus saw the look of confusion on her face, and elaborated grudgingly. "You keep me in line and make sure I divulge everything that happened— every last detail. You make the decisions on what I have to do next—and when it becomes too much for you to deal with, making certain that you're alright is the only thing stopping me from giving up entirely."

Hermione swallowed. "I don't understand. Breaking down—not being able to handle it—it's a weakness."
"It's your weakness," Severus agreed quietly, pulling her to her feet. "Not mine."

That was when Hermione understood.

She was in charge, entirely in control, when they were doing their jobs.

But when it came to surviving the aftermath, it was Severus who called the shots.

It was all strikingly clear to her now. It was ironic that they had uncovered such an odd coping system based on power exchange, but Hermione was relieved that she understood—that she finally understood. She could relax now, knowing that she could rely on him to take the lead when she needed a rest. When she needed to give up for a bit—to relinquish everything and sit back and let the world hang without actually tightening the noose. They were both carrying burdens, and Hermione had been carrying her share for too long.

"Alright," she said softly. She felt calm now. Not in control. Before, control had been everything Moody had taught her. His lessons had been valuable, but she couldn't function like the old Auror could, and she realized this now. Now she felt as though the situation could be well-managed without her maintaining the lead. "What do you want to do now?"

He sat there for a moment, tight-lipped and considering, before he began to unbutton his shirt and shrug it off.

"Kiss me," he commanded. "Give me your time."

Hermione smiled, stretching up to brush her lips against his, and then kissed him heatedly.

"All of it," she agreed. "Once this damn war is over—it's all yours."

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After that, the dynamics of their relationship changed, not drastically, but in the manner of defining lines. Hermione continued her duties as Severus's handler, taking care of the strategic and business side of their combined efforts in the war. But as soon as their job could be set aside, it was Severus who dictated how things were to go, and Hermione followed quite happily.

'Happy' probably was not the best word to use. The world was still churning with the rages of war, and tidings were grave. But she was in a much better place than she had been for a long time, and when she and Severus were alone, she revelled in the peace he brought her.

Hermione traveled between two personalities—one where she was detached, aloof, and cold, the other where she was warm, loving, and very much concerned. The former was a mask she wore, much as Severus did. The second was the woman she had blossomed into underneath, and the side only Severus ever witnessed.

School resumed, much to Hermione's interest and Severus's displeasure. They fell back into their pattern of teaching, breaking in the first years and reacquainting themselves with the older years.

The students were quite frankly shocked to see her return, and Hermione took almost sadistic, very un-Hermione-like pleasure out of informing them that not only was she returning for another year, she was planning on staying for at least ten—and that they had therefore better get used to it, for now that they were familiar with her teaching methods, they would be expected to resume lessons with the same kind of ease and speed that the other teachers accomplished.

This was accompanied by groans, but they knew better by now than to argue.
Hogsmeade visits were still off. Newspapers were flown in daily by delivery owls to announce the latest grisly news. And in spite of all of this, the students were still expected to learn.

It seemed that very little had changed.

It was not until one late Wednesday afternoon, in the middle of September, that the routine changed. Hermione was called away to stop by the Prewett brothers' residence to make a delivery of sensitive information in person, via recital rather than letter by owl.

"The Headmaster says he'd like you two to take a look around the Department of Mysteries," Hermione said, taking off her traveling cloak and setting it aside on a chair before taking a seat at their kitchen table.

"Tea?" Fabian offered genially.

"Yes, please," Hermione said, reclining in her chair. In answer, Gideon began fussing with the teakettle. "He says there's a leak in the Department of Mysteries by one of the Unspeakables, although he hasn't figured out who it is yet. Whoever's spying on them has high-level clearance and access to a lot of sensitive information, so they probably work there." Hermione suddenly remembered something from her fourth year, and added, "They might also have multiple informants—a network. You need to roll those up, or You-Know-Who is going to destroy the Ministry from the inside-out."

"Any suggestions?" Gideon said, leaning against the counter to look at her. "We only work in the Department of Magical Games and Sports—we don't have access to that floor, so we'll have a difficult time getting around."

"In all honesty, my suggestion would be stealth," Hermione advised. "Find an excuse to go down there on inter-departmental business and get a feel for the layout, and then sneak back down there. James Potter has an invisibility cloak—I'm sure you could borrow that," she said thoughtfully. "Even if you can't, you could always Disillusion yourselves and cast Anti-Detection charms."

"Fair enough idea," Gideon said, with a nod to his brother. The teakettle began whistling, and he pulled it off the stove to pour. "What d'you reckon?"

"Its sound enough," Fabian agreed. "We could probably figure out the leak with the excuse of inter-departmental business alone—all we have to do is watch people and find anyone suspicious worth investigating."

"Be sure to report every leg of your investigation to Kingsley," Hermione reminded.

"Of course," Fabian said, with a wry smile. "Don't want to lose any of your precious paperwork. You'd go nuts."

Hermione laughed. "That's not too far off—"

Her words were suddenly drowned out by a loud, shuddering crash. They all jumped. Hermione's teacup fell to the floor and shattered, forgotten, and the teakettle was flung aside as wands were drawn. The wooden walls around them suddenly exploded, splintering, and Hermione recognized the hint of silver that preceded the grotesque mask of their enemies.

There was no time to talk. Hermione had her wand out, and before the first could appear, had fired off a hex in their direction.

"Duro!" The walls hardened into stone, and she snapped her wand at the ceiling. "Diffindo—Reducto!"
There was a sickening crunch as the wall broke and shattered, crashing down on them, and Hermione turned away to duck toward the fireplace, only to find that it had been blocked by a piece of fallen rubble. Shite. Moody and Shacklebolt's training jumped in at that moment, and Hermione was up in a flash, barking out orders.

"Gideon, clear one of the walls so we can get out!" she demanded as she ducked forward behind one of the stone-turned remains of the wall for cover. "Fabian, get over here and help me. Get cover!"

They moved quickly, as shouts from the other room grew louder. The walls blasted apart around them, and Hermione and Fabian quickly ducked out of the way, wands out, and ready to duel. Hermione assessed the situation quickly as she snapped a crippling spell at one of the intruders. There were three,—four, no, five of them, all masked and robed and with their wands out.

What were they here for? Were they searching for something specific, or was this just a raid?

There was an explosion behind her, signaling the Gideon had just blasted a hole through what had been his kitchen window, and Hermione signalled for the two of them to get out while she handled them. Gideon was already out, pressed against the wall outside with his wand at the ready, but Fabian shook his head no urgently in response.

"You get out first," he hissed, sending out an array of stunners. The rubble around them was making it difficult for the Death Eaters to get into the kitchen, much less get a good shot at them, but they were certainly trying. "Go stand with Gideon, I'll lure them out—"

"Omnes Crux!" Hermione shouted. A series of pained screams followed her spell, and she quickly skittered backwards toward the exit, wand at the ready. She whipped around to duck behind the wall, standing on the opposite side next to Gideon. They exchanged glances, wands at the ready, and a moment later, when Fabian dove through with two Killing Curses flying over his head by a mere two inches, they both came around the side half-way with their spells already on their lips. They cast and then ducked back, Gideon helping his brother to his feet. Hermione summoned a pile of rubble to block the blasted exit, and the three of them turned to make a run toward the sparsely-wooded field of the back yard.

The sound of multiple Apparitions stopped them in their tracks. Two of the Death Eaters had misjudged the location and ended up several feet from their intended targets, but the other three had them effectively surrounded until their cohorts could run into position.

They were outnumbered three to five, and all had their wands raised.

Hermione didn't wait for them to try negotiations. Her wand snaked out in the direction of the Death Eater in front of her.

"Sectumsempra!" she snarled. The spell cut across the Death Eater's face, slicing the lower half of his mask, causing it to sever and drop to the ground, revealing the bleeding, gurgling wound high up on his throat. Hermione didn't wait to see what became of him, but whipped around to the one at her left as Gideon and Fabian took on the other three behind her. A hex cut across their circle, striking a glancing blow at Hermione on her hip and causing her to stumble for a moment in pain before she was up again.

Her next spell was flung silently at the man who had nicked her, causing him to be lifted up about a foot in the air. His wand dropped from his hands as they flew to his neck, trying to fight against the invisible force strangling the life out of him, clawing his mask aside to reveal his identity to try and gasp in some air— Dolohov. Hermione spared a glance down at his fallen comrade, who had collapsed on the ground and was clearly bleeding to death, even as she whipped around to help her
two companions.

The other three were better prepared, as Hermione had caught the first two off guard, and the three-on-three duel became a game of dodging and defending against hexes and ducking Unforgivables. Hermione's reflexes were far too good to allow her to be caught easily; her movements were graceful, instinctive as they had been drilled into her after hours upon hours of reinforcement, and she shot back hexes that were as deadly as the Killing Curses that narrowly missed her feet.

One Death Eater's hex missed Fabian entirely and struck their house, setting it aflame; Hermione used the distraction as an opportunity to Apparate behind him, wand at the ready, and struck him with an Entrail-Expelling Curse.

The man's dying screams were broken by the sound of another Killing Curse being uttered; Hermione's eyes widened in horror as her vision was filled with a flash of green light, and then Gideon crumpled to the ground.

Rage—and fear, but mostly rage—boiled within her, and she struck the man in the back of the neck with a Severing Spell. He let out a choked, surprised sound and crumpled to the ground not six feet from the man he had just killed. Fabian's gaze flickered from his enemy to his brother, and then to Hermione; she wanted to scream at him to pay attention, to bloody pay attention, and not allow himself to be distracted—because that was the first rule Moody had taught, that distractions got you killed—

Fabian let out a soundless whimper, much like a sigh, when the flash of green struck him next.

"You bastard!" Hermione screamed, as the Death Eater whirled around to strike her next. "You fucking animal!"

"Blood traitor!" her enemy sneered back, his tone mocking. "Die!"

Hermione ducked the next hex. Eyes blazing, she faced him, her wand aimed between the eyeholes of the man's mask.

"You first," she snarled. "Sectumsempra!"

Blood splattered against her as her spell cut horizontally through the man's face, sliding through his mask, which tore off and slipped to the ground. Her enemy's eyes widened with horror as blood poured down his face, and then narrowed in pain as he realized that half his right eye had been ruined. He opened his mouth to speak, but Hermione didn't give him a chance. She took three leaping steps forward and kicked him backwards, grabbing the end of his wand and breaking it in half using his own hand for leverage, and pressed him down against the ground by his chest.

"What were you here for?" she demanded.

The man coughed, his injured eye rolling white and twitching as it bled. He fumbled for a moment for his broken wand, and then pointed it at Hermione.

"Avada Kedav—"

There was a sudden sound of multiple, popping Apparitions. To Hermione's horror, she realized that she was now surrounded by at least a dozen masked and armed wizards.

"—ra!"

There was a spluttering flash of green light, and Hermione leapt back, but she need not have worried;
the broken wand shook and flashed for a moment, but did nothing more than let out a few sparks. The owner coughed in surprise at this, but Hermione paid no attention; instead, her fingers flew to her watch, pulling the third dial loose and twisting it hurriedly as multiple voices fought to be heard as the prepared to hex her.

"Avada—"

"Stupe—"

"Cruc—"

She slammed down on the dial, and a sudden tell-tale yank behind her navel told her that it worked, and she spun away. A sharp pain seared through her hip as she disappeared, and she let out a grunt of pain even as she struggled to hold onto the Portkey on her wrist.

She landed with a hard thud on the floor of the Headmaster's office, scrambling to her feet quickly and painfully, in time to hear the scrape of a chair being quickly pushed back. Dumbledore was out of his seat in a flash and standing at her side, pulling her up.

"What happened?" he demanded sharply. There was no trace of twinkling eyes or a friendly smile on his face. "Where are the Prewetts? Who did you kill?"

Something suddenly lodged itself in Hermione's throat.

Who did you kill?

"I—I don't know," she said, pulling herself together. She brought a hand to her cheek to wipe the blood away, and stared down at the red smearing on her fingers. "Fabian and Gideon are dead—they were both killed by Death Eaters." She took in a deep breath, and then continued with icy, detached calm. "I was in—I was in the middle of my report to them, when the house was broken into. Five of them came in. They're all dead now, but twelve more came, and I had to flee."

Dumbledore was moving quickly now, striding over to Fawkes, who let out a trill of alarm.

"Fawkes, send Alastor a message," Dumbledore intoned seriously. He turned around to look at Hermione, who had finally regained her wits and was now spelling blood off her clothes. "You had better let Poppy take a look at you, my dear—and then you had best go off and find Severus."

And just like that, after facing five murderous Death Eaters and coming back covered in blood, Hermione was dismissed.

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"Stop being such a cantankerous git," Hermione snapped tiredly as Severus examined the cut across her hip where the matron had been forced to remove a chunk of skin that had been sliced into by a spell which had begun to ooze black pus amidst the blood. The skin had been regrown, and now looked quite healthy, but the scar where the original cut had been made was still visible. "I'm fine."

"The only one being a cantankerous git here is you," Severus retorted, as he traced his wand over the scar. The Dark Lord had not yet summoned him, but Severus had gone through her memories, and knew precisely which Death Eaters she had killed. They had to think of something that would convince the Dark Lord to overlook such a transgression. "I'm trying to help you. Your cooperation would be most appreciated."

"Severus, I just killed four men and watched two more die," Hermione snarled miserably. "I'm tired,
and I want to go to bed and maybe drown myself with Dreamless Sleep before I have to get up for class tomorrow. The scar on my hip is the least of my worries."

"You still don't know what spell Dolohov used?"

"It was nonverbal, and you saw for yourself—I didn't get a good look at it."

Severus let out a rough sigh and stood up, allowing Hermione to push her chair back, away from the desk, and yank her skirt back up.

"I haven't detected any traces of Dark Magic still in it," he admitted crossly. "It could have been worse, I suppose. It seems that Poppy took care of it."

"I told you so," Hermione muttered, rubbing her face. "Now can I go?"

"No," Severus pulled her to him, and kissed her forehead. "You're angry with me now, but I'm only looking after you."

"I'm not angry," Hermione confessed, pressing her hand against her temple. "I'm just aggravated and—upset. I'll have to tell Molly that I watched her only two brothers die, and as if that isn't tragic enough, we'll need to find replacements for the assignment those two were being briefed on." She sighed, and then reached into the pocket of her robes, and pulled out a slightly dented watch. "I know I wasn't supposed to, but I went back before going to see Madam Pomfrey. I want to give Molly something of her brothers, and I managed to get Fabian's watch."

"Merlin's ruddy beard, Hermione!" Severus exploded. "That is one of the most dunderheaded things you could have done!"

"I had to," Hermione said, her voice surprisingly calm as she looked down at the watch. "I just—I had to. There are so many people I've lost, who I wish I had at least gotten the chance to get something to remember them by—once they're gone, I never had the chance to. The Death Eaters were desecrating the bodies—I had to summon the watch off of Fabian without being seen. They sacrificed themselves for the Order," Hermione continued softly. "Their sister deserves this much, at least, to remember them by."

Severus froze, staring down incomprehensibly into her face. His eyes flickered over her, as though trying to divine something from them, and then he let out a sigh of frustration.

"Gryffindors," he growled. "Over-sentimental to the point that they forget the concept of self-preservation."

"I'm sorry," Hermione responded wearily, slumping back into her chair.

Severus placed a hand on her shoulder, and then let out another sigh, calmer this time, more controlled.

"Let's go to bed," he said quietly. "We have class tomorrow."

Hermione stood up gratefully. When they went to sleep, neither looking forward to the next day, but relieved that they would both be there to see it, Hermione snuggled against Severus's chest, with his arms wrapped firmly around her.

Neither of them wanted to contemplate how close one of them had come to sleeping alone in this bed for the rest of his days.
Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Molly's reaction to the news of her brothers' deaths was an expected one. She was shocked, terrified, tearful, and then when Hermione pressed Fabian's watch into her hands, overwrought.

Moody was as paranoid as ever about the reasons the Death Eaters had attacked, and he and Sirius had words, loudly, at the table with all the other Order members and Hermione present, about whether or not she should be sent out on such assignments again.

"She's the one doing the organizing, boy!" Moody snarled. "She can't just hand out fliers to everyone and ask 'em to pass them along!"

Sirius slammed his hand down on the table. His hair had grown longer, he was looking slightly unkempt, and he had been aged by grief. His eyes, which had once been full of easy laughter, were as pitiful and mournful as a basset hound's, shadowed by sleep deprivation and grief. "We keep losing people because you waste their lives by taking unnecessary risks! If Hermione's got a message to deliver, she can do it here at Headquarters!"

Their argument had lasted nearly half an hour, by which time Hermione had slipped away to return home, in no mood to involve herself in their debate. She found out later that the argument had been cut short by the arrival of Albus Dumbledore, whereupon he insisted that precautions would be taken, but that Hermione would not be removed from her current duties.

Severus was summoned two days later, and returned with his back covered in welts. Hermione emerged from the library to find him kneeling on the floor at the foot of the couch, clutching the wounds that trailed over onto his shoulders, and panting with pain. She took the liberty of transfiguring the couch into a low, wooden table, lifting him onto it and removing his shirt in order to see the extent of the damage. The bloody fabric had dried and turned into a crust atop of the wounds and had to be extracted carefully.

Severus talked to her while she worked to apply healing potions to the raised and bleeding skin on his back. "He was furious when he found out it was you," he muttered, wincing as a dollop of potion sizzled and burned before the skin began to close up, leaving a faint scar in its wake. "Enraged… said I was losing control over you… I wasn't the only one beaten, the dozen or so who arrived on the scene were struck multiple times with Crucio for not capturing you… but I got the worst of it."

Hermione stroked his newly healed back, kneeling beside him. "It'll be over soon," she whispered.

"How do you know?" He asked faintly.

"I just know," Hermione responded, her voice firm.

He let out a low, slightly hoarse chuckle. "Have you been a seer all this time?"

Hermione tapped him lightly on the side of the head. "Don't be ridiculous. Divination is still rubbish, if you ask me."
"I wasn't asking you."

"Prat."

He was up by Monday, teaching class with his usual acerbic intolerance, and Hermione took this as an indication that he was well again. His back was littered with the faintest of scars from where the cuts had run deepest, and they were barely noticeable. Yet, when they were intimate, and Hermione ran her hands down his back, she could feel them beneath her fingers, and knew that they were there.

After the incident that had given Severus his scars, he was rarely summoned. Voldemort had summoned him a week after the beating to inform him that his job would now involve keeping a closer eye on Hermione as well as continuing to spy on Dumbledore and report the on-goings at Hogwarts to him, which Severus was only too happy to do. In addition, Hermione was only called to Order meetings once a week, her workload having been reduced due to the fact that she was now back to a full-time teaching job. This meant that during the week, when their only obligation was grading and patrolling the halls at odd ours, their spare time was dedicated solely to each other. Something that Severus took shameless advantage of at every opportunity.

It was how Hermione found herself being yanked into a niche in a corridor on one of the evenings when both she and Severus had been assigned the patrol the sixth and seventh floors, on one of those rare occasions when their schedules happened to coincide. She let out a squeak of surprise, and promptly had the living daylights snogged out of her.

"Severus, we're supposed to be patrolling…"

Her protests died a quick, heated death, as Severus's hands proceeded to roam over her body, hiking up her skirt enough for him to slip a hand underneath so that he could tease her in her most sensitive spot while another hand began unbuttoning her shirt with only five fingers to do the job. Five very skilled, nimble fingers at that, for the job was soon done, and he was flicking and suckling her nipples even as he worked her core.

Hermione moaned and cried out as he had his way with her, responding with growing enthusiasm as he warmed her up before pulling away to undo the flak of his trousers. Hermione took the initiative to kneel down in front of him, pulling the waistband down and placing her mouth on him as soon as she could manage it. She teased him in turn, licking and nipping lightly at his shaft until he pulled her back up, yanked her skirt aside, and took her up against the wall.

This was not an isolated incident. It became a habit for them to request that they be partnered together for patrols, and on Hermione's birthday—which happened to roll around on a school night—they were wandering the library together, splitting up periodically to check that the library was as empty as it should be before they ended up at the corner between two bookcases, in front of the stained glass window, where Severus had first kissed her.

He had kissed her then, too. And again. They had dragged each other to the floor, and then over to a nearby study table, where Severus proceeded to demonstrate exactly what else he had been on his mind when he had thrown caution into the wind that day. Hermione had received a thorough and very enjoyable birthday shag, one that had left her boneless and beyond satiated, and she didn't think she would quite see that particular section of the library the same way again.

With less stress concerning outside obligations, they had a good deal of time on their hands, and resorted to being the randy, young adults that they were.

This stretch of good fortune lasted until mid-October, when Severus was once again summoned—and whereupon he began to be summoned with upsetting regularity. In response, Hermione was
again called to the Order with the news that the Potters would be going under deeper protection, and
decisions concerning who the Secret Keeper should be as well as what additional wards and
protections should be used were being discussed. James and Lily were present for these meetings,
and they unanimously agreed that they wanted Sirius to be their Secret Keeper.

Hermione didn't like the look on Peter's face as they discussed additional protections. She was sorely
tempted to hex him to the ground and choke the life out of him, the slimy worm-tailed creature that
he was, but restrained herself.

Tensions grew high. Hermione and Severus spent every waking moment they had grading, which
included bringing their work with them on patrols and using spare time to mark essays and tests.
Severus had avoided the wrath of Voldemort's displeasure since the beating he had taken back in
September, but it was clear that the Dark Lord was still not pleased with him. Hermione was busy
discussing protection details with the Potters and the small circle of those involved, and in late
October, the plans were finalized. On October 29th, Godric's Hollow was placed under the Fidelius
Charm, and Sirius sent Hermione a letter indicating that he planned to go into hiding himself.

Hermione spent that half-week restless and frantic, on edge with near-hysteria as the hours and days
slowly whittled by. She wanted to visit the Potters. She wanted to say goodbye. Would Harry
survive in this new timeline she had altered? How was she going to be able to live with herself when
all was said and done?

On the morning of October 31st, Hermione shakily got up and prepared for class. She was distracted
and off-kilter all day, leaving her students feeling wrong-footed as they tried to deal with her snaps
and barks of irritation when they did not do something exactly right. She barely ate at the Halloween
feast. Severus had not managed to get an honest explanation out of her, and when the two were
finally excused from patrol duty, they returned to their quarters in silence.

Hermione paced in her room, checking her watch every so often, and then eventually, she put her
foot down. She pulled her robes back on over the sleepwear she had donned, and headed for the
door.

"Where are you going?" Severus demanded.

"Out," Hermione said sharply.

Her tone brooked no argument, and Severus stood there, his face pulled into a blank expression as he
absorbed her odd behavior. And then she was gone.

~o~O~o~

Hermione strode down the street, her robes fluttering behind her, as she kept to the shadows afforded
by the other homes in the vicinity. She had just thrown on her slippers, and if anyone saw her now,
they would probably think she looked quite ridiculous, walking around at this odd hour of night in
nothing but her pyjamas and a robe.

It was pitch black save for the streetlamps, and as Hermione walked, dread began to sink into her. At
this point, she didn't know what she thought she was doing. Yet, she could not bring herself to
simply go back home, pretend nothing happened, and sleep until the news broke that He-Who-Must-
Not-Be-Named was dead…

She stopped in front of the space where Godric's Hollow was. She was privy to the Fidelius Charm
—Sirius had let her in on the Secret before keeper-duties were switched over to Pettigrew—and she
waited.
She was one of James and Lily's closest friends. She was Harry's godmother, for Merlin's sake. Why wasn't she doing anything more to save them? She blinked for a moment, raising a hand to her mouth to chew on her fingernails. Everyone else could claim ignorance concerning Pettigrew's true loyalties—furthermore, none of them knew what would happen tonight. But what about her? She had no such excuse. She was in full understanding of what was going to happen here tonight, and furthermore, she was doing nothing to stop it.

She couldn't stop it. It had to happen. Lily, at least, had to die protecting her son so that he could live to destroy Voldemort through his mother's love. James had to die in order for Lily to be put in such a desperate situation. If she interfered, if she tried to stop it, time would be altered with such severe repercussions that Hermione did not really want to contemplate it. But she wished there was another way, other than standing here waiting for them to die.

She let out a sudden gasp of surprise as the upstairs window on the left suddenly burst and exploded, the glass shattering. A moment later, a series of explosions followed, and the entire house began to slowly shudder inwards on itself before Hermione's eyes. She let out a whimper as something whispy and white began to seep out of the cracks and breaks, the pallid and poisonous-looking entity let out a ghostly scream. It coalesced into some undefinable shape, and then vanished into the night air. Hermione took a step back as the house began to crash down on itself, and she looked around wildly, waiting for someone—anyone else—to appear.

The house let out a warning creak, on the verge of total collapse, and Hermione made her decision. She whipped out her wand, pointing it at the now-ruined structure.

"Fundamenta stabilis!"

The creaking stopped, just barely. Hermione ducked forward quickly, entering the front yard and skipping around the broken glass shattered around the ground, stopping in front of the front door, which was cracked in two and bent outwards, ready to snap at any moment. She couldn't get in. She didn't dare try a summoning charm—in a wreckage like this, Harry could run up against something sharp, and the spell might even go so far as to smash him through a wall to bring him to her.

A wailing sound caught her attention, and she looked up to the window just above her. Stowing her wand, she gritted her teeth, grabbed hold of the nearby window ledge and began to climb. It wasn't easy; glass was embedded everywhere, splinters dug into her hands at every opportunity, and when she made it half-way up there a few moments later, her leg got caught on the broken edges of the window, tearing into her skin.

Heavy footsteps suddenly caught Hermione's attention, and she glanced back at the yard, where the enormous form of Rubeus Hagrid making his way through caught her attention.

"Oi, what're yeh doin' there—?"

"It's me, Hagrid!" Hermione called back, twisting her neck around to look at him. Her grip slipped for a moment, and she struggled to hold herself in place. "Help me up—I've got to get to that room—"

Big, meaty hands grabbed her feet, lifting her upward, and Hermione stumbled into the room.

"Where's Harry?" Hagrid asked, peering into the room from his enormous height. "Can yeh see 'im?"

The walls looked ready to fall in on themselves, burnt black. Everything was in ruins. Laying on top of the wreckage that had been his cradle, was one-and-a-half-year-old Harry, crying loudly in a
pitiful sound of fear, distress, and general upset. Hermione swallowed and knelt down next to him, lifting him up gently and trying to soothe him even as she stared down at the lightning-bolt scar freshly emblazoned on her best friend's forehead.

She glanced around at the room, which had been strewn into disarray. Part of the wall had been blasted off, including the door, and on the floor—on the floor…

Hermione's feet crumpled beneath her, and still gripping Harry tightly to her chest, she stared down at the still form of Lily. She heard shouting below, but did not register it as she carefully set Harry down and reached out a trembling hand to touch Lily's face. Her green eyes were open, glistening with unshed tears, and her body was lukewarm to the touch. Her hair spread around her face, like a burnished halo. A moment later, she whipped around in surprise as she felt familiar, long fingers grasp her shoulder.

"No…" she heard Severus whisper. Hermione scrambled to pick Harry up, holding him protectively as Severus fell to his knees beside Lily, pulling her into his arms to cradle her. He made a choking sound, and then a moment later, he was sobbing. Something snapped inside Hermione, and she broke down as well, crying bitterly as she finally registered the raw pain of the situation.

Lily was dead. James, too, though Hermione had not seen him yet.

Not wanting Harry to remain in here any longer than he had to, she approached the window, gingerly placing him in Hagrid's hand. The half-giant took him carefully, and then she turned away, kneeling beside Severus for a moment before she shakily stumbled off down the destroyed hall. She made it to the end, and down the stairs, where she saw the still body of James Potter lying feet away. She knew he was dead—she knew that this man she considered to be an older brother, a best friend, was dead—but still, like Severus, she could not help but get down on her knees next to him, pull him into her arms, and ascertain for herself that he was really, truly gone.

The pain wormed its way into her heart, brutally wrenching a hole in it. James's glasses had cracked and were askew on her face, and his eyes were empty, gazing off into the distance. She heard Hagrid call her name from above, but she ignore him, pulling James more tightly against her, and crying helplessly. She had thought that she could just stand by and let what needed to be done happen, but life was just not that easy. Tonight, she had lost someone important to her, just as Severus had, and he was gone—gone—

The sound of broken, choking, sniffling sobs drowned themselves in her ears, but they felt so far away that she could not tell whether they were hers, Severus’, or both of them combined. All she knew was that when she eventually stood up, blinking more tears out of her eyes and pulling out her wand to try and lift James's body into the air, she realized that the crying had not stopped. In a daze, she staggered back up the stairs, where she saw Hagrid still peering in through the window, his expression worried.

Wordlessly, Hermione maneuvered James toward the window, where Hagrid took him and disappeared from sight for a moment to set him down on the ground. She came to kneel by Severus, who was still on his knees, his face pressed into Lily's arm even as his shoulders shook.

"We need to go," Hermione whispered, her voice cracked and wet from crying. "We c-can't—we can't stay here forever…"

With great effort, Severus stood up, lifting Lily into his arms. He refused to look at Hermione as he handed her to Hagrid, and then without another word, Apparated down to the ground with a loud crack. Hermione did not dare attempt Apparition at the moment, so Hagrid helped her back down. She landed on the ground with a soft 'oomph', and stumbled a few feet away from the house
before pulling out her wand and pointing it behind her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered into the air, as she flicked her wand, ending her spell with a silently-cast _Finiē_. The house let out a final warning creak, and then promptly began to fall in on itself, like a bunch of kapla blocks, with wood and bricks that were still intact and sticking out at odd, splintery angles as it came down, looking as though someone had taken a sledgehammer to it.

Hagrid was cradling Harry with all the care he might give a newborn kitten, who was still wailing loudly, plaintively. Hermione held out her arms for him, and hesitating for a moment, Hagrid handed him to her. She hugged Harry to her chest, trying to soothe him.

"Shh," she whispered, glancing down the street as a few lights in the nearby houses came on. The Fidelius Charm on the house was slowly breaking apart by its destruction, but it would take several minutes for that to happen. Then the ruins would be visible for all to see. "It's alright, Harry, it's alright…"

She saw Severus walking away, and gathering up the strength, she called after him croakily, "Where are you going?"

Severus turned to look at her. His expression was partially hidden by his hair, which hung forward over his face, but the look of great, twisted pain on his face was unmistakable.

"I must speak with Albus."

There was a sudden rumbling sound, and Hermione and Hagrid's necks both swivelled to seek it out, caught like deer in the headlights as a huge motorcycle slammed down on the cobblestone, skidding to screeching halt just a few feet away from them. Another _crack_ snapped across Hermione's hearing, and Severus was gone. Sirius leapt off of it, his eyes wide with shock, as he registered first the wailing baby in Hermione's arms and then the wreckage of his best friend's home that lay behind them. Beside them, on the street, James and Lily lay peacefully, eyes still open, gazing up at the stars.

"Hagrid—Hermione," he whispered, his voice cracking with disbelief. He was pale and shaking. "What happened—James, Lily…?"

Hagrid let out an enormous sob, pulling out a giant handkerchief from one of his enormous his pockets, and blew his nose with a honk. Hermione swallowed, glancing down once at Harry, who had turned quiet, and then back at Sirius.

"They're dead," Hermione said quietly.

Sirius let out a whimpering sound like a wounded animal, and then sank down to the ground with a loud, keening wail. Hermione handed Harry to Hagrid, and quickly moved to kneel next to him, wrapping her arm around him.

"I'm so sorry, Sirius," she choked, as the full force of tonight's event hit her, and she too broke down and began to sob once more. "I'm so sorry."

Something seemed to snap within Sirius, for in the next moment, he stood up shakily, wiping his eyes.

"Give Harry to me, Hagrid," he said, holding out his hands. He wore a look of scared determination, and Hermione rather thought that it was taking all of his willpower to stand strong in the face of his best friend's murder. "I'm his godfather. I'll look after him."

"No can do, Sirius," Hagrid said, holding Harry close. He looked genuinely sorry, and though he
was firm, his voice was as soothing as it was hoarse. "I've got me orders from Dumbledore. I'm sorry."

"I'm his godfather," Sirius shot back, his expression dead-set. He rubbed his eyes, trying to clear them of the tears, but his face was now a blotchy mixture of red and white from crying. "Tell Dumbledore I'll take him. James would have wanted me to look after his son, Hagrid."

"I can't," the half-giant replied hoarsely. "Dumbledore's got his reasons fer wantin' him to go ter his aunt an' uncle's, an' I trust that he knows what he's doin'."

Hermione placed her arm on Sirius's shoulder. "Lily gave up her life defending Harry," she told him quietly. "The kind of love it takes for someone to do that is a powerful one. There is magic in love, Sirius, and Dumbledore of all people would know that. I'll bet that's what he's capitalizing on, trying to find protection for Harry until he's old enough to look after himself."

"But…" Sirius rasped.

"Even if V-Vol—even if Voldemort's gone," Hermione said, stumbling over the name. The monster's death seemed to have triggered the breaking of some kind of dam within her, for Hermione felt as though everything she had reined in so tightly, even the stuff she had let out occasionally, was threatening to escape into chaos within her. "His followers… they're still out there, Sirius, and neither of us are well-equipped enough to care for a baby. Dumbledore knows this, Sirius, and he's obviously made arrangements that he believes are in Harry's best interests." She swallowed. "We have to trust him."

Hagrid retrieved his handkerchief with one hand and blew his nose, the tangled brambles that were his beard turning damp from the enormous tears leaking out of his eyes. "Tha's right, Sirius. James an' Lily are dead, and now we have You-Know-Who's followers ter look out fer—it's not safe fer Harry, I reckon."

Sirius bowed his head, and then strode over to his bike. He placed a hand on it. "Alright," he whispered hoarsely. "Take—take Harry to Dumbledore. You can use my motorbike." His voice shook. "I won't need it anymore."

"Where are you going?" Hermione asked, as Sirius walked the bike over to Hagrid.

Sirius shook his head, refusing to respond. He hesitated, pulled Hermione into a startled hug, and then with a crack signifying Apparition, he disappeared.

Hermione stood still for a moment, her robes billowing faintly in the cold autumn wind, and then she slowly turned to look at Hagrid.

"I guess—I guess you'd better get going," she said thickly.

"Yeh're not coming with me?"

Hermione shook her head, staring down at her leg, which had begun to sting painfully. "I need to return to Hogwarts. You know where you're headed, right?"

"Dumbledore told me where ter go— his aunt an' uncle live in Little Whinging," Hagrid said, pulling out several blankets from the pocket that thankfully did not contain his stained handkerchief, and beginning to wrap little Harry up in them. "Yer sure yeh'll be alright?"

Hermione nodded tightly. "Yes. Little Whinging is a long way from here—you probably won't get there for a couple hours. Make sure to stay out of sight."
"O' course." Hagrid climbed onto the motorbike, tucking the bundle of blankets containing the Boy-Who-Lived in the crook of his arm. "Would yeh do me a bit o' a favor—cast a Disillusionment Charm on me?"

Hermione nodded, pulling out her wand. A tap on Hagrid, and then on the motorbike, and she stepped back as Hagrid, now shimmering, started the engine. The bike lurched forward, and Hermione bent down over her watch, twisting the third dial that would porkey her back to Hogwarts.

A yank behind her navel, and she left the scene of the ruins that she was certain would haunt her for the rest of her life.

~o~O~o~

The next day found the Wizarding world in an uproar. Classes had been cancelled, and owls were swooping in and out of the Great Hall in masses every few minutes. Groups of students had gone around the castle shooting up sparklers and fireworks with their wands in celebration, laughing and cheering and hugging each other. House rivalries were disbanded for all of twenty-four hours among the Hufflepuff, Gryffindors, and Ravenclaws, who all engaged in an exorbitant amount of celebratory crying, embracing, eating, dancing, and comforting. Dozens of students practically ran down to the kitchens, to request that fine food be brought up, and this kind of celebration was only a microcosm of the true extent of celebratory catharsis that had gripped the community.

In the distance, shooting stars could be seen coming up from Hogsmeade, and Hermione heard reports that Dedalus Diggle was responsible for a very noisy bunch of them down in Kent. It was like Guy Fawkes night, with lots of fireworks, only for a different cause. She heard rumors, tales, and gossip about the celebrations and parties that were taking place all over, and she could not help but smile faintly at this.

But that was the extent of her cheering. After working relentlessly for the past two years, she was very tired, and enormously relieved. Exhaustion and relief were the extent of her reaction, when she finally slumped against a wall, sank down, and registered that for the next decade, at least, Tom Riddle would be out of their hair. That, and a little bit of hysteria, for she was torn between sobbing and laughing, and it took her a good four hours to work it all out of her system.

Severus's reaction was one of stupefied shock and horror. Hermione didn't see him that night, and she knew he would be in the Headmaster's office. She was in just about the same state of mind as he was, to be frank, and while the world around them exploded with cheers, she curled up in their quarters, on the sheepskin in front of the fire, and cried.

She did not see Severus again until the next day, when he finally returned, staggering into their quarters. He looked terrible. His hair was unkempt, his face blotchy from crying, and he looked as though he had aged several years in the few hours that he had been shut up with Dumbledore. He took one look at her, letting out a sound like a wounded animal, very much like the one Sirius had made, and then collapsed onto the rug as Hermione quickly sat up to accommodate him.

They sat there, with Severus staring listlessly into the flames, as Hermione wrapped her arms around him, trying to provide what comfort she could. She cried, too, but it was in quiet, choked sobs. He did not speak for a long time. When he did, his voice was raspy and hoarse, and full of such pain that it nearly broke Hermione's heart.

"Lily," he whispered raggedly. "Lily's dead."

"James too," Hermione croaked. "I'm sorry."
"He said he would protect them. He said…” Severus trailed off, turning away. He took a deep breath, trying to continue, his voice cracking. "This is my fault, Hermione. All my fault…"

"No," Hermione retorted, and when he did not respond, repeated more loudly, "No!"

"I relayed the prophecy to Voldemort, I painted the target on them…"

"Severus," Hermione said firmly, painfully. "There are many people who are to blame for James and Lily's deaths. You are not one of them."

Severus choked on his next words. "There's only one thing I can do to honor her memory."

Hermione waited.

"I'll help protect her son, when he comes to Hogwarts," Severus whispered. "The Dark Lord won't be gone forever, Hermione, and when he returns—I'll be there to help her son."

Hermione nodded, burying her face in his shoulder.

"I'll be there too," she whispered. "I promise."

He tensed, and then one arm limply came around her, pulling her closer to him. They sat there for the rest of the night, with barely a word spoken between them, each mourning the loss of the Potters in their singular yet mutual way.

The Potters' remains were retrieved from the ruins of what had been their home in Godric's Hollow, and the funeral was planned to take place in two weeks' time. The Dursleys were not attending, a facet of news that had made Hermione tear up with fury at their coldness, but there was nothing she could do about it. Two days after the funeral plans were made, news broke out around the Wizarding World: Sirius Black had murdered twelve Muggles and blasted Peter Pettigrew to smithereens, and was awaiting sentencing in Azkaban.

"No!" Hermione had cried, against her better judgement, when she stood at Tine Cottage with the rest of the Order. Severus had finally been let in on the Secret, and was in attendance, standing by her side as the meeting commenced. "That's not—that's not possible! You know it isn't!"

Dumbledore looked grave. "He was the Potters' secret keeper, and in light of his recent actions, I'm afraid that not only is it possible, it is reality."

"No…” Hermione whimpered, before she managed to regain control over herself.

Everyone else looked grave. Severus was bitter. Alice, who was no longer in hiding, took Hermione's hand in hers and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I know Sirius was your friend," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

The Headmaster cleared his throat. "The next order of business, I believe, is that Milicent Bagnold is planning to retire. There has been lobbying to convince her to retain her position, at least for a bit, but she has made it clear that she will be leaving office soon."

"You've got plenty of votes to make it to Minister," Frank pointed out.

"I have said this before, and I will say this again," Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling slightly. "I have no interest in becoming the Minister of Magic. Who else would be at Hogwarts to offer everyone lemon drops?"
Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose at this. Several of the other Order members tittered.

Once that meeting was over, Severus pulled her aside, taking her to the small garden behind the house to stand in the brisk November air. His face was still pulled by the pain of his loss, but his expression was a mixture of determination and relief.

"Hermione, you said that as soon as the Dark Lord was gone, we could talk about—about circumstances being as they are, if you would marry me," Severus said slowly.

Hermione rubbed at her face with one hand, and then nodded. "Let's go see the Headmaster," she agreed miserably.

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They sat together in Dumbledore's office, with the man himself sitting behind his desk, looking as old and weary as Hermione had ever seen him. The war had taken a heavy toll on them all, despite their relief that it was over—at least for now—nothing could erase the marks of their servitude. Hermione had filled Severus in on a few basic details as they had made their way to the office, and now they sat, waiting, as Dumbledore explained Hermione's tale.

He had pulled out the pieces of the broken Time-Turner, which still gave off heat, but no longer threatened to burn, and laid them out on his desk for Severus to examine.

"Miss Granger came to us quite by accident from her fifth year at Hogwarts in 1996," Dumbledore stated, as Severus poked the broken glass of the Time-Turner with his wand, an expression of curiosity and disbelief marring his features briefly before they turned stony. "There was no feasible way to return her to her own time, and I advised her to make a life for herself here until things could be rectified."

Severus's jaw tightened and he sat back in his chair. "She was a child," he said coldly. "She could have altered everyone's timelines—you couldn't have expected her to act with that constant threat in mind!"

Hermione shook her head. "I kept everything as it was supposed to be," she said, twisting her watch around her wrist with nervousness. "So far, everything is playing out as planned."

Severus turned to give her an odd, incomprehensible look.

"I have been working on a solution for Hermione that would allow her to resume her old life in 1996, but it will take a bit more time to make it work," Dumbledore continued smoothly.

Severus did no appear to be fully listening. His fingers dug into the side of his armchair, and his expression was contorted into one of anger—and fear.

"Tell me something, Hermione," he asked coolly. "When you were keeping everything in order, did that include knowing that the Dark Lord would kill Lily?"

Hermione swallowed. "I had to let things be."

Severus lurched out of his seat, twisting around to face her. "That's it? You just stood by and watched them die?"

Hermione stood up, anger—and something a bit like terror—rising in her chest. "I had too!" she responded quietly, willing him to understand. "I couldn't stand by and pretend nothing would happen, so I went to Godric's Hollow that night—but it was too late, and even if I had gotten there
sooner, it would have been useless."

He bared his teeth. "You're a coward."

Rage flared in her eyes, and she took a menacing step forward. "If I had stopped Voldemort," she spat, enjoying the way her lover flinched at the use of the name, "he would have only found them again—and killed them, possibly in a way that would not have invoked Lily's protection. Harry would not have lived to see his next birthday, and hundreds, probably thousands of others, would have died!"

"You sold out people you professed to be your friends for a stint of peace," Severus said, his voice dangerously quiet. "What kind of friend does that?"

Tears prickled at Hermione's eyes, but she held them back. "You act as though this didn't affect me—but James and Lily were my friends, and in my own timeline, Harry is my best friend. How do you think I feel, knowing I watched this happen and could literally do nothing to save them?"

"Hermione, Severus," Dumbledore interrupted firmly, "This conversation is not productive. Kindly sit down and let us discuss this—"

"I think I'm done here, Headmaster," Severus sneered, turning away.

"Severus," Hermione bit out, "do you remember last December, when I had to sit by and watch a dozen Muggle women be killed and tortured before my eyes?"

"That was different," he roared, whipping around to face her. "You didn't know them! Your presence there was purely as an observer—there was nothing you could have done!"

"I see no difference!" Hermione yelled back at him, balling her hands into fists by her side. "It hurt me to see them die painful and useless deaths just to fulfill a madman's urge for entertainment, and it nearly kills me to know that I had to see the same thing happen to James and Lily! I was purely an observer then, too, because I can't change time no matter how much—" she broke off as her voice collapsed into a ragged sob, and she inhaled deeply, trying to get the rest of her words across. "No matter how much I want to, I can't save everyone... this situation was no different from all the other deaths I couldn't stop."

Severus stiffened for a moment, and then the doorhandle clicked underneath his fingers.

"This is why I told you to wait," Hermione said bitterly. "I knew this would happen. Everyone else—everyone else is absolved of guilt because they didn't know, but I did, and for that, I am to be condemned. At the very least," she added coldly, "you can thank me for not agreeing to marry you before you knew what you were getting into."

A vein pulsed along his jaw as he tightened it convulsively, but his next words were calm and controlled. "I thank you for your consideration."

He left, the door banging shut behind him.

Hermione sank back into her chair, feeling pain lace through her. She had known this would happen. She had known it would come. She had hoped, that somehow, he might be able to see past his own pain long enough to realize her own, and perhaps even forgive her, but...

She sniffled, wiping at her nose as the hot, wet tears began to pour down the sides of her cheeks, and then stumbled her way toward the floo.
"I'll—I'll come back later, Headmaster," she whimpered, reaching for the powder. "I need to be alone."

"My dear," Dumbledore said, rising out of his chair. "All is not lost. I am certain Severus will come around once he has had time to think—"

"He gave up his freedom and safety within Voldemort's ranks to spy for us—for her," Hermione sobbed, trying to suppress the hiccups that threatened to interrupt her speech. "Perhaps he didn't love her the way he loved me, but that doesn't mean she didn't matter more. And now he's found that it was all for naught—and the blame is being placed squarely on me for not preventing it. Do you really expect him to come around, Headmaster?"

With those final words, she stepped into the floo, and managed to stumble out the words to Tine Cottage.

~o~O~o~

School had been out for nearly three weeks now, and it was not expected to resume until December at the earliest, though it would most likely actually happen after New Years Eve. The entire country seemed to be on a national holiday. Many of the students had been sent home on impromptu vacations to reunite with their families, particularly those whose had gone into hiding. Several teachers had left as well, and many shop owners had closed their doors in lieu of hosting celebrations. Almost everyone had gotten the news by now, and anyone who had left the country in light of the war was returning home. People were reuniting with loved ones who were alive, and mourning and preparing proper funerals for those who were not.

Hermione had taken the loss of James and Lily, on top of Severus's abandonment, very hard. She spent her days moping around Tine Cottage, barely able to function. The only good James and Lily's deaths had achieved was to make Hermione abandon her previously-held notions that she should not deliberately change the time line, and had come clean to Dumbledore about the Longbottoms' fates in her time. She did not know when they were to be attacked, but she knew that with Dumbledore alert for it, they would be safe.

Hermione sat in the kitchen at Tine Cottage with a cup of tea and a book, watching rain pour outside, pattering loudly against the windows. She had not spoken to Severus for nearly a week now, and she had not gone back to fetch her things. She made do at Tine Cottage, staying with the written permission of Nicholas Flamel, and spent her time in a bit of an isolated retreat, trying to recover what bit of sanity and dignity she could.

She wished Harry and Ron were here. She could imagine the discussion they might be having now.

*Blimey, Hermione, you've really gotten yourself into a mess this time.* Ron.

Harry chimed in. *I can't believe you were shacking up with the greasy git.*

*Don't call him that,* Hermione found herself mentally chiding them.

*Still, he shouldn't have blamed you for all of this,* Harry stated pragmatically. *It's not your fault.*

*He's hurting,* Hermione pointed out reasonably. *We all are.*

*Quidditch helps,* Ron suggested unhelpfully.

*Thank you, Ron.*
Moody decided to interject himself into the conversation. *Are you planning on sitting here for the rest of your life, girl?*

"Of course not," Hermione said out loud.

She was startled when Moody's grizzled, ragged voice barked her out of her complacency. "Then get up and get ready!"

"I—what?" Hermione said, twisting around in her chair to find Mad-Eye Moody standing at the entrance to the kitchen, soaking wet, his electric-blue eye whizzing wildly, and his claw-foot braced against the doorway. He was wearing a pair of nice robes that were soaked all the way through, and quite honestly made him look like a mad pirate captain. All he needed was the parrot and the hat.

"The Potters' funeral is today, Granger! Or have you forgotten?" Moodly clunked his way into the kitchen, stopping next to the table, where Hermione's jaw was gaped open in horror. Seeing the expression on her face, he muttered, "It would appear you did."

"Shite," Hermione breathed, standing up quickly and shoving her things aside. "I forgot!"

"I thought so." Moody clunked over to a free chair and helped himself to it, eyeing her tea suspiciously. "You've got twenty minutes to make yourself presentable, Granger. Of course it's raining hard, so anything you wear is probably going to get ruined, but it's the thought that counts, eh?"

Hermione fled up the stairs, and came back down with barely five minutes to spare, tugging on her boots under the plain black work robes she had managed to throw on, and they were out the door and into the pouring rain in three.

~o~O~o~

They all stood in the little churchyard of Godric's Hollow in the rain, which had slowed to a thrumming drizzle. The Order—or what was left of the Order, such as it was—stood by the marker signifying James and Lily's grave, heads bowed. There were a few who were not members of the Order, and there would have probably been far more were it not for the fact that they had agreed unanimously that it would be a private ceremony. Without reporters. Without the fanfare of important figures who had not actually known the Potters, but wanted to get up and make fancy speeches anyway.

They made an odd picture, dressed in various odd non-Muggle things, except for Hagrid, who was wearing what looked like his best jacket. The bodies were finally laid to rest in front of the headstone, and amidst the pouring rain, they all had a chance to shovel in a bit of dirt—which was now mud—into it before Dumbledore raised the ground over their coffins, sealing them from the view of the world forever.

During the time that Dumbledore had been speaking, praising the lives of Lily and James Potter with an odd bit of honesty and frankness that most people did not receive at their funerals, Hermione saw Severus standing near the back of the group, soaked through to the bone and staring not at Dumbledore or the gravestone, but the ground. She did not try to catch his eye, nor give any signal that she was there.

Did she love him? Yes, still. She probably would for the rest of her miserable life. But it seemed clear to her that she had done something both irreparable and unforgivable in Severus's eyes, and as much as it made her heart break with anguish, she respected his feelings and gave him his distance.
People stopped by the freshly-packed, muddy earth to pay their private and personal respects, some charming grass to grow on the otherwise sodden earth, others conjuring flowers and wreaths to place on the grave. No one had bothered to cast any kind of rainproofing charm on themselves; they were all alive, James and Lily were dead for their sakes, and that kind of comfort seemed to go against the grain for all of them. Yet, soon enough, people began Apparating away, no doubt to return home to their own hearth-fires.

Alice, sopping wet, came to stop by where Hermione was standing and squeezed her hand while pulling her into a hug, telling her that she was free to pay them a visit anytime she liked, before she left with her husband, no doubt to rescue their son from his grandmother. Hermione watched her go, feeling at ease now that she was assured her friend would be all right. A few other Order members stopped by her—Hagrid to thank her for helping retrieve Harry from the wreckage of his home, Dumbledore to thank her gravely for the work she had done, and Moody and Kingsley to give her their regards for the efforts she had put in on the behalf of the Wizarding world. Remus was there to pull her into a hug and tell her that he would be spending some time trying to find a job in the Wizarding world, but that he would still be there if she ever needed him.

Hermione thanked each of them in turn, reminding them all as somberly as she could that it had been their combined efforts. She stopped to hug and thank Remus for being the good friend he was, before she turned to leave.

A pale hand reached out to grab her shoulder, turning her around. She stared into the dripping wet face of Severus Snape, and wondered if he was there to berate her for helping put James and Lily in their graves. She opened her mouth to prepare a retort, when she realized that the expression on his face was not one of anger, but rather a sad mixture of pain and resignation.

The first thing out of his mouth was entirely not what she had expected, however. "Hermione, I'm sorry."

Her jaw dropped for a moment, and then she shut it quickly.

He stooped down to lower his mouth to her ear, saving his words for her alone, despite the fact that the pounding of the rain and the fact that there were very few people left to witness them meant that hardly anyone was expected to eavesdrop on them.

"You were right," he said hoarsely. "I—I had time to think about it, while you were gone… you were right, when you said there was no difference."

Hermione swallowed. "You forgive me?" she whispered.

His hands came to grip her shoulders, pulling her close to him, an answer in of itself. The tears pouring down her face now were intermingled with the rain, which meant that they would not be noticed—but she buried her face in his chest nonetheless.

"Lily… she and Potter were never certain they would survive the war, but they—they spent every waking moment they had together," Severus admitted quietly. "It's given me time to think. I still love you, Hermione, and as much as I was angry when I heard about their deaths, it isn't your fault. It's the Dark Lord who has to pay for it, not you." He pulled away, cupping the side of her head with one hand, running his fingers through her damp, water-logged curls. "Yes, Hermione. When I think about it, I know I don't want to spend the rest of my life without you—I want to spend what time we do have together. However long that is."

Hermione stared at him, gaping in near-disbelief, and then her face broke out into a brilliant smile that was completely at odds to the miserable weather and the pain that still went bone-deep. His
words had lifted her. "You still want me?"

"I want to marry you."

"Then yes, Severus." Hermione wrapped her arms around him, and pulled him into a wet, rain and tear-stained kiss. "Yes!"

They stood there, kissing, Severus's cloak coming to wrap around her shoulders as the rain began to come down harder. When they finally broke apart, turning to give the Potters' grave a final glance before they left, Hermione experienced a feeling of utter absolution.

~o~O~o~

Severus's trial in Courtroom Ten, in front of the Wizengamot, took place a week later. He might have had a rougher time of things had Dumbledore not been there to vouch for him. When he returned to her that night a free man, Hermione demonstrated how grateful she was to have him by peppering her lover's face with kisses. Other trials made the news—Igor Karkaroff, Walden Macnair, and most interestingly, Lucius Malfoy. The lattermost's excuse was the Imperius, and Hermione could not help but find herself frustrated with the predictability of his pardon.

It was not until the beginning of November that the trials for Barty Crouch Jr, Bellatrix Lestrange, and the two Lestrange brothers occurred. Hermione had nearly been knocked to the floor when she heard the news that Frank and Alice had just been admitted to St. Mungo's—the last time Hermione had seen them alive, happy, and very much sane, had been at James and Lily's funeral. At that moment, Hermione vaguely had an inkling of how Severus had felt, upon Lily's completely unexpected murder.

She had been counting on Dumbledore to protect them. He had assured her he would. Last she had seen, they had been making plans for the Longbottoms to go back into hiding again. But the day they were scheduled to be moved to their safe house was two weeks too late; Voldemort had not even been dead a month when Lestrange, her husband, and younger cohort had taken it upon themselves to attack Alice's family, drunk with the delusion that she and her husband knew where the Dark Lord was. Alice and Frank had wanted to stay out of hiding to be with their family until after Christmas, and now Hermione sank into despair once more: why hadn't she insisted that they go into hiding immediately? Why hadn't she demanded that Alice and Frank stay with them in Spinner's End until arrangements were made? Or Hogwarts? Why?

Dumbledore could not have forced them to go into hiding if they did not want to. They had agreed to do it, but had wanted to wait, to have a chance to spend the Yule holidays with the family they had not seen for months. And now… and now…

While Dumbledore attended the trial, and Severus tried to keep a low profile as a result of his, Hermione paid St. Mungo's a visit.

Guilt had become a familiar knife twisting in her gut, and she felt another jarring stab as she walked into the ward that Alice and her husband were in, on what the Healers hoped to be temporary basis, but what Hermione knew would be a permanent one. She came to stand by the bed Alice was sitting in, and after a cautious moment, she placed her hand over Alice's, giving it a gentle squeeze.

"Alice?" she said softly.

Alice's eyes grew wide, and the shadows underneath them became more prominent as she stared up at Hermione like a frightened animal. Hermione looked guiltily back at her, and then pulled out a bag of Droobles Best Blowing Gum and cautiously handed it to her. They had always been Alice's
favorite sweets. The empty shell of her friend stared down at the bag uncomprehendingly for a moment, before she slowly pulled out a stick, fiddled with the wrapper as she tried to figure out how it worked, before she carefully extracted the piece of candy and lifted it to her mouth.

She chewed, her face blank and unexpressive for a moment, and then she pressed the wrapper into Hermione's hand.

Hermione wrapped her fingers around it, tucking it into her pocket. She sat down on the edge of Alice's bed, talking softly to her for a few minutes, before getting up to leave. She handed the bag of Droobles' to the healer currently checking in on patients at the ward.

"This is for Alice Longbottom," she told her.

"We can't give this stuff to patients," the healer said, shaking the sleeves of her lime green robes out of the way as she examined the bag. "They might choke."

Hermione jerked her thumb at Alice who was chewing her gum with a placid look on her face, very different from the expression she had worn when Hermione had first walked in.

"She seems to be doing fine," Hermione responded coolly.

The woman gave her an odd look, and then stuffed the bag in her robes. "I'll speak to the healer in charge and see if he'll allow sweets, provided we can ascertain she's able to feed herself, and if her relatives agree to allow it..."

Hermione's mind turned to her memory of Augusta Longbottom with her grandson, and felt the wrapper in her pocket, and was certain that yes, Alice's relatives such would allow her this small consolation.

She was finding it more and more difficult to live with her guilt. The war had ended for now, and the aftermath was terrible. It would take time for the ache to heal.

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Christmas was spent at Spinner's End. Hermione managed to push her lingering depression aside and force herself to perk up for the season, hoping that a jolt of holiday cheer might help her. They had brought in a proper Christmas tree this year; Hermione had insisted on it. She decorated it with her wand, conjuring and transfiguring bits and bobbles and glittering strings, decorating the tree with such growing delight that Severus had snarked that he might have to exile himself from their living room lest it contaminate him.

"Don't be such a git," Hermione had teased him playfully, earning a sneer and a scowl from her lover before he retreated from the room—though not before charming several of the bright-red baubles Slytherin green.

For the first time, they had gone through the trouble of buying each other proper gifts. Hermione, knowing he was at perfect liberty to buy himself whatever books he liked, had taken her time in picking out a set of clear glass bell-jars for storing ingredients. The spells placed on them would keep them in suspended stasis until the tops were lifted, keeping them fresh until the minute they were needed. She received a kiss on the cheek for her efforts, and was then taken upstairs, to the room at the far end of the hall that she had only ever stepped foot in to clean.

What she saw made her jaw drop.

Severus had scoured it out completely—somehow managing to do so without catching her attention
—and had placed in it several tables and a bookshelf, along with a row of cupboards along the far end of the wall, above a desk. As soon as the shock had finished registering, he informed her that it was her personal workspace—and a very comfortable and functional workspace it was. He explained that he had his private lab in the basement, and given that they were both living in this house—their house—it was only fair that she have a place to do her own work.

Hermione had her own research plans and ideas brewing in her mind, among other things. Ideas she had let slip to Severus to bounce off on him, and ideas she fully planned to see through, but she had not expected this—this gift of support, his confidence in her ability to succeed. That was truly a far greater gift than the actual workspace, but it was a two for one, and Severus found himself both extremely pleased yet slightly embarrassed by her reaction, particularly when it ended up with him against the wall receiving a collection of very passionate, very heated kisses.

Hermione rarely went to Severus's private lab, and never without knocking first. The same privileges were afforded to her here, and while the rest of the house was free for them to roam, they each had a private retreat where they could unload. In Hermione's mind, it was glorious—and a very effective distraction from the guilt that occasionally reared its ugly head. She was able to push it aside when she focused instead on her work.

That was the better side of Christmas. The more grave event was them sitting down in the living room and discussing what they could of the future. Severus's expression had turned tight-lipped and ashen when Hermione admitted that he had indeed been her Potions professor, before calmly pointing out that it hardly mattered now. He was less than a year older than her in this timeline and they were both consenting adults of sound mind—he was hardly taking advantage of her as his student when she was his equal as a professor, had given authority over him as his handler, and was a good ten years away from having her counterpart as his student, not her as she currently was.

"I don't know what Albus has in mind, but I suspect it's along the lines of slotting me back in my timeline when it comes around," Hermione said smartly. "As soon as my sixteen-year-old self disappears in time, I can step in and take her place—at least," she added somberly, "I hope so."

Severus eyed her askance. "And what happens then?"

"The age of consent is sixteen," Hermione reminded him. "Up until then, assuming this scenario works out as imagined, I would have been living with you as your wife for fifteen years. I'd also be two years older than the rest of my classmates due to time-turner usage, as addition. I started my schooling just before turning twelve, not eleven, because my birthday is in late September." She paused, and then admitted, "I don't know what the future holds for us then."

Severus held her close to him, burying his face in her hair. "I confess there might be… difficulties with the situation," he murmured, "but I imagine they can be worked through, even if all it takes is waiting."

Hermione leaned her head back against his shoulder, closing her eyes in contentment. "I suppose that means we'll cross that bridge when we get to it?"

He nibbled at the side of her neck. "Indeed."

"Besides," she added in agreement, "I honestly have no idea what the Headmaster's plan is. He's kept it a bloody great secret up until now."

~o~O~o~

On New Years Eve, Hermione tried to coax Severus into going to Diagon Alley with her. He dug in
his heels on the matter.

"Absolutely not!" he growled, when Hermione first brought the subject up. "We'll come back toting another bloody expensive rug!"

Hermione grinned mischievously, cocking her head to the side as she assessed their positions—he was leaning against the front of the couch on the floor, she was standing—and gracefully slipped down to the floor, straddling him. He was hard before she began properly grinding herself against him, and the flaring of his nostrils and quickening of his breathing told her exactly what she needed to know.

"Witch," he hissed under his breath, though it came out as a distinct whimper, as she began peppering kisses along the column of his neck. "You can't get everything you want with that."

"Hmm," Hermione said, nibbling on his ear next. "With you, I think that might actually be possible."

"Witch."

"We can go to Fortescue's for ice cream," Hermione promised, running her hands across his chest, privately marveling as she always did about how he was hers—all hers—as she continued, "I'll bet they've started letting the owls out again—and there'll be fireworks…"

He gave her a heated glare. "We're not stopping for new furniture."

Hermione glanced back at the couch he was leaning against. "New books," she bargained.

He eyed her consideringly for a moment, and then promptly pushed her off his lap and backwards onto the rug, pinning her wrists down and straddling her with a victorious smirk.

"Only after I've made love to you," he purred, his voice a deliberately smooth and silky cadence that made Hermione shiver underneath him.

Hermione tapped him on the nose. "Absolutely not. We have all the time in the world, with the Dark Lord gone—that," she said, pushing him away, "can wait until after we've seen the fireworks."

He scowled at her, a look of supreme disappointment that conveyed just how much his libido had in making that decision, and that the postponing of sex was enough to ruin a possible good mood.

Hermione's next words seemed to make it up to him, however. She slipped her hand down his chest, taking a moment to pinch his nipple, before giving him a sensual, mischievous smile. "Which means that we have all… night… long."

He was sold. Pulling her to her feet, they fetched a bit of pin-money from a small tin they kept on top of the mantle, and a few moments later, they were Flooing to Diagon Alley. They skittered out of the fireplace in time to hear the crack of a loud firework going off, and Hermione stared up at the sparkling blue and green lights.

"They're setting fireworks off already?"

"A bit precipitous of them, but yes," Severus said, taking her arm firmly and pulling her along until they were two blocks down the street—and did not stop until they were at Fortescue's. Hermione noted that he had conveniently avoided leading them close to the shops Hermione liked to frequent, and couldn't help smiling as he placed their order. Or rather, tried to. The minute Florean had seen them approaching, he had already started scooping their ice cream, and had it almost ready to hand to them by the time they made it to the window.
"You're regulars," he told them with a wink, and was about to speak again when there was a boom of fireworks. He looked up, smiling. "I should have known you'd come, even with all the fireworks.

"The fireworks are sort of why we're here," Hermione said, licking her ice cream and letting the flavor melt over her tongue. She let out a happy sigh, and then her eyes widened as she saw the wingtip of an owl pass by. Taking a step back as Severus paid for the frozen treats, a wide grin spread across her face as, moments later, a flock of owls began swooping through the air, hooting delightedly, quite unafraid of the sparklers.

"And the owls," she said, pleased, as more fireworks began going off and feathers began to float down here and there. "What a beautiful sight."

Severus's lips tipped up in a controlled smile, visible more for her benefit than anything else. The streets were heavily crowded now, and she could already see shades of the intensely private, secretive man she remembered from her earlier school years; getting him to smile in public was so difficult when he continued to grow even more reserved. And yet, it was still a nice smile, one that encouraged Hermione to smile back in return, simply happy to see that he, too, was happy.

He let out a grunt of surprise when Hermione grabbed his hand and ran out toward the middle of the street for a better view of the fireworks, and then retaliated by pulling her to him so that she was tucked under his arm. Angling his head so that his face was not in her hair while he supped at the melting but otherwise frozen treat, he gave her a squeeze and then turned his gaze skyward.

It was only eleven-thirty. The real fireworks would not be for another hour. And yet, the view was still spectacular.

"This must be your birthday present," Hermione told him mischievously as they stood back, trying to find a spot that wouldn't have them being knocked into by the younger children running through the street waving charmed sparklers. Snow was still on the ground, but that hardly seemed to deter the troublemakers, despite the threat of slipping on ice.

Severus finished the last of his ice cream cone, taking a moment to chew it languidly before burying his face in his hair. "Absolutely not."

"What more could you get?" Hermione countered, twisting her head to look at him.

He gave her a smug, self-satisfied smile that was frankly on the dark side of lascivious.

"I can think of a few things," he said, stroking the under-curve of her cheek with two fingers as his other hand gripped her waist. "It's cold now, but once the fireworks have run their course, we can go home…"

Another firework went off and Hermione shivered, accentuating her reaction to his words.

"Have a seat on the rug in front of the fire…"

The fact that he could make a suggestion so simple and otherwise innocent into anything but was a talent Hermione was able to appreciate, but at this moment, all she wanted to do was to get him to shut up before the heat rising in her cheeks could bloom any further. The ruddy bastard! He knew exactly what got her attention.

Another loud firework caught her attention, and then within the crowd, Hermione could hear the murmurs of a countdown from ten rippling wildly. The bringing-in of the New Year, to be celebrated beyond all others because it was free of Voldemort—the excitement was contagious.
"Ten, nine, eight—!"

Hermione struggled to remain calm. "And what do you suggest we do with our lovely sheepskin rug?"

"...Five, four...!"

Severus smirked, and then spun her around so that he was facing her, stygian eyes flickering over her with a mixture of love and Slytherin appreciation.

The countdown reached one. There was an enormous crack, followed by a series of almighty booms, and light exploded into the sky, blinding them all. And instead of replying, he kissed her. Hermione let out a moue of surprise, but responded quite eagerly the next moment, wrapping her arms around his neck and deepening the kiss, tasting him as though she simply could not get enough. They stood there for several moments, surrounded by the cheering crowd and the roaring, multi-colored fireworks, wrapped up in each other, before they Disapparated away.

They landed in the living room, a few feet away from the rug, and they kicked off their boots and eagerly dragged each other down to the floor. Severus had her pinned down as before, her hair splayed around her like a curly halo, and snogged her thoroughly for a moment before pulling away.

"My love, we had better block the floo," he purred.

~o~O~o~

Hermione woke up the next morning to find that they had fallen asleep on the rug—unsurprising, to be frank—and furthermore, when she tried to shift so that she could sit up, Severus's arms pulled her tighter to him as he mumbled something in his sleep. Hermione tried to twist her neck around so that she could get a look at him, spooned against her, but the angle was too awkward, and frankly, she was too full of lassitude to try. She sighed and snuggled back down, pillowing her head on his shoulder, and ran through a mental list of things they had to do.

School would resume today, though admittedly not until the Welcoming Feast—or what would technically be the second Welcoming Feast of the year. They had several hours to spare until they were required to be in attendance. Until then, she marshalled her mental efforts into thinking through issues that, at the moment, required serious consideration.

Sirius was still in Azkaban. That, first and foremost, was her most pressing concern. He was innocent, and she needed to find a way to get him out.

What kind of friend does that? Frankly, Severus was right, even if he had been somewhat in the wrong with regards to throwing those words at her in that instance. And yet, it seemed very relevant here. Particularly since those words still bothered her deep down, even now.

Her hair had reverted back to its naturally bushy state, and Hermione shook her head and brought up a hand to try and trap it down under her cheek before pressing her face back down on her lover's arm. Her body rested placidly beside Severus's, but her mind was a whirling vortex of thoughts, ideas, Plans with a capital 'P' that needed to be made. There was no reason Sirius should spend twelve useless years in Azkaban. She certainly could not conceive of a way to get him out now, but it was now January of 1982. In eight years, Milicent Bagnold would retire, allowing Fudge to take her place—and Hermione knew first hand just how corrupt and easily blinded Fudge was.

Money. Money and support. He would need that in order to succeed in his run for Minister of Magic when the year of 1990 rolled around. Hermione turned over onto her back, thinking, turning over the
tendrils of the idea in her head, weaving them together into a concrete, possible plan of action.

Money and power made the world turn. Hermione had learned that lesson well.

The question was—now that she had learned the lesson, and had knowledge of the future to apply them to, how should she put the two and two together?

She wriggled in Severus's grasp just a bit, trying to see if she could extract herself subtly enough so that she could escape to the kitchen and grab herself a cup of tea. He responded by wrapping his arms more securely around her waist, pulling her tighter, and burying his face in her neck in clear protest. Hermione writhed harder, trying to get loose, now quite determined to get herself a cup of tea to help her think things over—and a hand wickedly slipped down between her legs, giving her clit a warning stroke.

"Severus, much as I enjoy being here, we have only a few hours left before school starts and I have things to—ohh—ah!" Hermione threw her head back with a sudden jerk, letting out an unanticipated moan as her lover—damn him!—began to toy with her lazily. He knew her body so well by now, his ministrations such a far cry from the hesitant and then later almost frantic, if somewhat clumsy and untutored, attempts at the start of their relationship; he could pleasure her in his sleep if he wanted to. On occasion, he did, much to Hermione's mixed reaction of consternation and delight.

He ground his morning erection against her, in very clear demonstration of his intentions. In that damned silky voice of his, in just the manner that he knew both made her melt and consequently stalk, gag, and throw her Good Judgement into a godforsaken closet, he gave her a look that defied description and murmured into her ear: "I want you here."

"You know," Hermione muttered, her tone mutinous even as all thoughts of grabbing herself a cuppa flew out the window, "You really can't just pin me to the rug and have your way with me every time."

"I don't see why not. That is clearly what this rug was designed for." He was stroking and caressing her now, one hand drifting up to squeeze her breast, demonstrating that he was now far more awake than he had been moments ago. And very much aroused, judging by the way he was now rubbing insistently against her. "Additionally, I don't believe I have ever actually pinned you, but if you would like to give it a try…"

Hermione let out a chortle of laughter, and twisted around so that she was on her back, looking up into his face, where he was smirking with unabashed smugness. "You would love that, I'm sure."

"You surely realize that you're not prepared to marry a nice man," Severus said, treating her to a morning sneer.

"I am fairly aware of the difference between niceness, moral repugnance, and simply being a bit dark," Hermione responded dryly, as Severus pulled himself onto his elbows and began suckling on one of her nipples. "You're the lattermost, I'm afraid."

"Understatement of the year, my dear. Now hush." Severus was like a needy cat with his movements; that was the only comparison that did him justice. He literally slinked and slipped his way on top of her, much in the way a housecat might worm his way onto his favorite lap, without seeming too obtrusive, and yet reaching his goal in the end.

"I will not hush," Hermione defied him mockingly. "When is this marriage supposed to take place?"

"The first of April." He was sucking on her with more intensity now, both his hands now rather
preoccupied with squeezing, toying, and caressing the mounds of flesh that fascinated him so.

"In that case, I vote February the fourteenth."

"Absolutely not." He pulled away to give her a sour look. "Furthermore, I was merely joking."

"Then let's pick something a tad more reasonable, shall we, husband?"

He tilted his head to the side for a moment, giving her an incomprehensibly scrutinizing look, before he pronounced, "June."

"The day you first kissed me?"

"Indeed."

"Severus Snape, you are a sentimental man!" Hermione teased.

"Where it counts. Now hush." He returned his attention to her body, slipping one leg over her so that he was straddling her, and then began to grind against her core with increasing, unrelenting persistence. "I'd prefer to spend my morning making love rather than considering wedding plans."

Hermione tried to mutter a witty response, but failed, throwing her head back before her voice cracked and gave way to a moan. Her lover—fiancé—husband-to-be—gave her a victorious smirk, and took a moment to adjust himself before thrusting into her, letting out his own hissed epithet of appreciation before nudging her into wrapping her legs around his hips. A look of delightful wickedness stole across his face, mingling with the smirk he had worn moments before, as he took hold of her wrists, tugging them to lay on either side of her head, and held them down as he moved.

She moaned and bucked underneath him. Very often, she pushed away thoughts of the Professor Snape she knew from her original timeline, because she felt it was inappropriate to think of a teacher in such a manner. And yet he was fast becoming less her professor and more her lover, and she was able to allow herself to entertain certain notions without repulse, and she did so now as she registered how simply intense was. In her memories, he had a bottled passion for potions, visible self-restraint and discipline, and a dark, intense presence that had made controlling the classroom possible with a motion alone.

He was both intense and dominating. Those were the two words she could best come up with to describe him during their most intimate moments. He was not on such a power trip that he forgot to attend to her needs, but it was clear to her that he thoroughly enjoyed taking charge of their sexual encounters. He had been hesitant to be overt about it, but as time went on, his inclination to hold back on such urges was simply pushed aside in favor of trying them, in seeing how far he could push her, how much she would allow him. Because make no mistake, she was not a witch to be walked over, and he knew this all too well—and yet, somehow, he seemed to realize that it was different for her during sex.

She would certainly never let him decide what to do with her life or make the important decisions that were hers to make in regards to her duties as his handler, but when it came to moments like these it seemed to dawn on him that she enjoyed letting him have his way. That perhaps she even enjoyed provoking him into being just a bit more passionate, in allowing himself to do so.

But this morning, it seemed he was taking his testing of boundaries a few steps farther. With her hands pinned down, he was rendering her physically incapable of stopping him—and when his mouth came to cover hers, drinking in her moans and muffling her cries, he was also leaving her vocally unable to explicitly tell him to stop. He clearly did not expect to be told to stop. And with her
held in a rather vulnerable position underneath him, he took her on the sheepskin rug that she had so
determinedly talked him into buying.

He took her—no, possessed her—and when he was done, he still refused to let her go, instead rolling
her over onto her belly and nibbling on her neck, tugging her hair to the side and curling it around
one hand. Hermione had by then resigned herself to the fact that she was certainly not getting up and
ready for the day—much less collecting herself a cup of tea—any time soon; that was now the least
concern on her mind. She wanted this, and responded with sounds of encouragement, resting her
chin on her arms and letting him have complete and pleasurably undisputed access to her body. She
let him have his way with her delightfully.

It still amazed her that she fascinated him this much, that he found her so alluring that he simply had
to be allowed to explore her. It both amazed her and warmed her deep down, to feel so lovely and
appreciated under his gaze. He wanted her constantly and in what seemed to be as many ways as
possible, the result of a mixture of his deep-seated love for her and his natural inclination to
randiness.

Hermione despised the idea of thinking about another man—or boy, for this matter—while her
husband-to-be was lavishing such attention on her, but she couldn't help taking in certain
considerations. It had always been expected that she and Ron would at least make a go of things—
they had been part of the trio for so long that it would simply have been impossible for them to not
have at least tried it out when their hormones kicked in. And yet, she could not possibly imagine him
being as considerate, as loving, as passionate as Severus.

He simply was not Severus—he shared very few interests with her, and had a tendency toward
selfishness that Hermione did not think she would have tolerated. Severus was selfish, yes, but it was
usually in regards to his personal space and his sexual wants—and largely limited to those. Hermione
could not only live with them, she loved them, for she required a certain amount of personal space
herself and Severus's wants did not push her own aside. Ron was selfish in regards to just about
everything—Quidditch, food, and limelight were among the top contenders. He came first for
himself, and though he was certainly loyal and a good friend, and often struggled to put others first as
well—it was not something Hermione could have lived with. It would have been a fight with them
every day, on everything, at every level.

They would have driven each other mad and then mutually arranged to have the other sent to a
different ward of St. Mungo's.

Severus was merely driving her mad with lust, at the moment. At this point, she couldn't complain.
He was being most thorough.

Their relationship was not an equal one, even if it was still an incongruously balanced one. Hermione
was almost entirely in control of their life in professional and pecuniary matters, while Severus took
charge of the intimate aspects of their relationship. It was not that Severus was incapable, or that
Hermione never took initiative, but rather that Hermione was the better choice for managing their
money because she was a person who thrived on keeping top of such organizational duties, and
because she enjoyed the way Severus took the more sexual aspects of their relationship. Hermione
and Severus were both control freaks—self-admittedly so—and they adjusted to this in different
ways; Hermione by allowing Severus control in a situation where she could afford to do so, and
Severus by taking control in the one situation where Hermione undisputedly did not have to—and
often times, simply did not want to. It was an exchange of power, and though it was arguably
unconventional, it not only worked for them, they thrived on it. It was their relationship—all theirs—
and what was more, it worked far better than the prospect of dividing everything equally like a line
drawn in the sand.
They took charge of what they had to and what they wanted to, and relinquished control in just the same way. Hermione simply, deliciously enjoyed everything Severus did to her, even when a good three-quarters of his attention was focused on self-gratification, and Severus truly did not relish the idea of making sense of bank statements and trying to organize their money for the year.

The only activities independent of this power exchange were their private projects. Hermione had the workroom Severus had gifted her, and Severus had the lab they had set up for him. Both areas were private and off-limits to the other unless they knocked and were explicitly invited in. They were their personal sanctuaries, their retreats, and neither were in charge of the others’ individual pursuits. In fact, they largely left each other alone in such things, because they both preferred it that way. Severus did not want Hermione nosing about his potions, and Hermione wanted him going through her private charts and equations even less.

And yet Severus did take almost exclusive charge of their sexual encounters with the attitude of a dominant. He was always pushing her boundaries, something Hermione took great pleasure in—and made certain that he knew it, too—in ways that he had been hesitant to try at the beginning of their relationship.

But there was no Dark Lord hanging over their heads, and they knew each other well enough that Severus had grown bolder—and this morning was one of those instances where he decided to up the ante several notches, flipping her over onto her belly and massaging the curves of her buttocks, contemplating whether or not he ought to smack them.

When Hermione finally did get up that morning to prepare breakfast, it was with a reddened, rosy backside and a satiated, if slightly silly grin on her face.

Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Twenty-One

Big thanks goes out to my beta, the amazing SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review.

Term resumed at exactly five that afternoon, as the students proceeded to make their way from the Hogwarts Express to the castle. Hermione and Severus had returned an hour earlier, greeting their fellow colleagues and receiving cheerful, relaxed, even relieved welcomes in kind. Minerva and Pomona had taken a three-week vacation in Majorca which, in Hermione's humble opinion, had done both women a world of good. Dumbledore looked the same as ever, if a little less weary, as evidenced by the colorful decorations he had recruited Filius to assist him in charming around the Great Hall. In turn, Septima Vector remarked to the both of them that they 'looked well.'

Hermione supposed the extended vacation had done a good deal for their well-being. She not only looked it, she felt far more relaxed—and Severus, if that was at all possible, appeared a little less uptight in public. This new visage extended into her teaching the next day, and the days following. Hermione remained just as strict and demanding as ever, but her temper had lessened somewhat, and she was less harsh on the students. She spent the first week trying to find a balance that was efficient and easy to keep without giving the students so much leeway that they would attempt to break down her authority in the classroom.

Severus, however, changed very little. He had favored his Slytherins on the Dark Lord's orders, but now he did it both to remain in favor with Voldemort in the future and because it had become his natural inclination to do so. The other teachers and students treated Slytherins with suspicion, and having been treated very poorly by the other houses as a student himself, Severus was inclined to give them his favor and protection while striving to give the other houses hell. Hermione disagreed with this, given that she knew many of the Slytherins personally while she had been a student personally, and knew what a nasty, odious lot they were. But this was one instance where she left the choice entirely up to Severus; how he wanted to rule his classroom was entirely his choice, and even if she disagreed, she did not put her foot down and use her authority as his Handler to put a stop on it. Hermione rather felt that the other students' suspicion and general dislike of Slytherin house was well-founded, given the majority of them had been smug, supercilious bullies under Voldemort's reign.

She did not believe that Severus was blind to these faults, but was certain that he simply saw something else in them that others did not—could not—see. She couldn't see it, either, whatever it was, but Severus did, and as much as it pained her to do so, she accepted that.

Severus's birthday was spent on the bricked-off balcony over Flourish and Blott's, eating ice cream amidst the swirl of owl feathers and snow. It was also where Severus pressed a silvery round object into her hand—and was then bid to slip it onto her finger—before explaining that if it was still agreeable to her, he would like to go through with their plans to marry on the eleventh of June. He earned a cold but passionate, chocolate-flavored kiss for his efforts, and she in turn received a smug, thoroughly pleased smile of triumph.

In truth, none of the students noticed that their Defense Against the Dark Arts professor—the only one to have lasted more than a single year, mind—was wearing an engagement ring until the beginning of February. Truth to be told, it was not much of a fuss; it was the girls who were the main
culprits of passing notes and whispering on the subject during class, and Hermione paid little attention to it other than to confiscate the notes and dock points for their distraction. Their reaction was understandable: they were teenage girls. They were also clearly very curious about who had given her that ring. Nevertheless, by the third day after the first observant student had noticed it, it was not much of a topic of interest.

Everyone was far more taken with the fact that Hogsmeade weekends were to resume, starting the weekend before Valentine's day. Anyone who had permission to attend (and some who didn't) signed up, and due to the exorbitant number of students who were attending, triple the number of chaperones were required. Dumbledore recruited the four Heads of House for the job ("Conscripted," Severus snarked) and found two more volunteers in the form of Professors Vector and Granger.

If Hermione had plans to do a bit of window shopping herself, such notions died a quick, embarrassed death; all of the shops were stocked to the brim, and fit to burst with the number of students packed into each one. Colorful, eye-catching advertisements for Valentine-themed products graced every window, and where the stores had previously had few, sparse supplies due to the lack of customers, their full stocks were quickly depleted.

Hermione knew Severus did not place all that much stock in Valentine's Day; in addition, they did not have money to spend frivolously on every occasion. Anything that was not set aside for bare necessities (they were of the unanimous agreement that Fortescue's ice cream qualified), books, and stocks had been spent on their Christmas gifts. They simply did not have the means to go out and buy an expensive box of chocolates, a bouquet of roses, and a card for each other. The only truly luxurious, expensive thing they had bought was their sheepskin rug, which they put to good use and quite often, and that had been a one-time special occasion. It was a long-term joint gift to each other.

These thoughts did, however, remind her to stop by the now-overcrowded Three Broomsticks to speak to Madam Rosmerta about resuming her part-time job during the summer. The proprietor was pleased to have her return now that the original reason for her leaving was gone, and they agreed that Hermione could work during the school year on Sunday evenings for six galleons a night, and that they would revisit the subject when the semester ended.

Hermione was, however, surprised when halfway through the afternoon, Severus stopped her mid-patrol through the street to slip a dark red rose into her hand.

"I stole it from Pomona's greenhouse earlier," he murmured into her ear. "I believe she noticed the theft, but if she confronts you, deny everything."

Hermione laughed, and kissed him before tucking the rose into her hair, at the base of the chignon so that it looked like a red, layered center of a secondary, shiny brown rose composed of her curls.

"You are unbelievable."

He smirked into the kiss, before pulling away and moving to continue his own patrol before the students stopped to notice their two professors. "You already knew that, love."

On the walk back from Hogsmeade, Hermione took Severus aside for a few moments to explain her new arrangement with Madam Rosmerta, lagging behind the others and drawing up the rear for their conversation.

"A little extra income on the weekend wouldn't be a bad idea, I admit," Severus murmured, taking a moment to slip his fingers at the base of her hair to adjust the rose still tucked quite flatteringly in it.

"But that leaves me less time to spend with you."
Hermione nodded. "I don't like it either, but it's one day a week, for six hours—and the truth is that we do need all the money we can get. Things will get a little easier without the problems that we had to deal with previously, but money is money, and a little side job couldn't hurt."

"What are you planning on doing for the summer?" Severus inquired silkily.

"Three days a week, for six hours, all in the evening," Hermione stated. He opened his mouth to protest, and she quickly pointed out, "You're usually in your lab during that time, working on your own projects."

"I still like knowing you're around," he muttered, scowling slightly. He turned to give her a considering look. "No—do two days a week, evenings only. I'll see if Slugs and Jiggers is hiring part-time, too. If we're both working at the same time, it shouldn't bother either of us that we're not in the house. And I'd really rather not force you to be the sole breadwinner," he added dryly. "We'll share the burden."

Hermione tilted her head to the side thoughtfully. "It didn't bother me, really, because I know you're planning on marketing a good deal of your research. But I like your idea," she clarified. "It'll make it a lot easier on us both, I think."

"It's a pity that a teacher's salary is so… pitiful," Severus drawled.

"We could always find something to blackmail the Headmaster with," Hermione teased.

"Don't blackmail someone whose power far outstrips your own, my dear," Severus muttered. "Dumbledore's power is so far above us that I would not ever truly contemplate the notion as more than a joke."

"It's a good thing I was joking, then."

"Indeed." Severus snorted. "Although I feel it incumbent to tell you that as far as persuasion methods go, blackmail is a short-term and very risky one."

The topic had gone from teasing to serious, and Hermione latched onto it immediately. "Blackmail is a quick and easy way to convince someone to do something, but you'll always have to watch your back around them because you know they'll forever be trying to find a way to get free of their obligation to you."

"That's what makes Dumbledore a far more effective leader than the Dark Lord," Severus confessed quietly. "The Dark Lord is ever impatient, and understands people very little; his only interest is in immediate control, and he banks on fear and bewitchment to keep them in line."

Hermione understood all too well. It had taken her months to realize this, but Voldemort had been hoping to exert more direct control over her through his bloody, nauseating stunt at Malfoy Manor. "Dumbledore looks for people who he can motivate to help him," she pointed out. "Everyone in the Order all has reasons to want the Dark Lord dead. They might not have been inclined to fight without a bit of pushing from Albus, and you wouldn't have been inclined to spy if he hadn't asked it of you, but no one there doesn't want to be there."

Severus nodded, lip curling in distaste.

"You know," Hermione continued, her tone thoughtful. "In the Muggle world, when people watch movies about spies, you see more dealings with blackmail than in any real motivational persuasion. If you can find what motivates someone, and make them an offer based on it, your job is already half-done because they'll do the rest talking themselves into it."
Severus raised an eyebrow at her. "I suppose that's how the Headmaster recruited you to be my—ah—handler?"

Hermione raised a brow right back at him, the deliberate stress he placed on the last word not lost on her. "I was half-talked into it by him, and did the rest of the job for him by talking myself into it."

"And to this day, we are both unerringly loyal to the Order," Severus muttered, his tone dark with amusement.

"The irony is still killing me that the Dark Lord is using techniques only ever shown to be effective in Muggle action movies—which are almost never accurate in regards to true espionage, I might add—and they're failing," Hermione said, snorting with barely-suppressed laughter.

Severus gave her a tight, curled-lip smile. "Yes, indeed. It is ever more amusing because it suggests he has actually lowered himself to watching Muggle cinema."

Hermione's mind suddenly turned to the Diary that had held, or rather, still held, a part of Voldemort's rotten, fetid soul, the one he had used to take possession of Ginny in her second year. It was a Muggle diary, enchanted though it was. It was a curious piece to add to the twisted puzzle that was Voldemort, and yet, Hermione felt that association between an anti-Muggle psychopath with clear Muggle roots was important.

Her nose twitched in distaste at the subject, and remembering that it was Valentine's Day, she abruptly decided to drop the subject. Tom Riddle would be gone from their lives for at least another ten years. They didn't need to bring the monster up while they were having a temporary respite from him. Hermione daringly slipped her hand into Severus's, holding it loosely for a moment before tightening her grip when she met no resistance. He stopped walking, halting her too, and took a moment to examine her face and seemingly dismiss some less-than-pleasant notions from his mind before bending down to kiss her.

And just like that, they pulled themselves away from their maudlin thoughts, and made the decision to enjoy the present.

~o~O~o~

Hermione began working down at the Three Broomsticks every Sunday afternoon for the rest of the school year. A tiff with Professor Trelawney one morning over a teacup was the extent of any problems in the timeframe preceding exams.

When exams did arrive, it was with the usual expected frantic, last-minute apocalyptical reception that had taken place every single year before it. Every student in their fifth and seventh year was certain that the world was going to end for them, personally, and Madam Pomfrey had her hands full trying to soothe the more overly-distraught students that were inevitably sent to see her.

The weeks flew by with surprising speed, and as soon as exams were over, Severus and Hermione left Hogwarts to return to Spinners End. They did not remain long enough to see the Leaving Feast, because on that very same evening, the two of them were wearing their dress robes—Hermione was wearing the ones Alice and Marlene had given her, after she had placed a temporary charm on them to make them white—and were in Diagon Alley with the few people and the minister they had shanghaied into attending.

It was a quick ceremony, and a small audience. They were right in front of Fortescue's, and the man himself was there with his ice-cream hat in his hands and a smile on his face, standing beside the other three people attending: Moody, still with his pirate-captain like dress robes, alongside Kingsley
and Hagrid. There was nothing between Severus and the half-giant, though the two mutually respected each other, but since the incident where Hermione had helped rescue Harry from Godric's Hollow, the two had become fast friends—almost as good friends as they were in Hermione's own timeline. It was something she had tried to avoid for the sake of keeping her timeline intact, but a conversation between the two of them with Dumbledore had straightened it all out.

Mad-Eye Moody had frankly thought she was insane when she informed him a week prior to this day that she was getting married, but had gruffly agreed to attend. Kingsley had been a more cheerful response. Hagrid had nearly shed tears of happiness at the news. Glad that Diagon Alley was almost entirely deserted tonight, so that they had the relative privacy of having their marriage take place among people they considered friends—or at the very least, trustworthy.

The rings had been a generous gift on the Headmaster's part. Hermione and Severus had merely gone to his office to request permission to leave as soon as exams had been concluded, choosing to forewarn the Headmaster just before Easter, and left with more than they had expected to when Albus cheerfully told them that he would cover their payment, as his personal wedding gift to them.

They were both simple and silvery—one was actual silver, the other was white gold—with a set of symbols inscribed on the inside of both bands. The words were private, and were written using the Elder Futhark runic alphabet. Such glyphs were primarily used in Arithmancy, something that Severus and Hermione remembered taking together with fond amusement, and the meanings would not be immediately apparent to any ignorant layperson who happened to get a glimpse of the inscriptions.

It was not just that they had inscribed **Wunjo**, **Gebo**, **Eihwaz**, **Ehwaz**, and **Kenaz** onto their rings. They had over four months to work with them, and an Easter break in its entirety for her to keep the rings in her lab and charm them accordingly, tying the magic to each rune. On the outside, their rings were not particularly extraordinary; but on the inside of the band, and within each rune, Hermione imbued them with the magic, emotions, and meanings she wanted to make their marriage something unique and singularly important between the two of them.

Severus used the Easter break as an opportunity to brew two potions that, when Hermione finally handed the rings over to him, he dipped into them. The first made the rings lose the metallic properties that would cause them to react to other potions, which was necessary for Severus in particular. The second solidified the spells Hermione had cast on them, making them permanent.

Their rings were special and unique to them, gifted by an old friend, and made valuable by the energy and intent they poured into them. Severus added a Notice-Me-Not Charm to his ring, spelling it so that unless someone knew to look for it, their eyes would simply pass over it.

This was something that the two knew they would treasure the Headmaster for, his kind gift to them without insisting on attending what they wanted to be a very quick, low-key affair that was significant only in its sentimentality. The only thing Albus asked in return was that as soon as the honeymoon was over, they would to pay a visit to his office, as he had something important to show them—but it was something that could wait.

As planned, the ceremony itself was short. When the vicar uttered the final words—"You may kiss the bride"—Severus pulled her into a kiss that was deep, passionate, almost affirmative in its manner, yet surprisingly gentle. They nuzzled noses as they parted and then turned, both smiling, to face their witnesses. Ice cream cake, stacked three-layers high though it was only a foot-tall, was served courtesy of Florean Fortescue, and they all sat outside at one of the tables to eat it. It was the simplest wedding ceremony and reception Hermione had ever attended, and it was all hers—and she loved it. There was no pompous crowd, no hundred-fold hands to shake, no loud, raucous hoops to jump
They broke apart an hour and a half later, cheerful and happy, and Hermione personally thanked their other three guests while Moody took Severus aside, presumably to warn him to take good care of her. Hermione was not surprised, and frankly, she had no illusions that Severus would be at all intimidated. But Moody still had to have his say, and when Severus finally returned to her side, looking no worse for wear, Hermione hugged the grizzled old Auror in thanks—a feat that had taken years of trust to happen—and then left with her new husband. A single Apparition to Spinner's End, a few moments finagling with a tricky Muggle record player, and the two spent their wedding night dancing in each others' arms. A quiet, private ceremony, followed by a small and friendly reception, and closed with an intimate dance only between the two of them.

It was a far cry from the last time Hermione had listened to a Muggle recorder, which had been accompanied by cheering, stamping, screaming, and shouting. A very far cry from the tune of the Flamingo’s much gentler song—*I Only Have Eyes For You.*

That night, as she turned slowly in her husband’s arms, Hermione pushed away any and all thoughts of jealousy she might have ever had toward anyone else—Lily, specifically, setting such notions aside permanently. She and Severus had picked out the songs for tonight together, and she knew. Merlin, she knew. For her husband, for her lover, for her partner, for her Severus, she was the only one—and the same went for her. There was no one else for either of them. It was a simple, solid truth that was gloriously recognized on this night that was extraordinarily special for the both of them.

Their shoes came off first, so that they were circling slowly, their feet finding soothing purchase on the sheepskin rug. They were kicked away, and then Severus turned her around so that her back was to him. Resting his chin on her shoulder, both of them gazing into the flickering coals of the fireplace, he began to take apart the back of her robes, sliding them down her shoulders with care. Hermione returned the favor by silently twisting around to face him, her hands slipping each button of his own robes free, until she could pull them aside to reveal the pale expanse of his chest.

And that was how their dancing proceeded for the rest of the night. One piece at a time, one turn to each, they slowly undressed each other, taking their time to appreciate the sight before them, gently dragging each other down to the sheepskin rug that they so often found pleasure with each other with more often than their own bed. Lips slid across their necks, shoulders, arms, and the curves of their backs in a mutual quest to taste each other, to fully explore and absorb the person they had taken as their partner for life. It was like nothing that they had ever done before, and would probably never do again, and yet they both passed through the moments with lassitude and unhurried movements.

Eventually, as she knew he would, he pressed her down on her back with his weight. One finger slicing through the folds of her labia, smearing her wetness around before bringing his finger to his mouth to taste it, he bent down to nuzzle and lick at her neck before moving on to her lips, sliding them over hers in a kiss that was sensual and passionate, as he rocked himself into her with more gentleness, more care, something that was more explorative and considerably slower than any of their previous encounters had been.

Hermione was not a woman who particularly liked it slow—and Severus was not a man who preferred it that way, either—but for tonight, it was more about connection, about truly *feeling* the other person, than finding immediate, gratifying pleasure. It was about making the night memorable not because he had pounded her into a screaming orgasm, or because she had turned the occasion into a rare one by turning the tables on him and ambushing him with her mouth on his cock, but because they were simply being *together.* He was in her; she was around him. He felt her just as much as she was aware of him being inside her, on top of her, his hands pinning hers to either side of her head and twining their fingers together. It was about this moment where they were doing
something that was utterly unique to them, that was special only in its sentimentality, that they would remember fondly for the singular fact that they were looking into each other's eyes. Sharing this moment.

That they were performing mutual, gentle legilimency on each other in a way that slowly absorbed the slow pleasure the other was experiencing and rebounded it upon itself, where they were taking in the others' thoughts and affectionately responding with their own.

Severus's lips attached themselves to the column of her neck, suckling as he rocked himself in her in a sensual grind, before slipping one hand down to where they were joined—a somewhat awkward move, in this position—to find her clitoris and roll it between his thumb and forefinger. He buried his face in her breasts, his breathing becoming heavier, as he struggled to continue this excruciating pace that was keeping him just barely on edge.

"I love you," he murmured, his voice slightly hoarse, as he continued to thrust in and out of her slowly. "Wife. My wife… it feels good to say it now, knowing beyond a shadow of doubt that it's true…"

Hermione arched underneath him, struggling to keep her eyes open as his fingers—ever talented—caused her to clench and spasm tightly around him in a way that made her feel every inch of the flesh that was thickly embedded in her.

"I… I can't tell you how long I've waited to hear you call me that, and know that it was true, too," Hermione whispered, stroking the back of his hands with her thumbs before reaching up to kiss his forehead. "Or to call you my husband."

"Mmh, good," Severus moaned, his eyes fluttering shut as she deliberately—very deliberately, this time—squeezed herself around him. "Oh, yes…"

They moved against each other with a little more force now, their moves still languid and decisive, their lips sliding against each other as they tasted. A few minutes later, Severus's hips bucked uncontrollably against her, his hands tightening their grip in hers, his face pulling into a grimace of pleasure, as he found release. He softened inside her, but didn't bother to pull out as he leaned over her, one hand still stroking against her clitoris, knowing she was moments away from reaching a small peak of pleasure herself.

"I love you," he told her lowly, his voice deep and sensuous as he bent down so that he could nuzzle her face even as she threw her head back, eyes squeezed tightly with pleasure. "I don't tell you often enough, but I try to make it known to you…"

"I know," Hermione gasped, grinding her hips slightly against him in response. "I know you do—trust me, I know…" he pulled away, slipping out of her, and pulled her to him as she began peppering his face with kisses. "And I love you too. Never forget that."

He shifted until he was lying on his side next to her, holding her in his arms, with more tenderness than he had ever done so before. This was not a suggestion of how the many nights they hoped would follow were expected to go, but this was the one night they had set aside in reserve to be gentle, to be kind, to open up and spill their guts in the privacy of their room, to share everything between the two of them. A moment to make themselves utterly and completely vulnerable to the other in a way that they do with no other.

"I love you."

"I love you…"
"I abhor redundancy," he muttered playfully, nuzzling her breasts.

"I think it's rather appropriate, in this case," Hermione murmured in response, smiling brightly at him as she stroked his hair.

"I will grant this is a special occasion for it."

"Well, so long as you say so…"

The tender moment was over, and they gave way to playfulness instead, nipping and laughing at each other, which eventually turned into tussling on the rug, which somehow ended with Hermione resting on top of Severus, nose-to-nose with him, looking happier than he remembered seeing her in a long time.

"We have the whole night to spend together," she murmured. "A whole uninterrupted night."

He gave her a wicked grin that reminded her so much of the time he had silver-tongued her into helping him sneak out of the castle for his birthday.

"I'm quite certain I know what you're thinking, Severus Snape—"

"Given that you're currently in my head, Mrs. Snape, I'd be rather surprised if you didn't—"

"Unfortunately, I didn't think to buy any whipped cream."

"Sod the whipped cream. We do have strawberries."

"Oh? Perhaps I should go check on that?"

"Please do. And bring some back with you."

"I love you."

"Mmmh, yes."

~o~O~o~

Their uninterrupted night of marital bliss extended into a honeymoon of three weeks, during which time they received several heartfelt gifts from the four people who had attended their wedding ceremony. Hagrid gave them a handkerchief—one that could have classified more as a blanket than a kerchief, according to Severus—that was hand-made, with stitching at the border that was apparently made of unicorn hair, and which Hermione folded neatly and kept at the foot of their bed. A book of advanced house-hold spells from Moody—a surprising gift, to say the least, until Hermione saw the annotation on the first page, warning her against complacency in upkeeping a house, that nearly had her in convulsions with laughter. A practical but lovely set of china from Kingsley, and a note from Florean Fortescue that the next time they stopped by for ice cream, it would be free.

Three days after they resignedly admitted that their three weeks of hedonism were over, they paid the Headmaster a visit, as requested, flooing into his office via invitation, and stepping out of the hearth shaking soot off their shoes.

"Ah, Hermione, Severus," Albus greeted them warmly, clasping his hands together. "Or should I say, the new Mrs. Snape with her husband." Hermione couldn't help grinning at this, but Severus managed to restrain his reaction to a smirk. "I hope you've enjoyed yourselves. Now, for the news you've been waiting for…"
The grin slid off Hermione's face. "Don't tell me you've found a way to send me back to my own timeline."

"Oh, I have," Dumbledore admitted, opening a drawer in his desk to search for something.

Hermione and Severus both stiffened.

"Although sending you 'back' to your own timeline is not quite the correct phrase—there is still no way to move forward in time that we are aware of, and given your recent marriage, I think it would be rather cruel to send you on your way," Dumbledore continued, setting a letter down on the desk. "No, indeed. Not in that manner. But when the year you left arrives, we'll have a way of slotting you back so that you may continue where you left off without anyone being the wiser."

Hermione's mouth opened for a moment, uncertain of what to say, and then shut it. Dumbledore seemed to understand that the two of them were at loss for words, for he slid the letter on his desk over to Hermione for her to peruse.

"My good friend Nicolas Flamel has generously agreed to help de-age you back to your sixteen-year-old self, once your fifth year arrives," Dumbledore explained kindly. "My idea, you see, is that you alone know when and where you will disappear exactly before you are thrown back in time. My advice is for you, as you are now—although with a minor appearance in terms of your age—to step in as soon as your former self disappears."

Comprehension dawned on Hermione—and, judging by the relieved expression of Severus's face, her husband as well. "I'll simply replace the version of me that first got thrown back in time—and then we'll be right back where I started, only I'll be continuing forward rather than going back in time—and without changing the fact that I went back in time, too."

"Precisely, my dear, precisely," Dumbledore said cheerfully.

"That's in nearly fourteen years," Hermione said softly. "That's a long time." She paused. "How am I supposed to go back to looking sixteen?"

"Nicolas Flamel stumbled upon something curious, very curious, on one of his travels," Dumbledore told her calmly. "He has a store of a liquid that is rather legendary, but can only be created under special circumstances—the means by which are nigh-impossible to recreate now. But he possesses a unique object called the Philosopher's Stone, which allows him to place the liquid in the right conditions upon which to be effective."

"Liquid…?" Hermione repeated.

"From what was formerly known as the fabled Fountain of Youth."

Hermione's jaw almost dropped. Severus was staring at the both of them, silently, his expression unreadable except for his eyes, which were flickering between them with a mixture of some undefinable emotions.

"I assume the plan is agreeable to you?" Dumbledore asked genially.

Hermione swallowed.

"Yes, sir."

The Headmaster clasped his hands together. "Excellent! I shall inform Nicholas, then."
Hermione nodded slowly, still trying to process what she had just been told—and what she had just agreed to.

"My god," she said aloud. "The fountain of youth."

"Wizards have spent their whole lives searching for such a thing," Severus murmured.

"Nicolas is over six hundred years old," Dumbledore informed them genially. "He has spent what I suppose translates into several lifetimes looking for it—and I must say he succeeded on the equivalent of a third."

"Is that how he has managed to stop himself from turning into a withered old walnut?" Severus drawled. "Keeping himself young for six-hundred years?"

"Indeed, although they have had to use it sparingly," Dumbledore responded, his tone musing. "Their supply is not unlimited."

At this, Hermione remained silent.

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Hermione never took her wedding ring off. She kept the engagement ring in a box full of sentimentally significant objects—pictures of Lily, Alice, Marlene, James, Sirius, Remus, with their various letters and well-wishes. The engagement ring had been a promise of marriage, a promise that had been wonderfully, gloriously kept, and had been replaced with the wedding rings that Hermione and her husband had put so much into. It was neither charmed nor fixed in any way to make wearing it useful, and Hermione was not fond of wearing much jewelry, particularly on her hands. She was a small woman; there was no need for her to wear a lot of jewelry. Thus, she kept it safe, but rarely wore it.

The ring that Severus had slipped onto her finger during their ceremony, and had followed through on with a kiss, never left her hand. Not while she was working in her workroom, not while she showered, not while she slept, certainly not while she made love, and not when she was at work.

She had indeed taken a part-time job at Rosmerta's, going two days a week. She and Severus were gone from the house at the same time on Mondays and Wednesdays, spent their lunch breaks together, and the rest of the week in their respective labs or in each others' company. Severus was hitting on some valuable ideas that could turn out to revolutionize a small but nonetheless significant part of the Potions community. Hermione, meanwhile, was charting through Arithmancy, a timeline she had conducted of the future, and when she needed a break from that, Charms and Transfiguration work.

Cornelius Fudge, an ambitious yet prominent prospect for Minister once Bagnold retired, was already beginning his campaign for the next election within the Ministry. Milicent Bagnold was not planning on retiring until 1990, but if she could be persuaded that there was a suitable replacement, Hermione's impression of the woman was that she would rather step down and take her well-deserved retirement. The point of knowing this was to figure out how to manipulate Fudge into working with her, Bagnold into capitulating, and holding Hermione's support over Fudge as a means for his cooperation.

But that was simply a means to an end. Hermione did not particularly like Fudge. She was not doing this for his benefit.

No. Her real goal was Sirius Black.
He did not deserve to be locked up, and even if Hermione's methods were a bit unorthodox—something Severus would have been proud of, if she could ever confide this newest project of hers to him—she knew that she was doing right. She would find a way to free him from Azkaban without having the Wizarding World in an uproar.

All it required was one easily-corruptible politician.

~o~O~o~

Hermione set down the drinks, smiling at the patrons, before turning away to relieve herself of her duties for an hour. Severus had a meeting with a representative of the local Potioneer Society at lunch, and knowing this, Hermione had arranged her own lunch conference. Pouring herself a butterbeer, and seeing a familiar bowler hat walk through the door, she poured a second drink of gillywater for her guest and motioned for him to follow her to one of the private meeting rooms that Rosmerta had furbished as an added attraction for businessmen who wanted a drink with their meeting.

"Mrs. Snape," Fudge greeted her, removing his hat and twirling it absently in his hands as he shut the door behind him and took a seat opposite her. He gestured at the drink, raising the glass in thanks, before taking a sip. "Lovely choice of drink, my dear. I must compliment you for that."

Hermione gave him a tight, curl-lipped smile that was very reminiscent of her husband's. "Mr. Fudge. I believe we have business to discuss?"

"Your letter suggested you might be willing to help with my campaign," Fudge stated baldly, though there was not a slight crease to his forehead as he frowned. "And that if I refused to come to an agreement with you, you would put your resources into sabotaging my efforts."

"I work in an establishment that is an excellent place for influence," Hermione said, stirring her butterbeer with a spoon. "I also have some—contacts—in the Ministry who might be of assistance. Provided, of course, that we can come upon an agreement concerning why I'm willing to help you and what I want in return."

"Money, I expect," Fudge said, taking another sip.

"I have no interest in money," Hermione returned.

"Come now, Mrs. Snape," Fudge said, setting his glass down with a chuckle. "A teacher's salary, working a part-time job—I wouldn't be surprised if you budget everything. Of course you're interested in money."

"I can take care of my own fiscal problems, thank you," Hermione responded sourly. "Everything we have, we earned, and it will stay that way." She raised an eyebrow at him. "Besides, the stock market looks very promising—my shares are rising quite nicely."

"As you say," Fudge agreed. "What, then, could you possibly want? A different job, assuming I win the election?"

"No."

Fudge frowned. "A law pushed through?"

"Hardly," Hermione said, taking a tiny taste of her butterbeer.

"Then I must confess, I am at a loss."
Hermione slowly set her drink aside and sat up straight. She glanced lazily at the door once, as if to check that no one was listening, and then turned to face the politician sitting across from her.

"There is a man in Azkaban who was sent there without trial," she said quietly.

"You are a married woman, Mrs. Snape!" Fudge said, his face suddenly turning uncertain.

"This man was—is—one of my best friends, Mr. Fudge, not my lover." Hermione let out a dark chuckle. "He's one of the last people I'd ever contemplate having a romantic relationship with, to be honest."

"Nevertheless, you cannot expect me to just grant someone a pardon—"

"I'm not asking for a pardon," Hermione said, her expression unreadable.

"Then—I—I don't understand," Fudge said, blustering slightly.

"I want you to place this man in my custody," Hermione stated clearly. "The world will still assume he is in Azkaban. No one else in the Ministry will be aware. This will just be a secret between the two of us, Minister," she added, giving him a cold smile. "You will not see hair nor hide of him in the Wizarding World—and if you do, you will then tell the press that he has escaped from Azkaban, and you will be free to try and imprison him again at such a time. But as long as he is in hiding, under my watchful eye, you will perpetuate the misconception that he is still rotting in a cell, in the bowels of that dementor-infested hell he has been sent to."

Fudge was fingering his hat now, looking slightly uncertain, but Hermione knew she had his attention. "That's a lot to ask for, Mrs. Snape. I don't even know who this man is, or if your help is worth it."

Hermione leaned forward slightly in her seat. "If you don't make it to Minister, you will owe me nothing. But I will put all my considerable," she said, stressing the last word, "efforts into winning you the post, provided you agree to my request. The position as Minister is surely worth letting a man go free without the trouble of scandal and press."

Fudge's expression was one of raptured interest, the glazed look in his eyes telling Hermione that he was already imagining himself having won the election. "Who is this man?"

Hermione held a finger to her lips.

"Sirius Black."

~o~O~o~

Convincing Fudge after that had been an enormous task, but Hermione's skills of persuasion were a force to be reckoned with. By the time they had departed, Hermione had earned the to-be Minister's handshake on the matter, his solemn promise of his word, despite the fact that Hermione's payment consisted of letting an alleged mass murderer go free.

Hermione's next visit was to the office of the Minister herself. A request from Kingsley to put in a good word for her, a recommendation from Moody himself, and a month later, Hermione's presence was requested at the office of one Millicent Bagnold.

The woman looked to be in her late forties, with straw-blond hair, a worn but piercing gaze, and a thin smile. She had her back to the desk, facing the window, as she poured herself a glass of iced tea.
"They won’t let me drink firewhiskey up here anymore," she lamented, as she set the pitcher down, turning around to face her guest. "Bloody bureaucrats. How can I help you?"

Hermione checked that the door was shut securely behind her, before moving to take a seat at the desk. She crossed one leg, folding her hands in her lap, and sat back, looking rather serene as she enlightened the Minister for the reason concerning her presence.

"It's been known for years that you've been waiting for an opportunity to retire," she began.

"I suppose you're about to offer yourself up for the job?" Bagnold asked dryly.

Hermione waved a hand dismissively. "Hardly. But I do know someone fit to replace you."

"I've heard that joke quite a bit for the past few years, Mrs. Snape."

"Cornelius Fudge is a rather promising candidate, don't you think?"

There was a pause.

"It's true that he's widely popular for the job," the Minister mused, setting her iced tea down.

Hermione smiled inwardly.

Perhaps this would be easier than she thought.

She was dealing with someone who did not want to be Minister anymore, but cared enough about the country to not leave it to fall in shambles in the hand of a total incompetent. If she could convince the woman that she had found the right person, her job was already halfway done. The woman would talk herself into the rest.

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Two years was a long time to pull strings and convince people where to put their vote. Two years, and a handful of months later, Hermione had completed her fourth year as a professor of Hogwarts, and was smirking at the morning paper as the Daily Prophet announced the results of the final elections.

A lot had happened in that time. Severus had earned significant standing among the Potions community, having published two important discoveries concerning the refining of Wolfsbane and a formula for figuring out what kind of poisons could not be counteracted with bezoars. It had earned them a good deal of money that meant neither of them had to work part-time during the summer, leaving them with two favorable options: private research or spending time together.

They never ceased to enjoy being in the other's company. Hermione looked forward to waking up every morning with Severus beside her, and was pleased to rarely be allowed to go downstairs and make breakfast without receiving some considerable good-morning loving. At the age of twenty-four, Hermione and Severus were in their prime, and enjoying married life to the fullest. The students at Hogwarts still called her Professor Granger for the sake of reducing confusion, but for the last two years, she had been, and would continue to be, Hermione Snape.

Two years, and on this day, she had an appointment to keep with the new Minister of Magic.

Fudge sat at his desk, wearing a smile, although he looked pale and ill at ease as he contemplated what he was about to do. He surreptitiously requested that two Aurors to escort them to Azkaban for his first rounds of the place, and upon reaching the desolate place, bid them to wait for their return.
Hermione had transfigured a rock into a large, thin, shaggy black dog, and as the three of them approached the cell of Sirius Black, Hermione watched the dementors hovering about them, waiting.

She held up her wand, taking a moment to remember her wedding night, and something large and silvery leapt forth, sprinting across the ground with purpose. In truth, Hermione was not entirely surprised that it had changed after all this time. But casting a Patronus had never been her strong suit, and she had not yet gotten a chance to get a good look at it; the form was too undefined. It was definitely not an otter, however.

The dementors, who had been floating closer, scattered at once, and Fudge took out the rusty iron keys to open the door. Hermione squinted at the man huddled in a corner of the cell, with his face buried in his arms, and she knelt down on the ground outside the bars for a better look.

"Sirius?" she whispered.

The man looked up, his black hair wild and unkempt, his eyes just as wary. "Hermione?" he whispered croakily.

Hermione turned to look at Fudge, who was staring at the ground, twirling his bowler hat nervously.

"The door's open," Hermione said. "You can come out."

Cautiously, Sirius stood, and Hermione helped him as he stumbled over the doorway. His skin hung off his bones, and his eyes were sunken into his face. His once handsome visage had been ravaged by starvation, neglect, and the dementors' presence, and it broke Hermione's heart to see the way his eyes flickered pitifully with barely-remaining hope. She urged the Transfigured dog in, placing a piece of ribbon around its neck, and watched as it took a seat in the corner. The ribbon glowed brightly, and a moment later, the dementors still hovering nearby started becoming agitated as they sensed human emotions emanating from the dog.

To Hermione's eyes, however, it looked as though the dog had been replaced with a copy of Sirius. It was nothing more than an illusion, of course. It fooled the dementors, and it fooled human eyesight. She quietly whispered into Sirius's ear for him to transform, and several minutes later, the three of them returned in the direction they had come, still accompanied by a stark, shaggy black dog.

One of the Aurors glanced down at the mangy thing as they passed. "You ought to take better care of your dog, miss."

"Oh, don't worry," Hermione said, as the dog glanced up at them with soulful, sunken eyes. "I will."

She then turned to glance at Minister, who was stepping into the boat they were to leave by, and as she took a seat next to him, she discretely pulled out her wand. He could not be allowed to remember that Sirius was an Animagus. An illegal one, at that. But he could remember that he had been instrumental in letting a wanted prisoner escape; the ruin it would bring to his career if he tried to reveal her part in it would make him hold his silence.

The boat was crossing the sea, and they were nearing sight of land when she pressed the tip of her wand into the Minister's neck.

"Obliviate!"

~o~O~o~

Tine Cottage had not been used by the Order for nearly three years, yet Nicholas Flamel had never
requested that they no longer use it. Anyone was free to still pop in, but years after the war had
ended, no one was particularly inclined to. No one lived there, no one used it, and after all this time,
those who were privy to its location had all but forgotten it.

It was where Hermione arrived with a bedraggled and faint-looking Sirius Black, who collapsed at
the kitchen table the moment they arrived, in his human form, sobbing.

Hermione did not try to dissuade him from doing so, but summoned a blanket for him, wrapping it
around his shoulders for comfort, and then went through the cupboards for something to prepare,
having stocked it three days prior. Several minutes later, she had warm soup stewing on the stove,
and stirred it lightly as she listened to her friend let out his misery. Thin chicken noodle soup was
served to him ten minutes later, not too rich to upset his severely weakened digestive system, but
enough to start him off with.

As he ate, Hermione sat next to him, explaining the measures she had taken to help him escape.

"No one else knows," she told him quietly, as he hunched over his soup, his eyes shut in painful bliss
at the first real food he had been privileged to in nearly four years. "No one else can know. I've
worked out the contingencies beforehand, and we'll go over those, but first—we need to get some
food in you."

"How—why?" Sirius asked hoarsely as he finished swallowing down another mouthful of soup.
"Why would you help me?"

"I know you didn't betray James and Lily, Sirius."

"No. I would never."

Hermione nodded. "The world doesn't believe that, but I know better."

He turned to look at her, his eyes dark and sunken, nearly lifeless, though a faint flicker seemed to
pass through them.

"Thank you, Hermione," he rasped, his tone piteous and grateful. "Thank you."

~o~O~o~

Sirius became Hermione's Secret. The one secret she kept from Severus, the thought she guarded
jealously from the Headmaster, the knowledge that she hid from the world. She did not have a proper
chance to sit down and fully discuss the series of events that had occurred after his imprisonment
until well after a month later. He had progressed to solid food within two weeks, and was now eating
three proper meals a day. He was still a skeletal figure, but the edge was taken off marginally, he had
improved. Hermione knew he would bear the physical marks of his imprisonment for the rest of his
life, but every time she saw him, he seemed to return more to himself. More to the man she
remembered, the boy she had grown up with in Gryffindor house, the one who had always been at
James Potter's side whenever mischief called.

"Harry's living with his aunt and uncle in Surrey," Hermione told him one evening, as she prepared a
dinner of steak and spaghetti for him. She went to Flourish and Blotts to browse for books every
Wednesday afternoon, and for half an hour afterward, she would Apparate to Tine Cottage for a
visit. "I confess that they don't treat him well, but he is alive and much better off than he would be in
the several alternatives I can think of. And he will be going to Hogwarts, in just a few years," she
murmured, chopping some strawberries into a bowl before bringing it to the table with the rest of the
meal. Sirius dug in heartily. "He'll be fine."
"Do you ever check up on him?" Sirius asked, in between ravenous bites of spaghetti.

"Occasionally," Hermione confessed. "I drop by about once a year, just linger out in front of the house, to catch a glimpse of him."

"He looks like James?"

"He looks like James. With Lily's eyes."

"I'm glad," Sirius whispered.

Hermione smiled. She didn't need to ask what he meant.

"And you?" he prodded, now moving on to the steak, mincing it into tiny pieces to make it easier to eat. His teeth had suffered, and though Hermione was repairing them with a bit of magic and discrete advice from Madam Pomfrey, they were still yellow and a bit loose in the gums. They would tighten up with repeated use of the Root-Strengthening Spell, she hoped. "You haven't told me about what you're doing with your life. Married? Kids? A bunch of curly-headed swots to come home to after a long day at the Ministry?"

Hermione laughed. "Nope."

"Not a spinster, I hope." Sirius was grinning almost playfully at this, a gesture that made Hermione's heart lighten with happiness that he was slowly but surely recovering.

"I'm married," she informed him. A pause, and then she let the other shoe drop. "My name is now Hermione Jane Snape."

There was a long, loud silence. Sirius's jaw dropped open, showing an uncomplimentary mix of the mashed steak in his mouth, and then he shut it quickly.

"Snape? You married Snape?"

Hermione held up the ring on her finger for him to see.

"Just remember that he's the man I love," she told him warningly.

Sirius's mouth twisted slightly, and it was several moments before he forced out the only neutral words he could manage. "I honestly never thought he was the marrying type."

Hermione shook her head, although she was smiling slightly. "We both teach at Hogwarts. I'm the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor. My husband teaches Potions."

Sirius winced at the usage of 'my husband'. "I see. He doesn't know about me?"

"I love him, but I'm not stupid," Hermione said, leaning back in her chair.

"Small, heavenly mercies."

"Eat your dinner, Padfoot."

For the rest of the summer, Hermione paid Sirius a visit once a week. She bought him food, Transfigured his prison robes into plain, charcoal-grey ones that looked shabby but did their job. His teeth and gums recovered enough that he could eat solids without having to mince or mash them, and though he was still a haunted, gaunt figure, his ribs had disappeared ever so marginally, and his stomach was starting to pack on a little more flesh, though not by much. Hermione had set the rules
for Tine Cottage from week one, giving him permission to wander around outside near the cottage as long as he was in his Animagus form, but forbidding him from going down to the nearby village or the sea. The fresh air did him good nonetheless, and he appreciated it all the same.

When school resumed, Hermione arranged for food to be sent to him from the kitchens once a week, finding one of the elves and appealing to their natural urge to be helpful, as well as the secondary one that was to go overboard and stuff someone full when they had only asked for a snack. Thus, the house elves she recruited were only too happy to send food to Tine Cottage, and from the unsigned letter she received from Sirius, he got the deliveries and enjoyed them immensely. Hermione was unable to visit him, but now that he was able to care for himself, she was content to let him work off of what the elves sent him.

On Halloween, she personally delivered to him a package of sweets that came from the stash the house elves had supplied at the feast. It was the first time she had given him candy, and though she warned him to take it easy with it, she got the impression that he had enjoyed the treats when and where he could get them.

Happy that Sirius was now well-cared and provided for, Hermione returned almost her entire focus to her work and her husband. During the summer, the times she had visited Sirius had been inconspicuous and unnoticeable. During the first two months of school, Severus noted to her that she had occasionally seemed thoughtful, distracted even. Now, however, he was pleased that whatever project that had been occupying her mind was apparently complete, and demonstrated it thoroughly.

The year passed without incident. Hermione remained in touch with Sirius with occasional, nondescript letters and inquiries concerning his needs and welfare.

The following Christmas was a delightful affair. They exchanged gifts and then spent their day in front of the fire, curled up on the sheepskin rug, with tea, a blanket, and a book. Christmas was often the only occasion Hermione could be guaranteed to see her husband's normally austere face soften. He was strict and unrelenting with the students, harsh to a degree that made even her cringe on occasion, and it was difficult for him to let go at the end of the day. But at Christmas, Hermione was treated to the side of her husband that he saved only for her, and it was on special days like this one that they could enjoy the lassitude of it properly.

His birthday, however, was another story. They had begun celebrating it with not only a trip to Fortescue's, but free rein to act out whatever sexual fantasy he wished. They would go out of their way to make it possible, to set aside the time and collect whatever materials might be needed in order to go through with it. Hermione's birthday was celebrated in a similar manner: it was the one day where she had her husband entirely at her mercy, and enjoyed it so. The year before, she had daringly tied him up and then teased him ruthlessly to the point where he had lowered himself to begging. This year, for his birthday, Severus wanted to try something that was again a little different, but would take more planning and consideration than they could normally set the time aside to do.

Given that Hermione knew what he was planning in advance this year—it was the end of 1985 now, a year since she had freed Sirius—and knowing that since his birthday fell on a weekday this year, they chose to go through with his gift during the Yule holidays and simply have ice cream on the actual day his natal day fell upon. Ice cream was no problem; arranging a fantasy needed uninterrupted time. They couldn't do it if they were both dealing with work.

It was how on Boxing Day, Hermione found herself mentally reviewing what they had planned out as she lay down on their bed, stripping her clothes off and setting them aside. She was unclasping the back of her bra when a warm, familiar breath gusted over her ear, and she felt another pair of hands helping her remove it. She felt him gathering her curls up into a knot on top of her head, lifting them
up just enough to bare her neck, before she felt his lips begin nibbling on them.

His hands released her hair, and began sliding down her waist, trailing down to her legs. Hermione arched her head back and moaned as he went straight for the target, dipping his fingers below the waistband and stroking her.

Suddenly, without apparent warning—though Hermione had known this would happen—she found herself being flipped onto her back, her arms pinned by invisible bonds across the bed, leaving her utterly and completely exposed. This fantasy—for him, to imagine that he had snuck into her room late one night, while they were both still students. That he had found her alone and undressing, and seducing her by the sheer virtue of taking her by surprise, had then incapacitated her enough to have his way. It was the fantasy of a teenager who desperately wanted to have her without reserve, and as Hermione began struggling against her bonds, knowing that it was exactly what he wanted, she couldn't help inwardly wondering just how often this particular scenario had dominated his thoughts while he had masturbated to thoughts of her.

Nothing about this scenario was real. Had it been, Hermione would have had him flat on his back, rather than being caught off-guard long enough to be made vulnerable. She would have been screaming her lungs out, using whatever wandless magic she was capable of to help herself. But this was a scenario based off the notion that she wanted it, and yet did not want, yet knew that she did, and his job was to shake her resolve not to have him by any means possible. It was a pure fantasy, which was the only reason why Hermione would ever agree to it. Because not only did she want Severus to enjoy his birthday—however his fantasy played out—she was genuinely interested in seeing what he would try. This was for both their pleasures.

She felt him hook his fingers in the waistband of her knickers, and begin sliding them down almost tauntingly. Hermione struggled in vain, wriggling underneath his hands, trying to shake him off futilely.

She let out a yelp as he surged over her, just as naked as she was, wearing a lascivious expression.

"I knew you wanted it."

"Liar!" Hermione snarled, struggling fruitlessly against the invisible ropes holding her arms in place. Her legs were free to move, but she was not exactly inclined to start kicking him. "You had me by surprise!"

"Still," he purred, leaning to whisper into her ear, "your reaction was rather… suggestive."

Hermione bared her teeth at him. "I'm certain your reaction would be just as suggestive if I ambushed you by the balls!"

"Only if I already wanted you, I think."

"Well I don't!"

He bent down to nuzzle her cheek, one hand maneuvering between her legs to continue where he had left off in pleasuring her. She was wet. She had been wet from the start, thanks to the lust potion he had slipped in her pumpkin juice earlier at lunch, as a part of his plan. It was a slow-acting one, but now that he had lit the fire underneath her, so to speak, it was racing through her veins, setting her whole body trembling with temptation for him. She was naturally not inclined to protest against him to begin with, such was the depth of her natural attraction to him, but with that potion acting like lighter fluid for her arousal…
The lust potion was a passing fancy of his, to see what she would be like tied up and helpless, with a raging need for him, and unable to find satisfaction unless he helped her. Already, it was making her whimper with need, even though she continued to try and protest. Yet, his thumbs had begun massaging the sides of her labia, slicking her with her own wetness, and given that she could actually smell her own arousal, she was certain he could too.

It certainly did nothing to deter him. A moment to bend down, giving her a long lick from clit to slit, and then he began suckling on her in earnest. Hermione nearly shrieked at this, now struggling not because she wanted to get free, but because—sod the fantasy!—she had to touch him, had to bury her fingers in his hair and press him down on her just right…

"You know, given your current reaction, I'm very much inclined to call you a liar," he murmured against her.

"Bastard," Hermione whimpered without reserve.

He nuzzled and nipped at her clitoris for a moment, and then pulled away, pressing the tip of his erection against her entrance. "You want this, don't you?"

"Yes—no—yes—no, no," Hermione moaned. Two sides of her were screaming for the affirmative, but the barely-sane part of her that was still trying to keep in line with his fantasy was reminding her that she was not supposed to make it this easy for him. "No—don't you dare!"

"Pity. You certainly look as though you need it." He ground himself against her anyway, and then withdrew, causing her to whine involuntarily in protest at the loss. "Your mouth says one thing, but your body says another."

Hermione bit her lower lip, attempting to shove aside the effects of the lust potion—a rather fruitless attempt, really, but it was all she had going for her—long enough to shake her head.

She watched as he leaned back on his haunches, twisting as he stretched over to reach for something on the nightstand. Hermione's neck strained painfully as she tried to see what it was that he was retrieving, and then her brows furrowed in confusion as she stared at the unfamiliar bottle. Panting heavily, with a mixture of natural and potion-induced lust, she posed the query to him. "What…what is that?"

"An experiment of mine."

"Oh no—oh no—you are not using me as your—your guinea pig!"

"I'm afraid that right now, you really don't have much choice." He unscrewed the lid, tilting the jar in her direction so that she could see the rose-colored cream, and then leaned back toward the nightstand to retrieve something else—a bit of cotton cloth—before dipping it in the cream. A moment to swirl it around, making certain that was thoroughly saturated, and then he pried her legs apart—she had clamped them shut upon seeing the jar of unknown ointment—and, hooking one of them over his shoulder and holding it there to stop her from blocking him again, he placed the cloth against her folds.

Hermione was genuinely curious as to what it was supposed to do. The academic in her was fascinated at the thought of what he might have done; he had told her beforehand that he was going to try something of his own devising, in addition to the lust potion, but he had merely smirked and refused to respond when she had inquired precisely what the experiment was. Hermione had not been particularly bothered, but now—now she was deadly curious, and combined with the fact that her body already felt on fire, and she badly wanted to throw the whole fantasy aside, free herself, and
tackle him to the ground and *fuck* him—

"Oh!" She let out something that was between a gasp and a yelp, as she felt the skin where Severus was rubbing the cloth start to pulse unmistakable with need. He had placed something on there, something that made her undeniably more sensitive, made her need for sexual satiation more acute. She bit down hard on her lip, her head falling back against the mattress, as she tried to grind herself against the cloth, trying to garner what little friction she could—

Unfortunately, in this case, it was like trying to scratch a mosquito bite. Or more accurately, alleviate an itch from poison ivy by scratching the spot with something that still had poison ivy on it. The cloth was giving her only the faintest relief with the friction it provided, but it was also rubbing the cream more thoroughly into her folds, which merely resulted in exacerbating the problem. She could feel her folds pulsing with need, swollen and just plain *needy*…

"Oh, *fuck*—"*

"Language, Hermione."

He had pulled the cloth away, dipped it back into the jar, and was now lathering it over her again—even going so far as to dip it in slightly into her slit, causing her to buck as her body became increasingly frantic with need. She swore at him, and he merely watched her with amusement as she struggled to find some way to alleviate the need herself. Her attempts at finding friction were only resulting in exacerbating the problem, and in Hermione's opinion, he was clearly enjoying himself too much as he swiped more of the ointment onto the cloth, twisting it against the jar, and then pressed it deeper into her. Right into her passage.

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"Oh—*fucking—mother of*…"

Her body was already aflame with need for him, and if nothing else, that could be attributed to the lust potion. Her folds and her cunt, however, were almost unbearable; Hermione needed relief, and she needed it *now*, and the bastard was just sitting there and making it worse.

He pushed the cloth in as far as he could, and then withdrew it, before moving to take another helping of cream, this time rubbing it onto her nipples. They began to tingle warningly as the cloth, damp with both her juices and the bloody damned ointment, rubbed against them.

"Shite, Severus, stop!" Hermione wriggled and writhed uncontrollably, simply incapable of holding still, as her body waged war with her senses. She was moaning, nearly incoherent, but her words got the meaning across well enough. "Stop—*fuck* me, please, just stop—!"

"I thought you didn't want that." She was going to kill the bastard for this. Him and his silky baritone —

"I lied! *I* lied!"

He was smirking openly at her, as trailed the cloth mercilessly down her belly, causing it to flutter in anticipation under his ministrations. A moment later, he set it down, scourgifying his hands in case they had come in contact with the contaminated part of the cloth, and then wordlessly crumpled it into a ball. He picked it up gingerly, and then placed it at her lips.

"Open up."

Hermione bit down on her lower lip in refusal to comply, her eyes wide as she stared at the cloth
with something akin to horror. He pressed it firmly against her lips, prodding her to obey.

"If you don't take this into your mouth, I won't give you what you want."

She let out an involuntary, muffled whimper. She felt his erection grind ever so slightly against her clitoris, and let out a high-pitched whine of need when he retreated a moment later.

"Open up," he purred, tracing the corner of her lip with one finger. "Or I'll put this somewhere else."

Hermione let out a moan, but shook her head, mouth clamped shut. He pulled the cloth away, and slowly began trailing it down her belly again, before pressing it instead at her entrance yet again.

"I'll put it in there instead of my cock," he growled.

Hermione's eyes widened even further, and she shook her head frantically, letting out a whimpering half-moan.

He gave her a cruel smirk, and pressed it into her ever so slightly. "I'll leave it there and go find a book to read."

Hermione let out a squeal and a gasp of outrage. Her lips parted. "You wouldn't!"

"Wouldn't I?" He challenged, wearing a sneering smile that was clearly triumphant.

Hermione wibbled for a moment, still writhing on the bed in wanton need, and then she obediently opened her mouth. He pulled the cloth away from her legs, quickly bringing it to her lips, and pressed it inside. Her mouth closed around it, and immediately, she tasted the cream mixed with her juices—an odd, odd combination of tastes—and felt her mouth begin to tingle slightly.

He sat back to watch her for a moment as she worked her jaw, trying to alleviate the sensations that were beginning to overtake her mouth. She jerked against her bonds, her mind empty and gone and replaced with one single need. She barely registered when he grasped her legs, hooking them both securely over his shoulders, and he leaned forward until she was almost doubled over, before pressing the tip of his erection against her again.

"Yes," he said, his tone thoughtful as he took in the glazed expression on her face. "I'd rather say you certainly look like you want this."

She let out a muffled whimper and a moan, both agreeing with him and begging him to hurry up.

Severus smirked, pressed his face forward until their noses were touching, nuzzling for a moment, before he slammed into her.

Oh, bliss! Hermione threw her head back again, nearly smacking her head into his, as she felt pleasurable delight and a fraction of advertised relief. The sensations in her mouth were not nearly as intense as the rest of her body—in fact, the more she worked it, the more it seemed to alleviate the tingling itch of pleasure roiling through her tongue, and she chewed and bit down on the cloth all the harder.

Severus began thrusting into her hard, pounding into her and meeting no resistance; she was too wet for that. Furthermore, it was pleasurable on several levels, and a little over ten seconds in, Hermione felt herself clamping down on him in sudden orgasm. She was that overwrought with pleasure, so on edge that the slightest bit of relief tipped her over—and then again and again, until she was spasming around him, squeezing like a hot, wet vise.
He grunted in surprise at this, clearly not expecting this reaction. Hermione had never experienced anything like this, and by logical extrapolation, Severus had not experienced anything like it either; he wouldn't have known, couldn't have known, what it would feel like to have Hermione strangling him in this particular manner. It hardly stopped him, for he merely began moving harder, faster, if somewhat more erratically.

Hermione clamped her eyes shut, unable to keep them open; she felt light-headed and dizzy, spots appearing in her vision behind her eyelids, and the sensation in her loins was only magnified by the lack of sight to distract her. His thrusts were providing certain relief, and she could feel the effects of the cream wearing off, but it no-less reduced the effect of the lust potion still running rampant through her body.

She was not at all satisfied when he let out a grunt, his hips jerking, as he came inside her. She let out noise between a whine and a squeal, muffled by the cloth in her mouth, and struggled against the bonds holding her down. He pulled away, letting her legs thump back onto the bed, as he watched her still writhing with need. Hermione's eyes flew open as she felt him remove her bonds. A moment to roll over onto her belly so that she could push herself onto shaky elbows, and then she managed to pull herself upright and tackle him.

In hindsight, he should have expected this. Hermione simply couldn't control herself. He might be satisfied, but she was not, and she scrabbled at him with all the gentleness of a feral animal, pushing him down on the bed and grinding herself against his leg. She tried to lean over to spit out the cloth, but Severus's hand clamping over her mouth sent the message through her fuzzy, desire-soaked brain that he didn't want her to, and instead made do by tucking her chin on his shoulder, burying her face in the sheets as she rocked against him, seeking more relief.

"Unbelievable," she heard him mutter, as he brought one hand between them to slip two fingers into her passage, his thumb massaging her clit. She shuddered around his fingers, clamping tightly, in yet another orgasm, and he let out an exclamation of disbelief. "Merlin—you're insatiable."

"Mroah frault," Hermione mumbled incoherently, still gagged by the cloth.

His sharp intake of breath told her that he was perhaps finally realizing that he may have gone too far—or at least, misjudged how effective his creation was, combined with the lust potion, and a woman's ability to be continuously pleased. Perhaps he had tested it on himself earlier and achieved a different sort of result—she did not know. Or perhaps he had not realized what the consequences of using such copious amounts would be. Nevertheless, he was now reaping the rewards, and as soon as the surprise had worn off, he had flipped her back onto her back, taking a moment to stroke himself back to hardness before thrusting inside her again.

They spent the next hour fucking. It was the most accurate term for it. It ended by degrees; Hermione went from frantic to merely desperate, to finally just in need of a little friction, a little pleasure by his hands. She writhed against the bedding as he took her from behind, alleviating the ridiculous amount of cream he had used on her passage as well as the stuff he had used on her belly. It ended with her curled up next to him, tired and thoroughly satiated, boneless to the core, and her eyes fluttering shut as he suckled gently on her nipples, scraping them every now and then with his teeth.

She was exhausted. Had things gone as planned, he might not have been before, but now Severus was thoroughly worn out. Inwardly pleased at the success of his experiment, a little put-out at how he had failed to gauge the right dosage, and just as worn-out and boneless as his wife. Her cheek was pressed against his chest, and she let out a little sigh of satisfaction before her eyes closed completely and she snuggled against him. He released her breast with a slight pop, taking a moment to tuck a stray lock of hair that had reverted to its naturally bushy state out of her face, before closing his own
eyes and deciding that a nap was most certainly in order.

Hours later, he was awoken by a weak smack in the face with a pillow.

"I am never... ever... going to agree to be a guinea pig for your experiments. Ever," Hermione moaned, and he rolled over to watch her sit up, wincing and moving gingerly as she did so.

"I confess that things did not go as planned."

"That was rather obvious when I tackled you, I think," Hermione said dryly, working herself off the bed to see if her body was still in functioning order. She grimaced, and then turned to give him a tired, half-hearted glare. "For this, I am going to short-sheet your bed."

"We're married," Severus reminded her, moving to push her back down and retrieving his wand to summon two glasses of water. Hermione did not protest to this, but sat up and drank the glass down gratefully when it appeared. "You'd end up short-sheeting your bed, too."

"I'll sleep on the rug," Hermione groused.

"I'm afraid to ask how you plan to get downstairs, much less short-sheet the bed in the first place."

Hermione let out a weak chuckle, and then rolled over onto her side, snuggling into his chest. "I'm going to take another nap. When I wake up, if I've figured it out, I'll tell you."

Severus tugged the pillow she had used to smack him with over to his head, given that his neck was sore from sleeping at an awkward angle, and settled down to relax. "I look forward to it."

"Mmm. Yes." Hermione sighed and closed her eyes. "What do you want for breakfast tomorrow?"

"Whatever you're up to making, at this point," Severus drawled.

Hermione laughed. "Happy birthday, love."

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione leaned against the window of The Three Broomsticks, watching the students who came in and out, giving them a look that was meant to deter the under-age students from attempting to find a way to sneak themselves something strongly alcoholic. It was a Hogsmeade weekend, once again the week before Valentine's Day, and Hermione was in an unusually sour mood.

Severus had once again snuck a rose into her hair, no doubt nicked from Pomona's greenhouse again—the woman had finally begun to notice the yearly thefts, and entertained though she was, she had begun strengthening the wards around her charges, which only made the challenge more interesting for her husband—and every time Hermione placed a hand on the back of her neck to feel the soft, silky petals, she couldn't help the clenching in her gut.

At first, she had simply thought her period had been late. It happened on occasion. But now it was beyond simply being 'late'—it had been skipped. She had missed her period, and the implications had her aggrivated, edgy, irate, and somewhere in the mix, fearful. She had waited over a month for her period to come, and now that it had not, she was being forced to resign herself to a visit with Madam Pomfrey.

It was with trepidation that Hermione forced her feet to take her to the Hospital Wing, once she had returned with the students from Hogsmeade, and slip inside with a terse request for the Matron's presence.

The look Poppy gave her as she left her office was one of resignation mixed with private amusement. The woman had known her since she was a fifth year in this timeline, and had been the one to patch both Hermione and her husband up when they were students. Patched up after encounters ranging from simple to near-disastrous. She was quite used to dealing with the two of them now, though Hermione had not had to see her for anything more than a checkup once or twice a year since the war had ended.

"Hermione," she said, greeting her by name as a colleague. "Did you need something?"

Hermione debated how to bring the subject up as tactfully as possible, for a moment, and then she decided to be candid. Beating around the bush with the mediwitch would be less than helpful. It was best to be direct with her, in regards to the problem at hand. It made solving it much simpler for the both of them. Poppy was a trained medical professional, and holding back only made it more difficult for her to do her job.

"I've missed a period," Hermione stated carefully. She paused, and then confessed out loud what she had previously only admitted as a possible fear inside her head. "I think I may be pregnant."

For a moment, Poppy looked as though she did not quite know how to react, and then she briskly led Hermione over toward one of the beds.
"Which result would be considered the 'good news' for you?" Poppy asked, giving Hermione a wry smile as she pulled out her wand, silently performing the usual array of diagnostic spells.

"A negative," Hermione stated without compunction.

A few moments of pause.

"I'm afraid I'll have to give you the bad news, then."

Hermione's jaw dropped, and then snapped shut. "I'm pregnant," she repeated, uncertain if she had heard the mediwitch correctly. The concept was such an alien one, and as she stared down at her stomach, she felt disbelief that it applied to her.

"Yes, indeed," Poppy replied candidly.

"I don't understand how," Hermione said slowly, sitting up straight. "I've been taking my contraceptive potion. It's supposed to be completely effective."

"It is unless it's compromised," Poppy warned her, moving to pull over a chair and sit down. "Have you drunk anything that might have reacted with it recently?"

Hermione took only a moment to think. "A lust potion."

Poppy's eyebrows rose to her hairline.

"It was completely consensual," Hermione told her firmly.

"A lust potion would have done it," Poppy agreed.

Hermione let out a groan, pinching the bridge of her nose between her thumb and forefinger. "Shite."

Poppy eyed her calmly for a moment. "If you wish to talk, Hermione, I can listen. I'm a licensed mediwitch, and am bound to hold everything confidential."

Hermione expelled a pent-up sigh, grateful for the ear. "I can't be pregnant. You know—you know I'm not from this timeline, right?"

"Of course."

"Having a kid could change the future that I've tried so hard to change as little as possible," Hermione muttered. "And the fact is—given what I know of the future—I don't... I don't feel it would be safe to be a mother. Not safe for me—and for the child, even less."

For the first time since Hermione had discovered she was pregnant, Poppy gave her a look of sympathy mixed with understanding. "This isn't the first time I've had a pregnant witch come here, although most of them have been students. I'm licensed to give abortifacient potions, if you feel your situation is desperate enough for that."

Hermione winced, placing one hand over her belly. "If I'd gotten pregnant while Voldemort was still alive... when I was working on active duty, for the Order... I'd have gotten an abortion without hesitation. And Merlin forbid, if I'd gotten pregnant in my own timeline, I'd have gotten one then, too. But now..." She turned to give the mediwitch an uncertain glance. "How do you do what you do and also willingly allow... this?"

She saw the mediwitch let out a faint sigh, before giving her a sad, slightly weary smile that was no less serious than Hermione's situation. "As a mediwitch, I've sworn to do my best to help any patient
that comes into my care. However, I do recognize that not all witches who get pregnant are in a position to handle it. Not all women are fit to be mothers, and some are in untenable situations for both themselves and the child."

"Some would argue for them to put it up for adoption," Hermione murmured.

"A pregnancy can be difficult to hide, even in the Wizarding world," Poppy enlightened her. "Furthermore—and this is merely my opinion, mind you—I don't believe in life at conception as a valid argument against it. Everyone will have different opinions on when a pregnancy includes two lives instead of one, and I highly doubt we will come to a unanimous resolution on the matter anytime soon." Seeing that she had Hermione's attention, she continued, "Some people believe that human life starts at conception. Others place it at the heartbeat. Further along, the brain. There are those that consider it alive at those times and still think abortion is acceptable in those instances, although they might have different ideas on what constitutes appropriate circumstances. There is really never a simple answer to this question."

"Give me your point of view," Hermione stated baldly. "I want to hear it."

Poppy took a moment to formulate her words. "It's true that an embryo is alive—but it is also true that the sperm and egg are alive, in their own right, as they are composed of living cells. In that case, I don't think being alive is the measure for it." She gave Hermione a serious look. "This is where I step into murky water. I judge it based on its humanity. Wizards are aware of the existence of souls, not in the least because we have Dementors to suck them out. Without a soul, we don't consider Kissed wizards to be alive or have rights. We don't legally consider them human, either. Research has also shown that a functioning brain is required to have a soul, because the brain determines personality, which is also tied into a witch or wizard's magic and soul—which brings us back to those who are Kissed, and therefore have no personality or magic."

"Logical," Hermione agreed.

"Then for me, personally, I place it at the development of the soul, which is measurable," Poppy told her briskly. "Others will certainly disagree with me. The majority of the world would disagree with me, in fact, although I don't know how it is in your timeline. Nevertheless, I believe it is a witch's right to choose to not carry a pregnancy to term. Whether I agree with the decision or not is irrelevant, although I believe…" she paused. "I believe that all life is precious—and were it my decision, witches would not have to have abortions. Were it my decision, every child that was ever born would grow up with at least one loving parent. I don't like abortion, but in some cases, I do recognize it as a valuable service to women in regards to controlling their reproduction, when contraceptive measures fail."

"Wishing doesn't change facts," Hermione said quietly. "And even with precautions—mistakes do happen."

"Indeed." For the first time, Poppy looked distressed, but then her expression turned serious. "Opinions about abortion depend on a person's upbringing, culture, religion, inherent beliefs, philosophy, life experience, political atmosphere—there is no right or wrong answer about it, as much as some people would like to believe it to be so. I feel it important to remind you that everything I've just told you is not the mediwizardry community's take on the matter, but my own. You're in the first month of your pregnancy, and if you wish to have an abortion, I will provide you with the means to have one safely. It is your decision to make, although I feel that you should spend some time thinking it over first."

Hermione nodded. "I can't make this sort of decision without Severus. It's—" she paused. "It's my body, but this affects us both. Furthermore… we both wanted a child, eventually. I'm not exactly
prepared for this, but I'm also in a position where if I want to, I can find a way to cope with this. Even if it's a good deal more complicated than I would like."

Poppy nodded. "Take your time to think it through," she told Hermione gently, but firmly. "Take at least until Easter. You're a logical person, Hermione. You can use that logic to make the decision that's best for you. Even if you decide to go through with an abortion in the end, I'd like you to be absolutely certain that it's what you want."

Hermione nodded, grateful for the offer and support the mediwitch had given her. "Thank you, Poppy."

~o~O~o~

Hermione spent three days trying to figure out how to bring up the subject to Severus. When she gave up rehearsing and simply came out and said it, during the evening in their quarters, Severus's reaction made her wonder if she should have been more tactful.

Simply coming out of nowhere and candidly telling him, "I'm pregnant," could have probably been done with more care. She wished she had. But she had decided to discard decorating the fact with being blunt and getting the point across to him, without a breach of communication.

The look on Severus's face went from surprised to stony as he absorbed this. The moments of silence that followed her declaration gave Hermione time to see the warning signs of anger in his face. When a student messed up royally in class, he was ready to explode like a cauldron under the inept hands of Neville Longbottom. The same expression that transformed his face in those moments was creeping up on him now, and Hermione could see it in his eyes, the way they glittered with anger; the pinch of his brow, the unsmiling curl of his lips, the slight sneer…

And then he did explode. But unlike the way he treated most of his students, with unparalleled volume, his voice had become dangerously soft.

"What do you mean 'I'm pregnant'?"

Hermione, who had been tense and on edge all day, snapped.

"I don't think that phrase can be easily misunderstood," she snarled.

Severus stood up from where he had been grading, the quill dropping from his fingers.

"What I want to know is how!" he demanded angrily.

Hermione's lip curled disdainfully. "Remember that lust potion you gave me the day after Christmas?"

There was a long pause, and then Hermione watched the color literally drain from her husband's face as he sank back in his chair, realization dawning on him like the Hogwarts Express on an unsuspecting chicken on the train tracks.

"Shite," he breathed.

"My thoughts exactly." Hermione sank into her armchair by the fire, looking rather weary. When the fight had gone out of her husband, it had left her, too. "Lust potions, love potions, fertility potions, and contraceptive potions are all in the same class. We both learned that in our seventh year, yet neither of us spared a thought about whether your lust potion was compatible with my contraceptive potion." She gave her husband a wry, if slightly nervous smile. "That's why we're here and having
this discussion now, I think."

Severus stared at her with an expression that, in Hermione's mind, defied description. Then he leaned forward, burying his face in his hands.

"Leave me," he bit out.

Hermione stood, but instead of walking away, she came to stand beside his chair. "I don't blame you for this. We both let it slip our minds, and what we did was entirely our choice." He did not respond, but Hermione knew he was listening, and she plowed on. "I know we both planned on having children. Not now, I know, but hear me out. We're not in the middle of a war, or on the immediate brink of one—we're in the interlude. I'm willing to keep this child—in fact, I want to. But I cannot, and absolutely refuse, to do it alone." She placed her hand on his shoulder, and bent down so that her lips were level with his ear, so that he could not miss her next words. "This affects us both, Severus. Whatever choice we make, I'm the one who will have to see it through—but this is something for the two of us to decide, together."

"How much time?" Severus asked quietly, raising his head slightly.

Hermione took a moment to consider this. In truth, Poppy's words had made a great deal of sense to her. She did not consider the life-at-conception argument, but she felt that to treat a nine-month-old baby still in the womb like an embryo was inarguably absurd. She knew that the joined egg and sperm went through different stages of growth, and Hermione was in agreement that it was the soul—and joint presence of the brain—that determined the cut-off.

The world might disagree with her. Many people, if they knew the predicament she was in, would try to pull her to their argument to keep or not to keep it, for their own reasons, some of which were solely for selfishly philosophical or political ones. Hermione was not about to let another person's or entity's belief dictate what she could and could not do with her body—or what she should do with the choices she had before her. She was making her own decision about both her body and how she interpreted the presence growing inside her—and her unique situation.

Did she love what she knew had made a temporary home for itself in her womb? Gods above, yes. Even now, she felt protective of it. But as of right now, it was an issue of logic, reality, and her heart all coming to a unanimous agreement on how she should deal with the situation. It was not a simple situation of yes or no. Children were expensive in regards to time, money, and energy; in times of war, they were vulnerable and a liability. It hurt Hermione to do so, but she had to take all of those important factors into account as she contemplated her final decision.

"I'm one month along," Hermione informed him. "Poppy said the due date is around late August. We'll have our decision made by Easter, one way or another."

Severus nodded tightly.

"I need time to think," he said shortly. "Alone."

Hermione nodded, bravely planting a gentle kiss on his cheek, before she collected the test papers she needed to grade and went off to the library.

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When Severus brought the topic up the following Saturday, Hermione was ready to listen, and Severus was ready to talk. They sat across from each other, their sides to the fire, cross-legged on the sheepskin rug that had traveled with them from Spinner's End. Severus had spent the two days of
retreat thinking, and he laid everything out on the metaphorical table for them at the start of their discussion.

"It's true that I—that we have both agreed that we want this, if not now, at least in our future," he stated uneasily. "And I will confess that the very thought of you pregnant with my…our… child is…" he looked away for a moment, chewing on his words indecisively, before he admitted, "…an intoxicating one."

Hermione nodded, indicating for him to go on.

"But the logistics are difficult. In ten years, you'll be de-aged with Flamel's help—a prospect complicated enough on its own—not to mention the added factor of a child that still needs a mother capable of looking after it."

Hermione bit her lower lip, having thought of this as well, but nodded at him in encouragement to continue giving her his thoughts.

"Particularly," Severus added, just a bit bitterly, "since at that time, according to what you've told us, the Dark Lord will be a prominent figure for us to deal with again. I will be in very little position to take your place while trying to do my job as a spy. Unless we find a way around this, it is simply not possible."

"And I'm not willing to carry my child to term just so I can give him or her up for adoption," Hermione added, forcing herself to meet his eyes. "You never know what will happen to a child when you place them in the hands of another family."

"In that matter, I am inclined to agree. On the other hand, there is one benefit I must bring up, one that you pointed out to me earlier." He inclined his head at her. "When war finally does resume, if we were to keep the child, it would be at an age old enough to understand what is happening in the world around him. It would still be a dependent, but not so much that we could not perhaps place him…or her… in hiding. Temporarily."

"That's true. In fact, that's the only mitigating factor that suggests keeping it is at all possible," Hermione replied honestly.

"Which brings us nowhere, as we still have not come to a decision."

"We both want to keep him—or her," Hermione ticked off slowly, holding her fingers up for emphasis on each one as she listed them. "The situation is complicated in a way that would make having a child more complicated than it would be otherwise, both because of my time-turner accident and because of the Dark Lord, but we have acknowledged that is not impossible. We also agree that if we make the decision to keep it, it is because we want to raise our child as ours—not as anyone else's."

Severus inclined his head at her, again, in agreement.

"We also recognize that when we say that the situation is complicated, we really mean that it is complicated in a way that is risky to us, the child, the Order, and any attempt at keeping the future the way it should be."

Yet another inclination of her husband's head was her only response.

"You're right," Hermione said with a frustrated sigh. "We're still nowhere on the matter."

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February passed into March. Hermione and Severus discussed the issue of Hermione's pregnancy several times, giving them many opportunities to explore possible alternatives to certain obstacles. Several times, Hermione was tempted to put her foot down and tell Severus, simply, that she was going to take care of the issue with a visit to Madam Pomfrey, and that would be that. Other times, she was tempted to put the other foot down, and simply state that she would be keeping it. The former was something that, as time passed, Hermione felt more and more as though she would come to regret it. The latter was a poor decision to make on the fly, given their circumstances.

Hermione was not averse to the idea of abortion. It was simply that she and Severus finally had something that they both unanimously wanted—even if she knew that somewhere, deep down, Severus was privately insecure about the prospect of having a child—and they were in a position where they might have to give it up completely this time around for the greater good. If she had not wanted a child, if she had still been a student, if they were embroiled or on the cusp of immediate war, she would not have hesitated to have an abortion out of understanding of necessity. And if Severus had even shown the slightest adversity to being a father, any sign that he was not the least bit interested or supportive of it, Hermione would have gotten one. In her mind, parenting was a two-person job unless circumstances absolutely called for it, and if they could avoid the issue while the problem was still small—nipping it in the bud, so to speak—she would have.

It would have been her choice to make in regards to not raising a child alone, or with an unwilling father, or a marriage broken by its presence. Her choice alone. And she was grateful that she was not in the position where she had to make such a choice based solely on that fact.

But this issue was simply complicated by the fact that if they planned and played their cards right, they could keep it.

It was not that Severus was enthusiastic about being a father. Hermione was not as naïve as that, nor did he give such a mawkish impression. She knew that his childhood had been a poor one, neglectful in many prominent ways, and even though he never spoke to her about his parents, Hermione was certain that somewhere deep down, he was uneasy about the prospect of becoming one. But the fact was that part of him wanted a family; in this time period which Hermione was now growing up in, it was expected that you grew up, got married, and bore offspring. In that order. It was socially ingrained that this was the expectation.

Hermione and Severus—Severus more than Hermione, but Hermione nonetheless—were more than happy to give the finger to what society expected of them. Yet the desire for that image of a family was a strong and tantalizing one, and Severus was not entirely immune to it. He was not jumping up and down with joy at the prospect—and if he had been, Hermione would have been greatly concerned—but he genuinely wanted to have a family to call his own, composed of people he could honestly proclaim to hold dear to him—people who were, in every sense of the word, a part of him.

And to hear him speak of it, if in a somewhat darkly amused manner, he had no idea where to even begin to create a Philosopher's Stone, nor the depth of inhumanity required to do whatever the Dark Lord had done to make himself immortal—the third option, therefore, was the more reachable and conscientiously acceptable one.

It was also, he leered at her before pulling her into a kiss and getting to work on her clothes, by far the most pleasurable option.

Hermione had openly laughed at this explanation, but she felt that it shred a bit of truth on his motivations. He was not overly fond of children—other peoples' children, in particular—but he was willing to give his own a chance at having a better childhood than he himself had survived and suffered through, one that could surpass him and carry on a part of him.
Easter arrived, and Hermione and Severus sat down to make their final decision. They had spent a good deal of time planning through the most obvious obstacles, and in Hermione's opinion, the only thing that would make their decision now was not one of logic, but one of the heart.

Did she trust that she could do this? That they could do this?

The answer, when she looked into his eyes and posed the same question to him, was a quiet but sincere, "Yes."

The decision-making was over. The next part was informing the headmaster of this rather important development.

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Albus Dumbledore's reaction to new developments were rather unpredictable a good portion of the time. The man was a jolly, dotty enigma, and you never quite knew what he would say next.

When Hermione and Severus took a seat in his office and explained that Hermione was pregnant, three months along, and that they planned to go through with it, they had at least expected some disappointment on the Headmaster's part in some capacity: he was about to lose the one Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher he had managed to retain for more than a year since refusing the post to Voldemort. A teacher who not only managed to retain the position, but was competent and got along well with the other staff members.

Instead, he took the news rather cheerfully.

"Fate is fickle, but oftentimes its hand knows best," Dumbledore told them with a twinkle in his eye, after popping a lemon drop in his mouth that Hermione and Severus had both politely refused. "I was planning on asking you to retire soon, given that the year of 1991 will soon be upon us, and I would rather the majority of the students not remember you as their professor when your eleven-year-old self walks into the door. This saves us all the trouble of trying to find a way to convince you to leave."

Hermione's mouth opened in a silent 'oh' of surprise at this declaration.

"And a child… you'll certainly have something to occupy your time in the interim, to say the least." Dumbledore's smile was so benign that Hermione was momentarily disarmed.

Hermione cleared her throat. "I was not actually planning on leaving," she said weakly.

"Surely you were not planning on teaching with a child to take care of?"

"I would rather not, but Severus's salary alone wouldn't be enough…" Hermione began, trailing off when she saw that Dumbledore was still smiling.

"How long have you two been teaching here?" he inquired, as though he did not very well know himself.

"Nearly five years, Headmaster," Severus interjected. "We both began teaching in 1981."

"A combined total of ten years of dedicated teaching," Dumbledore stated cheerfully, clasping his hands together. "That calls for a pay raise, doesn't it?"

Hermione and Severus both exchanged glances.
Neither were quite sure what to say.

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Hermione did not start to show until the end of March. What could be seen was barely noticeable, and if they had not been fully aware of the reason for it, it could have been passed off as an incident of weight gain, which inevitably happened to people when they spent a week overindulging on rich food. But Hermione had not changed her diet by much, unless it was to make a concerted effort to eat healthier than she already did, and it was certainly not the result of rich food. And neither she nor Severus mistook it as such for a single moment.

When exams were finally over, Hermione and Severus celebrated their fourth wedding anniversary with a return to Spinner’s End and a night where Severus made dinner for them both for a change, along with a comfortable evening spent gently, mutually pleasuring each other.

This was the most gentle Severus had ever been with her since their actual wedding night. Since reaching her fifth month, everything Severus did with her was determinedly careful, almost cautious. He had made no attempts to demand from her to give up any aspect of her normal routine as a result of her pregnancy—in short, he did not treat her like a fragile piece of china—but he himself was almost warily gentle with her. He eyed her body with brooding, contemplative looks, sometimes turning away when he noticed her looking back at him, hiding his face behind his curtain of greasy hair. In Hermione’s opinion, he simply did not know what to do with her, and where his previous default had been to simply do it harder, it had now switched to the exact opposite—though he was no less thorough.

By the time Severus was due to return to Hogwarts, this time without her—for they had agreed that it was best if she remained at Spinner’s End—Hermione was literally quite sick of her pregnancy, and was desperately hoping that it would be over soon. At this point, she frankly didn’t care if he—for they had known it was a boy since April—wanted to stay in her just a bit longer. As much as she loved him, and as protective she was, he had worn out his welcome in her body, and she was hoping he got the message sooner rather than later.

It was not that Hermione’s entire life revolved around the fact that she was pregnant. It was more as though being pregnant was simply another facet of her life. She still spent an inordinate amount of time doing private research. Near the beginning of the summer, she had found a slim window of opportunity to visit Sirius. She paid Flourish and Blotts a visit at least once a week to see if they had a new stock of Charms and Transfiguration books for her to peruse. And on nights with weather just too good to sit inside and miss, she went to Fortescue’s. Hermione hid her pregnancy with a glamour, leaving not a single person she met with the idea that she was anything more than simply herself.

Now the visit to Sirius bore telling. Hermione had not bothered to hide her pregnancy from him, six months along as she was, and the open-mouthed expression he had worn was priceless.

"Don’t tell me that’s Snape’s!" he had demanded weakly.

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "Of course it is. He’s my husband. Who else’s would it be?"

Sirius buried his face in his hands. "Merlin’s beard, I did not need to know that Snape had a sex life."

Hermione was tempted to elbow him for this, and she might have if she was not currently holding a very hot frying pan. "Then you shouldn’t have asked for an answer to an obvious question."

"I’m sorry I asked."
"You should be. I was almost insulted."

"I can't believe this is happening to you, of all people," Sirius stated, playing moodily with his fork. "You'll be turned into a bloody housewife."

Hermione gave him a pointed glare. "I am not Molly Bloody Weasley! Get that thought out of your head right now—child or not, nothing can stop me from doing whatever I would normally be doing!"

"How can you be expected to teach with a kid to take care of?" Sirius pointed out.

"I'm not," Hermione sniffed. "I'll be doing private research at home. I'm making progress on those mediwizardry spells I was devising earlier, that I told you about. The ones that focus on the nervous system. Nothing has changed, other than the fact that I'll have more time to do my own work."

"Alright, then," Sirius said gruffly, leaning back in his seat. "What about names? Have you thought of that?"

"I'm not naming him Sirius Snape."

"Thank the gods. I might have to kill myself if you did."

Hermione snorted with laughter. "My husband would kill me first, if I even suggested it."

"But seriously," Sirius said, bringing them back to the topic at hand, "names. Have you thought of them yet?"

"Well," Hermione said slowly, thoughtfully, as she set the pan aside and hastily began boiling a pot of water. "I have to admit that even though we haven't actually discussed it, I have been thinking of names."

"And?" Sirius pressed, openly curious.

"And I decided that I wasn't going to set my heart on one until after he's born," Hermione replied determinedly. "I think it's better to wait and see what he's like first. Picking a name for a child isn't like picking out a new set of curtains, you know—you don't know what you'll get until you've got it." She paused, and then turned to give him a mischievous look. "That doesn't mean I'm not writing out foot-long lists of possibilities, of course."

Sirius let out a bark of delighted laughter. "I can see that you haven't changed one bit."

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Neither Hermione nor Severus could have fully anticipated how Selenius Tacitus Snape would affect their lives. He had been born the day after Severus had returned to Hogwarts; Severus had delayed in leaving because Hermione had been so close to her due date, and he had finally departed two days before the students were due to arrive because he could put it off no longer. There was some expected exasperation to this bit of contrariness, but that turned out to be the least of their worries. To begin with, Hermione, who had been prepared to deal with the unpleasantness of constant wailing, was surprised to discover that Selenius was oddly quiet for a baby. In all the time that Hermione nursed him, he hardly made a sound—something that had eventually worried her into wondering if he was deaf or perhaps mute. It wasn't until she dropped a pot in the kitchen directly behind him, catching her son by surprise, that she discovered he was neither—but that he was simply difficult to rile up, though when he was, it turned out to be equally difficult to quiet him.
Lesson learned and worries on her son's health set aside, Hermione spent the majority of her time in her workroom, with Selenius either in his crib or in the room with her so that she could keep an eye on him. He had black eyes like his father that followed her around as she moved, eyes that would occasionally wander around the room before coming to land back directly on the woman who was responsible for feeding him.

He hardly ever cried. It was something that Hermione found astonishing to the point of absurdity. He had a way of demanding something by reaching out to grab it in his tiny fingers, and would impatiently continue doing so—even going so far as to bang on a nearby surface with his fists—if she was too slow in recognizing what he wanted. And when it was something he couldn't logically be allowed to have, like a kitchen knife for instance, he would pout and sulk and visibly look rather put out. But he would do it silently.

The first few months of caring for him were harrowing. But by the time Hermione stopped nursing, having lost most of the weight she had gained during her pregnancy through breastfeeding and daily exercise, it grew much easier. Yet, Selenius took up a great deal of Hermione's time—and the times when Severus was home from work to visit happened to coincide with the times that Hermione had to give almost entirely to Selenius, which made Severus rather sour and easily irritated.

When Severus was not home, Hermione often took Selenius to visit Sirius, who was delighted to have the company. Sirius was one of Hermione's best friends, the person she could joke around with and visit when she needed an ear or a few moments of measured, friendly insanity. Severus provided her with something unique that only he could give, but he was not capable of giving her everything in regards to social needs, and particularly given the hours he worked, Hermione was desperately in need of a friend. Had Lily, Alice, and Marlene been alive, it would have been the three of them going out on weekly get-togethers. But nearly all of Hermione's friends were gone, and she was forced to either resign herself to going-stir crazy in the house or pay her surviving and in-contact best friend the occasional visit.

Now that Hermione had left Hogwarts, she knew that she would slowly have to fade out of this timeline. It would be odd if she were to suddenly disappear, and she knew that her absence from the places she had once frequented would have to be gradual and inconspicuous. Given that she was home much of the time, caring for her son—who, by August 31st of 1987, was a year old—it was a good excuse not to be seen out as often.

Hermione and Severus's visits to Fortescue's dwindled down to three visits a year over the next few years—Hermione's birthday, Severus's birthday, and even though he was not old enough to understand it—Selenius's birthday. Fortescue was probably the only man in Diagon Alley who even had an inkling that Selenius existed, when the Snapes ordered three cones for two people.

When Selenius turned four, Hermione returned to Hogwarts in secret. Over the past four years, she had slowly disappeared from the Wizarding world at large, and their gradual return to their previously prominent spy-handler partnership accelerated as they prepared for what they next year would bring.

By that time, Selenius had grown a great deal, and his features had become more defined. It had become immediately apparent to Hermione that he took after his husband, but the slight curl to his otherwise straight, jet-black hair and the lack of an oversized nose were the most promising indications that some of Hermione was in him, too. His tendency to be quiet and, for the most part, mild-mannered had prompted a series of jokes from Sirius.

"You should have named him Tacitus Rex Snape," he told her one summer evening, when Selenius was three. "The king of silence."
In truth, Selenius was simply a very easy child to deal with, which was more than Hermione could have ever hoped for. He was very slow to anger, very difficult to rile up, and Hermione discovered that keeping him content was not that hard. It truly took effort to make her son upset, although Hermione had discovered that once that happened, he was liable to throw a temper tantrum of wreckage-inducing proportions.

His involuntary magic, the kind young children were apt to use, came into existence on the one occasion that he had become inconsolably upset: Hermione had refused to let him in the study. It was where she and Severus kept stocked wall-to-wall with books, the majority of which were neither appropriate nor safe for a toddler to go through. Occasionally, she let him in to find one he could use — mostly consisting of his parents' old schoolbooks. But on the occasion where he wanted to get another book, Hermione had been extremely busy in the kitchen, and had been forced to put it off.

The kitchen table, which Hermione was using to hold all the pots and pans she was keeping out of the cupboards for spring cleaning, suddenly lost its legs. The four elegantly-carved posts vanished, and the whole thing went crashing to the floor in a pandemonium of dinging metal. Even Selenius had flinched, at the amount of noise this had made, and it never happened again.

Hermione was not certain that she was being the best mother by doing all she could to make sure nothing set Selenius off; yet, given how rarely the threat ever surfaced, she felt that making concessions when it seemed that concessions needed to be made was not at all a bad idea.

Hermione remained in their quarters during the day. At night, she would slip out into the halls with the assistance of a Disillusionment Charm, and wander. The other teachers were aware of her existence—at least the Heads of House, along with a few of the older ones who had been at Hogwarts long enough to be trusted with a secret. Sibyll Trelawney not included. Thus, if they detected her on their rounds, they either ignored her or gave her a nod or a word of greeting.

Hermione made it a regular habit to sneak out onto the grounds at night with Selenius and knock on the door to Hagrid's hut, where she would be summarily invited inside for tea. Hagrid was terribly fond of Selenius, who found the odds and ends in the round hut utterly fascinating, and often gave him interesting things to toy with while he and Hermione sat down at the table to chat. The handkerchief Hagrid had given them on their wedding night had ended up in direct possession of their son, who now slept with it and made excellent use of it in the way of a security blanket.

One evening in late July, Hermione was sitting in Hagrid's hut, while Fang lay on the floor with Hermione's four-year-old son petting him when there was a knock on the door. Hermione jumped up, her reflexes slowed after years of inactivity—though she had resumed training nearly two years ago—and relaxed when she realized it was merely Albus.

"Good evening, Mrs. Snape," Dumbledore greeted her cordially, giving Selenius a nod as he glanced up at the wizard from where he sat on the floor. "And young Selenius. I'm just here for a word with Hagrid, I'm afraid."

"If it's a private word, I'm more than happy to leave…"

"That won't be necessary, Hermione," Dumbledore responded genially. "It's a conversation concerning Harry Potter which, I'm afraid, includes you by extension. You should be interested in what I have to say."

Curiosity piqued, Hermione returned to her seat, helping herself to another sip of tea while Selenius turned one of Hagrid's rock cakes over in his hand, smacked it two or three times against the floor, before offering it to Fang, who took it in his maw and began chewing on it without compunction.
Hagrid sat up a bit straighter at the mention of Harry’s name. "Isn't he comin' ter Hogwarts next term?"

"If he ever got his letter," Dumbledore replied.

Hermione placed a hand over her mouth. Of course. Harry had told her this story before, although at the time, he had described it as one of great amusement.

"I don' understand," Hagrid said, frowning. "Didn' McGonagall send his out with the rest o' 'em?"

"Naturally, but his aunt and uncle have been most diligent in preventing him from getting ahold of it." Dumbledore took a seat, waving his hand to politely decline a cup of tea. "Although when I told her to send as many as she thought necessary, I was not quite expecting her to flood the house with them."

Hermione was trying not to giggle with amusement. Dumbledore’s eyes were twinkling.

"An' now?" Hagrid asked, grinning.

"I'm afraid that Vernon Dursley has gone through rather extraordinary measures to try and keep Harry from coming to Hogwarts," the Headmaster continued. "He's taken them on an impromptu vacation to a little shack on the ocean, in the perpetual middle of nowhere, and I'm afraid that I must ask you to deliver Harry's letter to him personally."

There was a sudden loud crash, as a set of pots and pans came crashing down from their hanging places on the far wall, and they all jumped. Selenius had apparently decided to chuck a rock cake at one of them, to see what would happen, and it had come off its hook and taken down a good dozen others with it.

"I'll get it," Hermione sighed, flicking her wand at the fallen cookware to restore them to their proper places. She lifted a very amused Selenius off the floor, placing her in her lap as Hagrid stood up.

"I'll do it, Headmaster. Don' yeh worry abou' nothing."

"Excellent!" Dumbledore beamed. He stood up to leave, and then almost as if he just remembered, he added musingly, "Harry's birthday is also coming up soon."

"A present or two wouldn't go amiss, seein' as how the Dursleys have bin treating 'im," Hagrid said, immediately pulling on his enormous boots. "I'll get goin' now, sir. Hermione, would yeh watch Fang fer me while I'm gone?"

As soon as Hermione had given her word, Hagrid began collecting his stuff, and Hermione collected Selenius and left with the Headmaster to let the gamekeeper make his plans. They walked quietly together back to the castle, until Hermione broke the silence.

"It's suddenly occurred to me, but now that Harry, Ron, and my eleven-year-old self are coming to Hogwarts, I won't be able to visit Hagrid much anymore."

Dumbledore nodded, humming slightly as he absorbed this. "You won't be able to risk getting out regularly, much less with young Selenius."

"This isn't right, Albus," Hermione said, somewhat distressed. "I can't keep him in our quarters all day, week after week."

"And Spinner's End isn't much of a choice either, since the impression is supposed to be that no one
is living there," the Headmaster mused. A pause, and then he quickly changed the subject. "I took it upon me to do a bit of investigation into your family, as soon as your letter was sent out. Your cousin died two years ago, didn't he?"

"I—what?" Hermione asked, bewildered. "Sirrah?" Something clicked wildly in her mind. "What's wrong with Sirrah?"

Dumbledore's white eyebrows rose to his hairline like fuzzy caterpillars. "Your cousin Sirrah Granger died two years ago—he would be about Selenius's age now, wouldn't he?"

"My cousin was alive and well, last I recalled in my own timeline," Hermione said, wracking her mind for something—something—that would explain this. "Granted, I think they said something about sending him off to a boarding school and summer camp back in my fifth year…"

Something seemed to dawn in the old man's eyes, although he did not seemed to be inclined to explain it plainly for Hermione. "When was the last time you saw your cousin, in your own timeline?"

"Years," Hermione said, adjusting Selenius in her arms, who was starting to fuss slightly. "He got taken ill when he was three, but he recovered—or—or so I thought." The look in the Headmaster's eyes confirmed the realization that was slowly beginning to sink into Hermione's mind too, and she stared at him in abject horror.

"You're not—you're not suggesting I replace Sirrah with Selenius!"

"Your cousin is dead," the Headmaster told her, his voice gentle but firm. "Yet, you recall him still being alive in your timeline. Is it not possible that Selenius is, indeed, a part of your timeline—and that you may have placed him in your aunt and uncle's care?"

"I'm not about to give Selenius up the way you forced Sirius and I to give up Harry," Hermione snapped angrily. "Given the way things have turned out for him, do you really think I'd willingly put my son through that?"

"Do you really believe your aunt and uncle are capable of treating your son in such a manner?"

"Well—no—" Hermione's aunt and uncle were actually very kind people. "But I didn't have Selenius with the intention of giving him up when things got difficult!"

"Sometimes we have to learn to discern whether we're doing something for our benefit, or someone else's," Dumbledore told her gently. "I am not saying you must do anything. He is your son; anything that happens to him is between you and your husband to decide." Hermione, who had been bristling, relaxed ever so slightly at this. "I would just like you to be aware that it is a possibility that may come to pass simply because Hogwarts, next year and probably for the following years, will not be the safest nor easiest place to raise a young child."

Hermione's heart sank, knowing he was right. She, more than anyone else, knew how right he was. Next year was just an appetizer compared to the disasters that would take place in the years following. She shuddered involuntarily as she considered the events that would take place in her second year, and she looked down at Selenius, the sinking feeling solidifying into something inevitably tangible.

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Hermione did not bring the subject up with Severus for a good long while. In addition to the fact that she needed time to consider it alone, her husband was busy with classes. More importantly, he was
busy trying to wrap his head around three new Gryffindors that had made their way into his first-year Potions class.

The first day, he had returned to their quarters wearing an expression so full of deep-seated dislike, that Hermione knew there would be no reasoning with him.

"Potter is arrogant, lazy—"

Hermione rolled her eyes, and continued trying to coax Selenius into having a taste of mashed potatoes, but her son would have none of it, and kept his mouth stubbornly shut.

"…delighted to find himself famous, full of unmitigated cheek—"

"You did pick on him," Hermione could not help but remind him.

"And you!" Severus said, whirling around to face her. "You are unbelievable—the most prissy know-it-all I have ever laid my eyes on! Pray tell, when did you lose that habit of practically standing on top of your chair waving your hand?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this, smiling unrepentantly. "I did warn you, love."

Severus sneered at her, then turned away to retrieve his grading and get started on it.

Her husband was fond of their son, but given his busy schedule—and the fact that in his opinion, Hermione seemed to have everything well in hand—he rarely took care of Selenius. His focus was entirely on his work, his private research, and Hermione—and now, the newly-arrived Golden Trio. He simply could not bring himself to treat Selenius the way a toddler should be treated, and was content to let Hermione do it instead. It was not precisely what Hermione had had in mind, while she was pregnant with their son, but all things considered, it was probably the best way the cookie could have crumbled given their current circumstances. Had they not had the years with Harry Potter and his eventual showdown with Voldemort looming over them, she would have insisted on him taking an equal share of the work.

He was fond of their son to the point that Hermione dared suspect he loved him, but given the amount of time his son's presence took from his wife, Hermione also knew that it was a mild love-hate relationship. There were times when Hermione found him on the floor, his graded work set aside, quietly listening to Selenius attempts to read out loud—a feat that he only ever performed for his father, much to Hermione's consternation. And then there were times Severus would glare, sulk, brood, and even complain when he felt Hermione was not paying him enough mind because of his son.

They had scarcely had a moment alone, together, uninterrupted, since Selenius's arrival. As it was, Severus swore that the moment Selenius turned six, he was going to demand his son have his own room. Somehow—provided he could convince the Headmaster to expand a bit of their quarters for it. Intimacy, on the occasions that they could manage it, was quick, hurried, often preoccupied with thoughts concerning whether or not their son in the other room was about to get into trouble. It was not exactly conducive to being enjoyed, and though Hermione considered Selenius to be a blessing in their life, she was not blind to the strain it put on their relationship.

That night was the kind where Hermione would normally have been inclined to pull her husband aside, kissing and fondling him, and convince him to forget the source of his consternation for a while. It was the kind of night that would have become an enjoyable one that went from being stressful, to full of playful riposte, and then satisfying sex. But with Selenius in the room, that was simply not possible.
On Halloween night, Hermione was unsurprised to find her husband wearing an expression of enragement when he returned.

"Any other surprises you'd like to warn me about beforehand?" he asked snidely, limping. Hermione forced him to sit down, sending Selenius to the bedroom to play for a bit before she pulled his robes aside, tugged up the sleeve of his trousers, and examined the bloody gash on his leg.

"Fluffy did this?" she asked with amazement.

"So that's the blasted beast's name?" Severus sneered.

"Don't look at me," Hermione told him crossly, stepping back to retrieve some potions from the supply they kept in a cupboard in the bathroom. "That was Hagrid's idea, not mine."

To her surprise, for the first time in what was probably months, her husband relaxed. He leaned back in the chair, closing his eyes, and dare she even suggest he was smiling slightly?

"What's so funny?" she asked, her tone mild with curiosity as she dabbed at the wound.

"This is the first time in nearly a year that we've had a moment alone, and it's because Hagrid's bloody three-headed mutt decided to take a chunk out of my leg."

Hermione almost laughed. As it was, she barely held back a giggle of amusement. Cleaning up his leg and bandaging it with a spell, she stood up and—to his surprise—began unbuttoning his robes.

"Hermione…?" he asked, his tone uncertain, though there was an edge of underlying interest to it.

"You pointed out that this is the first time we've been alone together for a year," Hermione pointed out, kissing him. He responded immediately, enthusiastically, and a minute later, he pulled his injured leg aside before dragging her down onto his lap. "Selenius is in the other room. A Silencing Charm should take care of everything else, shouldn't it?"

Severus's response to this could not have been more encouraging. Despite the leg, he was not about to give up this opportunity to have a moment—a private, lusty, and very *alone* moment—with his wife.

A few weeks later, Hermione was once again faced with a very frustrated husband after she had examined his burned robes, declared that he would have to buy a new set, and then to top it off, confessed that her first-year self was the culprit.

Another burden of stress was added soon after. Nicholas Flamel had requested that the Headmaster use all of his vaunted resources to hide the Philosopher's Stone, and Severus had to devote a fair amount of time developing another layer of protection for it. In this case, it miraculously turned into a rather enjoyable evening, when Hermione pulled Selenius onto her lap and took a seat next to Severus as he began writing out the logic puzzle for the potions currently brewing in his office.

He was forced to discard the first version when Selenius, only five, managed to solve it. The second had him almost politely puzzled, but Hermione looked it over and handed it back to Severus with the correct answer after barely a glance at it. The third stumped him, and when he began to wail in misery at being faced with a puzzle that was simply too hard for him—he couldn't even understand half the words Severus had used in this version, and was baffled beyond what he felt he should have any right to be—Severus handed it to Hermione, who confessed that it took some real effort on her part to solve it. It was a riddle based entirely on logic, and Hermione could not imagine the average witch or wizard attempting to solve it with sufficient diligence required.
Hermione convinced Severus to sit down on the rug with them, with scraps of parchment and some quills, and develop a few simpler puzzles for their son to try. The night turned into a game, and Selenius—who had become bored almost literally to tears from being inside for too long—was utterly fascinated and entertained for the night. He lay down on his stomach, his nose pressed to the paper as he read it, and then he would look up and hesitantly pose the answer to his father. That evening marked a moment of change within their family: Selenius was now old enough for all of them to participate in something interesting enough to keep them all mutually engaged. Severus grew into the habit of lazily writing odd riddles during class and bringing them home at night for Selenius to pick apart.

Hermione discovered that even though she was the one who spent more time taking care of Selenius, her son was more interested in earning praise from his father, who gave it to him where it was due—much to her son's visible delight. Hermione could almost see it from a child's point of view: Severus was an imposing, authoritative figure while she was the dedicated and reliable caretaker who was understandably taken for granted. Who would she be more interested in, if she was Selenius?

It was moments like these that made Hermione forget the Headmaster's warning, but when Christmas arrived, Hermione took her husband aside for a long discussion. They found an opportunity to leave Selenius in Minerva's care for two hours, a prospect that had Severus sneering that she would turn their son into a "bloody Gryffindor" by the time they got him back; nevertheless, they found a quiet place in the library—*their* quiet place—to talk.

He was far from happy with the prospect.

"Why would we send our son to live among Muggles?" He had hissed, as they sat down.
"Furthermore, how would he fit in?"

"Severus," Hermione told him firmly yet shakily, "Hogwarts isn't safe for him—not to mention he's a growing boy. He needs to interact with children his own age, and it's just—keeping him at Hogwarts isn't going to do it for him."

Severus bared his teeth at this, but Hermione knew that he was considering her words.

"In my timeline, I have a cousin named Sirrah," Hermione told him slowly.

"Sirrah," Severus repeated disdainfully.

"Well, my aunt complains that it's my uncle's fault for giving her almost nothing but Shakespeare to read while she was pregnant—"

"I'm well aware that the name originates from the Scottish play," Severus sneered.

"Well, the Headmaster alerted me to the fact that Sirrah died almost two years ago," Hermione continued. "When in my timeline, I recall him being very much alive—or so I thought."

The implication was not lost on Severus.

"So you're telling me that you're willing to go through your entire family, alter their memories, and place our son in your aunt and uncle's family as a replacement for the one they lost?"

"That, and I'd have to modify the records of Sirrah Granger's death, along with the certificate—"

"And do you believe this is absolutely necessary?"

Hermione looked him squarely in the face, willing her courage to screw itself into place, and took a
"This year is just a taste, a tip of the veritable iceberg, compared to what we'll have to deal with in the coming years," she told him stoutly. "I should know. I've already lived with it. Even if we don't place Selenius with my aunt and uncle this year, next year, I will have to get him out of this castle. One way or another. Even if it means leaving with him."

Severus looked startled, even disturbed, and rather taken aback by this, but he recovered himself quickly.

"It's that serious?" he asked quietly.

Hermione shook her head.

"Worse," she said softly.

Severus straightened.

"Come summer, we'll discuss this more thoroughly," he said.

His tone brooked no argument, not that Hermione was inclined to disagree on this matter. They both needed time to think this through more clearly.

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The rest of the year followed through as Hermione expected, but it was no less stressful or hair-raising. Her husband once again went through a fit of anger when he discovered that Harry had been given his father's Invisibility Cloak ("What on earth is Albus thinking?" he raged. "That fool!"). On the Headmaster's orders, he began putting more pressure on Quirrell.

The Gryffindor versus Hufflepuff match arrived, and while Severus was off refereeing the match, Hermione used the opportunity to sneak out with Selenius for a walk around the lake. It was the first time her son had been outside since Christmas, for Hermione had found an opportunity then, and he was delighted with the chance to see the Giant Squid.

Hermione was alarmed when, after the match ended and the rest of the school began making their way back up to the castle, she saw a familiar figure on a broomstick flying down from the direction of the castle. Her husband was prowling quickly in the direction of the Forbidden Forest, his face hooded, but in Hermione's mind, there was no mistaking him. Right now, it was dinnertime, when most everyone else should have been at the Great Hall—but for some odd reason, Severus was not.

Hermione immediately became more concerned with the fact when the figure of an eleven-year-old Harry was following her husband on a broomstick, into the Forbidden Forest. There were so many things wrong with that picture that it took her a moment before she snapped to her senses long enough to Disillusion her son and then herself, hiding quickly before she could be noticed most disastrously by her best friend on a broomstick.

She was definitely going to have to write Sirius an edited version of this incident, later. She had almost forgotten about what Harry would be relating to her younger self and Ron later, up in the castle, while everyone else was celebrating their victory.

When Severus reappeared, with Harry nowhere in sight, Hermione lifted Selenius into her arms, intercepting her husband and dropping the Disillusionment Charm quickly enough for him to see who it was. He startled for a moment at her abrupt appearance, and then drew them toward a copse of trees near the lake before lowering his hood. Selenius stretched his arms out toward his father,
clearly wanting to be held by him, and Severus obliged.

"I didn't realize you were planning on staying out past the game," he told her conversationally, as Selenius smiled and placed a hand against his father's cheek. Almost as though he could not help himself, Severus smiled too, a wry curve of his lips—though that quickly vanished, his expression turning sour as he recalled the reason for his being out this late in the day.

"I wasn't, but no one's cared to stop by, so I figured I might milk the opportunity for all I could," Hermione responded cheerfully, before her tone turned serious. "What were you doing?"

"I was in the Forbidden Forest for an arranged meeting with Quirrell," he told Hermione, pursing his lips. "I can't tell how much he knows about the Stone. At this point, I'm not certain whether he knows how to get past Hagrid's beast or not."

Hermione mentally did the calculation in her head, trying to recall precisely when Hagrid acquired a very memorable Norwegian Ridgeback egg. "I doubt he does, but he'll find out soon enough."

Severus gave her a piercing look, taking a moment to adjust Selenius in his arms, before giving her a raised eyebrow that all but demanded an answer to his silent inquiry.

"By the end of March, at the latest," Hermione told him firmly. Severus's other eyebrow rose, and she let out a sigh of exasperation. "You'll know when Hagrid keeps the fire on in his hut even when it's a fine enough day without it."

"What on earth is he up to this time?"

"A dragon egg," Hermione confessed.

"A dragon egg?" Severus repeated, stunned. Hermione nodded. "You're telling me that in a few months' time, Hagrid will be trying to raise a bloody dragon in his hut?"

"Well, if my memory when I was eleven serves me right, yes."

"Hermione," Severus said, his expression pained. "Hagrid lives in a wooden hut."

"I told him something similar at the time, but he didn't really listen."

"And just how was this mess fixed?" Severus asked dryly, starting off in the direction of the castle. Everyone was at dinner now—or rather, almost everyone, and Harry wasn't in view, which made Hermione suspect that he had flown back to the broom shed at some point. This would normally be very risky, to walk without something to hide them, but with the distinct lack of observers, they felt safe doing it.

"Well, in the end, we convince Hagrid to let us send Norbert to Romania," Hermione responded, "which ended up getting us a detention, when Filch caught us. It wasn't really a situation all that different from when he caught us coming back from Hogsmeade for your birthday," she reminded him, grinning. Severus looked away, color appearing visibly on his cheeks, and Hermione continued. "But that's another story."

"Hagrid appears to have a bad habit of giving his monsters ridiculously incongruous names," Severus observed snidely.

"That's the least of your worries," Hermione told him, giving him a kiss on the cheek, before Disillusioning herself and taking Selenius back—and Disillusioning him, as well—as they neared the castle.
"Spare me," Severus muttered.

"No can do, love," Hermione said, laughing quietly, as they entered the courtyard. A moment later, Severus opened the door for them both, and they parted; Severus to make his late appearance at dinner, and Hermione to return to their quarters.

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Hermione managed to find another opportunity to sneak out of the castle, leaving Selenius with Severus while he got some grading done, to pay Hagrid a visit. He ushered her inside and shut the door quickly behind her, and Hermione was immediately blasted by a warm gust of heat.

"I take it you're still trying to hatch that thing?" Hermione asked dryly, taking a seat and pouring herself a cup of tea.

Hagrid gave her a startled look. "How'd yeh—oh, o' course," he said, suddenly remembering. "I almost forgot yeh've already gone through it all. Well," he stated, giving the egg in the fire a proud look. "It's almost ready ter come out—but yeh'd know that."

"You can't keep it forever, you know," Hermione told him, taking a sip. "Dragonkeeping is illegal without a license."

"I know, I know," Hagrid said, looking rather disheartened at the prospect. "But I'll figure something out."

"You'll also ignore the fact that you live in a wooden house," Hermione told him, smiling.

"Yeh already told me that," Hagrid said with a chuckle. "Earlier, when you an' Harry an' Ron came down ter ask me abou' the Philosopher's Stone."

"You ignored me," Hermione accused.

"Tha' I did." Hagrid bent down to give Fang a scratch behind the ears. "Yeh're a persistent lot. An' your two best friends don't trust Snape one bit. Even yeh don't, some."

"So I remember," Hermione said with a sigh.

"So tell me," Hagrid said, smiling behind his bushy beard. "Have yeh changed yer mind about that since?"

"Well," Hermione said, grinning. "Since I'm married to him—I'd rather say I have."

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Harry, Hermione, Malfoy, and Neville Longbottom were all given a detention some weeks later, in addition to a good deal of point loss. Lucius Malfoy, predictably, was furious at the prospect of his son having to do what he referred to as 'servant's work', prompting him to pay Severus a floo call to ask if, as his head of house, he could take over Draco's detention. Severus was all too pleased to tell him that he did not have the authority to do so for a wrongdoing of such magnitude, though he did not make his true feelings on the matter apparent to anyone but Hermione.

Hermione, however, was another matter for him to deal with.

"I hope you're pleased with yourself," Severus said, looking almost weary at the subject. "All the effort it took to get you to break a few rules with me, and you have a bloody laundry list of misdeeds
that I can't even count on my fingers for your resume."

"I was trying to mend my ways," Hermione said, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Selenius was napping on one of the armchairs, having fallen asleep while reading one of the essays he had not-so-sneakily nicked from his father's desk. "I believe you did your utmost to help me do otherwise."

Severus smirked at this, glancing down at his sleeping son before pulling Hermione to him and kissing her thoroughly.

Hermione found more opportunities to wander through the grounds with Selenius while exams were being taken. Few students were inclined to be out and about when they had studying to do, and it was to her advantage. The usual NEWT and OWL students were studying their rear ends off—even Fred and George, who for the past three years had been causing a rather undue amount of mayhem, were putting their heads together and taking a look over their notes. However, this time, there was the added fascination for Hermione of her eleven-year-old self and friends also studying.

She knew it was risky and foolish, but during the day, she would often sneak out into the library where she knew Harry, Ron, and first-year Hermione would be studying. She would Disillusion herself and find a place to watch, usually within the shadows of the walls, listening in on their conversations and reminiscing. She remembered what it was like, studying like mad while also trying to deal with the fear of Voldemort—a fear that had been far more pronounced in Harry than in the two of them, really. They had not taken the whole thing entirely seriously.

Yet, exams did finish, and Hermione found herself silently following her younger self and her two best friends as they ran to find the Headmaster's office, after confronting Hagrid about the slip he had made in the Hog's Head. It was a foolish blunder, really, but it was a very Hagrid-like mistake to make, and Hermione knew that he would be kicking himself for it later. He didn't need her to berate him for letting someone get him drunk enough to loosen his already somewhat-loose tongue any further.

"We've got to go see Dumbledore," Harry said, panting as they ran through the halls. "Hagrid told that stranger how to get past Fluffy, and it was either Snape or Voldemort—" Hermione could not help rolling her eyes at this. "—under that cloak—it must have been easy, once he'd got Hagrid drunk. I just hope Dumbledore believes us. Firenze might back us up if Bane doesn't stop him—" Again, Hermione could not help rolling her eyes, doing her best to restrain her laughter at how ridiculous this whole situation looked. Their naivety concerning the centuars was utterly absurd to her now. "Where's Dumbledore's office?"

Neither of them, at the time, had any idea where the Headmaster's office was. It was a mystery to most of the younger students, and they simply had no idea what floor it was on. Certainly, there wasn't a sign in bold letters pointing to Dumbledore's office. The thought dragged another barely-suppressed snigger out of Hermione.

Someone suddenly swept past Hermione, barely casting her Disillusioned form a second glance as she addressed the three of them.

"What are you three doing inside?" Professor McGonagall demanded, her voice ringing across the hall, stopping all three of them in their tracks.

Hermione leaned against the wall, watching the scene unfold before her. When Harry had finally explained to her why they were seeking out the Headmaster—the Transfiguration teacher's books fell out of her arms at the mention of the Philosopher's Stone—and when Minerva finally regained her wits, after having been delivered quite a shock concerning how much the three of them knew, she sent them away. She watched them reluctantly file outside, let out a huff that was somewhere
between disbelief and exasperation, and then began gathering the fallen books.

Hermione moved from her post to help her. "What would you say if I told you that was only the beginning, Minerva?"

Minerva turned to give her Disillusioned form a rather hawkish expression. "Given the situation you're in now, after having been thrown back almost twenty years in time, I would say I quite believe you."

Hermione grinned at her, though she knew Minerva could not see, and after helping her pick up her books, she trotted off after the three unwitting miscreants.

But she had lost sight of them. Knowing where they would be, Hermione took another route, and almost bumped into her husband. He gave her a thin-lipped smile, but did not address her as he continued his prowl through the halls, though Hermione could see a certain dark amusement in his eyes. Voices floated through the hallway, out of the earshot of McGonagall, but not the Potions Master.

"...he's found everything he needs," Harry said, sounding both frustrated and worried. "And now he's got Dumbledore out of the way. He sent the note, I bet the Ministry of Magic will get a real shock when Dumbledore turns up."

Hermione and Severus exchanged glances. Severus put a finger to his lips, gave her a quirk of his lips, and then strode forward, rounding the corner of the hallway and coming up right behind Harry and Ron.

"But what can we—"

Hermione watched as her younger self gasped, her eyes widening in fear as Severus came to stop directly behind the two boys, causing them to whirl around.

"Good afternoon," he said smoothly.

Hermione placed both of her hands over her mouth, trying not to make a sound. She was quite tempted, however, to burst out laughing.

"You shouldn't be inside on a day like this," he said, wearing a smile that he only ever reserved for maximum effect. It worked. Harry was scrambling about for an excuse, but her husband cut him off.

"You want to be more careful," the glorious, sadistic bastard said silkily, still giving them that odd, twisted smile. "Hanging around like this, people will think you're up to something." A delicate pause. "And Gryffindor really can't afford to lose any more points, can it?"

Hermione saw Harry's face go beet red. The three of them quickly turned to go outside, no doubt wanting to flee the horrible bat of the dungeons, but Severus stopped them with a word.

"Be warned, Potter," he called, causing Harry to freeze mid-step. "Any more nighttime wanderings and I will personally make sure you are expelled. Good day to you."

He sidestepped them and strode off, robes billowing behind them, without a second glance. Hermione ducked the other way, turning around another corner where she intercepted him on the way to the staff room.

"Where's Selenius?" He murmured, his voice low enough for Hermione's ears alone.
"I left him in the staff room with Filius," Hermione whispered back. "He said he would be happy to look after him while I wander around."

Severus was smirking to himself now, and they stopped in front of the staff room. "I must confess, that opportunity back there was too good to pass up."

Hermione sniggered. "I noticed."

He courteously opened the door for her, and she slipped inside, whereupon he shut it after him. Filius was in there as well, going through a stack of fourth-year exam papers, and he looked up and greeted Hermione with warm welcome before returning to his work. Safe in the security of the staff room, Hermione removed the charm, and found a chair beside the fire.

Selenius was sitting on the thick, brown rug in front of the fire, lying on his belly and looking at a set of puzzles his father had written out for him earlier.

"You know, I almost wish Dumbledore had let me add my own enchantments in regards to protecting the stone," she mused. "It would have been something interesting for me to try."

"The Headmaster knows you too well, I'm afraid," Severus said, smirking as he laid back in another chair. Selenius sat up, arms outstretched, and Severus made a show of grudgingly obliging him by pulling him onto his lap.

"Here, here," Filius squeaked, glancing up briefly from his papers to wink at her. "You were the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for a number of years—I'm certain the Headmaster feared you might put something rather dangerous in there."

"As if a troll doesn't count?" Hermione asked dryly.

"Knowing you, you would have put in something far worse than a troll," Severus retorted lazily.

"True," Hermione confessed with a sigh.

"What happens next?" Severus asked, glancing at the door. "There must be more than this. Exams are over—for you three, suspicions are high—"

"Actually, at about right now, my younger self is presumably standing guard at the staff room door, making sure you don't come out," Hermione said, pinching the bridge of her nose. Selenius let out a sudden yawn, and she stood up. "I ought to take him back to our rooms, but you'll have to deal with the other me outside first."

Severus got to his feet, and Filius looked on with ill-disguised amusement. "You are far more bothersome now than I ever thought possible."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him. "You thought I was rather bothersome when you first laid your eyes on me, back in 1977," she reminded him.

"Not in the least because of your behavior in Arithmancy class," Severus remarked snidely, reverting to his Professor Snape persona as he strode to the door. There was a sudden yelp of surprise, and a quickly squeaked, "I'm sorry, Professor!"

"What do you want?" he snapped.

"Pr—Professor Flitwick, sir—"
Severus craned his head around to look at the diminutive Charms teacher, who gave Hermione a look that fell somewhere between amusement and exasperation before hopping off his chair. Hermione lifted Selenius into her arms, re-casting the Disillusionment Charm, and slipped quietly out the door that Severus was so considerately holding open for her. He gave her eleven—twelve, actually, but she was a first year still—old self a sneer, and then followed his wife back toward the dungeons while Filius handled the version of herself that had been recruited by Harry to do a little target watching.

"It's just—I'm sorry, Professor, but I think I got fourteen $b$ wrong, and I just wanted to check…"

Laughing silently to herself, Hermione accompanied her husband back down to the dungeons.

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Severus's face registered pale and sallow as he stared down at The-Boy-Who-Lived, who was resting peacefully in his bed in the Hospital Wing. Two beds down, Weasley was doing the same, though Granger—for that was what he had begun to think of Hermione's younger self as, to avoid the confusion in his mind—had been free to return to Gryffindor Tower.

Beside him, invisible, Hermione stood, staring down at the sleeping faces of her two best friends. Harry had returned last, carried by Dumbledore after his fight with Quirrell, and upon learning the discovery that not only was Quirrell working for Voldemort, but that he had the wizard living in the back of his skull for nearly a year, Severus had lost it.

"We're getting Selenius out of here," he hissed quietly to her, while Poppy bustled in and out of the room. "If this is just the beginning—if next year is to be worse, as you say—then I won't have him stay a moment longer."

"Now?" Hermione whispered fearfully. "He's leaving now?"

Severus gave her an odd look, eyes glittering strangely, and then he shook his head.

"As soon as the students leave," he amended. Glancing down once more at Harry and Ron, both of whom were sleeping soundly after their harrowing night, he added somewhat disgustedly, "Potter should have been expelled for all those rules he just broke. The stone would have been safer had he let it be."

"That's true," Hermione admitted, biting her lower lip. "Quirrell wouldn't have been able to get a hold of it on his own. Harry fulfilled the requirements for the mirror's release of the stone, which is why the Dark Lord tried to use him then."

"All in all, a dangerous waste of time," Severus sneered.

"I don't think so," Hermione said slowly, as she made her way toward the door. Severus followed. "I don't want to think about what would have happened if the Dark Lord had managed to maintain Quirrell as a host, even a temporary one. He was too dangerous that way. Harry's confrontation with him forced him back out into a powerless state, and I'm thankful for that."

Severus's lip curled disdainfully, but he did not contest Hermione's assessment.

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Hermione sat in Hagrid's hut, nursing a cup of tea and sniffling miserably.

She and Severus had finally made the decision to send Selenius to live with Hermione's relatives, and
even if it was only a temporary placement, it broke Hermione's heart. She could hardly stand to be in
the same room with him without crying, and not wanting to upset her son any further—Severus had
already had to explain the concept to him, difficult thought it was, and it was clear that he was
unhappy with the prospect—Hermione had gone to visit Hagrid.

They were both in equally sorry states. Hagrid was still furious with himself for his slip in the Hog's
Head, to the point where he was almost sobbing, the snot getting smeared into his great, wiry tangle
of a beard. Yet, when Hermione had come to see him, he had pulled himself together long enough to
get her a cup of tea and sit down to try and comfort her.

"Jus' remember that yer making the right decision fer him," Hagrid offered, as he pulled out an
enormous handkerchief and blew his nose. "He's a growin' boy an' he needs ter be with kids his own
age. And yeh'll be able ter visit him, keep an eye on him…"

Hermione nodded sadly, pulling out a napkin from her robes to wipe her face. "I wish it wasn't like
this," she said, sniffling. "You think that once you make a commitment to raise a child, that you go
through with it—you don't think that you'll literally be forced to give him up."

Hagrid stared down at his hands, and let out a rough sigh. "I know it's not the same, but it was like
that with Norbert— he's jus' a wee little thing, and before yeh know it, yeh just can't handle it
anymore, and yeh just have ter let him go…"

Hermione nodded, pressing the napkin to her nose, but Hagrid's recollection had brought a watery
smile to her face. "True…"

"I got summat that might cheer yeh up a bit," Hagrid said, leaning over toward one of the counters
and pulling out a handsome, leather-covered book. "I bin sending owls off ter all o' James an' Lily's
old school friends, askin' fer photos… would yeh like ter help me put it all together?"

Hermione smiled, crumpling up the napkin and throwing it away, before nodding. "I have loads of
pictures we can use, too. I think Harry will like that—he doesn't have anything to remember his
parents by."

Hagrid beamed at her, and Hermione felt her heart lighten just a little.

~O~O~O~

The day the students were to leave, Hermione sat down to discuss the effect Flamel's death would
have on the two of them.

"Fear not, the Elixir of Youth is prepared and good for you to use when such a time as you will need
it comes," Dumbledore reassured them. "He has left it with me, and when 1996 comes around, it will
be ready for you."

"What about Tine Cottage?" Hermione asked, doing her best to keep her tone carefully neutral.

"Nicolas has willed the property to go to me, but as I have no immediate use for it, those who are
aware of its location are still free to come and go," Dumbledore told her cheerfully.

Inwardly, Hermione breathed a great sigh of relief, and then went off to owl Sirius.

Shortly after, Hermione took Selenius with her to Muggle London, where she sought out her aunt
and uncle's home in Kent. A knock on their door admitted them—but a series of quick memory
charms and a quick 'Accio!' of a copy of Sirrah Granger's death certificate took place in favor of a
cup of tea or even an inquiry as to why they were there.
Hermione slipped through the house like a shadow, looking at the few pictures of Sirrah that were on the walls, dressers, mantles—and found that they looked so different that her only solution was to carefully remove the boy from each picture. It was painful to do so; her aunt and uncle were kind people and did not deserve this manipulation, but that fact that she was doing this for Selenius spurred her on.

She had sent Severus to the Muggle Ministry to take care of fixing the records concerning Sirrah's death, and to alter his date of birth to reflect Selenius's—as well as to change the name from Sirrah Hugo to Sirrah Selenius. Her son would retain his birth name as his middle name, on the official records, rather than her grandfather's name, for which the original Sirrah had been partially named for. However, Selenius's middle name, Tacitus, was going to be lost in the shuffle.

Hermione scoured through the house, making surgical alterations to it that were necessary to keep up the deception that Selenius was Diane and George's son. When she was done, she quietly went back downstairs, where she found Selenius staring at the bookshelves in the living room.

Hermione knelt next to him, wrapping her arms around him, willing the tears not to escape.

"This is where you'll be staying for a little while," she whispered, planting a kiss on the top of his head. "They'll treat you as their own. Be good while I'm gone, alright?"

She slowly stood up, wincing as Selenius let out a whimper at this, and released her relatives from the suspended state she had kept them in while she had gone through their home. Her aunt started for a moment, caught sight of Selenius, and as Hermione quickly slipped out the door and into the kitchen, she saw Diane bend down to pick him up.

Hermione heard Selenius start to wail, the sound wrenching her heart, and as she quietly shut the back door behind her, she felt as though someone had taken a knife and stabbed her when she heard her aunt call him—not by his real name, but by his adopted name.

Hermione returned home to Spinner's End, where she sat down on the couch in the living room, and cried.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
The next day, Hermione forced herself out of bed—the first time she had slept through a night without waking up once to check on her son—and ate a hasty breakfast before leaving the house to visit her parents'. She had taken care of her aunt and uncle, but if the real Sirrah had died several years ago, it was likely that her parents knew about it—and that had to be fixed.

She stopped by their house in Sussex, and as before, she was invited inside with a questioning, curious look. Her younger self stepped into the room to see the new visitor, and Hermione whipped out her wand and stupefied them all.

She modified their memories quickly. Sirrah had gotten ill; Sirrah had recovered. When they had a family cook-out during the summer, as they always did for a reunion, they would not find it strange for Selenius to be there.

She was in and out in less than ten minutes.

~o~O~o~

Without Selenius, the home felt empty.

Hermione wandered through the rooms listlessly, trying to find something to do. Her head felt too muddled to get private research done, and none of the books held her interest. Severus had shut himself up in his lab, having quite the opposite problem, leaving Hermione to go through the things that had piled up throughout the house, unorganized from disuse.

While she was going through old photographs, something caught her attention. Last Christmas, they had celebrated at Hogwarts with the rest of the staff, and Selenius had been with them. Pictures had been taken. Minerva had briskly insisted on Hermione and Severus coming to stand next to each other in front of the fire, with Selenius in his mother's arms and one of Severus's hands on her shoulder.

Severus had sneered and snarked at the woman for her impudence at the suggestion, but had been cajoled by his wife into complying nonetheless. The photograph had been taken, and Hermione had kept it with all the others.

A small spark of an idea waded its way through the misery clouding her mind. Hermione clutched the photo in her hand, smiling faintly at how Selenius was actually smiling in this picture—even Severus had managed to curl his lips into a similar resemblance. Hermione had been out and out beaming. She traced her son's face in the photo with one finger, and then abruptly pocketed it.

She acquired a small silver locket at a Muggle jewelry store. It was not particularly expensive or fancy, but Hermione nevertheless made a duplicate of the picture, placing it over the locket until she found the right cut, and then traced her wand around it, trimming the excess off. She slipped it inside the locket, tugged the chain around her neck, and opened it.
Her son's face looked out at her, his head tucked underneath her chin, smiling. Her husband's face appeared just above his, to the right, and Hermione's appeared a few inches below his to the left due to their height difference. Yet, they were all there. Snapping it shut and tucking it under her shirt, Hermione found herself able to smile for the first time for many days, heartened by the knowledge that she would always have a piece of her family with her wherever she went.

~o~O~o~

The next few weeks passed in a state of near mourning. The house was distressingly silent, and when Hermione and Severus both surfaced from their mutual exile to their respective workrooms, it seemed they both agreed that the mourning period was over. Selenius was alive, well, and cared for. They would see him again. Meanwhile, life moved on, and they had things to do.

At least, this was what Hermione told herself.

Severus was called away to Malfoy Manor for a visit, and came back thin-lipped and paler than his natural skin had any right to be. Hermione managed to pull enough brain cells together to take the initiative in pulling out her notebook, recording every word of Severus's visit.

"Lucius is planning something," Severus told her shortly. "He wouldn't say what."

Hermione nodded, snapping the book shut.

"You know this, of course."

Their eyes locked. Hermione looked away.

"Yes," she admitted.

He let out a sigh of frustration, and then stood up to retreat to his lab.

Without Selenius, Hermione had an excess of time on her hands, and as she set her heartsickness aside, she focused on resuming the research she had put on hold in favor of looking after her son. He had been a large demand on her time and energy, and Hermione had literally been tied to him; she could not simply leave a toddler alone, unattended. Thus, she could not easily leave the castle without first arranging for someone to look after him. Now, however, despite her loss, she was now free in a sense, and she was slowly beginning to take advantage of that again.

Hermione managed three visits to Sirius, regaling him with the tales of Harry's exploits in his first year. She also told him about Selenius, and Sirius was not only disappointed that Hermione's son would no longer be visiting, he also felt terrible for Hermione. He was fond of Selenius, was like an uncle to him, and though he was aware that having a young, dependent son severely restricted Hermione, he also knew all too well how much she loved him.

"You could have left him with me," Sirius joked at one point, when Hermione was well past the waterworks. "But I suppose that would have defeated the purpose."

Hermione had laughed ruefully. "A child who shouldn't have been born yet, and a prisoner who isn't where he should be. You would have made quite a pair."

Hermione and Severus's sex life had dwindled rapidly with the difficulty of caring for a child. Their opportunities for intimacy had been few and far between. Now, a month after Hermione had sent Selenius off to live with his Muggle relatives, they had slowly begun to take advantage of the quiet and the freedom from poking one's head into the room every so often to see that Selenius had not brought a bookcase crashing down on himself.
It was Severus who reminded Hermione of what they had once enjoyed with ease, slipping his arms around her waist one evening while she was washing dishes, and kissing the curve of her neck. The bowl Hermione had been scrubbing almost slipped out of her fingers when his hands dipped lower, unzipping the front of her Muggle jeans and pulling her knickers aside. And then the dish did drop, crashing into the sink and breaking into three pieces, when he slipped two fingers into her while massaging her clit with his thumb.

Her body had very nearly forgotten how good it was to have his hands there, and it took a few tries for him to wind her up, like a violinist strumming his instrument, back into that state of constant and willing readiness for him. But he had soon re-invoked that Pavlovian response buried deep inside her for him, and intimacy became a regular and pleasantly anticipated expectation again. But Pavlovian or not, Hermione found that there were times when she was simply not in the mood—even if her body responded to him, there were times when she was too caught up in her head with heartsickness and a sense of moroseness to give her husband what he wanted. Try as she might, there were times when she would drop what she was doing to think about her son—how was he doing? What was he doing right now?—and nothing else seemed to matter then.

They had missed their tenth anniversary, because that had been the very same day that they had been going through the first levels of the legal and social system to force the deception that Selenius Snape was Sirrah Granger. Yet, starting in early July, they were able to celebrate their ten years of marriage with the same passion that had been present in the early years, before Selenius, and they came to enjoy it thoroughly.

Hermione visited Kent once a week for the rest of the summer to get a glimpse of how her son was adjusting. Hermione discovered that he consistently ignored Diane and George whenever they called him by name, until the second week in, in frustration, Diane called him by his full name—"Sirrah Selenius Granger, if you don't put that book down…!"

Hermione had placed a hand over her mouth, trying to hide a smile, as her son's head swiveled around to look at Diane. Diane gave pause, and then repeated his name—"Sirrah"—to which Selenius looked away, his expression disinterested. It took some trial and error, but Diane and George were soon calling him by his middle name, and Hermione could only shake her head with disbelief at how well Selenius had trained his foster parents. Severus had smirked quietly at this, silently impressed, when Hermione had relayed the tale.

Toward the end of the summer, near late August, Selenius had begun responding to both Sirrah and Selenius. It was, Hermione observed, with a sort of tired resignation that he did so. Yet, when September 1st arrived, Hermione delayed leaving for Hogwarts to observe her son on his first day of Muggle primary school. Like all the other students, he was required to wear a school uniform—black trousers and a white shirt, covered with a dark gray jumper. The tie was apparently optional, and Hermione observed with amusement as George quickly gave up trying to convince Selenius to wear one.

Part of the problem was that while George would try to fit the tie around Selenius's neck, despite Selenius's tiny fingers clawing and pushing his arms away, the end of the tie would somehow slip loose just as George had tugged it into its proper knot, and he would have to start all over again. When he pulled away to try again after the fifth or sixth try, he looked down in bafflement at the length that was about a dozen inches shorter than it should have been.

Satisfied that he would be all right, Hermione reluctantly left to Floo to Hogwarts.

~o~O~o~

"Hang on…" Harry muttered, peering through the window into the Great Hall. Hermione leaned in
just a bit closer, invisible and pressed against the wall, knowing the two of them would be late. She had missed this moment as a student, having arrived along with everyone else on the train, and she was curious concerning precisely what had happened upon their arrival. "There's an empty chair at the staff table ... Where's Snape?"

"Maybe he's ill!" Ron said hopefully. A little too hopefully. Hermione gave the redhead a fruitless glare.

"Maybe he's left," Harry said excitedly, "because he missed out on the Defense Against Dark Arts job again!"

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. It was true that Severus had been angling for her former post, and given his fascination with the Dark Arts, Hermione frankly wasn't surprised. But still…

"Or he might have been sacked!" said Ron enthusiastically. "I mean, everyone hates him—"

Harry's face suddenly turned thoughtful, and for a moment he looked as though he were about to counter Ron's assessment of Severus's popularity. A shadow of moment caught her attention, and she smirked as the form of her husband appeared, standing behind the two boys and wearing his trademark scowl.

"Or maybe," Severus told them coldly, interrupting them—and whatever else Harry had been about to say—and causing their backs to go ramrod straight, "he's waiting to hear why you two didn't arrive on the school train."

Both boys exchanged terrified looks that clearly indicated they knew just how much trouble they were in. Severus's eyes flickered over to where Hermione was hidden, but his expression changed little. He didn't give them much time to come up with an answer, for he quelled any excuses they might have come up with a glare and a curt order for them to follow him.

Hermione trailed them silently, watching as the two boys stared at the ground, unable to look at each other. They slipped inside, into the brightly-lit Entrance Hall, and Hermione could faintly smell the delicious food that was being offered at the Welcoming Feast. Yet, her husband did not lead them there, but rather down the steps leading to the dungeons. He pulled open a door halfway down the narrow stone staircase descending into the dungeons.

He pointed at the doorway, and snarled, "In!"

Hermione simply could not help smiling as she slipped into her husband's office, which Harry and Ron clearly found lacking given the furtive looks they were casting it and the way they were shivering. Her husband had begun a collection of pickled creatures after his first year of teaching, something that had become a bit of a sadistic hobby of his, and since last year, the number of jars had multiplied rapidly.

He must have planned this, Hermione knew. She had warned him that Harry and Ron would be late, not to mention the flying car headline in the Prophet which would have been indication enough; he normally kept the fire lit in his office, but he had clearly wanted to make the unsuspecting boys as uncomfortable as possible. Well, she thought idly, herding them into a freezing cold office that passed for a prison cell was one way to do it.

"So," Severus said softly, closing the door behind them with an audible click before prowling around to the other side of his desk. "The train isn't good enough for the famous Harry Potter and his faithful sidekick Weasley. Wanted to arrive with a bang, did we, boys?"
"No, sir, it was the barrier at King's Cross, it—"

Severus clearly wasn't interested in any of their excuses which, given Ron's attempted answer, was a rather paltry one by Hermione's estimation.

"Silence!" he hissed, placing both hands on his desk and leaning forward. Hermione saw Harry and Ron flinch slightly at this. A pause, and then Severus snarled, "What have you done with the car?"

Hermione didn't need to use Legilimency to know that Harry, at that moment, was seriously considering whether or not Severus could read minds—but suspicion of such skills were quickly laid to rest when her husband pulled out the latest edition of the Evening Prophet, smacking it onto the surface of his desk and unrolling it. He was not fabricating his anger: Hermione knew that he was genuinely furious.

"You were seen," he hissed, pushing the paper toward them as he proceeded to enumerate the extent of their crime. "Six or seven Muggles in all, I believe," he concluded. He gave Ron a nasty smile, and then added cruelly, "I believe your father works in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts office?" Ron's eyes widened with horror, and Harry frankly looked as though he has just been walloped in the stomach.

"Dear, dear… his own son…"

It was a faint flicker, but only Hermione could have detected it: that moment of quiet bitterness laid over the last word. A split second later, it was roughly shoved aside.

"I noticed, in my search of the park, that considerable damage seems to have been done to a very valuable Whomping Willow."

At this, Hermione could not help rolling her eyes. He certainly had not considered it valuable when he had nearly been attacked by a werewolf in the tunnel underneath it, and he certainly did not consider it valuable now. Her husband had a rather deep animosity directed toward that tree, and Hermione was certain that if Pomona had not filed a formal complaint to the Headmaster when it became clear that her precious tree was at risk, it would have been subject to target practice during her husband's fits of sullen temper.

Ron tried to speak in their defense. "That tree did more damage to us than we—"

"Silence!" Severus snapped, getting to his feet. He glared at them both as he stalked his way over to the door. "Most unfortunately, you are not in my House and the decision to expel you does not rest with me. I shall go and fetch the people who do have that happy power."

Harry and Ron both gulped, audibly.

"You will wait here." And with that, he was gone.

Hermione stood there, in the shadows of the cold, dark office, while her two best friends shivered.

"So…" Ron said blankly a few minutes later, weakly trying to lighten the situation. "You were about to say, in regards to the everyone-hates-him bit?"

Harry again looked ready to reply, but the door burst open again, and he shut his mouth. Casting Ron a quick I'll-tell-you-later look, he turned around to face Professor McGonagall. The Transfiguration teacher snapped her wand at the fireplace, causing flames to erupt—and earning her a disapproving glare from Severus—before turning sharply to face her two charges.
"Explain," she demanded coldly.

It was twenty minutes later that Hermione finally left, alongside her husband, who frankly looked like any other person would if Christmas had been cancelled. The Headmaster walked on his other side, having arrived shortly after Harry and Ron had finished being chastised for not sending an owl rather than taking a flying car.

Severus was simply furious, and he lit into the Headmaster for it as soon as they were out of earshot of his office.

"Had that been any other set of students, you would have expelled them without question!" he barked, turning to look at the wizened old man, who merely took in the Potions Master with a calm and mild expression. "You spoil Potter—give him undue favors—" His voice turned bitter, as he glanced back at Hermione. "Gryffindor's Golden boy…"

Dumbledore held up a hand.

"What Messers Potter and Weasley chose to do was an act of poor judgment, but the situation they were thrown in was by no fault of their own," the Headmaster responded gravely. "Had they been late and been prevented from entering the platform for that reason, I would have been forced to expel them." Severus opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore cut him off. "Other forces are at work here, I'm afraid, and their interference cannot be ignored. My decision here is final."

Severus shut his mouth, fuming. Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder to calm him, but he ignored her, turning away to storm off in the direction of the Great Hall.

"You should really try those custard tarts!" Dumbledore called after him amicably. "They certainly look worth sampling."

An audible snarl of frustration was his only response.

Hermione glanced at her husband's retreating back. "Sir? Do you really think Severus wants Harry and Ron expelled?"

Dumbledore mused over this question for a moment.

"I have no doubt that he would enjoy it thoroughly if they were," he said at last, "but I have a feeling he prefers making them sweat to actually making good on his promise. I do believe he simply wants to see them punished—he feels they have swollen heads, you see—and wants them taken down a peg. Much as I believe he feels James Potter should have been."

Hermione brought one hand to her neck to finger her locket absently as she shook her head.

"Alas, but there is nothing to be done about it now," Dumbledore told her, ascending the steps into the Entrance Hall. "It is simply Severus's way, I suppose. I do hear he enjoys torturing the Longbottom boy with his mere presence—I suppose that is evidence enough to support my case."

Hermione gave the Headmaster a wry smile, momentarily removing her Disillusionment Charm so he could see. "It's not that hard, really."

Dumbledore chuckled. "Indeed. Now, would you care to go down to the kitchens and try that delicious-looking custard, or are you retiring to your quarters for the night?"

"My quarters, I think," Hermione said, re-spelling herself to invisibility. "Good night, Albus."
The Howler Molly sent Ron, which arrived the next morning, could be heard all throughout the school. Hermione, who had intended to sleep in a bit, had forgotten that little tidbit following the incident with the car, and was abruptly awoken by the sound of Molly Weasley's voice penetrating the walls to their quarters. Severus had already gone up to breakfast, and would no doubt be subjected to the full blast of it. But Hermione…

"—STEALING THE CAR, I WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SURPRISED IF THEY'D EXPELLED YOU, YOU WAIT TILL I GET HOLD OF YOU, I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU STOPPED TO THINK WHAT YOUR FATHER AND I WENT THROUGH WHEN WE SAW IT WAS GONE—"

Hermione pulled her pillow over her ears and pressed her face into the mattress, trying to go back to sleep. Frankly, she was exhausted. When Severus had returned last night, Hermione had had a rather difficult time getting him to calm down—an attempt that had resulted in her flat on her back for the rest of the night, on top of the sheepskin rug that had been neglected for so long. It worked, for it tired him out and put him in such a state of sated lassitude that he was simply unable to retain his fury. Yet, once he had her where he wanted her, that was not the only time that night, and he had gone through great lengths to wear her out.

Life without obligations that prevented him from getting sex suited him, Hermione thought lazily, as Molly Weasley's voice died away. It put him in a much characteristically better mood when she had to deal with him. And it did wonders for her, too. She had not felt so good in years. It did absolutely nothing to soften the pain of the gaping hole left by Selenius's absence.

When she finally did get up, somewhere around noon, she began to wander the castle, invisible. Twice, she passed by Gilderoy Lockhart who, in-between classes, went to a nearby corridor to check his reflection in a window and practice his award-winning smile. Hermione stopped once to stare at him with a mixture of disbelief and disgust, trying to recall where the man's appeal had been. She supposed that to a twelve-year-old girl, he was dashingly handsome and, combined with his tales of bravery and daring deeds, he could be quite attractive. But she saw him for what he was now quite easily and wrote him off as being a pompous ass who would, eventually, fit in quite well at St. Mungo's.

Hermione eventually made her way down to Hagrid's hut, where the half-giant was applying Flesh-Eating Slug Repellent to his pumpkin patch. Hermione stopped short when she recognized the blond hair and million-galleon-smile, and her face pinched into an expression of disbelief as she listened to Lockhart prattling to Hagrid.

"Getting Kelpies out of a well is tricky business, very tricky business," Lockhart was telling him loudly, striding through the patch as though he owned it. "But it can be done. I've had to do it more than once, myself—why, that time I was up in Ireland to deal with the Bandon Banshee, I had to fetch water out of a well, and it was infested with no less than four Kelpies. If you could believe that!" he added, beaming.

"Yeah, I know," Hagrid told him, frowning as he tried to herd him away from the vines so that he would stop trampling on his precious pumpkins. "I've dealt with Kelpies before. Now get out of me garden."

Hermione glanced back, in time to see Harry pull Ron—who was belching slugs onto the ground—behind a nearby bush, pulling Hermione down with him. Hagrid tramped back inside, clearly fed up with Lockhart by this point, but the obnoxious twit obvious had not quite given up yet.
"You should read my books, you know," Lockhart said. "They'll help you in figuring out how to deal with them in a trice—I should know, I'm famous for it! I could give you a signed photo, if you like," Lockhart added absently. "I know young Harry has been trying to get the business started early—"

"Harry doesn't need ter hand out signed photos," Hagrid growled, turning around to give the teacher an aggravated look. "He's more famous than yeh without even tryin'." Lockhart opened his mouth to speak, and Hagrid added quickly, "An' I'd never read any one o' yer books."

He started to shut the door behind him.

"It's a simple matter if you know what you're doing!" Lockhart called loudly to the half-giant's retreating back. "If you need help, you know where I am! I'll let you have a copy of my book. I'm surprised you haven't already got one—I'll sign one tonight and send it over." Hagrid shut the door, not bothering to give him a second glance. "Well, good-bye!"

And he strode off.

Hermione watched as Harry and her younger self helped Ron into Hagrid's hut—Hagrid, who admitted them with far more cheer than Hermione had seen on his face in the last five minutes—and deciding that there was no point in waiting around an hour for the trio to go away, reluctantly made her way back up to the castle, plans for tea utterly ruined by the idea of Ron vomiting slugs—again.

Hermione wandered through the halls that night, wary and alert. It was not until around Midnight that she heard a faint hissing emanating from the walls. The hair on her back rose as the registered the Basilisk's incomprehensible, raspy hiss. She drew her wand out, narrowing her eyes as she glanced around, just to make certain that it wasn't out and about in the halls the same way it had gotten her as a second year—and would get her, later on this year. Her younger self, at least.

To her surprise, the hissing died down, and Hermione cautiously made her way back to the dungeons nervous and on edge.

Every night, until the end of October, Hermione would patrol the halls, silent and invisible—and would hear the hissing sounds through the wall. She tried to discern where the pipes were, following the snake's path through the stone labyrinth that lay behind the corridors, and eventually came to the conclusion that the pipes were everywhere. On every floor, in every classroom, in every place—there was no escaping it. No wonder it had been—and would be—so prolific!

Halloween arrived, and Hermione—her heart beating wildly as she did so—came to hide against the far wall of the corridor perpendicular to the one where Mrs. Norris was due to be petrified. Everyone was at the Halloween Feast except for Harry, Ron, and her younger self—and the person who would be due to arrive, possessed, to do the Dark Lord's bidding—

Footsteps approached, accompanied by a strange, dragging, slithering sound; Hermione watched as Ginny Weasley slipped out of the girls' lavatory, walking over toward the wall from the corridor closest to the torch bracket where Filch's mangy cat was sitting. Her gait was heavy, her expression distant; she was clutching a familiar black book. Hermione's eyes widened with horror as she saw the head of an enormous snake appear behind her, rearing up over Mrs. Norris. The cat let out a shriek of surprise and made to jump down, aiming for the puddle beneath her—and froze. Petrified, as she caught the Basilisk's gaze. She hung there by her tail, stiff as an ironing board, and Ginny let out an unnatural, rasping hiss.

Obediently, the Basilisk closed its eyes, and Ginny approached the wall as though in a trance—and it was then that Hermione realized that she was carrying a dead rooster with the hand not holding
Riddle's Diary. Dream-like, she dropped the rooster to the ground and approached the space between two windows, smearing the blood on the wall to form letters.

_The Chamber of Secrets has been opened. Enemies of the heir…_

Hermione could not bring herself to watch anymore. She took a few steps back, stumbling, and then fled.

Fifteen minutes later, and enormous racket shook the corridors, and Hermione knew that Ginny's handiwork had been found.

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When Harry finally got out of the Hospital Wing some weeks later, after having the bones in his arm regrown due to another incident of Lockhart's stupidity, Severus returned one night to snarkily inform her that he had been asked to 'assist' in helping teach a dueling club.

"Assist?" Hermione asked dryly. "You should be teaching the bloody class!"

"Yes, well," Severus sneered, "it would appear that the blowhard has requested the job first."

"Oh, dear."

"And the way you _simper_ over him," Severus snapped angrily, tugging off his teaching robes. "I can't tell who I'm more disgusted with—Potter's ego, Weasley's ineptitude, or your obvious crush on him."

"I was twelve," Hermione reminded him.

"Yes, and am I to presume you will spend a whole year mentally composing love sonnets for him?" her husband asked venomously.

"No," Hermione responded calmly. She placed a hand firmly on his arm. "Look—I am well aware of what an obnoxious, pompous, fake and egotistical man he is—he's more of a fraud than Trelawney, and that's saying something. But you have to forgive a twelve-year-old girl's flights of fancy. It means nothing."

Severus turned to glare at her, but seeing the serious expression on her face, he reluctantly relaxed.

"I just miss you," he said softly. "I am always so busy—and lately, you have looked as though you are trying to wake from a living nightmare—and after that writing on the wall, I don't blame you—but I wish things were how they used to be."

Hermione's expression turned sad, and then understanding. She turned him around to face her squarely, standing up on her toes so that her lips could reach his nose, where she kissed him.

"I'll sneak out to watch the dueling club next week," she whispered, before kissing him full on the lips. His tongue slid against hers, eagerly tasting her, and his hands immediately came to rest on her hips. She pulled away to add, "And afterward—right afterward, before we do anything else—we can sneak into that chamber off the side of the Great Hall…"

He pulled her to him, their mouths mating hungrily and he hurriedly began to undo the buttons of her blouse, pulling it apart and part-way down her shoulders. His fingers undid the clasp of her bra, and her breasts came free. They had gotten bigger from pregnancy, and they hung lower now—they had been much smaller before, rather round with pert nipples, but were now rather quite the opposite. It
was the one thing that had not disappeared even years after Selenius was weaned, and it was frankly the object of her body that she was the most sensitive about.

Severus couldn't seem to care less. He had tasted her milk, when Selenius was still nursing—in fact, he was part of the reason why it had taken her until Selenius was nearly two years old before she had stopped lactating—and had enjoyed her breasts then. He did so now, taking one into his mouth and suckling on it the way he used to when Selenius was asleep and he had a window of opportunity for it.

It was the fact that he still wanted her, enjoyed her, brought her pleasure and showed her through his actions that he still loved her despite the changes to her body that Hermione was able to set her insecurity aside enough to truly participate and find pleasure with him. She was still able to tempt him beyond reason—that alone was enough to send a thrill of power through her, and she used it at every opportunity, more and more confident each time she seduced him into taking her wildly on their favored sheepskin rug.

And she did so now, arching her back and thumbing her head against the ground as he pulled her trousers down along with her knickers, and sought out the core of her body's pleasure.

They were quickly getting reacquainted with each other. Without Selenius's presence to constantly interrupt them, without him always at the forefront of Hermione's mind and being her most immediate concern, she and Severus were once again making each other the very center of their universe.

Hermione found herself on her hands and knees that night, her husband's chest pressed against her back, gripping her tightly; scraping the curve of neck normally hidden by her hair with his teeth, causing her to squeeze tightly around him in response; he came inside her, letting loose with an audible half-growl, half-grunt of completion, followed by a familiar murmuring of "Oh, yes…"

It was like being twenty again; Severus had turned in a beast, all hell broke free with Hermione's senses, and they both loved it.

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The next day, a potions accident involving a set of Filibuster's Fireworks and a cauldron of Swelling Solution was hailed by the disappearance of several very specific potions ingredients. Severus flew into a rage when he finally got around to telling Hermione, all but prepared to fetch a vial of Veritaserum, kidnap Potter, and force the entire contents down his throat until Hermione confessed that she was the one who had done the actual stealing.

Judging by the expression on his face, Hermione was rather of the sense that she was driving her husband just a bit mad. On one hand, her younger self had just orchestrated a distraction of disastrous proportions in his classroom and stolen from his private stores—on the other hand, her current self, the one he was married to, was so far removed from the crime that it seemed pointless to berate her for it.

He did manage to compensate; that night, her backside was bright red with imprints of Severus's hands, the sheets damp with her arousal, and she was well and thoroughly screwed for her deeds. They both enjoyed every minute of it and Severus, at least, felt he had gotten some kind of comeuppance for her younger self's thievery.

"You know," Hermione told him sleepily that night, nuzzling her face into the crook of his neck, "if this is how you're going to react every time my younger self does something rather disastrous to you, I might have to find a way to subtly encourage her."
Severus's eyes flew open at this, and he eyed her warily.

A week later, Hermione was standing at the far end of the hall, up on the dais, as the Dueling Club commenced. Severus was wearing a glowering expression as he strode onto the raised platform, wearing his usual robes of black, while Lockhart came in dressed like the result of an unholy mating between a poppinjay and a peacock.

"Gather 'round, gather round! Can everyone see me? Can you all hear me? Excellent!"

Severus glared at him with an expression that clearly displayed that he would rather not be able to do any of the things listed above, but no one but the students took any heed—that was to say, Lockhart ignored him, completely oblivious.

"Now, Professor Dumbledore has granted me permission to start this little dueling club, to train you all in case you ever need to defend yourselves as I myself have done on countless occasions," he announced. "For full details, see my published works."

Severus's lips curled disdainfully at this. Hermione wondered if the man didn't use every single opportunity that passed by to prop his books.

"Let me introduce my assistant, Professor Snape," Lockhart continued, flashing the students a wide smile. "He tells me he knows a tiny little bit about dueling himself—" 'A tiny bit'? Hermione repeated mentally. 'Just 'a tiny bit'? "—and has sportingly agreed to help me with a short demonstration before we begin." More cynical mental commentary following the word 'sporting' ran through Hermione's mind, but she tried to brush it aside. "Now, I don't want any of you youngsters to worry— you'll still have your Potions master when I'm through with him, never fear!"

*I'm more worried about whether we'll still have our mockery of a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher,* Hermione thought smugly, as she watched the expression on her husband's face deepen into a snarl of intense dislike. His upper lip had curled at this, and it was a wonder that Lockhart was still smiling. By all rights, he should have been fleeing the scene at this point, fearing for his life.

The prerequisite bow, the wheeling around to take three steps forward, and then Severus spun around again, wand outstretched. Hermione watched him raise it, his movements elegant, like an adder ready to strike, and it occurred to her that it had been a long time since she had witnessed him in full form. She idly recalled that she needed to get back into a serious training regime, since she was a good deal out of practice, and wondered if she could convince her husband to start dueling her regularly.

*What fun that would be…*

"Expelliarmus!"

A flash of red bolted from Severus's wand, striking Lockhart squarely; the blond-haired wizard's wand flew from his hands and landed on the floor with a clatter, and Lockhart himself was thrown backwards off the stage, slamming into the wall behind him where he slid to the floor, his expression slightly dazed. The Slytherins cheered; many of the female students watching were standing on tip-toe, trying to see if Lockhart was alright. Hermione felt like doing the former, such was the grin plastered over her face.

"Well, there you have it," Lockhart said, tottering unsteadily back onto the platform.

*I should have brought popcorn,* Hermione thought amusedly. *Honestly, I should have. Or at least one of those lovely custard tarts the Headmaster was going on about before…*
Lockhart was splitting up the students now, clearly too unsteady—or perhaps, for the first time, deservedly unnerved enough to not attempt another demonstration. After that display of such easy, deadly skill, Hermione was surprised it had taken the oblivious blunderer so long to realize that perhaps he should not expect everyone to drop in awe of him. Certainly, Severus could not have been expected to be tempted, in any form, to go easy on him…

A sudden movement near her husband caught her attention, as Harry and Ron quickly moved to partner up together. Severus stopped them.

"Time to split up the dream team, I think," he sneered, separating Harry and Ron with an edge of sadistic delight to his voice. "Weasley, you can partner Finnigan. Potter—"

Harry quickly moved to stand next to her younger self, and Hermione saw Severus's lips curl into a sneer at this, before turning into a cold smile.

"I don't think so," he said silkily. "Mr. Malfoy, come over here. Let's see what you make of the famous Potter. And you, Miss Granger—you can partner Miss Bulstrode."

*Thank you, Severus, for partnering me up with the female equivalent of Dudley Dursley.*

Severus's eyes suddenly flickered upward, to where he knew Hermione was watching, and he smiled. Faintly. To anyone else, it would have looked like a smirk. She blinked as she felt his consciousness brush against hers, and with only a second thought to spare, she pulled him in. She took a moment to repeat her previous thought, whereupon she was treated to a deep, baritone laughter inside her head.

*Bastard,* Hermione accused, which only made him laugh harder.

Lockhart gave the signal for everyone to begin casting—"Disarm your opponents, only to disarm, we don't want any accidents..." followed moments later by his fruitless attempts to take control of a situation that was clearly spiraling out of hand, as the students began wildly hexing each other: "Stop, stop!"

*How did I get roped into 'assisting' this pompous dolt? Severus's voice sneered derisively in her mind, his eyes still locked onto her invisible ones, maintaining their connection.*

*I don't know, but that must not have been one of your finer moments…*

*It probably had something to do with my foolishly assuming I could actually teach any of these dunderheads something about self-defense with that twit in the room…*

*The road to hell is paved with good intentions, my love.*

He let out of a mental huff of annoyance, and then pulled away as Lockhart, again, tried to maintain the façade of control over the situation. A mental image of Lockhard beamingly assuring the Headmaster that he had everything in hand while a riot raged in the background behind him flashed through Hermione's mind, causing a snort to escape her.

"…Longbottom and Finch-Fletchly, how about you—"

Severus glided toward him, his lip curling with something akin to derisive amusement.

"A bad idea, Professor Lockhart," he drawled, placing a delicate stress of disdain on the title. "Longbottom causes devastation with the simplest spells. We'll be sending what's left of Finch-Fletchley up to the hospital wing in a matchbox."
Hermione pressed her own consciousness against his. *Don't be a bully, Severus.*

*It's my job, love.*

*Bully.*

*I thought I was 'bastard'?*

"How about Malfoy and Potter?" Severus suggested, with a twisted smile.

*I'll bet you're hoping they'll finish each other off,* Hermione said, with a mental roll of her eyes.

*Naturally.*

*That's what Harry and Ron were hoping you and Lockhart would do to each other.*

Severus snorted in clear derision. *That would never happen, even if I had both hands tied behind my back, and Lockhart had all the time in the world to attempt to cast his first spell…*

*Well, the difference in skill isn't as disparate here, but I still doubt they'll manage to mutually send each other to the Hospital Wing in—how did you put it so elegantly?—in a matchbox.*

*I should have just tied you to a chair in our quarters, applied enough of that Arousal Cream to drive you mad for several hours, and returned once all of this was over… I rather think that would be much preferred to your running commentary.*

Hermione felt herself grow wet. Were it not for her Disillusionment Charm, she was certain her cheeks would be flushing bright red. *Bastard…!*

Severus pulled away from her again, although this time, it was to bend down and whisper something into Malfoy's ear. The pale blond smirked, eyes gleaming with malice and mischief, as he muttered something under his breath at Harry.

Hermione saw Harry mouth a reply out of the corner of his mouth.

*I really should have brought those custard tarts…*

Hermione saw Lockhart slap Harry on the shoulder, in what was supposed to be encouragement. "Just do what I did, Harry!"

"What, drop my wand?"

Lockhart was doing a rather skillful job of ignoring Harry, as he stood up and quickly skirted back and well out of the way.

"Three—two—one—go!"

Harry raised his wand, ready to cast whatever spell he might have decided to try after Lockhart's unhelpful advice, but Malfoy was quicker.

*Serpensortia!"

Hermione had not forgotten this moment, but she had to wonder why Severus had decided to suggest that particular spell. Did he want to see Harry faced with the symbol of Slytherin house, see him wriggle uncomfortably when he realized that he lacked the knowledge of any such spells to banish it cleanly?
A long black snake spewed out from the tip Malfoy's wand, falling heavily to the floor, and then slithered toward Harry, head raised slightly in preparation to strike. Harry stood there motionlessly as the angry snake locked eyes with him and hissed.

Hermione was well aware that Harry was a Parseltongue, and at that moment, she was decidedly curious about what the snake was saying—assuming it was saying anything at all. Was it threatening Harry? Hissing angry words at him?

"Don't move, Potter," Severus said lazily, and it was clear to Hermione that he was rather enjoying the sight of Harry, frozen in apparent terror by the hissing, aggressive snake. "I'll get rid of it…"

"Allow me!" Lockhart cried, brandishing his wand with a flourish. There was a loud bang, and the snake flew ten straight feet up into the air and then smacked back down on the ground, still quite present and very much enraged—and possibly slightly disoriented from the fall. It recovered quickly, however, and slithered toward Justin Finch-Fletchley, having apparently decided to attack the nearest bystander.

Harry stood there, still frozen, and then the next moment later, he had begun to move again. Striding forward, he began hissing raspy, hoarse, almost guttural sounds at the snake. The snake paused, hesitating for the briefest moment, and then obeyed. It slumped back down to the ground, neutral and tame, about as threatening as a garden hose, and Hermione saw Harry look up to grin at Justin. His expression clearly told her that he expected thanks, a puzzled word, or even a grateful smile in return—but when Justin turned to storm away, angry and scared, she saw his expression fall.

Severus hesitated for the briefest second, unnoticed by Harry, as he stepped forward to banish the snake, causing it to abruptly disintegrate away into black smoke. The next moment, his expression was shrewd and calculating; it was not a friendly look, and Hermione saw the look on her lightning-scarred friend's face as he took it in, before being pulled away by Ron.

Hermione watched as the students all left the Great Hall, murmuring uneasily as rumors and suppositions began to flit around the room. Severus remained behind, though Lockhart was quick to gather up his things and make his exit, having finally got the notion that he was in over his head.

The sounds of feet and echoing voices died away moments later, and then Severus slowly turned to look at where Hermione was standing. She determinedly unmasked herself, removing her Disillusionment Charm, and strode toward him.

He stalked toward her. "Potter's a parselmouth—he was hearing voices inside the walls, the night Filch's cat was attacked, I saw it in his mind—the idiot boy revealed that in front of all and sundry—what—oof!"

He was not expecting the way she threw her arms around him, kissing him fervently, and it took him a moment to get his explanation. Hermione drew away long enough to give it to him.

"We agreed, that before we do anything else—"

"You knew this would happen—"

"Of course I did! I was there, remember?"

Severus inhaled sharply as Hermione renewed her attack on him, this time moving to place a trail of kisses along his neck.

"Severus, I came out here to watch this inane dueling club—not because I haven't seen it before, but because we both wanted to find the time and opportunity to do this—" her hands were pulling apart
the first few buttons on his frock coat, exposing the white shirt underneath. "—the way we used to. I already know what happens. Giving you an explanation now won't do much in the way of helping."

Severus's expression turned inscrutable for a moment, as though he were taking a moment to seriously consider her words, before he jabbed his wand at the doors leading into the Entrance Hall. They shut quickly, though silently, and Hermione heard the faint clicking sound that indicated they had just been locked. Now thoroughly satisfied that they wouldn't be interrupted, she pulled him down onto the dais where the Staff Table usually stood, and convinced him to shrug off his robes while she focused her efforts onto removing the frock coat and then the white button-up shirt.

Severus's preferred outfit had changed little over the years, while Hermione's had changed rapidly in comparison. Now that she was once again wandering the school, like an imitation of a silent spectre rather than a mother hiding with her child, she had gone back to wearing her teaching robes. If a student happened to catch a glimpse of her while she was unmasked, she could pass for any number of people who should be there, especially since she was almost always in the presence of a fellow professor when she was undisguised. Dressing the way she used to, back when she had taught, was both an easy and smart move. She simply did not look out of place, and people had a bad habit of seeing without seeing what was in front of them.

Decision made to follow through and take advantage of this opportunity Hermione had so assiduously planned for, he pulled her robes off, unbuttoned her blouse and tugged it apart, and then yanked the dark, knee-length skirt aside. His eyebrows arched rather expressively at the discovery that she was wearing nothing underneath, and then his lips curled into a smirk. The next moment, he had dragged her forward, onto the steps, and then bent down to place his mouth on her folds.

It was a damned good thing Severus had locked the door and added Silencing Charms; it would have been difficult to explain to the terrified, or otherwise disrupted souls who came to see what was happening, why Severus Snape—the greasy bat of the dungeons, as his students so often muttered under their breath—was taking an unknown yet vaguely familiar woman on the steps of the dais in the Great Hall.

He pulled away a few moments later, wiping his face with his hand and licking the juices from his fingers before hastily moving to unbuckle his belt. Hermione beat him to it, sitting up quickly and pushing him back down with surprising insistence onto the steps. She opened the flak of his trousers, tugging them down his hips just enough for her to do the same with his boxers, before pulling him out. A brief, mischievous smile, and then she pressed her lips against the tip.

He let out an exhalation of surprise, mixed with encouragement; winding his long, spidery fingers into her hair, sighing as her curls caressed his hands, he abruptly yanked her forward, directing her movements.

"I cannot believe we're doing this," he hissed, leaning over her as she took him as far into her mouth as he could go, sucking and licking at him determinedly with great care. "You certainly have not lost your touch—you still make me want to ambush you in the halls, pull you against some niche in the wall and take you, the way I did back when you had the Defense job..."

Hermione pressed him in deeper until her nose was snug against his groin, where she nuzzled him in response. She had missed this—had missed doing this, had missed the opportunities they had used so freely to drop the masks presented to the world and be themselves, with each other, with scarcely a second thought...

He trembled underneath her hands, which were resting on his thighs for support, and she pulled away. He let out a low sound of protest, but he had recovered his wits enough a moment later to grasp hold of her and press her down against the flagstones. A moment to extricate himself entirely
from his trousers, and then he was over her, pressed against her and possessing her utterly by his presence alone.

Their world shrunk; everything else at that moment was unimportant. When he slid into her, Hermione's thoughts were on no one and nothing but him. Something that had been a very rare occurrence—in fact, near-nonexistent—for what amounted to roughly six years. This moment marked something very important between the two of them, a chance for them to return to their previous partnership regarding their exchange of power. Severus was in control once more now, hooking her legs over his arms and thrusting hard into her with abandon, angling one hand to reach between them and smoothly slot two fingers on either side of her clitoris. Hermione had wrapped her arms around his neck, holding on tightly as though for dear life, and moaning in a way that told him she simply could not get enough.

Over the past few years, Hermione's focus had become more centered on their son, forcing Severus to do some of the accounting and financing duties that she had previously ruled over. Now Hermione was returning her interest in such matters, far more inclined to take care of such things now that she had the time, and she had become more independent of herself: she wandered the castle now with impunity, answering to no one but their mutual superior in the Headmaster, and in moments like these, she had once again taken charge of just when and how things happened.

And he, now, had the opportunity to take her open invitation on this matter and once again pick up the reins where he liked them. This scene of them wildly making love to each other in the Great Hall was more than just good sex: it was setting their preferred world to rights, like sliding two clasps solidly back in place after having previously being pulled apart. Their relationship had slid out of sorts because of the third wheel that had arrived—a third wheel they loved and cherished and would have honestly preferred not to give up, but a third wheel all the same—and were now simply reverting to how things had been before.

That was what this particular moment was, where Severus had deferred to her demand that he capitulate to her plans, and where Hermione was eagerly on the receiving end of being well and thoroughly stroked.

His head jerked back suddenly, face contorting in a grimace of pleasure. Hermione seized up underneath him, clamping down hard as his fingers began to move confidently and quicker; he shuddered in response, hips jerking as he came inside her, and he held himself there as Hermione's head thumped against the stone floor in her own electrifying climax. She winced as she registered the pain, but pushed it aside for a moment as she reveled in the pleasure she had just received.

They remained there on the uncomfortable stone floor for a surprisingly long time, not quite yet ready to part, both simply enjoying this moment of quiet, simple aloneness, together, in the empty Great Hall. Eventually, Severus sat up with a grunt, the floor pressing uncomfortably against his hip, and he retrieved his wand long enough to cast a Cushioning Charm for the both of them, before setting it back aside.

Hermione blinked at a sudden flurry of movement outside, glancing at the window for a moment before turning to grin back at her husband.

"It's snowing," she said happily, reaching up a hand to twine a long, greasy lock between her fingers. Her expression had turned calm and serene though she felt slightly giddy inside, a combination of things she had neither felt nor expressed in a long, long time. "Delightful, isn't it?"

Severus responded with a lazy smirk, before bending his head down to bury it between the valley of her breasts, nuzzling the soft, warm skin.
Somewhere, in the universe, existed a law of proportions. Of this, Hermione was convinced. While her relationship with her husband—wherein they were both steadily and quite pleasantly returning to their old arrangement, reaffirming their deep and personal connection to each other, and relaxing once more—was getting much better, the situation within the school seemed to grow progressively worse. Starting the following day, when Justin Finch-Fletchley and Nearly Headless Nick were both carried off to the Hospital Wing—Nick had been fanned all the way to the Hospital Wing, but that was beside the point. Severus’s face had turned, if at all possible, even paler with the realization that not even ghosts were unaffected by the snake that was roaming the castle.

He was certain that it was both a snake and a monster, due to Harry’s revealed status as a Parselmouth and the voices he had been hearing, and though Hermione had confirmed that much for him, she did not give the answer away.

"You're perfectly safe," she told him calmly one evening, as she idly flipped through some of his ungraded essays. "You're a half-blood, a supposedly loyal Death Eater, and a teacher with considerable magical skill. I'm sure you see the logic concerning the fact that the Dark Lord has no interest in attempting to take you out."

He glared at her.

"You'll figure it out soon enough," Hermione told him, raising an eyebrow as she took in the atrocious grammar skills apparent in the essay she was perusing.

His glare turned into a dark scowl. "I find it interesting that you think I am unfair to you in class, when you turn around and are the exact same way to me!"

Hermione could not help but grin sheepishly at this, but she held her ground nonetheless.

"Go ahead and continue being an arse to my younger self, then—I'll satisfy myself knowing that I can torment you the same way," she responded cheekily.

Christmas evening found thirteen-year-old Hermione Granger admitted to the Hospital Wing with the appearance of half a cat, complete with a tail. This particular bit of news had caused Severus to pinch the bridge of his considerable nose, closing his eyes in a mixture of disbelief and barely-restrained exasperation, as Hermione explained the entire event to him in great detail.

"I should have known you would find a way to enact payback for that headlock Bulstrode pulled you in—although I was expecting you to cast a Trip Jinx on her in the halls," Severus had said through gritted teeth, "not for Granger to botch up a Polyjuice Potion with cat hair!"

Granger. That was what her husband kept calling her younger self. And in a way, it was true that she was Granger while Hermione was not—after all, she was now Hermione Snape. Additionally, having heard him say it out loud, the name stuck: her younger self was simply Granger.

"I have neither the time nor the inclination to go around casting childish spells on students for stuff they've done to me while I was a student here," Hermione told him, twirling her wand between her fingers, Disillusioning herself and sticking it into the chignon she had pulled her hair into before following her husband out of the Hospital Wing. "It's frankly a waste of time, and not worth the risk of being discovered."

"As if any of those thick-headed imbeciles could hope to detect you," Severus dismissed disparagingly.
"Actually, given how out of practice I am, I don't really trust that they couldn't," Hermione confessed, her tone airy and expectant.

Severus paused to look at her.

"It might not hurt for us to find time to get some training done," Hermione continued, giving him an invisible half-smile. "The Room of Requirement is always open for our use, and frankly, I could use the opportunity to get back into shape."

And that was how Hermione found herself spending each evening during the holiday dueling her husband and, once term resumed, two evenings a week. Sometimes three, if they were lucky and Severus's schedule permitted it. She had been perfectly honest with Severus when she had declared herself unfit: though she had managed to work off the weight she had gained during her pregnancy, she had lost the sharpness of her reflexes. Her instincts were unsuppressed by her absence from rigorous training, and she was still alert and aware, but her body had simply not recovered its previous degree of capability. She had not had the opportunity to try, while looking after Selenius.

That was soon to be rectified.

Hermione continued to spend her days idly following Harry and Ron around, particularly when her younger self was not present. It was interesting for her to see all that she had missed; following them into Moaning Myrtle's bathroom one day, after the boys' interest had been piqued by the furious ranting of the cranky old caretaker, she watched silently as Harry and Ron stared down at a familiar, nondescript, thin black book that was now soggy and soaked through with toilet water.

Harry had been about to pick it up, following the distraught ghost's pointing out where it was, when Ron stopped him.

"Are you crazy?" Ron said, sounding for all the world as though it could be true. "It could be dangerous."

Hermione gave Ron an approving look; he was not the brightest when it came to classes, but he was dead-sharp at chess, and he had good instincts. Good instincts that showed through now.

"You'd be surprised," he continued seriously, glancing down at the washed-out book apprehensively when Harry laughed his warning off. "Some of the books the Ministry's confiscated…"

Good job, Ron, Hermione thought, smiling to herself. Even if he did not know specifically how that book was dangerous, even if he eventually relented and forgot about the book appearing at all threatening, at this moment, something in him had recognized that there was something just not quite right about it. Hermione only wished that Harry had listened to it.

"All right, I've got the point," Harry said.

For a moment, it looked as though he had capitulated—and then he ducked under Ron's outstretched arm and nicked the book up off the floor, shaking some of the water off before examining it.

Hermione sighed, shaking her head, as she watched the two of them.

Honestly, when one of them was finally using his head, the other compensated for it with an overdose of stupidity. It would have been entertaining if it was not so damn frightening at just how risky Harry was, at how easily he ignored warning signs even from his best friend…

"Well, it's not much use to you," Ron said. He glanced at Moaning Myrtle, who was watching them through tear-streaked cheeks from her seat on one of the toilets, and lowered his voice. "Fifty points
if you can get it through Myrtle's nose."

Another opportunity to dispose of the book. But Harry, instead, pocketed it.

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Severus's birthday was spent in Diagon Alley in their usual spot. Florean was beyond pleased to see the both of them, and inquired about Selenius's health. Hermione merely made the excuse that she had deemed it too cold to bring him—"I don't need him getting the sniffles," she told him cheerfully, as the man prepared her order—and dropped the matter quickly. Their evening together was nothing like recent years; they sat in front of the fire, made love, fetched tea and biscuits for themselves, read a book, and made love again. It was a simple, uncomplicated, and enjoyable way to spend the occasion.

The advent of Peeves the Poltergeist's newest edition of his song—"Oh, Potter, you rotter…"—with its own very unique, very crude dance routine marked the beginning of February, when it had stopped snowing madly on a weekly basis, and when Pomona's Mandrakes were fast reaching their maturity.

Lockhart, naturally, strutted about the castle, claiming credit for the monster's apparent retreat; Severus merely sneered, disgusted by this, and Hermione observed the other teachers often sharing equally disparaging looks whenever the man pulled one of his smarmy, egotistic, and obnoxious stunts.

Stunts that soon involved decking the entire Great Hall with large, decidedly lurid pink flowers, as well as causing the enchanted ceiling to rain heart-shaped confetti in every shade between red and white. Worse still, Hermione had almost forgotten about this—and could not help but choke as she recalled a bit too late that Lockhart had hired the absurd, dressed-up and tuneless dwarfs. This incident occurred when she happened to pass by a flustered-looking Ravenclaw who had been on her way to Transfiguration, but had been otherwise cornered and forced to listen to her card being read aloud for all and sundry to hear. By the time the poor girl had managed to escape to class, nearly seven minutes later, her cheeks were flushed red with humiliation and the entire corridor was either staring at the floor in embarrassment or laughing uproariously.

Still other students were subjected to this, and classes were barged into mid-lesson to have such sordid deliveries made. By the end of the day, no one found it remotely funny anymore, and everyone was simply praying that they would not be given one—or would not be given another one, if that was their case.

She only vaguely remembered the speech Lockhart had made the morning of Valentine's Day, but what she did recall was clearly enough justification in her mind for the outrageous mood Severus was in that day. The usual rose he had stolen from Pomona—earning her a bit of a stern look from the Herbology teacher when she invisibly passed by her on the way to Hagrid's for tea, later that morning—had been left for her that morning, on the dresser. That was possibly the only remotely considerate thing he did that morning; the students, none of whom would remotely bet their lives on asking him how to brew a Love Potion, were terrified to an almost steady roomful of tears throughout the day.

He was simply monstrous. Lockhart had ruined whatever possibly neutral attitude he might have been able to hold for the occasion, and the first time a dwarf barged into his classroom, he hexed it four times in quick succession before it had scarcely gotten a single word out. He locked the door securely behind it with a snap of his wand, and then snarled at the students to get back to work. All of the teachers were aggravated to the point where Hermione heard report that even mild Professor Sprout had locked and silenced the doors to the greenhouses, simply pretending to the dwarves that
she simply had not heard them when she opened the doors to let the students out.

Lockhart’s ‘treat’ for the school might have been easily swept under the rug if it simply were not for the fact that it was as obnoxious and intrusive as the man himself. Any plans Hermione and Severus might have had to enjoy Valentine’s Day were simply ruined.

The next day, the decorations had been taken down, the dumpy harp-carrying twits banished, and life returned to normal—or rather, as almost-normal as a school with Lockhart and an active Basilisk could be.

A few weeks later, Gryffindor’s match versus Hufflepuff was hailed with a bright morning of sunshine. Hermione bit her lower lip nervously as she got up to get dressed, and in her mind, she was silently reviewing all she had done prior to being petrified. She had gone to the library. She had run into another girl, and they had started using mirrors to get around. Around one corner, a pair of big, yellow eyes…

In hindsight, it had truly been foolish for her to run off to the library alone after Harry had just reported hearing voices in the walls again. She should have waited until after the match. But she had been so excited, so eager, she felt she just had to look at it up while the idea was hot…

Nothing, no outside interference of any sort, had decided her survival. Yet, Hermione was still edgy, still antsy. What if something went wrong this time around? She supposed that if she were still alive now, that it meant that she would be alive despite the Basilisk’s attack. If something in her past had changed, it would have affected her already, and she would be dead long before now.

Yet, she did not want to stay in the castle, alone, while the beast was out and about. She walked out to the pitch, invisible, but remained a bit distant from the field so that she would be the first to get back into the castle. And soon enough, just as the teams were about to mount their brooms, Minerva strode onto the pitch, bearing a megaphone. She directed all students to return to their houses, and then beckoned Harry—and a minute later, Ron—to follow her back to the castle. The Transfiguration teacher must have become so accustomed to the faint shimmer signifying Hermione’s presence, for she also gave Hermione a slight nod, signaling that she should come along too, if she wished.

Hermione deliberated for a moment, and then followed. They made their way back to the school, ascending the marble staircase leading to the Hospital Wing, and entered the infirmary.

Ron was the first to speak, upon recognizing the second girl on the bed, next to the Ravenclaw that Hermione recalled her younger self borrowing a small circular, compact mirror from.

"Hermione," he groaned, burying his face in his hands.

Hermione swallowed, as she stared down at the younger face of herself, Granger. She cautiously placed a finger on Granger’s wrist, checking for a pulse, and was disturbed—though it was expected—when she found none. Her body was like wood, or stone. Her face was rigid, frozen in an expression that was a distant mixture between alarm and surprise. Hermione definitely recalled being surprised, followed quickly by certain fear and alarum—but the Basilisk must have caught her just as her face had been transitioning from one emotion to the next.

She glanced back at Minerva, who was looking at her—both of her—with a look of heavy sadness. Turning her attention back to her Petrified self, she knelt down, and saw the piece of paper still clenched in her fist.

Harry would find that. That was how they would realize it was a Basilisk, and everything else would
fall in place. Satisfied, she nodded at Minerva—who registered the increase of shimmering by her movement—and then followed her as she escorted the two boys back to Gryffindor Tower.

She was still alive. She could breathe easily now. It would be fine.

Severus, however, was another matter. The minute she returned home that evening, it was apparent to her that the Petrification on her younger self had come as a great shock for him, and as soon as that had worn off, it was replaced by something akin to rage. The rage of a man who felt he had come dangerously close to losing his wife.

"I told you that I wouldn't end up spending a whole year composing love sonnets for Lockhart," she responded lamely, in the face of the anger burning within the depths of his black eyes. "Yes, Severus. I knew this would happen. I also knew I would survive—in the long run, it makes no difference."

She was shocked to find that Severus was shaking.

"That's it?" he asked coldly. "Is this how it's going to be for the rest of our lives—'Yes, I knew this would happen, I just didn't see fit to warn you in advance.'" His tone was mocking. "You set my robes on fire, stole from my private storeroom, participated in all manner of questionable activities under my nose—You may be certain of the future, my dear, for you have already lived it…but I have not, and this is bloody well a shock for me!"

Hermione winced.

"If I had told you in advance, would you have tried to stop it?"

"No."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this in disbelief.

"I wouldn't have," he continued stonily. "I know very well how interfering with time works, Hermione. I'm not interested in meddling," he continued, spitting out the last word. "I would simply like to be spared any manner of nasty and thoroughly unnecessary surprises!"

Hermione slowly sat down, and she began twisting the watch on her wrist—a habit she had begun to revert to again, which she had not done in a long time. She crossed her legs, leaning back in her seat, her expression calculating, thoughtful, and just a bit regretful.

Eventually, she responded, her words picked with caution.

"In the future, I will try to warn you of events before they happen, if I can," she said carefully. "There are some things I won't be able to warn you of beforehand, with good reason," she said, stressing the last three words. "Surely you understand that I cannot tell you everything. But I will try to tell you what I can."

A pause, and Severus crossed his arms across his chest, his expression stony and blank, though Hermione knew that he had privately withdrawn and was churning her words over in his mind. A few tense moments later, his shoulders relaxed, and he let out a sigh of sullen resignation.

"Very well."

Another pause, a shorter one this time, and then Hermione offered a tidbit to him, in good faith: "Later this year, Ginny Weasley will be dragged down to the Chamber of Secrets. Another message will be painted on the wall; it will be the final straw that threatens to close Hogwarts, but Harry and
Ron will find the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets. Harry will rescue her, destroy the Dark Lord's means of possessing her, and kill the Basilisk currently residing in the Chamber."

Severus's mouth opened and closed for a moment, silently, and then he slowly sat down in the armchair next to her.

"Aside from the fact that you have just confessed that Potter and Weasley will soon break a great number of school rules, you have finally told me what the monster is."

Hermione nodded slowly.


"Only directly," Hermione told him calmly. "Mrs. Norris saw the Basilisk through the reflection cast by a puddle of water. Creevy saw it through his camera, Justin saw it through Nearly Headless Nick, and considering the latter cannot die again…"

Understanding flooded her husband's face. "That's why you and the Clearwater girl were found with a mirror—Minerva brought it up with the staff, after we finished announcing the changes made regarding security, and none of us had a clue…" His brows furrowed. "But how the bloody hell does Potter figure it out?"

"The answer lies in my hands," Hermione told him, with a slight smile. "A page that I ripped out of the book I found regarding the Basilisk—it's crumpled up in my hand. Harry spots it, and manages to retrieve it."

Severus sneered. "So all along, Potter still needs you to do his thinking for him."

Hermione barely managed to restrain herself from rolling her eyes. "It's not quite like that, Severus."

She checked her watch. "Minerva asked to see me later tonight—I think she wants me to take up a floor to patrol when the students are switching classes. We can discuss this again, later."

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Hermione quickly ran down the stairs, curving around the railing to descend the next flight, before making it out the door and striding angrily into the courtyard, where she knew Cornelius Fudge was. Dumbledore was standing beside him, though Lucius Malfoy—the bastard—had already left, the damage he had come to do tonight complete. She strode over toward them, hardly glancing around to check for other observers before removing her Disillusionment Charm.

"I am terribly sorry, Dumbledore, but you understand that the decision is out of my hands—"

"Oh, I understand perfectly well, Cornelius," Dumbledore said gravely. "But as I said earlier, if the governors unanimously wish for my removal, I will step aside."

"And I assure you, once this business is cleared up, I'm certain that Hagrid…"

Fudge literally jumped a foot in the air when he saw her, stopping in mid-sentence.

"You!" he exclaimed, in a mixture of wonder and bewilderment. "What are you doing here still—I thought you had disappeared some years ago!"

"Reports of my disappearing off the face of the earth are greatly exaggerated, Minister," Hermione said, gritting her teeth as she stopped just inches away from him, her face pressed menacingly in his. The man took a wary step back. "You're sending an innocent man to jail, and furthermore, you're
stepping aside and *letting* it happen!” She jabbed him in the chest with her finger. "What kind of Minister are you?"

Fudge stuttered in response, but Hermione wasn't done yet.

"You *claim* you want to do what's best for the country, but that is *clearly* a bunch of hogwash," Hermione snarled. "Pander to whatever political party will line your pockets, but I draw the line at allowing you to throw innocent men in jail just to appease them, or make yourself look good."

"Allow?" Fugde spluttered, as Dumbledore looked on with an expression that was somewhere between interest and admiration. "You may have forgotten, Madam, but I am the *Minister*—"

"And you may have forgotten, Minister, that I know a good deal of damaging information about you."

It was a gamble and a risk; blackmailing someone was rarely a good idea. She understood the concept all too well. In addition, she and Fudge were equally neck-deep in what they knew about each other, so that they were in a position of mutually assured destruction. The benefit, however, was that Fudge was a man not interested in the other's destruction: he was more interested in saving his own hide rather than skinning someone else's.

It worked; Fudge faltered. "Well, if you have an alternate solution…"

"Where is he now?" Hermione snapped.

"Already in Azkaban—he arrived over half an hour ago—"

"Tell the Aurors that there has been a mistake," Hermione told him coldly. "Azkaban is for people who have committed crimes—putting someone in there as a *precaution*," she said, her tone mocking on the last word, "is just as bad as throwing an innocent man in jail without trial. Tell them that since Hagrid has not yet been *charged* with any crime, he is instead eligible for some kind of parole, or perhaps house arrest."

Fudge stared at her.

"I—I cannot do that, but I will see what I can do," he said feebly. "My career—I cannot risk losing it now, but I may be able to convince the Aurors to arrange for him to say in one of the temporary holding cells…"

"Are there Dementors there?"

"No, no, not unless specifically assigned." The man was agitated now, twirling his bowler hand and fiddling with the rim.

Hermione knew this was the best she was going to be able to arrange for now. "Do it."

"It will take a day or two to put in effect—"

Hermione bared her teeth threateningly at him, her shoulders rising like the hackles on a bristling cat.

"I said *do it!*"

Fudge wibbled for a moment, and then turned to give Dumbledore a cursory nod before quickly striding toward the castle, no doubt to use the Floo. Hermione watched him disappear, and then turned to Dumbledore.
"Where will you go, Headmaster? Where will you stay?"

"Oh, I think I shall use the time to conduct a few errands," Dumbledore responded, eyes twinkling merrily, his expression cheerful in the face of what he had just witnessed. "I shall use this period of time that would otherwise be spent twiddling my thumbs getting some things done—I believe you would call it research— one of your favorite words, I believe."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Hermione found herself grinning sheepishly at the last part. "Indeed, sir."

Dumbledore's expression then turned quietly serious. "I am entrusting Hogwarts to you, Hermione, while I am away."

"Me?" Hermione said, bewildered.

"You will be able to act in my stead when all others cannot."

Hermione nodded slowly, uncertain of this meaning, but one thing was quite clear to her: for all she knew of the future, the Headmaster still seemed to know far more.

"In that case," she said, straightening and turning to stride toward the doors. "I had better catch Cornelius and take care of a few other things."

She caught the man just as he was about to borrow the Floo in the Headmaster's Office—he had hiked all the way up there, just for the benefit of using the best fireplace in the castle—and she had her wand pointed between his eyes before he could reach his hands into the jar of floo powder. A single, well-cast Obliviate later, the man was off to do as directed, but with no recollection as to precisely why.

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"All students are to return to their House dormitories at once. All teachers return to the staff room. Immediately, please."

Professor McGonagall's voice, magically magnified, reverberated throughout the entire castle. Everyone immediately looked up from what they had been doing, and even Hermione was startled; the notes she had been jotting down for an Arithmancy equation was blotched with spots of ink as her hand jerked in surprised. Setting her things aside and quickly magicking the ink spots off her fingers, Hermione quietly slipped out of her quarters, Disillusioned herself, and ran quickly for the staff room. She threw the door open quickly, where she found most of the teachers already waiting. Quickly removing her disguise, she moved to stand next to Severus, and was about to inquire if anyone knew what was going on when Minerva herself arrived.

The staffroom, which had been abuzz with nervous speculation and frightful predictions, fell silent.

"It has happened," Minerva told them heavily. "A student has been taken by the monster. Right into the Chamber itself."

Filius let out a squeal of alarm and nearly fell out of his chair. Pomona clapped her hands over her mouth in abject horror; and Hermione, despite herself, slowly sank into the nearest seat nonetheless. Severus was gripping the back of her chair with such force that his knuckles had turned bone-white.

"How can you be sure?"

"The Heir of Slytherin," Minerva replied, whose face was ghostly pale at this point, "left another
message. Right underneath the first one." She paused for a moment to take a deep breath, before continuing with difficulty, "*Her skeleton will lie in the chamber forever.*"

At this point, Filius burst into tears; he was not the only one.

"Who is it?" Madam Hooch asked weakly, having sunk into a chair. "Which student?"

"Ginny Weasley," Minerva replied quietly.

"No," Hermione whispered. Severus turned to look at her. She glared at him, tears glistening in her eyes, before turning to look back at Minerva. She had known this would happen, but it was still a shock to hear it, to actually be there when it happened. Everything she knew about this moment, up until now, was the result of second-hand information. After all, she had been Petrified at the time. "Poor Molly and Arthur…"

"We shall have to send all the students home tomorrow," Minerva said. "This is the end of Hogwarts. Dumbledore always said…"

She trailed off just as the staffroom door banged open again, and Lockhart strode in, beaming. All the teachers turned to stare at him, their expressions of distraught contrasting rather starkly with his brightly-smiling countenance. Hermione set her jaw as she stood up slowly, and around her, her colleagues' faces began to transform into something that looked remarkably like deep-seated hatred. She exchanged a meaningful glance with her husband, and then he stepped forward.

"Just the man," he said. "The very man. A girl has been snatched by the monster, Lockhart. Taken into the Chamber of Secrets itself. Your moment has come at last."

The smile slid off Lockhart's face. He looked up at the dour Potions Master, who had done his utmost until now to say less than twenty words to him in all the time that he had known him, and opened his mouth to try and formulate a response.

"That's right, Gilderoy," Pomona interjected, "Weren't you saying just last night that you've known all along where the entrance to the Chamber of Secrets is?"

"I—well, I—" Lockhart said, spluttering almost remarkably like Fudge.

An unfriendly smile slowly began to steal across Hermione's face.

"Yes, didn't you tell me you were sure you knew what was inside it?" Filius piped up.

"D-did I? I don't recall—"

His blustering was frankly pathetic; apparently her husband thought so too, for he laid down groundwork for the guillotine: "I certainly remember you saying you were sorry you hadn't had a crack at the monster before Hagrid was arrested," he drawled. "Didn't you say that the whole affair had been bungled, and that you should have been given free rein from the first?"

"Of course he did," Hermione joined in, with a nod. There was a glint of something akin to fury in her eyes, but her smile was still in place. "He always has."

Lockhart tried another protest, but Minerva cut him off. All around him, the teachers, united and stony-faced, were nodding in agreement.

"We'll leave it to you, then, Gilderoy," she stated. "Tonight will be an excellent time to do it. We'll make sure everyone's out of your way. You'll be able to tackle the monster all by yourself. Free rein
at last."

Lockhart looked around the room like a cornered rabbit, as though hoping someone would bend down to rescue him, but none of them did. His lip was trembling, and at the moment, he was looking rather weak-kneed—not at all attractive. Hermione and Severus were sneering identical looks of derisiveness his way, expressions that were mirrored to varying degrees by the other teachers, and it finally broke the watery delusion he had been laboring under for so long.

"V-very well," he said feebly. "I'll—I'll be in my office, getting—getting ready."

He left the room quickly, the door snapping shut behind him with a note of finality.

"Right," Minerva said, nostrils flaring with barely-suppressed anger, "that's got him out from under our feet."

Everyone nodded in agreement, all wearing something that faintly looked like a touch of relief on top of their distress.

"The Heads of Houses should go and inform their students of what has happened," Minerva continued briskly. "Tell them the Hogwarts Express will take them home first thing tomorrow. Will the rest of you please make sure no students have been left outside their dormitories?"

They all rose, those who were sitting. One by one, they left the room. Severus left quickly, no doubt to take care of his students, but Hermione remained behind.

"Minerva," she said quietly. "There's something I need to do, I think. Do you mind if I stop by the Headmaster's office?"

Minerva nodded stiffly, wiping a bit of moisture from her eyes before reaching into her teaching robes for a handkerchief. "Yes. Certainly, you may. Meanwhile, I must go see to my House."

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Hermione made her way slowly but surely to the Headmaster's office, which was seven floors up, and when she finally reached the gargoyle that guarded it, the sky outside had turned dark navy, laced with the fading rays of pinkish orange on the horizon. Harry and Ron would have dragged Lockhart with them to the Chamber by now, though they would not have gotten far inside it quite yet.

"Custard tarts," she sighed, and the gargoyle swept aside to allow her through.

Fawkes was waiting for her there, though Dumbledore was absent. He trilled soothingly at her, and Hermione approached to stroke his beautiful, scarlet-plumed cheek.

"Hello, Fawkes," she said quietly. "Have you been waiting for me?"

The Phoenix let out a gentle, musical sound that warmed Hermione to the very heartstrings, and tugged a faint smile across her face.

"Harry needs you," she told Fawkes quietly, as she slowly crossed the room to where the ragged Sorting Hat lay. She picked it up, gazing at it for one hesitant moment, and then decided it couldn't hurt to take a moment to try it. She placed the hat on her head. It was not so big to her as it had been when she was a student, for it rested securely on her head without falling down over her eyes.

"You know," said a small voice in Hermione's ear, "For someone so clever, I have always regretted
"not placing you in Ravenclaw…"

"That—wasn't precisely what I was about to ask you," Hermione said, slightly nervous.

"Ah, yes—will I help your friend? Mr. Potter certainly needs it. But, I think, that can wait a moment…"

"All right," Hermione stated uneasily.

"I must say, even now, I have to ask myself whether I put you in the right house," the Sorting Hat mused. "You would have risen above all others in Ravenclaw—I believe I told you that two and a half years ago, by my estimation—although by yours, I see that it's been far longer for you."

"True," Hermione replied, glancing nervously at her watch.

"But I must say, people should be put in the house that will help them grow best," the hat continued, its tone thoughtful. "It is true that some people simply are so deeply ingrained with traits that make them suited for one house exclusively, but occasionally, the rare person comes alone who suits one house above all others, but has the potential to be something… greater, should they be placed elsewhere."

"If you had placed me in Ravenclaw, I might not have made any friends," Hermione said slowly. "I would have been among my peers in regards to interest in academics, but what good would that have done, when I am equally studious in Gryffindor?"

"Indeed, Gryffindor," the Sorting Hat responded, sounding amused. "In Gryffindor, you have made your real friends—and had you never been placed in Gryffindor, I do wonder if you would have developed the strength needed to survive as you are now. After all, living among friends does give one the power to do a good many things they would otherwise not fight for…"

"I once regretted being sorted into Gryffindor instead of Ravenclaw," Hermione admitted quietly. "But now I am more grateful than I can express that you have put me where you did."

The Sorting Hat seemed pleased. "Hmm, yes. And now, I suppose I must go help your friend?"

"Harry needs the Sword of Gryffindor," Hermione told it.

"Only a true Gryffindor could hope to pull that sword out of me," the Sorting Hat warned.

"Harry is a true Gryffindor," Hermione argued.

"I almost placed him in Slytherin."

The admission shocked Hermione, who for a moment, did not know what to say. But she rallied at once.

"You almost placed me in Ravenclaw, too, but that makes me no less a Gryffindor," she countered.

If the hat had eyes, Hermione suspected they would have twinkled in a manner reminiscent of the Headmaster's.

"Very well," the hat whispered quietly into her ear. "Let's test Potter's mettle, shall we?"

Hermione smiled, pulled the hat off her head, where it became quiescent once more, and held it out to Fawkes. The Phoenix, who had been sitting patiently, spread his wings. Thrusting himself into the air, causing a gust of wind to flutter a few things, he swept the ragged old hat out of Hermione's
hands, banked around her, and then with a cry, vanished into a burst of flames.

Hermione glanced out the window, where the sun had sunk completely, and the sky was dotted with stars.

Despite her argument with the Sorting Hat, she felt as though it had talked circles around her, making her accept something that she herself had never quite managed to, and then using that same realization as the basis for an argument to further help her friend. The hat had just forced her to accept that she was a Gryffindor at heart.

Gryffindors were brave, daring, with nerves of steel.

But that did not come to them overnight.

Hermione had spent much of her youth fighting Death Eaters and directing the spy among them. A task that had not come easily to her, and a mission that had been difficult to follow through when things came to the worst—and yet—and yet—

It was at moments like those that Hermione had doubted whether or not she should have been put into Gryffindor. Only cowards, or the aloof and disconnected, forced themselves to turn away when they saw harm being done. Ravenclaws could retreat into a bubble of scientific inquiry, attempting to make themselves mere observers of the world. Slytherins could do so in the interest of survival. Even a Hufflepuff could do it, to toil through such pain for the greater good. But a Gryffindor?

The Sorting Hat must have sensed her uncertainty, as nothing seemed to be hidden from it, and decided to do something about it, with this single opportunity it had to change her mind. A Gryffindor should typically be unafraid to rush out, all daring nerve and bravery, to go against the grain and fight to the last in the hope of changing what might otherwise be…

But now Hermione felt she understood something. Bravery went both ways. Brave enough to fight to the last, but also courageous enough to stay put despite the urge to go forth. Strong enough to know when one was not strong enough.

It was a different kind of strength from the one that Harry and Ron possessed. Hermione was strong enough in mind to do what she knew had to be done, even if it was hard, even if it went against her very nature. Harry had the strength to push himself, to step forward and try his hardest in the face of great adversity, knowing he might not survive, and yet knowing that he had to try. Ron had the strength to stick by his friends through thick and thin, the courage to try his hardest to be helpful and loyal.

They all fell short at this on occasion, though. Nevertheless, it was these strengths, different though they were, that they all engaged and plowed on with.

Satisfied with this answer, Hermione left quickly.

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"Ginny!"

Hermione peered through the doorway, unable to stop herself from beaming as Molly and Arthur both flung themselves on their daughter, holding their living, breathing, and very much shaken daughter tightly. She slipped inside, unnoticed by all but the Headmaster and Deputy Headmistress, and came to stand in an out-of-the-way spot toward the window.

"You saved her! You saved her! How did you do it?"
"I think we'd all like to know that," Minerva responded weakly, glancing over at where Hermione stood.

Hermione couldn't help it. She smiled and waved.

Harry began to explain everything to them, though Hermione had heard it all before. She saw Molly and Arthur's eyes growing wider and wider with each minute, their jaws eventually dropping open with shock as they heard confession of all of the dangerous, risky things the two boys had done throughout the year. Hermione had known about the existence of Aaragog, but this was a far more explicit retelling of the tale than the one Hermione had been given. She had not realized that the two of them had almost been eaten.

Good grief, she thought irritably. I'll have to have a talk with Hagrid about that—he could have gotten them killed!

"Very well," Minerva prompted, when Harry had paused in his tale, "so you found out where the entrance was—breaking a hundred school rules into pieces along the way, I might add—" At this, Hermione couldn't help herself. She giggled. Thankfully, it went unnoticed. "—but how on earth did you get out of there alive, Potter?"

Well, certainly, Harry and Ron had broken a good number of school rules. Frankly, too many to name. Certainly enough to get them expelled. But Hermione simply could not help finding this all vaguely amusing, now that the danger was over, that Harry and Ron would be getting off scot-free when she and Severus had both earned ourselves a good number of detentions and point loss for only one instance of rule-breaking. To be fair, they had not had a particularly good excuse for it, but still—

"What interests me most," Dumbledore mused, though his words were gentle, "is how Lord Voldemort managed to enchant Ginny, when my sources tell me he is currently in hiding in the forests of Albania."

"W-what's that?" Arthur asked, stunned. "You-Know-Who? Enchant Ginny? But Ginny's not… Ginny hasn't been… has she?"

Harry quickly stepped in. "It was this diary," he said, handing it to Dumbledore. "Riddle wrote in it when he was sixteen…"

And indeed, Hermione did recognize the shabby-looking object now in the Headmaster's possession. It had a gaping, charred hole in the places where Harry had apparently stabbed it, and now, quite frankly, it looked harmless. In fact, where before Hermione had found herself almost instinctively wary of the object, now she simply felt nothing from it. It was empty now, a battered, torn, burned-up book that could easily be used for firewood. It had been rendered obsolete.

"Ginny!" Arthur exclaimed, utterly flabbergasted. " Haven't I taught you anything? What have I always told you? Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain? Why didn't you show the diary to me, or your mother? A suspicious object like that, it was clearly full of Dark Magic—"

Never trust anything that can think for itself if you can't see where it keeps its brain. That seemed like sound advice to Hermione. If only Ginny had paid attention to it, when it counted most. If only she had bothered to mention it to her mother, or even ask her father if he thought it was too shabby to write it, even some innocuous way to tip someone off that it was in her possession…

But Hermione suspected that after using it once, Riddle might have written something that was
enticing on the surface and also subtle enough to both encourage Ginny to keep talking to him and not reveal him to anyone else. It seemed like the clever sort of thing he would have done, a bit of insurance the moment he found his victim, to keep him—or in this case, her—in his control.

Ginny left a moment later, along with Molly and Arthur, both of whom still looked shaken, although Ginny seemed to be on the verge between hysteria and relief. Minerva also left a moment later to alert to kitchens that a feast would be in order, though not before she had cast Hermione a glance that indicated she should follow.

"I seem to remember telling you both that I would have to expel you if you broke any more school rules," Dumbledore began, as Hermione inched her way toward the door, slipping through just as Minerva let go, allowing it to shut quietly behind them both. "Which goes to show that the best of us must sometimes eat our words."

Minerva waited until they were out of earshot, striding purposefully in the direction of the nearest stairwell, until she indicated that Hermione should drop her disguise.

"Goodness gracious, but I can see precisely where you got your inclination for trouble from," she stated, as they turned a corner. "The Forbidden Forest! Merciful heavens…"

Hermione grinned sheepishly at her.

"But could you not have said something?" the Transfiguration teacher demanded, rounding on her. "Could you not have told me, reassured me, done something to give me hope that things may yet have turned out for the best?"

"I didn't dare," Hermione said. "The fewer who knew, the better."

They descended the stairs, and had now reached the hall where a painting of a bowl of fruit hung on the wall. Hermione stepped forward to tickle it, but Minerva stopped her.

"This is the very reason you sent Selenius away, I take it?" she asked perceptively.

Hermione bit her lower lip and nodded. The sight of Molly and Arthur hugging their daughter, and then their son, sent a jolt of pain mixed with jealousy through her, and she tried to push it away.

"And I take it that you are not bringing him back next year."

Hermione slowly shook her head. Minerva nodded, and then tickled the pear herself.

"That's all I needed to know," she said, and she sounded tired, as though she had a head cold. "Thank you. I shall take care of this, but I would appreciate it if you would draft a letter to the Board of Governors informing them that exams will be cancelled this year?"

"Why?" Hermione asked curiously, as Minerva carefully stepped into the kitchen.

"The Petrified students will be well behind, and with all the trouble we went through this year, hardly any of them will be in any condition to do their best," Minerva informed her stoutly.

Hermione bowed her head, and then left.

~o~O~o~

The Hogwarts feast lasted all night, and from what Hermione could remember, nothing remotely like it had ever happened in her memory. Everyone had been in their pyjamas, including the teachers.
Severus had stubbornly refused to attend what he predicted would be a debacle, and as Hermione could not, he found a way to make use of the free and burden-free time they had just been given. He was not so much as dragging Hermione, as finding himself being dragged, up the stairs and to the Library, which they snuck into. Casting a Silencing Charm on the door to drown out the noise coming from the Great Hall, they mutually pulled each other toward one of the study tables scattered throughout the room.

"Everyone is celebrating downstairs," Severus muttered, as he yanked his arms out of his sleeves and tossed his robes aside, before hurrying to take care of the next layer. "The bloody celebration will last all night."

Hermione had already shrugged off her blouse, and, grinning at him, twirled slowly in her skirt, causing it to fly around her like the folds of a black flower. "It's great, isn't it?"

"And we don't even have exams to prepare," Severus agreed, stopping her circling by grasping her hips and pulling her toward him, where he captured her lips with his mouth. "The Headmaster is notorious for going overboard with celebrations. No more bloody Basilisk to deal with, no bloody Lockhart, no bloody classes…"

He pushed her backward, until she bumped into the table behind her, and then he turned her and pressed her face-down on the wooden surface. Hermione braced herself on her elbows, spreading her legs eagerly as her husband deliberated for a moment about what to do with her skirt. A moment later, he lifted it up and hung it on her waist, not taking it off but leaving her exposed all the same. A moment later, she felt him press against her, and then he slid home.

"I couldn't have predicted a better way to spend tonight," he breathed, grasping her hips tightly as he began to thrust. He leaned over her, pressing his chest against her back, and nibbled at the curve of muscle that was exposed when he brushed her hair aside. He breathed warmly into her ear, causing her to shudder with a mixture of anticipation and delight. "Merlin, how I love you…"

He shifted slightly, changing his and Hermione could not help but groan in response. "Oh yes, I love those sounds you make…"

"You're good at eliciting them," Hermione offered weakly, squeezing her eyes shut as he slipped one practiced hand around her and slipping the fingers between her folds, where he sought out the tiny bit nub of flesh that was the center of her pleasure. She shuddered involuntarily, not in orgasm, but as something very much like electricity coursed down her spine, quivering in her belly…

"Mmmh, yes," Severus agreed lazily. His eyes fluttered slightly as she squeezed herself around him, this time deliberately, and he buried his face in her neck. "Yes…"

A few more strokes, and then he slowed, before holding himself still inside her.

"I want to flip you over, and tie you to the table," he panted, whispering into her ear. Hermione found herself wincing at the thought—given how hard the table was on her elbows, she was not exactly certain she wanted to do that here. The thought was erotic, and it sent a jolt of pleasure through her, one that she knew her husband felt when she squeezed around him involuntarily again, but she found herself shaking her head.

"Too hard," she said, indicating the table.

"I know," he stated, nipping at her shoulder. "That's why I haven't already done it." He withdrew partially, causing Hermione to protest, but he placed a hand against one of her buttocks, silencing her
as she tried to predict what he was about to do next. "But I can certainly do this…"

A sharp, stinging slap caused Hermione to jerk forward in surprise, but when he caressed his hand over the place he had just struck, the sensitive skin responded by sending tingles of pleasure throughout her belly in response. Hermione expected more—in fact, she wanted more, and let out a moue of disappointment when the next predicted smack did not come—but then she squeaked in surprise as he thrust back in. One hand massaging her clit, the other grasping her hip, and her left buttock still stinging—it was an effective combination. A dozen more well-timed smacks later, each designed for maximum impact, each landing when she least expected them—and it soon sent her over the edge.

She slumped against the table, panting, as he continued to move his hips against her. She clenched around him in surprise as his fingers, which had not stopped in their ministrations, elicited another shudder of pleasure through her from her now hypersensitive body, and when he did it again—and then again—Hermione could not help but moan and whimper in protest as he forced pleasure from her body by toying with her overwrought senses. He rarely took her this far. He usually did not have the time, but when he was in an experimental mood, he would try to see just what new types of reactions he could extract from her, what things he could try that would have her keening for him.

Playing her body was an experiment for him, one that resulted in him becoming smug in satisfactorily knowing how her nerves worked, and in him being able to coax her body into clamping down on him almost on command for his own pleasure. And he did so now, continuing to coax a second orgasm from her, this one a bit bigger than the one he had given her a few minutes ago, and it had Hermione slumping onto the table as her legs shook and gave way, gripping onto it for dear life.

At that, he pulled her away from the table, causing her to squeal in surprise, before dragging her down to the floor, coaxing onto her hands and knees. She complied, and he took a moment to slide back into her before continuing his drive for pleasure, now focused solely on his own completion. His hips began to jerk, losing his rhythm in an indication that he was about to come, and in a moment of passion, he bit down on her shoulder. He nearly broke the skin, having done so harder than intended as his own climax swept through him, but neither of them cared at the moment.

Hermione felt him soften in her as the last of his orgasm shuddered through him, but he did not pull away, merely adjusting himself slightly in response to the way she continued to shudder and squeeze around him in weak, overwrought spasms. He rarely did when they were done, if they were not in a hurry: they might have finished, but her body was warm, and the intimacy was still there. He did, however, find the strength to maneuver her fully to the ground so that she could lie comfortably in the afterglow of her own pleasure, while he bent over and angled his head to lave at the bite-mark he had left on her shoulder with his tongue.

"You are an animal," Hermione murmured to him a few minutes later, though not at all unhappily.

"You married me," Severus reminded her, mid-lick.

"And I don't regret it one bit," his wife sighed, sounding rather sated and satisfied.

Something suddenly flashed across his face, something that caused a shiver to course through his spine, though it was not a pleasant one. He bared his teeth and withdrew, scooting over to give himself space, pulling out of her slicked passage. His actions could hardly have gone unnoticed by Hermione, who turned her head to face him, resting her cheek on her folded arms.

"What's wrong?"

"I just remembered that in three years, you'll be de-aging yourself," Severus sneered, looking away.
"And what's wrong with that?" Hermione asked, rolling over onto her side.

"I have no interest in bedding a child," he snapped, getting to his knees.

Hermione's hand whipped out to grasp his chin, halting him. She sat up, eyes blazing.

"I will be turning myself seventeen," she told him archly. "One year older than my classmates because I have a birthday in late September, another year older because of my time-turner usage in my third year."

"Barely of age, then," Severus said disparagingly.

"Legally of age, and with the mind and experiences of an adult," Hermione snapped right back. "You're acting as though making me seventeen again will change who I am—will change what we are. It will not," she stressed. "I will still be myself—Hermione Jane Snape, your handler, and your wife. Who I am won't change simply because my body will."

Severus gave her a wary, hesitant look, but his expression softened ever so slightly when her hand slipped from his chin, and instead came to stroke his cheek soothingly.

"It would be difficult to see you at seventeen again, when I myself will then be thirty-six," Severus confessed quietly.

Hermione raised an eyebrow, and gave him a thoughtful look. "How much Elixir of Youth do you think Flamel left us?"

"Enough to turn you back, I hope."

"He left us all of it," Hermione told him firmly. "Surely, there is an excess of it in regards to my needs."

Severus let out a bark of laughter. "You can hardly expect me to turn myself seventeen right along with you!"

"Not with me," Hermione stated, "but once the war is over, we'll still have it."

"Assuming that I survive—"

"You will survive," Hermione told him forcefully.

"Well," Severus admitted, almost reluctantly. "That's not a horrible idea."

"I've grown up in a time which I do not belong to," Hermione told him seriously. "I never got to do all the things I thought I would, once I grew up—it was either me fighting the Dark Lord or in hiding from the world while we wait for time to catch up. But once time does catch up, and once the Dark Lord is dead and gone for good…"

She trailed off. Severus raised an eyebrow, prompting her to continue.

She did. "Then we can live the way we both wanted to, without those two obstacles shadowing our lives—we'll get those lost years back, and our son."

Severus paused, and it seemed to her as though he were thinking her words through carefully. Then he carefully grasped her face between her hands, pulling her to him, and kissed her.

"You're right," he agreed, giving her a wry, sardonic smile before leaning in to nibble on her lip.
"We can. We will."

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione and Severus spent the evening of July 11th enjoying the absence of the students, and the empty, echoing serenity that fell upon Hogwarts. They summoned a bottle of champagne from the kitchen, uncorked it, and celebrated their wedding anniversary properly for the first time in nearly five years.

Every year, on their anniversary, Hermione at least found the time to take off her ring and read each individual rune, mentally reminding herself of the promises they had ingrained into the rings, before she would bring it to her lips and kiss the metal—which was always warm to the touch when she did. Some anniversaries had been spent merely finding an opportunity to have a rare, quiet evening together, when they had a son to watch. Now, however, Hermione was using this opportunity to celebrate in style.

It was an evening of relaxation, curled up in the library in a manner that he would never have done if the students were still present. As it was, they were grateful that they had managed to lock Madam Pince out for the entire evening, so that they could kick off their shoes, transfigure themselves a comfortable couch, summon themselves a few choice books, and read. Read with a champagne bottle that should not be in the library, granted, but if they could not hear Madam Pince pounding on the door to tell them off, well—that was hardly their fault, was it?

It was a quiet, peaceful night in the library with a good drink.

The next day, they returned to Spinner's End with Madam Pince glaring at their backs, and Hermione deliberated for a long while before she informed Severus that she had some errands to run. He raised an inquiring eyebrow at this, but then retreated to his lab to get some work done, which Hermione took as acceptance.

Her first stop was in front of the home of Diane and George. To her surprise, it was to find Selenius sitting on the front steps, staring sullenly at the walkway, chin resting in his hands, and elbows on his knees. He was wearing his school uniform, and his hair had been cut just past his ears. It looked recent, and he did not look particularly pleased. In fact, he looked downright miserable, and it was all Hermione could do to stop her heart from breaking in two.

Nevertheless, when he saw her walk up the drive, his expression brightened immediately. A moment later, he had stood up, and was running. Hermione knelt down on the ground in time for her son to throw himself into her arms.

"Mum," Selenius said plaintively, clenching the fabric on her shoulders in his hands. "You came back."

"Where are Diane and George?" Hermione asked gently, pulling away so that she could look into his face, try to remember it and how it had changed. She always had the locket to look to, the picture in it to gaze on, but this—seeing her son in the flesh, grown another year and another inch and a half, was something different.
Selenius's expression turned sour. "Inside," he said. "Reading my report card."

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After bewitching her aunt and uncle to sit quietly in the living room in a trance-like state, Hermione made Selenius a dinner of mashed potatoes and a bacon sandwich, before they sat down to discuss several things—Selenius's report card among them.

Selenius poked moodily at the potatoes with his fork. "When am I going home?"

"I don't know," Hermione answered quietly. "Not right now. But we need to discuss your report card."

"My grades are okay," he replied, now making crosshatches in the potatoes with the fork.

"They're good," Hermione assured him, "but I'm concerned about the teachers' comments."

Selenius reluctantly stuck a forkful into his mouth, chewing for a moment before swallowing, and then answering. Apparently, Diane and George had not been lax in teaching him manners. "I don't like school."

"Can you tell me why?"

A pause, another mouthful. Then he set the fork down.

"I miss home."

Hermione's heart sank at this.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. How to make a seven-year-old, even one as precocious as Selenius, understand? "Things are… complicated."

Hermione did not leave until long after eight, where she tucked a very tired, and somewhat overwrought Selenius into bed. His room was barren for the most part, the walls painted light blue and the bed covers a mix of pale blue and white-patterned sailboats. There was a picture on the dresser, of the three of them during the previous year's Christmas vacation, where Diane and George had apparently taken a vacation along the coast. Selenius was smiling in the picture, but it was a thin one, as though he had been ordered to do so, and not because he was genuinely pleased.

He was well cared for. Diane and George were doing all they could for him, albeit without knowing that he was their niece's son, not their own. He went to a Primary school, was getting good grades in his classes—which did not mean much, at the age of seven, but were good signs all the same. The only problem was that he was simply lonely. He had come from a world of magic, and to be thrust into a Muggle one, without his parents, without the teachers at Hogwarts who had helped to look after him.

Then Hermione went to visit Sirius. She entered carrying a most recent edition of the Daily Prophet, whereupon she laid it down on the table for him to see. He looked interestedly at it, examining the picture and then the article—and then his eyes suddenly snapped to the picture of Scabbers. Realization slowly dawned in his eyes, and then Hermione watched as he ignored everything else in the paper, and began staring obsessively at the picture of Ron's rat.

Hermione got up from her chair, made him dinner, and then left him to it.

That summer, as she examined their stock reports, and made the decision to sell almost all of it. Their
Gringotts bank vault filled up nicely, and the look on Severus's face when she handed him the written-out statement describing the final value of their sold shares was rather indicative of how well Hermione had done with them.

For her son's birthday, Hermione gave him a journal full of riddles and elaborate puzzles that Severus had sketched out, filling up every page of parchment with thick lines of black ink, and space enough at the bottom for him to write his answer. A note on the first page stated that he wanted to see Selenius's work on the empty pages near the back of the book, something Hermione knew would please her son. It was also an inspiration of hope, too—that he would get a chance to see his father again soon, if only to have him look over his work. If his father was interested, Selenius was happy. She also gave him a brand-new copy of *Hogwarts, A History* to read, knowing that if his foster parents happened to look at it, they would think it a fantasy book.

Hermione continued to stop by just to peer inside just on the edge of the front lawn, though now she came once a day. On his birthday, she saw him slide the book under his bed, after tucking the birthday card in-between the pages, and almost immediately begin working on the riddle journal from his father. The next day, he had locked Diane and George out of his room after stealing graham crackers and a glass of milk from the kitchen, and sat on the floor all day still working on the riddles. The two of them threatened to take the lock off his door, but unsurprisingly, Selenius was not bothered by this in the least.

They did take the lock off his door, for that. Somehow or another, it reappeared overnight.

The day after his birthday, Sirius sent a note telling Hermione that he was leaving the safety of Tine Cottage.

I have a job to do, he wrote. The consequences mean nothing to me now—I have to do this for my godson. Even if it means I will be sent back to Azkaban, once all of this is over. Go ahead and inform the Ministry, he added. It's your obligation to, and I won't hold you responsible for my actions here. Keep your end of the bargain with Fudge.

And so regretfully, Hermione was forced to notify the Minister that Sirius Black had escaped, though she gave him three days head start. The day following the notice, the Ministry was in an uproar, and the newspapers were in a flurry of excitement. A short time later, Hermione received news from Sirius that he had seen Harry leave for the Leaky Cauldron on the Knight Bus, and she received a request for a meeting with the Minister.

"As you can see," Fudge said, wringing his bowler hat as he offered her a cup of tea, "Black is out of your custody—that makes it my job to ensure he returns to Azkaban…"

"I understand," Hermione had told him shortly, getting to her feet.

"You do?"

"Yes."

A week before term resumed, Hermione stopped by her aunt and uncle's for the last time that summer. What she found was worth recounting to Severus: Diane wanted to take Selenius to get another haircut right before school resumed, as his hair had somehow grown past his shoulders again in a ridiculously short amount of time, and he was putting up quite a fuss. Their resulting argument ended in Selenius losing all self-control and throwing a screaming fit, refusing to let his foster mother come anywhere near him, until she eventually gave up. She tried to at least insist on trimming it to even it out, but at that point, Selenius's death glare was sufficient enough to dissuade her. He was going to school with his hair long, and nothing anyone tried would convince him otherwise.
Not that it stopped Diane from trying.

"You'll get teased for having such long hair," she said, trying to tuck Selenius's hair behind his ear the same way Hermione did, but Selenius smacked her hand away. Hermione had never seen him allow Diane to play with his hair, and since her visit earlier that summer, he had grown even touchier about letting his poor foster mother do anything to him.

"I don't care," he responded petulantly.

"It's really very hard to take care of, and it's starting to get a bit greasy…"

"I said no," Selenius responded, scowling blackly.

"At least let me straighten out the edges, give it some shape—"

"NO."

Severus found this too amusing to put into words, if amusing was the right word. In truth, he missed their son dearly, despite the fact that he now had Hermione back in ways he had not when Selenius had been around—but he wanted his son too. The idea that Selenius was still hanging onto his preferred choice of style, of which he had gotten from his father, was endearing to say the least.

Severus's good mood from the news lasted only so long as he and Hermione, having returned to Hogwarts to prepare for his classes, were both finally enlightened as to the situation at the school. Several changes would be taking place this year: first and foremost would be the presence of Dementors, a verdict which had Hagrid trembling and all of the other Professors both scowling and white-faced. The Ministry had made the excuse that they were doing it for the students' safety—Harry's safety, mostly—but it was clear that the Ministry was more interested in the prospect of catching Sirius than protecting the students.

Secondly, Professor Kettleburn would be retiring, and Hagrid would be taking over the job of Care of Magical Creatures. This elicited much congratulations and good wishes toward the half-giant, who was so pleased at the news that his already ruddy face turned an even deeper red, as he took a swig of firewhiskey to hide his grin.

Thirdly, Remus Lupin would be taking on the Defense Against the Dark Arts post.

Hermione and Severus's reactions were as different as could be. Hermione had actually squealed with delight, and immediately asked a very pleased Dumbledore if he knew how Remus was doing since she had last seen him. Severus had given the Headmaster the blackest scowl he seemed capable of, his face contorting into a disgusted sneer, and he turned away snarling under his breath.

"First Black, now the werewolf…" He muttered mutinously.

"An' Dementors," Hagrid added, shuddering. "Don' forget the Dementors." But Hagrid still seemed pleased, and when they left the Great Hall, Hermione walked down to his hut with him to hear all about his plans. Severus returned to their quarters, still in a foul mood.

"I'm going ter start off with Hippogriffs," Hagrid told Hermione happily. "Beautiful critters, Hippogriffs. Be a real treat, see."

"Just be careful, Hagrid," Hermione told him easily.

~o~O~o~
"I'm fine!" Harry insisted, getting to his feet. Poppy's earlier remark about him being delicate had already ticked him off after his experience on the train, and to be honest, Hermione was not at all surprised. He was not making things any easier for the Matron as she tried to peer into his eyes, while also suggesting that perhaps he should have a bit of chocolate—

"I've already had some," Harry said, annoyed. "Professor Lupin gave me some. He gave it to all of us."

"Did he, now?" Poppy said, approvingly. "So we've finally got a Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher who knows his remedies?"

Smiling slightly at this, Hermione slipped out the door to Professor McGonagall's office, and went to seek out the man himself.

She knew he was at the Welcoming Feast—along with her husband, who was certain to be most unenthusiastic when the announcements for new staffing arrangements came—and therefore resigned herself to the staff room, where she curled up in a chair and pulled out a book. When several teachers filed in about an hour and a half later, Hermione was delighted when she stood up to find that Remus was, indeed, among them.

He looked paler than Hermione remembered, and it looked as though he had not been eating well. She had not had many letters from him since disappearing off the map several years ago, but his last letter—which had been nearly a decade ago—had given her the impression that he had been doing well. Now, clearly, he had not been: and when the door shut behind him, Hermione immediately crossed the room and pulled him into a hug.

"Remus," she said happily.

"Hermione!" he exclaimed, looking surprised, but a grin pulled itself across his drawn face, and he returned her embrace. "I didn't see you at the Welcoming Feast! How have you been?"

"Better than you, it seems," she told him, stepping back with her hands on his shoulders so that she could get a proper look at him. "Goodness, you haven't been eating well! I'll summon the elves for a bit of a snack—"

"No need to trouble yourself, I had enough at the feast—"

"Oh, I insist," Hermione said, grinning at him, as she summoned an elf for some tea and biscuits.

Remus chuckled. "You're starting to sound just like Molly! She said the same thing, when I stopped by her place to see how she was doing." His eyes widened slightly for a moment, as they drifted over her fingers. "You married! I had no idea—why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried to invite you, actually, you prat," Hermione said, giving his shoulder a playful shove. "But the owl I sent never came back with a reply. I actually think the poor bird gave up."

"I was working in France at a clock shop for some time," Remus admitted. "The owner—who was a witch, mind—hired me to make sure nothing nasty was in any of the clocks she bought or sold. But it was rather out of the way, and I don't think I left any trail…"

"No, you didn't," Hermione responded dryly.

"So, who's the lucky man?" Remus asked genially, as he set down his battered case on the hearth rug and collapsed in one of the armchairs.
"Severus," Hermione responded smugly.

"Merlin help us."

"For eleven years," Hermione added.

"It's a good thing you didn't invite me, then—I think it's bad form for a man to strangle one of his wedding guests," Remus responded, with a slight smile. "He looked quite ready to put me six feet under this evening, at dinner."

Hermione winced. "He wants the job, and you got it."

"And you used to have it, last I remember."

"Yes, well," Hermione said uselessly, "things change."

"So they do," Remus responded slowly, as Hermione took a seat next to him. "I saw someone who looks exactly like you this afternoon. We were in the same compartment. Funny thing is—she had your exact name, too."

Hermione grimaced. "Yes, about that…"

And she began to explain everything to him. Minerva, Pomona, and Filius, all of whom had come in earlier and made themselves quite at ease, listened in as well, though they had all heard the story before. Severus came in some time later, throwing Remus a look of deepest loathing before taking a seat over at one of the desks. When she finally laid back in her chair, having told Remus everything from when she had been thrown back in time to when the first war had ended, the man simply sat back and shook his head.

"Unbelievable," he said. "Simply unbelievable."

"There's more to it, Lupin," Severus informed him sourly. "None of the students are aware of her existence, and it must remain that way."

"All the staff knows, of course," Minerva interjected, "although Sybill is a bit oblivious to it, thank goodness."

"I won't tell any of the students," Remus promised. Seeing the look on Severus's face, he added, "No, not even to Hermione's younger self. Don't worry about it. But still," he said, clasping his hands together, "I must confess I'm still in a bit of a shock… and here James and I always thought you were just a Seer, with the way you were always prepared for everything…"

"If you must know, I never even got through a single year of Divination," Hermione joked. "I'll end up storming out of the class sometime around Easter."

Remus was snickering; he simply couldn't help himself. He subsided a moment later, however, his expression serious. "So Harry is here, with your younger self, and we have Sirius Black out and about trying to kill him."

Hermione opened her mouth, hesitant, but Minerva interjected before she could respond.

"That's the situation, yes." Her lips were pressed into a thin line.

The room was momentarily arrested into silence. And then—

"Well," Remus said dully, "I'd best get prepared for my first class, then. I've got sixth years
Severus made a disparaging sound in the back of his throat. "The Headmaster has requested I inform you that if you are in need of Wolfsbane, you are free to call upon me to brew some for you." His tone was snide, and everything about his demeanor suggested he would rather be scrubbing rusty cauldrons by hand than brewing Wolfsbane Potion for Remus, but the werewolf had the grace to accept it gratefully.

"I would appreciate that, Severus. Thank you."

They stood up and left one by one.

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The first week of term could not, in Hermione's opinion, have gone any worse. Malfoy had managed to ruin what had otherwise been a splendid Care of Magical Creatures lesson by Hagrid, and was milking it for all it was worth at the Gryffindors'—and Hagrid's—expense. Pansy Parkinson was simpering over him, and when Hermione snuck into the Potions classroom on Thursday evening, it was to find that half-way through the double-lesson, Malfoy swaggered in.

Severus hardly looked up from the papers he was grading when his godson walked in. He allowed the Slytherins a moment to fuss over their Seeker before redirecting them to their work.

"Settle down, settle down," he told them idly, not looking up from his work once.

Harry and Ron exchanged identical scowls at this, and Hermione glowered at her husband's back. Not even five points from Slytherin for coming in late and causing such a diversion—he would have stripped anyone else for as many points he could get from their hide!

But that wasn't all. Malfoy set up shop at the same table as Harry and Ron, forcing them to prepare their ingredients in the same place—

"Sir," Malfoy called, his tone one of utter respect, "sir, I'll need help cutting up these daisy roots, because of my arm—"

"Weasley, cut up Malfoy's roots for him," Severus said lazily, without glancing up.

Ron went brick red, hissing something to Malfoy under his breath.

"Weasley, you heard Professor Snape; cut up these roots."

Hermione bent over to lean into her husband's ear.

"I'm going to give you hell for this later, you know."

His ear twitched slightly at this, but he gave no other indication to suggest he had heard her.

A moment later…

"Professor," Malfoy drawled, enjoying himself, "Weasley's mutilating my roots, sir."

When Hermione stormed out of the dungeons that evening, vowing to never sneak into his classroom again simply because she could not, for the life of her, put up with the way he treated the non-Slytherins so abysmally, she was stopped by him grabbing her arm.

"Going somewhere?" he purred.
"Yes, you arse," Hermione snapped. "Hagrid's."

"I thought you were going to give me hell for torturing Weasley?"

"And everyone else," Hermione growled, "but I changed my mind."

"How unlike you." Severus removed her Disillusionment Charm with a rap of his wand on her shoulder so that he could see her face, the color trickling back into her. "You know I have to be this way, to keep up appearances. Why are you so upset?"

"You're only like this because Remus is here and you didn't get the job you wanted," Hermione said angrily. "I know you're typically a nasty piece of work, but I have never seen you like this with another class! You nearly poisoned Neville's toad, ruined Ron's potion because you were catering to Malfoy like a lapdog—"

Severus's face contorted, and he abruptly pulled away.

"Fine," he spat. "Defend the werewolf, defend that bumbling incompetent with the toad, completely ignore the fact that Draco reports everything anyone says and does to his father—"

Hermione drew herself up. "There is an enormous difference between keeping up appearances and being an unmitigated sadist," she snarled.

Severus's expression suddenly turned painfully bitter, and he stormed back to his desk. "Fine," he repeated. "Go away. I have class in five minutes."

"Gladly," Hermione responded irritably, shutting the door behind her. "I'll be at Hagrid's."

~o~O~o~

Remus's first lesson with the third-years went well, as predicted, and Hermione spent the following evening in his office catching up with him. In a sense, both of them were hiding from her husband, who was still in a sour mood in regards to Hermione, and who appeared near-enraged when the topic of Remus came up after the story of him appearing in Neville's Grandmother's clothes had spread through the school like wildfire. The two sat at his desk, enjoying a cup of tea while catching-up on each other's lives.

"I spent the last few years moving from job to job," Remus admitted, taking a sip of tea. "One witch, when she found out I was a werewolf, wanted to hire me as a guard dog." He laughed ruefully. "I just found odd jobs here and there—most didn't last long, and they didn't pay very well."

"You should have contacted me," Hermione insisted.

"Yes, well, I didn't really want to place my burden on you," Remus said. "You had yourself and Severus to look after—and I know you weren't exactly rolling in the Galleons, when I last saw you. And I was surviving."

"You should have contacted me," Hermione insisted. "That's what friends are for, aren't they?"

For a moment, Remus looked regretful; he opened his mouth to say something, shut it, and then quickly changed the subject.

"How have you been?" He asked. "I know you've been well, but I can also tell you've changed. I want to hear about it."

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"How have you been?" He asked. "I know you've been well, but I can also tell you've changed. I want to hear about it."
"Well," Hermione mused. "Severus and I did some separate research, made a bit of money on that, and otherwise, we've both been teaching here for several years—although I had to quit around 1986."

"So that none of the students would remember Professor Granger by the time your younger self arrived?"

"That, and I was pregnant," Hermione confessed. Remus's jaw dropped. "Merciful Merlin," he exclaimed, choking on his tea. "I was not expecting that. Where is he—she—now?"

"He's with my aunt and uncle for a bit," Hermione said idly, taking a delicate sip from her cup. "Hogwarts isn't the safest of places, right now—he's about seven, and needs to be with other kids his age. He wasn't supposed to be born before I was even old enough to go to school, and I can't risk him being seen by too many people." She hesitated, and then dug the locket out of her shirt, pulling it off from around her neck and opening it. She handed it to Remus.

"The picture's a few years out of date—it was taken about three, maybe four years ago…"

Remus was staring down at the picture of Severus with his arm around Hermione's shoulder, the black-haired child in Hermione's arms and smiling. "You look happy," he observed.

"I was—I am," Hermione amended.

"You miss him," Remus stated perceptively, glancing down at the photo once more before gently handing it back to Hermione. She hung it back around her neck, tucking it back underneath her shirt.

"He's my son, Remus," Hermione said miserably. "What do you expect?"

"Well," Remus posed thoughtfully, "why do you stay at Hogwarts instead of looking after him somewhere else?"

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. "Because Hogwarts needs me—and Severus. I'm here to look after Harry when no one can reasonably keep an eye on him. And… and I need to keep an eye on the time-line, here."

Remus nodded. "Otherwise, you could find a place…"

"Even if I could, I still couldn't," Hermione explained. "I need to remain hidden from the world, for the most part, until I can slot myself back into my proper time—which won't be for another two and a half years," she said with a sigh.

Remus grimaced in sympathy.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Maybe I can kidnap him for Christmas vacation," Hermione joked dully.

~o~O~o~

Hermione and Severus had not exactly been speaking to each other for several days. It grew worse as the weeks flew by, and the silence between them festered. Hermione slept with her back turned to him, and Severus would angrily punch his pillow into a comfortable shape before turning his back to her, as well. For some reason, they still had not made up—exactly why, Hermione was not certain—
but by the end of the month, where neither of them had made any attempt at reconciliation, she finally became fed up with it. They were both too stubborn to even try, and since he obviously was not, she would have to.

Therefore, the day before Halloween, she woke her husband up at roughly four in the morning with a pillow smacked against his face. He awoke with a startled cry, and then tried to protect his face as she smacked him with it again.

"I am sick of this!"

"Bloody hell—"

"What is your problem?" she demanded, chucking the pillow aside and straddling him, so that she had him pinned down to the bed.

He gaped at her. "My problem? You're the one who woke me up with a pillow, screeching like a banshee—"

Hermione jabbed him in the chest with her finger. "We've said less than six words to each other over the last three weeks!"

Severus tried to throw her off, but she was fully awake, and he was admittedly still a bit muddled by sleep and the fact that it was such an ungodly hour in the morning. She pinned his wrists down, though with hardly any success, given how significantly stronger he was in comparison to her.

"Bloody—" He managed to sit up. He yanked one hand out of her grasp, and used it to rub the sleep out of his eyes. "Lupin."

"Yes, I understand you have unresolved anger issues regarding the Marauders. Next?"

"Not that!" Severus snarled. He glanced briefly at the watch on Hermione's wrist, reading the time upside-down. "Gods—I can't believe you're waking me up at four in the morning for this…"

"You have four seconds to start talking before I smack you with a pillow again," Hermione warned.

Severus glared at her for a single long moment, and then exploded. "I saw the way you looked at him—I—you—when you first saw him again…"

Hermione's jaw drop. In fact, she was surprised it had not unhinged itself and dropped off her skull and hit the bed, such was her shock.

She managed to close her mouth, after a moment.

"You're jealous?" she finally exclaimed. "You're jealous?"

Severus glowered at her.

"Severus, I have never once even thought about Remus like that—he was always like the older brother I could rely on—and I haven't seen him in years!" Hermione spluttered. "How the hell did you come to the conclusion that I was—oh, my gods." She pressed her hand against her forehead, and starting giggling with barely suppressed laughter. "Merlin, this is ridiculous."

"You went with him to one of Slughorn's parties—"

Hermione was now laughing uncontrollably.
This was it? Her husband of eleven years was being a colossal arse because he thought that Lupin had not only gotten the Defense Against the Dark Arts job, he thought Hermione was still interested in him—which required him to assume she had indeed been interested in the first place.

"Severus," she stated, pressing a hand to her lips to try and quell the urge to giggle, "I took Remus with me to Slughorn's party once—only once!—because Alice and Marlene roped me into doing it so that I could teach him to dance and get him to socialize. And I haven't seen him for over a decade—I've hardly heard word from him, even—and I've missed him because he used to be and still is one of my lifelong and closest friends."

Severus looked hesitant for a moment. Hermione pressed on.

"Are you telling me that this—" She gestured at the air, waving her hand in emphasis. "—is because you were jealous?"

Severus didn't respond, which was answer enough. Hermione sighed, pressing her hand back to her mouth to try and hold back a snort of laughter, and then gave up and leaned forward to kiss him.

"Honestly," she said, pulling away so that they were face to face. "You could have just asked."

"He…"

"Remus has never seen me that way, Severus. In fact, given the way he was around me when we were younger, I might have thought he was gay if it weren't for the short-lived crush he had on Marlene."

Severus snorted. "And now?"

"I've been in his office catching up with him, both of us essentially hiding from my prat of a husband," Hermione said, her tone slightly teasing. "Now, are you ready to be a little less cruel to me and my friends, or do I need to whack some more sense into you with a pillow?"

Severus surged up at once, reversing their positions and pinning her down against the bed.

"Smack me again with a pillow, wife, and I will personally ensure that you leave this bed with some sense smacked into your arse."

Hermione grinned unrepentantly at him, relieved that they had gotten over the divide that had been keeping them cold toward each other over the last few weeks. "That's hardly discouragement, is it?"

With a growl, he bent down to attack her breasts with his lips, before flipping her over onto her belly and pinning her down.

"What would discourage you, then?"

"Stop being an unmitigated git—or more of one than you have to be—to me and my classmates," Hermione countered, deliberately grinding her backside against him, wearing a victorious smile. She twisted her head around to look at him, and then kissed him, pulling away when the strain on her neck became a bit too much. "There's no reason for it, after all."

"Always the altruistic one," Severus drawled.

They spent the rest of the night making love for the first time in nearly a month and a half, and when Hermione got up very late the next afternoon to get some private research done, it was with a very self-satisfied look on her face. When she arrived at the staff room later that evening to use the desk
there and for some company, Remus—who had been using one of the desks to grade papers—took one look at her and shook his head.

"Merlin's undershorts, no wonder Severus looked so smug earlier."

"Smug?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow as she pulled one of the books from the small shelf in one corner.

"He came in with my Wolfsbane earlier—which I'm very grateful for, by the way, and I'll need some more later—but up until he laid eyes on Harry, he seemed to be looking quite pleased with himself."

Hermione's cheeks flushed. "Yes. Well... yes." She cleared her throat. "So you kept Harry busy while Granger and Ron were at Hogsmeade?"

"Granger?"

"That's what I— we— call my younger self."

"Ah. Well, yes." Remus leaned back in his chair. "Harry seemed to think that Severus was actually trying to poison me, judging by the expression on his face."

"Harry and Ron aren't exactly trusting of Severus," Hermione said dryly.

"And you—excuse me, Granger—are?"

"I have my moments."

Remus grinned. "Of course."

~o~O~o~

Hermione stood at the foot of the bottom stair leading from the Entrance Hall to the staircases, watching as the students all crowded and shuffled along in confusion, tired and sleepy from the Halloween Feast. A familiar squash-faced, orange cat wound itself around her ankles, and she bent down to scratch him behind the ears.

"Hello, Crooks," she said softly.

The half-kneazle let out a small mew of fond recognition.

"Looks like it's starting, isn't it?" Hermione murmured absently, as Percy Weasley's voice rang through.

"Let me through, please! What's the holdup here? You can't all have forgotten the password—excuse me, I'm Head Boy—"

And then silence abruptly fell over the crowd, starting from the front to the back, so that it seemed a chill had run down the spine of onlookers. Then Percy said, in a sharp, worried voice, "Somebody get Professor Dumbledore. Quick."

Hermione glanced down at Crookshanks, and then quietly strode out of the Entrance Hall, slipping out into the courtyard, followed by her cat.

"Do you know where he is, Crooks?"

The half-kneazle let out a miaow of agreement, and then began trotting down the steps, into the
courtyard, and then took a turn down the path leading to the Whomping Willow. Hermione followed Crookshanks all the way down, until they stopped just before the waving and club-brandishing tree. A quick stunning spell on the knot, and both cat and human ducked inside the tunnel, cat first.

Getting through the tunnel had not been made any easier with time: it occurred to Hermione that it might not be a particularly bad idea to seek out an Animagus form, given that she had both Minerva and Sirius at her disposal to help her. That could certainly make sneaking around Hogwarts easier…

"Who's there?" Sirius's voice rasped out from the gloom.

"It's me," Hermione said, pulling herself out. Crookshanks gave Sirius a prompt mew of greeting, and immediately rubbed up against his ankles, acting like his best friend. Grinning, he bent down to stroke him behind the ears. "Your handiwork hasn't gone unnoticed, you realize."

Sirius looked pale and gaunt, as though he were not getting enough food nor enough sunlight. He grimaced.

"I lost my temper…"

"Like that wasn't obvious," Hermione said dryly, lifting Crookshanks into his lap so that he could pet him. "You need to plan your actions more, Sirius, or they really will catch you." She wrinkled her nose. "Not to mention the collateral damage…"

Sirius buried his face in his hands. Crookshanks reached up and licked the side of his unshaven cheek comfortingly.

Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Relax," she told him gently. "I'll try to bring some food with me next time—you're looking a bit thin, again. And we'll try to figure out what to do next, to help your godson. Our godson," she corrected.

Sirius looked at her gratefully.

"I've just got a single question for you," Hermione said, her tone thoughtful.

Sirius gave her a rueful smile. "What is it?"

"Can you tell me how to become an Animagus?"

~o~O~o~

The Fat Lady’s mutilated portrait had been replaced with that of Sir Cadogan, the mad knight who, by the end of the week, had every single Gryffindor turned against him. The weather gradually worsened—as did Severus’s mood. He never stopped suspecting Remus of having helped Sirius into the castle, and the fact that Hermione had begun to spend her time with her friend—albeit in a very platonic and entirely unsuspicious relationship—did nothing to help.

"Black and Lupin used to be together," he hissed at her one evening, as they strode back to their quarters. "They used to be part of the Marauders, Hermione!"

"So was I," Hermione shot back.

"Lupin did nothing to stop Black and Potter when they humiliated me in front of the school—"

"Oh, don’t be ridiculous," Hermione exclaimed, exasperated. "Just because he didn't stand up to
Sirius then doesn't mean he'll help a murderer!"

"It doesn't give me confidence that he has the strength to stand up to him now, either!"

"Rubbish," Hermione snapped coldly.

The day before the match, the weather had reached an all-time low. The Dementors had grown restless, and Hermione hardly dared sneak out of the castle after hours. She was perfectly capable of casting a Patronus, but she neither wanted to draw attention to herself nor risk being overwhelmed.

This is why I need an Animagus form, she thought sourly, as she leaned against the far wall of the courtyard, trying to protect herself from the howling winds and downpour that were waging a vicious war against the castle walls. She watched Sirius padding toward her in the distance, and waved at him hoping he could see her. He can go anywhere with them around as long as he's not human...

A huge, shaggy black dog slipped out underneath the archway, and Hermione quickly dried him off with a spell—causing his fur to fluff up like a ball of black-spun wool—and she hurried to smooth him down, before reaching into her bag and pulling out a package of food that she had wrapped up and cast water-proofing spells on.

"The Quidditch Match is tomorrow," she told him, as the dog took the package gratefully between his teeth. "You'll have to be careful, though—the Dementors are going to get a little out of hand, I'd stay at the edge of the pitch if I were you..."

Sirius let out a whine. Hermione patted his side, giving his shaggy fur a rub, and then cast an Impervious Charm on him.

"Go on," she said, and the dog turned tail and slipped back out into the rain, which pattered against the invisible layer of the spell she had just cast, keeping him dry. "I'll see you later."

Sirius wagged his tail as he left, and Hermione hurried back inside.

~o~O~o~

Hermione began filling out the form for the Nimbus Two-Thousand that Sirius had requested and filled the necessary details in for himself. It astounded her, really, that the Ministry was not keeping an eye on the bank vaults of a wanted fugitive, but then again—Goblins could be a difficult lot to deal with. Perhaps they simply were not cooperating.

At any rate, Hermione managed to Floo to Hogsmeade and deliver the form to the Post Office in person, weathering the continuing downpour before making her way back up to the castle. Dumbledore was furious; Minerva was tight-lipped and pale; Severus was sallow with rage, and the other teachers were wary and on edge after the disaster of the previous day's Quidditch Match.

Slytherin was celebrating this win unrepentantly, and when classes resumed, Malfoy was beside himself with malicious glee at Gryffindor's defeat. Ron, who had just been relieved of a detention for sticking up for Granger the day Severus was teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts class—and indeed, Hermione pointed out that he had been particularly nasty—he was assigned another detention for chucking a large, slippery crocodile heart at Malfoy. Along with a fifty-point deduction.

"Honestly, Severus," Hermione sighed that evening, as she prepared to do her rounds—and make a discreet visit to the kitchens. "Was it really necessary to call me an insufferable know-it-all? Or to take points away for it?"
Severus's lip curled, but he did not defend himself.

"That seemed a bit excessively cruel to me," Hermione said softly.

A pause. "Lucius Malfoy has been making weekly Floo calls here, when you're not around," Severus finally responded. "He's put me under heavy pressure—when the Dark Lord returns, I will only have his good word to put in for my defense."

Hermione bit her lower lip, knowing he was right.

Just a little under two years left until Voldemort returned…

"I see."

The weather slowly but surely began to clear up, and when December arrived, it was with a cheerful air that had even Hermione padding down the halls with a bit of energy to her steps. At the final Hogsmeade weekend preceding Christmas vacation, Hermione was invited down to the Three Broomsticks with the other teachers.

Madam Rosmerta was most amiable in accommodating them that afternoon, as the teachers all found a seat together, accompanied by the Minister.

"A small gillywater—"

"Mine," Minerva stated, brushing her cloak off her shoulders and accepting her drink.

"Four pints of mulled mead—"

"Ta, Rosmerta," Hagrid said, accepting his tankard.

"A cherry syrup and soda with ice and umbrella—"

"Mmm!" Filius said, smacking his lips.

"A warm butterbeer—"

"That'd be me," Hermione said, accepting her drink cheerfully.

"So you'll be the red currant rum, Minister," Rosmerta said, setting down the glass.

"Thank you, Rosmerta, m'dear," Fudge said, accepting his drink happily. "Lovely to see you again, I must say. Have one yourself, won't you? Come and join us…"

"Well, thank you very much, Mininster."

Hermione sat back in her seat, very aware of the slightly nervous look Fudge was giving her, but she looked for all the world as though she were completely relaxed and supremely unconcerned. She took a sip of her drink, as Rosmerta returned and found a seat for herself.

"So, what brings you to this neck of the woods, Minister?" Hermione asked coolly.

Fudge twisted around in his chair for a moment, as though checking for eavesdroppers, and then leaned forward in his seat to whisper, "What else, m'dear," he said, with a nod at Rosmerta, "but Sirius Black? I daresay you heard what happened up at the school at Halloween?"

"I did hear a rumor," Rosmerta admitted.
Hermione shook her head, almost snorting into her drink.

"Did you tell the whole pub, Hagrid?" Minerva asked exasperatedly. Hagrid looked mildly guilty.

"Do you think Black's still in the area, Minister?"

"I'm sure of it," Fudge responded shortly.

"You know that the dementors have searched the whole village twice?" Rosmerta said, with a slight edge to her voice. "Scared all my customers away… It's very bad for business, Minister."

"Rosmerta, m'dear, I don't like them any more than you do…"

Hermione sighed, loudly, and resigned herself to her drink, knowing very well that behind the suspiciously-moved Christmas tree, Harry, Ron, and her younger self were listening with burning ears.

"Do you know, I still have trouble believing it," Rosmerta said thoughtfully. "Of all the people to go to the Dark Side, Sirius Black was the last I would have thought… I mean, I remember him when he was a boy at Hogwarts. If you'd told me then what he was going to become, I would have said you'd had too much mead."

"You don't know the half of it, Rosmerta," Fudge responded gruffly. A glance around, and then a wary one at Hermione, before he continued, "The worst he did isn't widely known."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, as if in contraindication. Her gaze slid across the table, filtering out the Minister's next words, and through the branches of the trees, she saw the back of her younger self's head, ears perked in attention. Ron's flaming red hair poked out a foot or two away.

"…Never saw one without the other, did you? The number of times I had them in here—ooh, they used to make me laugh. Quite the double act, Sirius Black and James Potter!"

"Precisely," Minerva said, her words masking the faint clunk of Harry's tankard hitting the floor. "Black and Potter. Ringleaders of their little gang," she said, with a slight nod in Hermione's direction, with a tight smile. "Both very bright, of course—exceptionally bright, in fact—but I don't think we ever had such a pair of troublemakers—"

"I dunno," Hagrid said with a chuckle. "Fred and George Weasley could give 'em a run for their money."

Hermione nodded in agreement. Sirius and James's pranks had been a little less benign than Fred and George's. The former had been more bullies than pranksters, while the latter were friendly, creative jokers through and through. Needless to say, Hermione preferred Fred and George's jokes to that of James and Sirius's.

"…Then they named him godfather to Harry, along with—well—the Professor here," Fudge gave a short jerk of his head in Hermione's direction. "Harry has no idea, of course. You can imagine how the idea would torment him…"

Hermione pressed her lips together in a thin line. She was Harry's godmother, of course, but there had been no need for Fudge to state it so bluntly. She was simply grateful that so far, none of them had named her out loud. Filius took a moment to explain the Fidelius Charm to Rosmerta, and after a moment of confirming the barmaid's whispered inquiry—

"Filthy, stinkin' turncoat!" Hagrid said, so loudly that half the bar suddenly grew quiet.
"Shh!" Hermione insisted.

"I met him!" growled Hagrid. "I musta bin one o' the last ter see him before he killed all them people!"

Hermione winced. *Don't mention me… don't mention me…*

"…an' yeh know what we did? WE COMFORTED THE MURDERIN' TRAITOR!"

*So much for that,* Hermione thought with a wince, as she placed her hand on the half-giant's shoulder in an attempt to calm him.

"Hagrid, please!" Minerva said. "Keep your voice down!

Hermione glanced warily over at the three listening third-years behind the Christmas Tree, and shrank down in her seat, knowing they were now risking turning around in their seats to watch, and praying they would not see her. But Hagrid was not finished—not by a long shot—but he had apparently gotten Hermione's hint to leave her out of it by her hand gripping his arm, for he left her out of the rest of the tale completely, thank Merlin.

A long silence followed the conclusion of Hagrid's tale, and then Rosmerta said, with some satisfaction, "But he didn't manage to disappear, did he? The Ministry of Magic caught up with him the next day!"

"Alas, if only we had," said Fudge bitterly, "It was not we who found him. It was little Peter Pettigrew—another of the Potters' friends. Maddened by grief, no doubt, and knowing that Black had been the Potters' Secret-Keeper, he went after Black himself."

"Pettigrew… that fat little boy who was always tagging around after them at Hogwarts?" asked Madam Rosmerta.

"They grew apart a bit when the Professor here arrived," Filius said, with a discreet nod toward Hermione, who responded with a look of appreciation. "But he was always tagging along…"

"Hero-worshipped Black and Potter," Minerva said. "Never quite in their league, talent-wise. I often felt that was the reason they grew apart, when you came in…"

Hermione's cheeks turned red. It had never occurred to her before now that her presence had been the reason for Pettigrew's distancing from the Marauders—her coldness toward him, the fact that Remus, who had been the only one to ever truly spend time with him, had begun to give her more attention…

"…Well, of course, Black was quicker. Blew Pettigrew to smithereens…"

Minerva pulled out a handkerchief and blew her nose thickly. "Stupid boy… foolish boy… he was always hopeless at dueling… should have left it to the Ministry…"

"I tell yeh, if I'd got ter Black before little Pettigrew did, I wouldn't've messed around with wands— I'd've ripped him limb—from—limb," Hagrid growled.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Hagrid," Fudge said sharply. "Nobody but trained Hit Wizards from the Magical Law Enforcement Squad would have stood a chance against Black once he was cornered. I was Junior Minister in the Department of Magical Catastrophes at the time, and I was one of the first on the scene after Black murdered all those people. I—I will never forget it…"
Hermione sniffled, wiping her sleeve on her nose. A moment later, everyone else had pulled out a handkerchief, and was blowing his or her nose, when Fudge's voice stopped abruptly, cracking.

"Well, there you have it Rosmerta," Fudge said thickly. "Black was taken away by twenty members of the Magical Law Enforcement Squad, and Pettigrew received the Order of Merlin, First Class, which I think was a comfort to his poor mother. Black's been in Azkaban ever since."

Hermione kept her mouth shut, and the Minister's eyes did not quite meet hers.

Rosmerta let out a long sigh.

"Is it true he's mad, Minister?"

"I wish I could say that he was," Fudge said, with a furtive, wary glance at Hermione, who was gazing at him stonily. "I certainly believe his master's defeat unhinged him for a while. The murder of Pettigrew and all those Muggles was the action of a cornered a desperate man—cruel… pointless. Yet I met Black on my last inspection of Azkaban—" he fibbed, adding a bit of lie to the truth, the way politicians were known to do, "You know, most of the prisoners in there sit muttering to themselves in the dark; there's no sense in them… but I was shocked at how normal Black seemed. He spoke quite rationally to me." You mean, Hermione's eyes told him silently, her expression silent and solid, He spoke rationally to me, that day you helped me free him. "Yes, I was astounded at how little effect the Dementors seemed to be having on him—and he was one of the most heavily guarded in the place, you know. Dementors outside his door day and night."

"But what do you think he's broken out to do?" Rosmerta said. "Good gracious, Minister, he isn't trying to rejoin You-Know-Who, is he?"

"I daresay this is his—er—eventual plan," Fudge said evasively. "But we hope to catch Black long before that. I must say, You-Know-Who alone and friendless is one thing… but give him back his most devoted servant, and I shudder to think how quickly he'll rise again…"

Hermione glanced down at her watch, and clinked her glass against the table, causing them all to jump. Minerva spoke up at once.

"You know, Cornelius, if you're dining with the Headmaster, we'd better head back up to the castle…"

One by one, they all rose. Hermione was out the door before the rest, and as soon as she had made it outside, quickly Disillusioned herself. She separated from the rest of the teachers, who all glanced her way but said nothing, and stood outside the door.

Moments later, Hermione watched the door open and then slam shut, invisible footprints stamping furiously through the snow, followed quickly by Granger and Ron. Hermione turned away, and reluctantly ran to catch up to the rest of the teachers and the Minister, knowing that under the Invisibility Cloak, Harry was very, very upset indeed…

~o~O~o~

After dinner that evening, Harry quietly made his way up to his dormitory, where he searched his bedside cabinet for a moment before he found what he was looking for: the leather-bound photo album that Hagrid had given him two years ago, which was full of wizard pictures of his mother and father, the only pictures he had. He sat down on his bed, drew his hangings around him, and started flipping through the pages, until…

He stopped on a picture of his parents' wedding day. There was his father, his mother, their best man
—the man Harry had never given much thought to before now—and the woman beside them...

The news about Black was shocking. His godfather, the best man at his parents' wedding day, who was scarcely recognizable in this photo from the wanted posters, had betrayed his parents. But that woman Harry had heard, the one with the brown eyes and curly hair, whom had only been mentioned as 'The Professor'—she had been his parents' friend too, hadn't she? In fact, if he understood correctly, Fudge had indicated that that woman—the woman whose name he did not know—was his godmother.

*She's alive. She's here. I just saw her—why has she never spoken to me even once?*

Something else that bothered him. His godmother—this woman—was at Hogwarts. He had heard her voice, seen her faintly through the cracks in the wardrobe he and Ron had been hiding in when they were in the staff room. And the year before...

He'd seen her holding a toddler, a toddler with wavy black hair and black eyes, whom she had handed over to Snape—Snape who had taken the boy with so much care, Harry could only assume that the boy was *his*—though the very thought repulsed him to the core. But more to the point, his godmother had been holding him, and the hair—the nose that was certainly *not* Snape's...

He had whispered to Ron, and Ron alone, what he had seen. Ron had been just as shocked as he—("Blimey, you're joking, Harry!") but neither of them knew whether or not Snape had a wife—a kid—a family—Harry just couldn't see it in him. But assuming all of this was true, that his godmother was Snape's *wife*...

It was confusing as hell, not to mention disturbing. He finally had an inkling of someone who was supposed to care for him, someone who was within reach, and yet—yet—

He slammed the leather-bound book shut.

The dormitory door opened.

"Harry?" Ron asked, uncertainly.

"In here," Harry responded dully. The hangings around his bed were pulled aside, and Ron stared down at him. He saw the photo album, and inhaled sharply.

"That stuff we heard earlier—that woman who was there—"

"My godmother," Harry said dully. A pause, and then an idea went through his mind. Black had black hair—the toddler, too, had black hair—perhaps the child was Black's…? But that would not have explained Snape's behavior toward it, nor did that make him feel better. Snape or Black? Both considerations were equally unappetizing. "Ron… d'you remember that woman I told you I saw, back in our first year…"

"That was your godmother with Snape?" Ron said, nose wrinkling.

"And the kid," Harry said. "But that doesn't make much sense, does it? Wouldn't you think my parents would have chosen my godfather and godmother if they were married together, so that I could live with them if—if they died?"

"Well, it doesn't always work that way," Ron said, flopping down on his bed. "But yeah, it would make sense. Be glad you didn't end up with them, though. But—er—you're saying you're trying to figure out whose kid it was?"
"I just thought she was Snape's wife, at first," Harry said grimly. "Y'know, to visit him. But what if she's not?"

Ron looked at him, at first uncomprehending. But he cottoned on quickly.

"Ron—what if she's married to Black?" Harry whispered. "What if that's her kid? And—what if—she's the one who helped him into the castle on Halloween?"

Harry and Ron exchanged identical looks of horror.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione spent Christmas with her son. She placed a temporary Memory Charm on Diane and George, and brought him back with her to Hogwarts. She Flooed him into the school from Spinner's End, by-passing the dementors entirely, and had him waiting in their quarters on Christmas morning for when his father returned. He had brought his puzzles and a knapsack of books with him, and when Severus arrived, it was a touching moment between father and son, when Selenius held out the incomplete, but nearly half-way done book of puzzles Severus had given him.

They spent the entire day in their quarters, cross-legged on the rug with their son, who was happy beyond all possible measure at this reunion. Words could not describe the look of utter joy on his face, and Hermione actually pulled out the camera so that she could get a picture. The fact that they were all together was more of a Christmas present than anything else could have possibly been.

There were less than a dozen students at Hogwarts for the holidays, so Hermione was able to risk bringing Selenius out in broad daylight, taking him up to Remus's office later that evening. He looked slightly drawn and ill, given the fullness of the moon, but he was delighted all the same to meet Hermione's son, and they spent two hours with him, talking and chatting animatedly. Remus summoned a platter of biscuits and a mug of hot chocolate for Selenius, who accepted it happily, munching on the biscuits and sipping his drink while he wandered around the classroom, poking at all sorts of odds and ends while his mother and her long-time friend talked.

He was constantly smiling; the sour, scowling, ill-tempered boy had been immediately replaced with a happy angel, and in Hermione's opinion, there was nothing more she could have asked for Christmas. Yet, she did present her son with a Christmas gift: she had bought him a small toy broomstick, and accompanied by both Severus, Minerva, Remus, and the Headmaster, they all went out to the Quidditch Pitch to let him have a go. There was safety in numbers, and the dementors were rather far off, back at their stations—and they spread themselves out around the field, and Selenius understood that he was not allowed to fly past the circle that they formed.

But the toy broomstick only rose about four feet in the air, and though it zoomed around quickly, it was really very easy to follow. Selenius was having the time of his life; he flew in circles around Remus, then his father, and then he managed to reach up and steal the vulture-topped hat that the Headmaster was still wearing from the earlier morning Christmas celebration. He pulled it down on his head, where it nearly covered his eyes, and Hermione and Remus dissolved into peals of laughter while Severus tried to convince his son to wear something else instead. He even went so far as to switch the vulture-topped hat with Minerva's plain black one, which went over very well: Minerva sourly stuffed the hat back onto the Headmaster's head, while Selenius flew around the pitch wearing hers.

They stayed out there for quite a while; Filius and Pomona eventually ventured down, bundled up against the cold, to watch. Severus stood there idly looking through the puzzle book his son had handed back, smirking as he registered the near-meticulous work that was almost identical in style to his own, though certainly in clumsier handwriting. In this distance, barely noticeable unless you were actively searching for it, a faint orange blurr sat beside a large, shaggy black dog, watching the whole thing.
It was a spectacular Christmas. Hermione set up a kip bed for him in the living room, with cozy blankets and the fireplace warmly lit. The next morning, they all had breakfast there; Selenius unwrapped the gift Severus had gotten for him, which he had wanted to save for after the novelty of the broomstick wore off.

It was a book of wizarding puzzles. It was the equivalent of Muggle Sudoku, but with roughly ten-thousand compressed pages of words and Arithmantic numbers instead, requiring the simplest, most elementary forms of Arithmantic equations, and basic knowledge of the Wizarding world. It might have been rather complicated to give to a seven-year-old, except that he also gave him several other books to go along with it, all of which were meant to help with research. An Arithmancy book designed for beginners and the latest edition of *Encyclopedia Magica* were among them, and Selenius dove into them almost immediately with the same kind of hunger for knowledge that Hermione herself had once exhibited.

"You'll have to hide this from Diane and George," Hermione warned him, as she collected the wrapping paper up by hand to throw away.

"I know, mum," Selenius said, opening up the book of *Encyclopedia Magica* and scanning through it, black eyes shining brightly with undisguised delight. "I'll hide it under my bed."

Hermione frowned. "Doesn't Diane ever check under there?"

"Not anymore," Selenius responded happily, examining the book with interest. "She knows I'll throw a fit."

Indeed, it seemed that all Selenius needed to do was threaten to throw a fit, and if they was within reasonable grounds, Diane would follow his requests. Such things did not work with Hermione nor Severus, but such situations had not come up yet. Selenius did not threaten to throw a fit when Hermione dropped by; he was sad and upset, to say the least, but he did not throw a temper tantrum to try and get his way. He simply did not. Selenius did not respect nor like his foster parents very much, despite the fact that they were very kind to him, and he was not above manipulating them. He was touchy and edgy around them, and wanted to be left alone. He was the exact opposite with his real parents, and frankly, his finicky behavior could not help reminding Hermione of Severus. It was just simply very much like him.

While Hermione knew that after the disaster with the Firebolt—a Firebolt she had helped order, and a Firebolt her younger self would end up arranging to be stripped for jinxes—tension would be high and Christmas spirit would be low up in Gryffindor Tower, it was certainly quite the polar opposite situation down in the dungeons with her son. Yet, all good things came to an end; Hermione arranged to take Selenius back to Diane and George's after the New Year, with his new books. She kept the toy broomstick, promising she would bring it with her when she next visited, and Selenius was unhappy but satisfied with this answer. He got to keep all his books, however, and Hermione gave him a tiny, four-page album with pictures that she had taken and developed over the last three days of their vacation. The warning for him to keep it hidden was unnecessary; he kept it pressed firmly to his chest, and Hermione actually feared what he would do if anyone else touched it. He treated it similarly to the way Hermione knew Harry treated the photo album she and Hagrid had put together, but perhaps with several shades more intensity.

She removed the temporary charm she had placed on her aunt and uncle, after helping Selenius put his new things away, and giving him a good-bye kiss.

Severus was genuinely depressed and in a blacker mood than Hermione had seen him in for quite some time once Selenius was gone, and Hermione was equally heartbroken. They'd gotten an entire Christmas with their son, a very special treat considering their circumstances, and it was more than
either of them could have hoped for. It had certainly cheered Selenius up, and given him something special to hang onto for the rest of the year. Hermione was actually considering bringing him home to Spinner's End for the summer, and that was where she began placing most of her research focus on: long-term memory charms that could be placed over already-existing memory charms, for the explicit purpose of moving Selenius in and out of their lives for short periods of time.

She had seriously planned, at first, to remove Selenius from their lives and keep him with her aunt and uncle for the duration of the time she and Severus were dealing with Harry, the Dark Lord, and school. It had been a good plan in theory—but Selenius's reticence and inability to integrate himself into Diane and George's family, as well as the fact that is was simply too difficult for Hermione to completely give up her child. Severus, too. Now they were going back on their original plan while they could still alter it.

Deep down, she also felt middling guilt at what she was doing to Diane and George, but she was able to shove it aside for the time being.

Hermione was certain—no, she knew—that once Voldemort returned, things were going to go very differently. She also knew that once she placed herself back into her proper timeline, things could be done differently as she no longer had to hide. The two things correlated very clearly in her mind, yet she knew not what the precise end-result would be.

Harry and Ron's concerns about the anti-jinx tests that his new Firebolt would be going through seemed rather paltry in comparison—and the way they were treating her younger self seemed childish and selfish.

Hermione helped Remus strip the castle for another boggart, for Harry's lesson, and after detecting one in Filch's filing cabinet—something that signaled just how long Filch had not gone through said filing cabinet—she helped Remus extract and transfer it into the cupboard under his desk.

"You're going to teach Harry the Patronus Charm?"

"He wants to learn, and frankly, given the boy's reaction to the foul things, I think he should," Remus stated, straightening with a sigh as the boggart rattled in the cupboard for a moment before falling silent. He glanced over at Hermione. "I know I can—d'you?"

Hermione smiled. Pointing her wand, remembering the wonderful Christmas she had spent with her husband, son, and her closest colleagues and friends, she took a single step forward and flicked her wand.

"Expecto Patronum!"

The silvery form burst forth from the tip of her wand, the same as it had when she had gone to get Sirius out of Azkaban. It was foggy around the edges, somewhat undefined, but there was no denying the large, sleek, feline form. What it was, precisely, Hermione was not certain. It landed gracefully on the desk, and then leapt down and padded once around the room, and vanished. Remus applauded.

"Excellent! Not that I expected any less of you—you were always the best in your class, no doubt about that… although I have to say there's definitely room for improvement…"

There was a pause at that, and then quite suddenly, Remus asked, "Do you think I should tell Dumbledore?"

"Tell... what?" Hermione asked, quiet thrown off by this seemingly random question.
"About Sirius." She raised her eyebrow at this, and he clarified further, "I... we both know Sirius is an Animagus, but we've never told the headmaster..." he fiddled with his wand for a moment, and then said, "I've been debating with myself whether I should tell him or not— tell him that I broke his trust in me, when he let me attend this school as a student, knowing my werewolf status..."

"Do you think that's how he got into the castle? As an Animagus?" Hermione asked carefully.

Remus hesitated, and then shook his head. "No. Even if he was getting past the dementors, Filch is guarding all the passageways he could possibly come through." He frowned, and turned away, now muttering, more to himself than to Hermione, "There has to be another way he got in last time... with some Dark Magic, perhaps; maybe he broke one of the wards... I certainly don't see how being a dog would get through all those protections..."

Hermione remained silent, and left Remus to argue with himself alone.

Several weeks later, Hermione charged Crookshanks with the task of sneaking into the Gryffindor Common Room and stealing the list of passwords Neville Longbottom had written down. Hermione's mind returned guiltily to the letters and photos of his parents she intended to give him, but she could not give them up yet: she couldn't part with them. Crookshanks was successful with his mission, and returned with the list of passwords clenched firmly between his teeth, which he deposited in Hermione's lap.

Hermione then delivered it directly to Sirius. After warning him to be careful, and she stole back to the castle. Her warning either went unheeded or was simply useless; before the Quidditch match, Scabbers had fled and made himself scarce, leaving behind an apparent death-trail, which Sirius followed, thereby drawing even more attention to himself, and causing more alarm. Alarm that elicited the arrival of hired security trolls, which served to do nothing but terrify poor Neville, who was forbidden to be given the password to Gryffindor Tower, and had to rely on someone else—usually Granger—to let him in at night after his detentions.

Hermione managed to pay Hagrid and Buckbeak a visit; the poor Hippogriff was facing execution, and though Hermione knew he would managed to get away unscathed, at the moment, his future was uncertain. Granger, Hermione knew, was overworking herself to the point of emotional breakdown, and yet still found time to try and develop a good appeal for Buckbeak.

Hermione knew Harry would try to get into Hogsmeade again, and in an effort to make sure that did not happen, she advised Severus to patrol the corridor where the statue of the One-Eyed Witch stood. He came back furious and triumphant; on one hand, Harry had managed to slip through the first time around. On the second hand, he now had proof that he had been sneaking into Hogsmeade in the first place. Hermione was treated to a view of the entire memory through Legilimency, and though she was glad that Severus had caught him, his behavior left something to be desired.

But at this point, Hermione could not complain about his attitude. He was a strict, unfair, and thoroughly nasty git toward the majority of the students, and that was something she had finally come to terms with. And to top it all off, Harry's behavior was certainly grounds to fuel his exasperation and frustration: he was not wrong when he sneered that Harry thought that he was a law unto himself, though it was an exaggeration. Harry was certainly breaking the rules without regard for the consequences, but it was not because he thought himself above everyone else.

Hermione did, however, remind Severus of the time they had snuck out to Diagon Alley for his birthday.

Nevertheless, the way he had provoked Harry bothered her still. If he wanted to be an arse to Harry Potter, by all means, let him. But Hermione did not think it appropriate nor called for to throw James
Potter's name into his son's face. He had used James Potter's memory with malice and derision, something Hermione neither thought that James nor Harry deserved. James had been a bully and a prat, but he had also turned into a good, if somewhat rash and reckless man, and Hermione still missed his friendship.

"You shouldn't take James's name in vain," she told him that very same evening.

"Don't start treating him as though he were Merlin himself," Severus snarled.

Hermione squared her shoulders. "No, but he was my friend, and he died protecting his wife and son," she told him stiffly. "I should think that would merit a bit more respect, even from you."

Severus's gaze faltered slightly at this, and Hermione knew she had hit a sore spot. She pressed on.

"I know Harry is breaking rules and ignoring the seriousness of the consequences—and for goodness sake, get him for that. But don't taunt him with his father's name to do it."

Severus glowered at her, but relented. Hermione knew it would not stop him from doing it permanently, but it would at least rein in his tendency to use that particular weapon against Harry.

"Not to mention," Hermione added as an afterthought, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, "that James only came to get me because he knew I was the one who could stop you in time. But it's a shame you can't tell him the real story."

A pause, and then Severus leaned back in his chair, one hand coming up behind him to cup Hermione's cheek.

"That bit of old parchment Potter was carrying about was written by your friends," Severus responded with a frustrated sigh. "Lupin came by to rescue Potter and the blasted thing, but there's no mistaking the names."

Hermione's face twisted into a sympathetic smile. "I take it they were not very complimentary, when you tried to force the parchment to—ah—reveal its true nature?"

Severus's expression soured even further, if that were possible.

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And several weeks later, news spread among the staff and students that Hermione Granger had stormed out of Divination class. Severus actually clapped rather sardonically at this, and Remus could not help but find great amusement in it. Minerva gave her a small smile of approval.

Trelawney was highly affronted. Hermione and Granger both frankly couldn't have cared less.

The Gryffindor versus Slytherin match commenced, and thought it turned out to be a rather dirty game, Gryffindor won in the end, if the cheers hailing the end of the match were anything to go by. Hermione could hear them all the way up from the tower. Exam week followed not long after, and a sort of depressed silence seemed to fall over the castle for the duration. Hermione remained ensconced in the castle at that time, not wanting to run into any of the dementors, who were once again becoming edgy and restless. Sirius had been helping her achieve her Animagus form, but such an accomplishment would take a good chunk of time to complete, and there was only so much that his tutoring could give her. She had gone to Minerva for additional assistance, but that did not speed up the process; it would happen in due time, and Hermione was working steadily toward her goal. Either way, it seemed that it would not happen before the dementors were sent away at the end of the year.
The day of Buckbeak's execution, Hermione paced to corridors agitatedly. When Harry finally half-ran, half-walked past her, looking just as bothered as she herself was, and Hermione, for lack of something better to do, followed him to Gryffindor Tower.

She stopped short of the security trolls and waited, wrinkling her nose in distaste as the grunted at each other and compared the size of their clubs. How Barnabas the Barmy could have ever conceived the idea of teaching trolls to dance, Hermione hadn't a clue. But when her younger self reappeared a few moments later, no doubt off to get the Invisibility Cloak, Hermione wheeled around and began making her way down the stairs. She reached the doors to the Entrance Hall just as she saw her younger self coming back, and she slipped quietly outside, and began making her way down toward the Whomping Willow.

Sirius was already waiting for her there, just out of the reach of the currently immobile branches, and they both stood there watched as the Cloak was slipped off the three third-years, before Hagrid let them inside his hut.

"Is there no end to this madness?" Sirius asked hoarsely. "First they send me to Azkaban, then they give Pettigrew an Order of Merlin… and now they're going to execute a Hippogriff?"

"He'll get away by the end of the night," Hermione whispered. "Of course, a lot of things are going to happen tonight…"

Sirius watched as Harry, Ron, and Hermione's younger self all vanished out the door just as the Committee people entered, and then Hermione smiled as Sirius's eyes widened as something even more shocking occurred: a few moments later, Harry and Granger slipped out of the trees, and began trying to lead Buckbeak away. The Hippogriff was not making it particularly easy, but within a few moments, they were leading him out into the woods.

"This is bizarre—! What—?"

"I told you a lot of things are going to happen tonight…"

"And you're still trying to convince me you're not a seer?" Sirius said. He shook his head. "Go on inside. I'll be there in just a moment."

"I'm waiting out here," Hermione stated.

Sirius let out a grunt of approval, and then a moment later, had transformed back into a shaggy black dog. He began bounding in the direction of the three of them, silent as a shadow, and then the sounds of growling and several thuds reverberated through the growing darkness—

Hermione dashed out of reach of the now-moving Willow, Disillusioning herself, and ducked down low in the distance as she watched Sirius drag Ron into the depths of the Whomping Willow. Harry and Hermione clumsily tried to get inside after being unceremoniously struck by the waving branches. She stood there patiently, and a moment later, Crookshanks dove into the fray, pressing his paw against the knot of the tree before slipping inside himself.

"Crookshanks!" Granger whispered uncertainly, gripping Harry's arm. "How did he know—?"

"He's friends with that dog," Harry said grimly. "I've seen them together. Come on—and keep your wand out—"

They slipped inside the tunnel, and all was silent once more. The Committee and the Minister, along with Dumbledore, began making their way back up to the castle. Quiet moments later, Remus appeared from the castle, prodded the knot on the tree, and vanished; Hagrid came striding up toward
the castle, singing and weaving slightly as he walked, swinging a large bottle of mulled mead. In the
distance of the woods, Hermione saw herself, Buckbeak, and Harry in the far distance, nearly
invisible, but she could see them.

Things suddenly began moving quickly again. The castle doors were slammed open, and Hermione
saw her husband charging down in her direction, straight for the Willow. Hermione jogged over
toward the entrance of the Willow, where he skidded to a halt, peering around in the darkness.

"Severus," Hermione whispered.

His head jerked her direction in surprise, having difficulty detecting her Disillusioned form in the
dark, but his black eyes glittered unmistakably. He bent down and grabbed the Invisibility Cloak
Harry had dropped, examining it even as he spoke out of the corner of his mouth.

"Hermione, if there was ever a time to tell me what's going on—"

"Just don't act too rashly," Hermione begged. "Please."

"Potter—Black, Lupin—Granger and Weasley—"

"There's a very good explanation for all of this, I assure you."

"They're going to be killed!" he hissed, pulling the Cloak over his head, covering him from her eyes.

"No, they won't. I'm still alive, aren't I?"

Without another word, Severus seized the same branch that Remus had used to freeze the tree, and
slipped inside. Hermione was left alone once more, only the presence of her younger self, godson,
and the fugitive hippogriff in the distance for company. She took a seat next to the entrance of the
tree and prodded the base every so often to keep it from re-activating, and picked through her
memories of what she knew would happen tonight. The frightened look on their faces as Sirius
revealed himself to them… then Remus's appearance… and finally Severus's…

Hermione winced. Severus would have been slammed against the wall and knocked out by now.
About an hour later, Hermione stood up quickly and got out of the way as Remus, Ron, and
Pettigrew all clambered awkwardly out from the hole in the roots of the tree. Pettigrew was trembling
and wheezing; Ron looked pale and in some degree of pain, given the state of his leg. Severus also
appeared a moment later, unconscious, and Hermione bit her lower lip as she saw Harry and Sirius
appear a moment later.

They began to make their way back toward the castle, and Hermione slowly followed, knowing
what would happen…

A cloud shifted, finally revealing the presence of the full moon, and Hermione watched as the figures
stopped. Remus went rigid, and then began to shake violently. Crookshanks fluffed up, hair on end,
and began backing away as his body elongated and shifted painfully into that of a werewolf—

The shouting of spells, the confusing flash of light, and Hermione saw Pettigrew's bald tail snaking
through the grass. Hermione wheeled around in time to see Sirius lunge at Remus, knocking him to
the ground, both snarling and clawing at each other. Hermione reached down and picked up a rock,
chucking it at Remus; a moment later, she was running away in the direction of the woods, an
enraged and howling werewolf on her heels.

Hermione was suddenly very grateful that she had resumed her training with Severus; had she not,
her stamina would not have been up to scratch, and she couldn't use her wand until she had made it
to the edge of the forest. She slipped and skidded on the wet ground in the dark, and the snapping and snarling of teeth behind her did nothing to calm her nerves—

Hermione reached the edge of the woods in time to trip over a tree root, and she slammed into the ground. Pulling out her wand, she rolled over on the forest floor, and brandished it at the oncoming werewolf.

"Petrificus totalus!"

The werewolf froze, stiff as a board, and Hermione shakily stood up. He was in mid-lunge, back legs planted in the ground and one forepaw in the air, ready to lunge and claw her to pieces…

The spell would wear off on its own, though hopefully not for a good, long while. Hermione brushed the dirt from her robes, and dashed back toward where Severus had been left hanging. He was still there, floating a foot or two off the ground, his limbs suspended by invisible ropes and his head lolling slightly to the side, chin pressed against his chest. Hermione quickly got him down, lowering him gently to the ground, and then tried shaking him awake.

"Severus—Severus—"

He didn't stir. The blood on the back of his head from where he had been slammed against the wall had begun to cake and dry, and the injury did not look all that bad, but Hermione tilted his head to the side and tapped it with her wand.

"Episkey," she whispered.

The wound healed immediately. Hermione tried shaking him awake again, but after a second time with no response, she once again flicked her wand, pointing it straight at his heart.

"Oh, for goodness sake—Ennervate!"

His eyes fluttered, and he sat up with a groan, gripping the back of his head.

"You… blasted…"

"Can I tell you I'm sorry later?" Hermione said, pulling him to his feet. "I've taken care of Remus—he's transformed, but I've got him Petrified for now. We need to get down to the lake."

Severus snarled something underneath his breath, but as soon as Hermione summoned his wand for him, he conjured up a stretcher for the limp, spell-dazed form of Ron. Standing up with a wince—Hermione was certain that his head must be throbbing painfully—he took a step forward in the direction of the lake, and stopped abruptly.

At the edge of the lake, hundreds of dementors were swarming in on the distant forms of Harry, Hermione, and Sirius. Severus raised his wand, about to cast his own Patronus, when Hermione placed her hand against his.

"Harry's got it," she told him. "We just need to get down there and get them all once the dementors have gone."

"Potter can cast—?"

"He can now," Hermione told him, tugging insistently on his sleeve. "Let's go."

Snarling something under his breath, Severus began to make his way down toward the lake,
Hermione following silently at his side. Scant moments later, a brilliant bright light emanated from where the dementors had been, and they all scattered quite suddenly. They flew off in all directions, and the ones that came by them ignored Hermione, Severus, and Ron completely, trying to get away from the source of the Patronus as quickly as possible.

"Unbelievable," Severus muttered, as they reached the bank. "Potter."

He began conjuring another set of stretchers, and lifted the limp forms onto them. He bound and gagged Sirius—which was unnecessary, in Hermione's eyes, but she did not argue. Hermione glanced once at the opposite end of the bank where she knew Harry and Granger were, but she was invisible to them, and they had already ducked down; his wand held aloft in front of him, Severus gave Hermione a short jerk of his head to signal that it was time to go, and she followed.

"Severus," Hermione said evenly, as they approached the castle. "You must listen to me very carefully. The events of tonight are not over yet, and what you'll have to report to the Minister has to be edited—he can't know that Pettigrew is alive, or that Sirius is actually innocent."

Severus scoffed. "Black? Innocent? Are you out of your mind, Hermione?"

Hermione gave him a stony glare. "Sirius didn't betray James and Lily, Severus."

"Eyewitnesses saw—"

"Pettigrew tricked them."

Severus bared his teeth. "Black—entering Gryffindor Tower with a knife, slashing the Fat Lady—"

"Sirius has not acted like an innocent man," Hermione agreed quietly, "but he is not guilty of the crimes he was put away for. He is innocent, Severus, yet if things are to go the way they're supposed to tonight, you cannot tell anyone."

"Supposed to…?" Severus let out a sound of agitation. "What more could possibly be done? Don't tell me you're planning on rescuing Black, once we get back to the castle!"

"I'm not," Hermione told him easily.

Severus stared at her, and Hermione saw rage in his eyes. Frankly, she was not surprised. After tonight, for him to be angry was rather expected.

"I'll explain everything to you later—in the morning," she told him firmly. "But right now, I'm telling you, as your handler, what you must do for everything to go as it should. It's not my fault that things have to be this way."

For a moment, it looked like he was going to start yelling at her again—again for him, because he had been shouting at the three third-years in the Shrieking Shack for the better part of the time that he was down there and conscious—but he simply let out a sound of frustration, and stalked up the steps leading to the Entrance Hall.

"Alright," he said resignedly. "Tell me."

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The roar of distant fury that echoed through the castle was not fabricated; after the events of tonight, the fact that Severus had truly lost all patience with the way time and fate were having fun at his expense truly lent itself to this moment. Hermione could not help but wince as she nibbled on some
of the chocolate that she had nicked from Poppy's stash, and she was sitting on the ground against the wall opposite of the doors leading to the Hospital Wing. She was the first to see Severus turn the corner and stride toward the Hospital Wing, followed by the Minister, the look on his face one of pure, unadulterated rage.

"He must have Disapparated, Severus. We should have left somebody in the room with him," Fudge said, obviously more concerned with the way the public would react to this than the fact that there was a dangerous would-be murderer on the loose. "When this gets out—"

"HE DIDN'T DISAPPARATE!" Severus roared, stopping to round on the Minister. Dumbledore took a little step to the side so that Severus would not accidentally—or, at this point, not so accidentally—knock him over. Hermione placed her hands over her ears and squeezed her eyes shut, trying to drown out the volume. "YOU CAN'T APPARATE OR DISAPPARATE INSIDE THIS CASTLE!" He turned away, storming off toward the doors to the Hospital Wing. "THIS—HAS—SOMETHING—TO—DO—WITH—POTTER!"

"Severus—be reasonable—Harry has been locked up—"

BAM.

Hermione stood up with a sigh, and quickly retreated down toward the other end of the hall as Severus slammed the door open. Her last glimpse of Dumbledore was of him looking calm, even cheerfully pleased with himself, something that Severus probably found more infuriating than anything else. Fudge merely looked angry and self-lambasting.

Severus, however, was enraged beyond comprehension.

Hermione was already around the other corner, hands still pressed firmly against her ears, when she heard Severus confront Harry.

"Out with it, Potter! What did you do?"

Still wincing at the volume level, and knowing that she was the one who was going to have to deal with Severus later, Hermione made her way out to the courtyard for some fresh air.

Later—it must have been around three o'clock in the morning—Hermione was in their quarters, sitting in a chair by their bed while Severus slept. Oddly, she was not tired, but when Severus had finally staggered into their quarters some time earlier, it was clear to her that he had been pushed to his limits. If Hermione had not helped him to bed, she suspected he would have simply collapsed onto one of the arm chairs in the living room and fallen asleep right there and then.

It was at moments like these that Hermione could see where Selenius got his temper from. Severus was going to be just as angry in the morning as he had been tonight, for Hermione fully intended to come clean to him, but at this point, she really couldn't blame him. He had gone down to the Shrieking Shack with the intention of stopping Harry from being murdered, and was instead confronted by both Sirius and Remus—and a trio of students who had no intention of being rescued. Admittedly, he had been an unreasonable, unmitigated git about the entire thing, but from his point of view, it had started going downhill from there. Add to the fact that he'd been smacked against the wall and given a concussion—a concussion that had not been helped by the events following Sirius's return to the castle. It occurred to Hermione that she probably should have tried to take care of the concussion after sealing the wound, but she had been in a bit of a hurry at the time…

Frankly, tonight had simply been one disaster after another for him. That was how it was supposed to go, but Hermione still could not help feeling a bit sorry for him. He was her husband, after all.
She stroked his hair while he slept, and it was a mark of how deeply asleep he was that he did not stir. With a sigh, Hermione eventually stood up, and got ready for bed herself. Crawling into place next to him, she pulled the covers over them both, and tried to get some sleep before she would have to commence the apocalyptic discussion that she knew they were going to have tomorrow.

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Severus pinched the bridge of his nose with disbelief as Hermione finished speaking. The shirt he had been shaking out so that he could put it on dropped from his hands, crumpling into a pile on the floor, and he took a seat on one of the armchairs.

"So you see, Sirius was innocent," Hermione repeated. "I—I just saved him from spending twelve years in Azkaban that he didn't deserve, and I couldn't tell you then because I was certain that you would react—well—the same way you reacted in the Shack. He's with Buckbeak now, in the Headmaster's hands. He's—he's probably going back to Tine Cottage, for a bit."

Severus didn't respond.

"Severus?" Hermione prodded carefully. He looked up at her, unsmiling and unspeaking. "Are you alright?"

He shook his head, and glanced down blearily at her watch, trying to read the time upside-down. "No, but I still have to get up and act as though I am." He paused. "I'm allowed—no, supposed—to let slip that Lupin is a werewolf?"

"Yes," Hermione stated. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Fix my pounding headache, for which you are partially responsible for."

Hermione frowned, and came to kneel by his chair. "How long have you had it for?"

"Since being slammed against the wall of the Shrieking Shack," Severus snapped tiredly.

"Go see Poppy," Hermione urged.

"I have my Slytherins to attend to—"

Hermione stood up, pulling him to his feet. She picked up his shirt and started helping him into it, before going to the fireplace and collecting a bit of Floo powder.

"It won't kill you to stop by the Hospital Wing before breakfast. Let's go."

She had explained everything to him. From hiding Sirius for eight years, to the fact that Sirius had escaped on Buckbeak with Harry and Granger's help. Everything. It was a mark of how tired Severus was, along with everything else currently plaguing him, that he did not explode at this revelation. He could accept what she had done the same way Hermione accepted his behavior toward the students, but it would require further explanation and reconciliation later. Right now, they still had work to do, façades to uphold.

Severus arrived upstairs in the Great Hall a bit late, but he did his bit in the damage soon enough. Hermione went to pay Remus a visit before he left, knowing there was nothing to be done, but still knowing that there was a chance—a slim chance—of getting one thing done right out of the year.

"Remus," she said, intercepting him at the courtyard.
"Hermione," he returned, setting his case down and turning to look at her. There was a bandage on his face, from where Sirius had slashed him in their fight, but he otherwise looked quite alright, albeit a bit tired. "I suppose you're here to convince me to change my mind?"

"No point, as you've already resigned," Hermione said, pulling him into a hug. "But I just want you to know that Sirius—Sirius is probably at Tine Cottage, if you want to visit him, and tell you that you had better start writing to me again."

Remus pulled her against him tightly, squeezing hard. "I will. I shouldn't have stopped writing in the first place, but I—oh, sod it, there's no excuse," he said, with a wry smile as they released each other. "But I'll be sure to keep up with you. And I'll stop by to see Sirius, too."

"If you're both going to stay there this summer, I'll try to bring Selenius by," Hermione told him seriously. There was no need to lower her voice; nearly all the students were at Hogsmeade on a visit right now. "Oh, I know I'm going back on my word that I'd have him grow up with my aunt and uncle but—I just can't… I'm going to try and have him stay with us, this summer."

"I'm sure he'll be delighted—we all will," Remus said, smiling. "Although I don't know if Severus will appreciate that."

"I'll speak to Severus," Hermione said firmly. "You just take care of yourself."

"Thank him for brewing the Wolfsbane Potion for me all year, would you?"

"Absolutely." Hermione pulled him into another hug, and then let him go. "Good bye, Remus."

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The first day back at Spinner's End, which was roughly a week after the students had left Hogwarts, Hermione and Severus sat down and had a talk. The previous day had not been the anniversary they had otherwise planned for, but both of them had gotten through the end of the year's disaster well enough. With the consideration of Selenius soon coming to stay with them, that alone seemed to be consolation enough for an otherwise missed celebration.

"Things are going to get more complicated the closer we get to 1996," Hermione told Severus as she lay down on the sheepskin rug, digging her fingers in the wool. "You won't like a lot of the things that need to be done—and neither and I—but I've already had to take out my notebook and start writing in it again." She let out a hollow laugh. "To record everything, you know, just so we don't forget—the details can get so muddled up with time…"

"I played the part you told me to play," Severus told her sourly. His face was paler than ever, his expression tight-lipped. "I will continue to play it—not that it's all that difficult, given who it's for. But this is another issue of me not having enough warning."

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. "I told you earlier this year that there would be a bit of a disaster with Peter Pettigrew—I already told you that he was Ron's rat, so that you would be on your guard to play the part of the loyal Death Eater. But beyond that…"

Severus closed his eyes. "I feel as though I'm operating half-blind."

"So am I!" Hermione insisted, frustrated. "I'm the one who has to make all the decisions—and one little slip-up means I could change everything irrevocably!"

"And I'm the one who has to play the designated role with what little I have to go on!"
"Neither of us like the situation we're in—don't take it out on me!"

Severus clenched his teeth. "What I'm trying to say is that more information would be appreciated!"

"There is such a thing as knowing too much," Hermione responded tightly.

There was a moment of tension, strung enough that it could have been cut with a knife, and then it vanished a moment later when Severus capitulated. "You're right. I understand I may not like it, but it's how it is..."

Hermione nodded, biting her lower lip now and fiddling with her watch. "We should figure out what we're going to do with Selenius, this summer. I've already figured out what's needed to make it possible to remove him for the summer."

"How are your aunt and uncle going to explain his absence away?"

Hermione gave him a guilty look. "They'll think they've sent him off to a summer camp for difficult cases."

"Merlin's..."

"Given his behavior over the last year, it wouldn't be all that unusual," Hermione said nervously. "I'm planning on Confunding them so that they'll think they're at their wits end with him."

"Hermione, he's only seven, almost eight." Severus raised an eyebrow. "He's a bit young to be a juvenile delinquent."

"That doesn't matter—they're still at their wits end."

Severus shook his head, yet a small smirk of amusement was tugging at his lips.

Hermione fetched Selenius from her aunt and uncle's a week later. The entire thing went rather smoothly: Hermione walked in the door and immediately Petrified her relatives, and then calmly sent Selenius upstairs to fetch his things. He was back down in record time, and to Hermione it was almost as though he thought she might leave without him if he took too long—and after checking his knapsack, Hermione went upstairs to help him pack a few more things.

They left roughly a quarter of an hour later. When they returned to Spinner's End, Selenius dropped everything and tackled his father scarcely before the latter had time to turn around and see who it was. Hermione couldn't keep the grin off her face as she watched him lift Selenius up into his arms, whereupon the little boy wrapped his arms around Severus's neck and hugged him. Selenius was getting a bit too heavy for her to carry, but obviously not for her husband. Hermione went upstairs to help him pack a few more things.

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By evening, he had gotten his answers back, and was already begging his mother for a turn on his toy broomstick. She relented, but he couldn't fly it through the house, and the neighborhood was too
inhabited by Muggles to allow it outside.

"We'll have to take him to Tine Cottage," Hermione told Severus.

Her husband snarled in response, knowing exactly who would be there.

"I'll stay here in my lab," he told her sourly.

Hermione didn't try to persuade him otherwise. "We'll only be gone for a few hours."

"I'll get some work done."

"There are some games at Tine Cottage—some Exploding Snap in the closet. We'll bring the set back with us."

At this, one of Severus's eyebrows rose thoughtfully. "We don't have a chess set, do we?"

"Not that I recall, no…"

As before, when Selenius was home, he was smiling in a way so unlike anything Hermione had ever seen. He never smiled so easily, so brightly, at his relatives' house. Yet, when she grabbed his broomstick and Apparated the two of them to Tine Cottage, he was grinning from ear to ear.

The reason Selenius had always been allowed at Tine Cottage was because Hermione had been there with him while she was pregnant. It was one of the few exceptions to the Fidelius Charm. The Secret was passed on to him through her, and furthermore, now that Flamel and his wife were dead, everyone who had known the Secret previously had been made Secret Keeper. That included Hermione and, along with the other Order members, Selenius.

It also included Pettigrew too, the slimeball. Furthermore, it explained to her why Tine Cottage was not the Headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix when Hermione and her two friends were first introduced to the concept. Tine Cottage was dangerously compromised; Pettigrew could tell Voldemort how to get there, and just about anyone else. It was far easier to build up on the protections already on Grimmauld Place rather than try to restore the ones on the Cottage. Additionally, Grimmauld Place was in London, making it easier for people to go out of their way to stop by.

The minute the appeared, Sirius and Remus stepped out of the cottage to see Selenius hop onto the broomstick. Sirius's waxy and sunken face was smiling as he leaned against the doorframe to watch, and Remus had shoved his hands into his pockets, wearing a wry smile. Selenius flew in a tight circle around him twice, and then headed off in the direction of the distant beach.

"Don't go too far!" Hermione called, but Remus placed a hand on her shoulder.

"It's alright, Hermione. The area is practically deserted. No one will see him."

And Selenius, it seemed, was having the time of his life.

"So," Hermione said, after a pause in which Selenius curved back around and began flying in their direction again, "how has Harry been?"

"According to him, his cousin has been put on a diet, and his relatives expect him to survive the summer on rabbit food," Sirius responded cheerfully. "He says that Molly's cooking has risen to the occasion quite admirably—fruit cake and some meat pies. He's surviving."
Hermione giggled. "Sounds like he's doing just fine. Where's Buckbeak, by the way?"

"Oh," Sirius said. "He's inside. I've set him up in one of the old bedrooms. He's quite comfortable, actually."

"We have to stop by the woods every so often to hunt squirrels for him, but it's not so bad," Remus said, smiling. "Sirius makes a very good hunting dog."

Sirius gave them both a wolfish grin, and the next moment, a shaggy black dog was bounding after the boy on the broomstick, barking happily. Selenius merely laughed and leaned lower on his broomstick, urging it to more speed as the playful hound began to catch up.

"The Quidditch World Cup is taking place sometime around mid-August," Remus observed, as though suddenly struck by a thought. "You might consider taking him."

Hermione bit her lower lip thoughtfully. Tickets were expensive, and there was no way she could afford top box tickets like the ones she had been treated to the summer of her fourth year, but they were not so far out of her reach that she couldn't treat her son to a once-in-a-lifetime event. They would have to leave immediately after, following the game, but the match itself was benign and perfectly good entertainment…

"I'll think about it," she said.

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Hermione and Severus were awoken by Selenius pushing open the door to their room at roughly seven o'clock in the morning, waving the *Daily Prophet* excitedly. He ducked over to Severus's side, pulled himself half-onto the bed, confronting his father's sour, sleepy face.

"The Quidditch World Cup—the Quidditch World Cup—can I go?"

Severus let out a ragged sound of frustration and leaned over to snatch the paper from his son's hand to peruse it himself. His first reaction was to snarl at Selenius to go back to sleep or to simply go away, but he suppressed the urge in favor of finding out what, precisely, had set his normally quiet son off. Selenius, impatient for an answer, immediately ran around to the other side of the bed, pulling himself halfway-up so that his legs were dangling an inch or two off the floor.

"Can I go, mum? Can I?"

Hermione, who had tried to bury her face back into her pillow with the prayer that Severus would take care of whatever it was, reluctantly came to the realization that it was not going to happen, and twisted over to sleepily look at the newspaper in her husband's hands.

"Why not?" she asked.

"It's expensive and a waste of time and money," Severus sneered, shoving the paper onto the floor and laying his head back down. "Mostly of the latter, but the wasting of the former is enough irritation in of itself."

"But it's two weeks before my birthday!" Selenius protested, undeterred.

"He's right, you know," Hermione said, "and we won't get to do anything for his birthday because that's the day he has to go back."

Severus turned around to glare at her, and then turned to look at Selenius.
"Your mother and I will discuss it," he muttered.

Selenius opened his mouth as though considering making his case further, but he snapped it shut instead. He quickly picked up the scattered pages of the *Daily Prophet* from the floor, and then left the room, almost bouncing on the balls of his feet as he went.

Severus pulled the covers more securely over his shoulder, snarling something under his breath that Hermione found to be as equally unintelligible as she was certain it was unpleasant, and then made to go back to sleep.

"You know," Hermione murmured. "I could probably reimburse the cost of the tickets alone just by placing bets on the match."

There was a moment of pause, and then the sheets twisted as Severus turned around to look at her, his expression no longer sullen but considering.

"How much are the tickets?"

"I don't quite recall, but naturally, they get more expensive the better the seat you get."

Severus opened his mouth, about to respond, when there was a knock on the door. Their heads swiveled around to see Selenius peer his head in, looking oddly cautious.

"Er—Mum, Dad, there's a Floo call for you…"

Hermione was out of bed in an instant, pulling on her nightgown while Severus swiftly left the room to attend to it. Hermione quickly knelt down next to her son, placing her hands on his shoulders to make him face her, who was looking rather alarmed by her reaction.

"Who was it? Who called?"

"He—he said his name was Lucius…"

"What did you do? Did you respond?"

Now Selenius looked genuinely afraid. "No—I was just in the kitchen getting some cereal when the fireplace turned green—I dropped what I was doing to come and get you." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I didn't respond or anything!"

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. Her grip slowly relaxed.

"Selenius," she told him firmly, "what you did this time was right—but you must remember that in the future, if anyone makes a Floo call, you are to get us immediately. Like you did now. That's how it needs to work. Am I understood?"

Selenius nodded quickly. Hermione patted his arms soothingly, and then kissed his forehead before standing up.

"Alright. Let's go downstairs and see if I can't make you a proper breakfast, shall we?"

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"Lucius," Severus sneered, as he took a seat at the table, "called to ask if I was at all interested in coming along with him and some of our mutual—*acquaintances*, to the Quidditch World Cup."

Seeing the look on Hermione's face, he added snidely, "I, of course, told him that I would consider it."
Hermione bit her lip and glanced over at Selenius, whose face was pressed so close to *Prophet’s* crossword that he had to pull away a few inches in order to take a bite of his bacon and eggs. His attention was entirely focused on the puzzle, he was oblivious to the world. Nevertheless, Hermione moved to take care of the kitchen sink, pulling Severus along with her as she responded in an undertone:

"The Dark Lord will be returning soon… you need to try and solidify your position among the other Death Eaters…" She hissed to him quietly. "Lucius is inviting you because they're planning on using a few Muggles for terror and sport after the match."

"The Dark Lord wouldn't stand for that—playing with Muggles for fun instead of doing their jobs —" Severus's eyes narrowed. "I could use that to my advantage."

"Do it," Hermione agreed, relaxing slightly. "We can pay for three tickets, enough for decent seats."

At that moment, Selenius looked up from his crossword, smiling brightly.

"Does that mean we're going?"

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Hermione soon discovered that buying tickets for the Quidditch World Cup was easier said than done. The announcement of the cup itself had drawn in hordes of people wanting top-notch tickets, and it was a wonder that the Ministry's Department of Magical Games and Sports did not drown in a flurry of owls all bearing the forms for advance tickets. Too many people wanted the same box seats, and Hermione had to haggle by owl with them before she finally settled on three tickets in one of the medium-level boxes, roughly thirteen levels up from the ground. The tickets were extremely expensive, cost about a sackful of galleons when all was said and done, and that wasn't even mentioning the deposit—but Hermione had her tickets. Part of their expense was saved by the fact that they were not reserving a campsite, but would be Porkeying in about an hour before the match began.

It was all Selenius would talk about for the weeks to follow, and he yammered on incessantly about the semifinals, the results which were posted weekly in the Sports section of the *Prophet*. Severus took to retreating from the room whenever the topic came up, having heard it once before and considered it enough, and Hermione tried to divert Selenius with the morning crossword, but frankly, there was nothing to be done about it.

Sirius did not help one bit. Remus had left two or three weeks into June to look into a part-time job offered in London, and Hermione brought Selenius to Tine Cottage regularly to fly his toy broomstick and to see one of his mother's best friends. Sirius was just as enthusiastic about Quidditch as James had been, and the cup itself was an enormous deal to him despite the fact that he would not be going—and the fact that Selenius was going only meant that the two of them chattered ceaselessly about the topic. It was like being caught in-between a conversation about a Slytherin versus Gryffindor match: Hermione only had a vague idea about what they were talking about, and the contagious sensation that it was an important discussion was entirely lost on her.

Hermione had never heard Selenius use so many words in his life. He was normally quiet, reserved, the one who spoke only when he had to. Hermione had once envisioned that when he finally did go to Hogwarts, he would end up raising his hand to answer, and then sit silently, as though willing the teacher to read the answer from his mind and save him the trouble of speaking it out loud. Now, however, it was as though someone had turned a switch on in him and had forgotten to program in an 'off' button. Sirius was the most likely culprit at this point.
Hermione managed to get hold of a chess set, however, and the novel distraction made for some interesting after-dinner family time. Selenius and Severus would sit quietly on the sheepskin rug while Hermione watched, and the way her husband dictatorially ordered his pieces about—and her son tyrannically commanded them—was highly entertaining. The fact that Severus won consistently, giving his son no quarter, only fueled Selenius to challenge and re-challenge him again and again, desperately trying to win, and stubbornly refusing to give up no matter how many times he lost. Hermione had been worried he might throw a fit of frustration upon having his broken and battered chess pieces handed back to him in a loss, but it only seemed to drive him to try harder, and come back with a vengeance.

The use of Wizarding chess was a good move on Hermione's part. It kept the talk of Quidditch at a minimum. But then Selenius would ask to go flying at Tine Cottage, and it would start right back up again. By July, Hermione had resigned herself to the fact that it would be a chess match to the death between father and son at Spinner's End, and an intense discussion of the Quidditch World Cup at Tine Cottage. Her son's mind was always working a mile a minute; it was simply that before now, he had hidden it by keeping it under wraps inside his head. Now, he simply could not contain it.

When England went up against Transylvannia, and lost three-hundred and ninety to ten, it was almost as though someone had died; Selenius and Sirius had both been rooting for their country's team, and such a loss was not lost on an eight-year-old like Selenius. His contagious excitement was not dampened for long; he and Sirius both next bet on either Ireland or Scotland to make it to the World Cup against either Bulgaria or France, and they began betting knuts on the eventual outcome. All summer long, it was Quidditch, Quidditch, Quidditch; broken only by the arrival of Harry's birthday, when Hermione decided to make a cake. She bought the ingredients, and took them to the kitchen of Tine Cottage to prepare it. Selenius and Sirius squabbled over the bowl of leftover batter, and the two of them ended up with their faces smeared in chocolate, resurfacing from the war-zone only when Hermione pulled the cake out to let it cool. Hermione suspected Sirius had engaged merely to get a reaction out of Selenius, and Selenius had fought for his right to the bowl simply because in the mind of an eight-year-old, cake batter was a matter of life-or-death.

Their wandering fingers put the cake's continued existence into question, and Hermione, exasperated, finally sent the both of them outside.

She went down to the local Wizarding post-office to request a large, tropical-looking bird to deliver the cake safely to Harry, along with another letter from Sirius. Sirius had the good grace to stay inside to help Hermione clean up the mess in the kitchen, and since Selenius was not allowed on the broomstick without someone watching him, the discussion between Harry's godfather and Hermione's son dissolved once again, and very predictably, into—Quidditch.

"Ireland has to make the finals," Selenius insisted, sitting at the table with a battered copy of *Quidditch Through the Ages* in front of him, which Sirius had managed to find in one of the rooms upstairs. "They make better use of the Plorskuff—Porkstuff—Porskoff Ploy than the other teams."

"They've also got a good Hawkshead Attacking Formation," Sirius agreed enthusiastically, winking at Hermione as he recognized the same difficulty in pronouncing Quidditch terms that she had in her son, though he was certainly more interested in using the correct terms than she was. Hermione rolled her eyes. "But Bulgaria's definitely going to make it to the finals, and they've got Krum!"

"Krum's one good player," Selenius shot back. "Ireland has seven!"

At this, Hermione leaned against the counter, dishrag in hand, and pressed her face against her hand, trying to figure out where she went wrong.
"Its simple math," Selenius continued, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Seven to one is an impossible odd to beat unless Krum gets the snitch at the start of the game—anyway," he added, "Arithmantically, Bulgaria has less than a five-percent chance of winning."

Hermione turned around to stare at him. "Did you actually do the calculations?"

"Yes! Last night—"

"After I told you to go to bed, you mean?"

"No! …Well, okay, yes, but still—"

Sirius roared with laughter, and Hermione turned around to bury her face in her arms, although this time, she too was shaking with badly-suppressed mirth.

Overall, it was a good summer, and when August arrived, they celebrated it at both Spinner's End and Tine Cottage. Separately; in the end, Selenius got two birthday parties for the price of one day, and was thoroughly overjoyed. Sirius insisted on ordering a Bluebottle Broomstick for him, which he insisted was perfectly safe, and that it would not exceed speeds of sixty miles an hour. This was not a great comfort to Hermione, who would have preferred the broomstick not be capable of exceeding half of that, but the built-in safety features seemed to balance it out enough for her. It arrived in time for the party at Tine Cottage, whereupon Selenius tore open the package and tried out the new broomstick with delight. It was a big step-up from the toy broomstick, and Hermione felt it necessary to set some ground rules, despite her son and fellow godparent-to-Harry's whinging on the matter.

"You're only eight," she reminded Selenius, who sulked when told he was not allowed to fly higher than the house unless she was present. Sirius did not have a wand to his name, leaving Hermione the only one capable of casting a Cushioning Charm if he fell.

"I know how to ride," Selenius had whined.

Oddly enough, it was Severus who came to his son's rescue. He paid Tine Cottage the one and only visit he had ever made since the Dark Lord's downfall, three days before the Quidditch World Cup. This was only at his son's request, who desperately wanted his father to watch him fly, and he exasperatedly told Hermione that there was frankly nothing to worry about.

"Draco was riding broomsticks more dangerous than this before he was seven," he told Hermione silkily. "Selenius would be hard-pressed to fall off of this one unless he deliberately threw himself off, and I highly doubt his inclination to do so."

This had earned him a stony glare from his wife, but she did not voice further objections, and Selenius gleefully took to the skies, with a big black dog racing him from the ground in his shadow. Severus sneered at Sirius for this, but otherwise acted as though his schoolboy enemy simply did not exist. He ignored the man completely, and left shortly after to get back to his lab.

He only had one thing to say to his son before he left: "Don't give your mother a heart attack." That might have gotten him away scot-free if he had not added smoothly, "I still need her around to make dinner for the two of us."

Sirius had sniggered at this; the look Hermione gave him suggested that if he was looking forward to open arms that night, he had better expect to work for it. Selenius simply howled with laughter. Severus had merely smirked at her, and then Apparated away.

Quidditch. Quidditch. Quidditch, Quidditch. Quidditch. If someone said the word "Broomstick" one more time, Hermione was going to go postal. Even Severus no longer seemed immune to the
contagious excitement of the oncoming match, and Hermione walked in on them the day before the
World Cup discussing the possible outcomes. It was rage-inducing, and ridiculously ironic: she had
been the one to convince Severus to let them pay the money to take Selenius to the Quidditch World
Cup in the first place. He had initially been against it, and now…

"I knew it would be Ireland and Bulgaria—Krum's a much better player than Lynch, but that's not
accounting for Ireland's team…"

"By your own admission, Ireland is far more likely to win," Severus drawled in response, not
looking up from the book he had been reading, but not precisely paying attention to it either.

"Yes, but Krum…"

Hermione really needed to get out of the house. She was going to go stark-raving mad. How on earth
had Molly Weasley survived all seven of her children—most of them Quidditch-mad—plus her dotty
Muggle-obsessed husband?

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Twenty-Six

Enormous thanks to my wonderful beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own!

Please review.

Hermione kept one hand clasped tightly around her son's wrist as they wove their way through the crowded, noisy stadium, looking for their seats. Severus had gone ahead, and as Hermione breathlessly tried to count the boxes they passed while keeping an eye on Selenius, she finally spotted him standing guard over their seats. But he was not alone.

Lucius Malfoy raised a single eyebrow when he saw her turn the corner, and Hermione immediately stopped, causing Selenius to bump into her with a muffled cry of surprise. Not daring to let go of his hand, Hermione did not venture another step forward, for doing so would pull Selenius into Lucius's line of sight.

"Ah, here she comes," Lucius said, with a nod toward the top of the stadium; if one squinted, they could see the distant figures of seven red-haired people, one messy black-haired kid, and a bushy-haired girl making their way toward the top box. "How long were you going to keep it a secret, I wonder?"

Hermione had become marble. She stood there, frozen, the roar of the stadium disappearing into the background. Selenius tugged on her hand, his voice barely audible over the shouting of the stadium, but she heard. "Mum, what's going on—"

She stepped lightly on his foot, indicating for him to be quiet. Mentally pulling herself back and pushing the actor forward, Hermione straightened up smoothly and put on a supercilious sneer to rival that of any aristocrat.

"I'm surprised it took you so long, Lucius—all the gold in the world can't compensate for a simple lack in observation skills, I'm afraid."

"Observation?" Lucius chuckled darkly. "Such as the fact that you are a Mudblood, you mean?"

Hermione saw Severus's jaw tighten, but he said nothing as he stalked over to where Hermione was, his movements prowling and predatory. He placed a hand on Hermione's shoulder, his own body effectively hiding Selenius if Lucius should decide to bypass them in order to leave.

Lucius did. With an exaggerated sigh, followed closely by an icy smile, he tilted his cane in their direction before striding away, no doubt to rejoin his own wife and son.

"I expect you to join me in my tent once the match has been concluded," he said lazily. His eyes flickered over Hermione with a cold, calculating sneer of disdain. "I'll find something else for our dear Minister to attend to then—perhaps Potter and his Mudblood friend? I'm sure he'll enjoy parading them both to his Bulgarian counterpart, after all, they're both quite famous…"

Severus waved a hand in clear, uninterested dismissal. "Go. I'm sure I'll be able to find your set-up—one could hardly be expected to miss it, could they?"

"Or infamous, should I say." With that last, parting remark, Lucius turned around the corner and left.
The roar of the stadium returned to Hermione's ears, and she did not realize she was gripping Selenius so tightly until she heard his whimpering: "Mum—my arm—my arm…"

She let go immediately, and after a backwards glance down the stairwell leading to the next box-seat, hefted him into her arms, apologizing profusely to him. The two of them quickly found their seats, and Severus did not join them until after he had double-checked the stairwell for his slippery friend, should he have decided to double-back and eavesdrop. Then he took his seat next to Hermione.

"Lucius is planning Muggle sport after the match, no doubt," Severus muttered.

"Severus," Hermione hissed. "Malfoy knows about me—how can you be sure he won't tell Draco? Or that he won't tell someone else? If he knows both me and my younger self—"

"He won't," Severus retorted. "Even Lucius is not so stupid as to meddle with time when it has already been picked at where it shouldn't."

"Lucius—"

"Is a vain and self-centered man, only interested in himself and his own," Severus responded dismissively. "He is not interested in trying to harm his best friend's wife, or cause chaos for its own sake."

Hermione snorted. "Even after that fiasco at his manor?"

"Lucius has changed his own stance regarding whether he wants you in the same room as his own wife," Severus responded silkily.

Hermione sighed, gritting her teeth even as she tried to relax. The memory of Narcissa Malfoy still did not sit well with her. "I'm certain he did not put it in such tactful terms."

"Of course not. After Granger struck Draco last year, he compared you to a deranged, bushy-haired mutt gone feral."

At this, Hermione could not help snorting. "I'm almost sorry I asked."

Selenius wasn't paying attention. After Malfoy had left, he had immediately taken his seat, flipped open his program, and was now fiddling with the Omnioculurs that Hermione had bought for him. A small figure of Krum sat in his lap, balanced on top of a Quidditch Teams of the World Cup poster that was rolled up and secured with a rubber band. Everything there was a part of his collective birthday presents from the both of them, and he wasn't getting anything more than that. Not that it mattered; what he did have already delighted him beyond description.

Advertisements flashed across the scoreboard, and Hermione had finally relaxed enough to bemusedly observe her son scanning the stadium and fiddling with the dials on his Omnioculurs. Simply put, they fascinated him to no end, and like Harry, Hermione was certain he would be watching the game at various speeds until he realized what he was missing.

The players all flew out following Bagman's attention-grabbing announcement for each team, receiving the dramatic arrival of both veela and leprechauns. Gold showered from above, mostly onto the higher box seats, but several pieces trickled down to where the three of them were sitting. Selenius made a grab for them, attempting to scrabble amongst the other audience members for his fair share, but Severus reached out to stop him.

"Don't bother. Leprechaun gold disappears within a few hours—it's a wasted effort."
Disappointed, but only mildly, Selenius sat back and watched the glittering green-gold of the floating, lamp-bearing creatures. Their performance lasted only a few minutes, for the veela soon stepped out onto the field. Almost instinctively, Hermione pinned down Severus's arm with one hand, and grabbed hold of the back of Selenius's jumper with the other.

He sneered at her, his tone mocking. "Don't be paranoid."

The music started, and the veela began to dance.

Hermione motioned toward Harry and Ron, who were steadily rising from their seats. "Those two look like they're about to jump off a springboard. You can't blame me for being cautious."

Selenius was trying to wriggle free of his mother's grasp, but Hermione wasn't taking any chances. "Mum!" he whined.

"You'll thank me for this later, trust me."

Severus shifted uncomfortably in his seat at this; the minute the veela had finished dancing, he wrenched his arm free, and gave her a look of deep exasperation. Selenius was staring at his mother with an expression that was a toss-up between insulted and amazed as, when the music stopped abruptly, he realized exactly why he had been trying to get out of his seat.

"Mum, what were those?"

"Veela," Hermione supplied unhelpfully, as Bagman continued his opening commentary.

"But what are veela?"

"The kind of women you should never marry," Hermione quipped.

Severus snorted. She saw the bemused and entirely confused look on her son's face, and waved it off. "Don't worry about it. Look—they're about to start," she said, as the players all flew down to the ground, hovering just above it as the referee kicked the crate open. The balls flew up into the air, and as one, the players immediately zoomed into their positions. "There they go!"

Selenius immediately fumbled for his Omnioculars, and the match began just as Hermione remembered it. This time, however, her attention was focused entirely on Krum. Watching a game where she already knew the outcome and incidents held little appeal for Hermione, and she instead mused about how Severus was going to react when he discovered that Granger would be dating the Quidditch star, however briefly.

Severus turned to look at her at some point in the game, and they locked eyes. Speaking out loud was easier on them both, as Legilimency—and conversations through it—required a level of energy and discipline that was inconvenient to apply regularly, when verbal communication was just as effective. Now, however, with the absurd, thundering noise of the audience, it was quite possibly the only way they could hear each other.

At least Selenius seems to be enjoying himself, Hermione remarked dryly, as Aidan Lynch slammed into the ground, and was summarily being revived by the mediwizards.

I take it you're not. As an afterthought—Neither am I, particularly. I'm more concerned about what Lucius will want after the match.

I shudder to think. Besides, I've already seen the game once before, and I've never been very
interested in Quidditch to begin with. This just isn't holding my attention.

Lynch was back on his broom now, and Selenius was cheering wildly as Mullet and Moran scored again—and then again, and again, eventually bringing Ireland up by another hundred points. The little figurine of Krum in his hand gazed up sullenly at this outright display of support for Ireland. The veela obviously did not like this, particularly when the leprechauns flew together to form a taunt; shaking their hair angrily, they got to their feet, and as one, began to dance.

Both of Hermione's hands came to clamp down on both males' arms, but she needn't have worried; Selenius was keeping his eyes firmly on the players, and Severus had sighed and turned his head away from the match in disgust. Selenius, however, began giggling uncontrollably, and his parents quickly turned to look at the source of his amusement.

A moment later, Hermione was giggling too; and Severus's eyebrows had risen almost derisively at the sight of Hassan Mostafa strutting in front of the veela, flexing his arms and twirling his mustache rather comically.

"Now, we can't have that!" Bagman exclaimed, though he sounded rather amused. "Somebody slap the referee!"

Severus turned to glare at her. We paid money to watch this?

It certainly is amusing, you have to admit... this happened last time, too.

Last—? For a moment, Severus seemed to have forgotten that she had been through this before. Ah, of course.

Just watch—this is going to go down in Quidditch history, if I'm not mistaken...

"And unless I'm much mistaken, Mostafa is actually attempting to send off the Bulgarian team mascots!"

...Spare me, please.

Both of them turned to glance over at Selenius, who was applauding wildly, highly entertained by this unexpected outcome, and cheering when Ireland was given two penalties for the Bulgarian Beaters' intractability in accepting the referee's ruling.

Hermione turned to give Severus a raised eyebrow that very nearly mirrored his own.

I don't know where we went wrong—our son is now Quidditch-mad.

He certainly didn't inherit it from me, Severus responded snidely.

Certainly not from me, either! I've never had any interest in Quidditch!

Which certainly explains a lot; I always wondered why you always sat in the sidelines rather than going out to score one for the team yourself.

I've never really liked heights.

An image of the bricked-in balcony at Flourish and Blott's surfaced to the forefront of Severus's mind, covered with owl feathers and snow; Hermione flushed and looked away, turning back around briefly to respond heatedly:

That's the exception to the rule! ...I'm not flying on some unreliable broomstick, I'm on a solid,
sturdy surface—

If you insist, love. Severus was smirking undeniably at this.

But I am not responsible for him liking Quidditch! If my memory serves me right, you once tried out for the Slytherin team!

In my third year, and you know very well what a bloody fiasco that was. Besides, Severus purred, laying down the guillotine, You're the one who bought him his toy broomstick.

...Shite.

Speaking of money, I recall you were planning on placing bets on the outcome of the match. A moment of sneering consideration, and then he added, I suppose you're planning on robbing Bagman's pockets?

Oh, no. I shouldn't give it away, really, but he'll pay in Leprechaun gold to whomever he thinks he can get away with it. I made some bets with some of the other takers while we were in line to get into the stadium.

And? Severus pressed.

I suspect I should feel guilty about it, but the odds they offered were too good to pass up…

Severus's smirk was now curling his lips as he took this in with something akin to dark amusement. Is this where I ask you why the hat never considered putting you in Slytherin?

Don't get me started on that, please! Hermione pleaded. I had enough trouble trying to figure out why it put me in Gryffindor in the first place.

The memory of her time in Dumbledore's office two years ago floated to the surface, and Severus grasped onto it. You got your explanation, I assume?

Oh, yes. Hermione was about to elaborate, but the raucous, screaming shout that swept the stadium interrupted her quite suddenly, and she stuck her fingers in her ears to try and drown out some of the sound. Their connection broke as they turned away to see that though Ireland was ahead by an almost obscene number of points, Krum had gotten ahold of the Snitch.

Hermione turned to glance at Severus, who was wearing the expression of a cat trying to flatten his ears. His jaw was set against the tumultuous applause that rocked the stadium, but he met her eyes nonetheless.

It looks like Cuthbert Mockridge, Gilbert Wimple, and Arnold Peasegood all owe me fifty galleons apiece, Hermione thought gleefully.

You took bets with the Head of the Goblin Liaison Office and an Obliviator? Severus asked in disbelief as he got to his feet, eager to leave quickly despite the fact that Ireland was doing another lap of honor around the ring. They'll be after your head, woman—and who was the last one again?

Wimple's got a pair of horns, not unlike the ones you got sent to the Hospital Wing for when we were students, Hermione told him smugly as she, too, stood up. Committee on Experimental Charms, I think. Arthur Weasley pointed them out to us; since our tent was so close to the field, the area was a bit of a thoroughfare to be honest… but those three were the ones who stuck out the most in my mind, so I sought them out while we were shuffling into the stadium.
"I will not make love to a woman who has horns on her head—do be sure to remember that when you ask Peasegood to pay up. With that, Severus reached around to take hold of Selenius's arm and pull him to his feet.

"Time to leave," he said silkily. His tone brooked no argument, but Selenius tried anyway.

"But Dad—Krum'll be giving out autographs if we stop by the Bulgarians' tents—I want him to sign my poster—"

Severus shook his head in negation, but Hermione stepped in.

"If you give me the poster, I'll have him sign it for you," she offered. "But it's time for you to leave—we'll need to head home quickly."

Selenius knew a good alternative when he saw it, and grasped it immediately. He handed the poster to his mother.

"Be careful with it!"

Hermione rolled her eyes where only Severus could see, smiling as she took the poster and tucked it under her arm. "I'll meet you over by the Roberts' house—he's the one in charge of the field closest to the stadium."

Severus let out a snide remark at this, but acquiesced; along with many of the other members of the audience who were not beleaguered with too many people in their party, they Apparated away from the Quidditch pitch. Hermione was lucky; she was one of the first to leave, and was therefore one of the first to arrive at the site of the Bulgarian-supporters' tents. Krum was sitting on the arm of a folding chair, surrounded by teammates and supporters, and was signing everything from hats to peoples' hands.

"Don't know what they expect that signing to do them any good," one mole-faced witch sniffed as Hermione managed to squeeze her way into the gaggle of people that passed for a line. "Really, on their hands?"

Hermione made a noise in the back of her throat at this that went unnoticed. The crowd took an extraordinarily long time to thin; a few gave up within the first thirty minutes to wander off to join the raucous celebrations happening on the Ireland team's fields, and about an hour later, Hermione found herself standing in front of him, unrolling her son's poster and holding it out for Krum to sign.

He grunted at this and picked up the pen, expression sullen, and giving anyone who cared to interpret the impression that he was not at all enjoying this. But Hermione remembered him from her fourth year, and gave him a friendly smile.

"It's for my son," she said calmly, lacking the usual fanatic excitement present in most of his fans. He looked up in surprise at this. "His name's Selenius." Almost tentatively, she added, "He just got his first real broomstick a few days ago—a Bluebottle. You learned to ride on a Cleansweep, didn't you?"

Krum raised an eyebrow at this. He had never told anyone—no tabloid, no journalist—that particular fact. And then for the first time, his face and expression actually relaxed into that of an amused smile. "Vhat, a Bluebottle? How can he be expected to learn on a broom like that?"

Hermione grinned. "I confess I've never much liked flying myself. But my son's gotten a bit wild about it."
"How old is he?" Krum asked conversationally, probably offering the most words in their discussion alone than he had said all evening.

"Eight," Hermione replied fondly.

Krum handed the poster back, where the scrawl of his name—and a few inspirational words—could be seen as she rolled it back up. His dark brows furrowed with amusement, accompanying his reply.

"You had better get him something better than a family broom when he goes off to school," he said, smiling. "If he wants to play Quidditch, he should practice often, and that broom will not do him much good on the pitch."

Hermione laughed. "He'll definitely try and convince me of that when he's ready to go off to school. I'm certain he'll appreciate your endorsement."

He bowed his head cordially at this. She thanked him and bade him goodbye, and then left.

As she made her way through the crowd, it was difficult to not think of the year—no, years—coming ahead. Viktor had been a love interest when she was younger, but he had quickly become more of a penfriend than an actual boyfriend. He had been too intense, a bit too old for her at fourteen—sixteen, really, given she was nearly two years older than most of her classmates at that point, but too old nevertheless. They would have wanted different things He lived so far away, and though they found each other's lives extraordinarily interesting, their relationship had resolved itself into a deep and sincere friendship rather than a romantic one.

Viktor was the kind of man who was lonely in a crowd; he was famous, but awkward and duck-footed when he was not performing his amazing airborne feats. People flocked to him, but only saw him as an icon, and it was difficult for him to find someone among the crowd who saw him as a person without the famous Quidditch banner. It was simply how his life was, and Hermione had been one of the few he had approached, and one of the few who had been interested in him for himself and not for his fame. Much like Harry, really. The way some people treated them simply made them feel like part of a freak show. Hermione sympathized completely.

Selenius was waiting with his father where they had agreed to be, clinging to the edge of his shirt as people came and went, still celebrating and caroling loudly in favor of the Irish. Severus was in a simple white shirt and black trousers, and he looked distinctly uncomfortable, scanning the crowd as though he were in a great hurry. He probably was; the last thing they needed was for someone they knew or, Merlin forbid, Lucius Malfoy, to see Selenius. But most of the crowd were all off deeper into the campgrounds, rather than at the gate with Mr. Roberts, and the problem was neatly resolved once Hermione had caught up with them.

Selenius reached eagerly for his poster. Hermione kissed Severus's cheek briefly before stepping away to take her son's hand.

"Don't be gone too long," she asserted.

Severus lifted an eyebrow at her, but gave her a short nod in response. He looked faintly disinterested now, aloof yet full of subtle disquiet; it was this personality that he was now bringing to the forefront in preparation for his encounter with Lucius. "Have your notebook out when I get back," he returned shortly.

Hermione understood the implicit message. A sharp nod in return, and she grasped Selenius's hand firmly before they both whirled away in a tell-tale crack of Apparition.
Severus slinked through the crowd of partying witches and wizards, pushing his way through until he finally came to a stop in front of a wooden stake which read: Malfoy. A few feet beyond it was an elaborate tent, not like a camping tent but a rather square one encircled by fancy silk hangings and with two house-elves standing guard at the entrance. It was flashy, had most certainly been put up with magic. Despite the fact that the two pitiful-looking elves were doing their very best to appear to be nothing more than garden gnomes, it was very clear that they were alive as they were trembling ever so slightly. There were little pikes on the ground surrounding the tent, and the entire thing looked like a scene out of a Muggle middle-ages action movie. Any minute now, Severus thought sourly, a king would come strutting out dressed in his finest armor, ready to give orders.

He came to stand by the tent, and for lack of a door to knock, swept the hanging aside and strode in. The inside was more pompous and decorative than the outside; the floor was enchanted stone, with a fancy purple-and-gold rug in the center, and elaborate tapestries decorating every wall. There was even a bloody fireplace, lit and being tended to by yet another house elf. It was far bigger on the inside than it looked on the outside; it looked to be about the size of a classroom when one stood away, but the moment he stepped foot inside, it immediately became comparable to the Great Hall.

Lucius himself was sitting in front of the fireplace, a glass of red wine in one hand and his cane in the other, legs crossed casually.

Merlin's bloody beard. As though Malfoy couldn't get any more grandiose and pontifically vainglorious as it was.

"Ah, Severus," Lucius said charmingly, rising to stand and give him a sardonic bow and a little wave for him to come over. "I was almost afraid you wouldn't come—or that you wouldn't know where to find me, come to that."

"It would almost be impossible not to," Severus drawled, coming to stand beside the fireplace with his arms crossed. "I'm surprised the Ministry of Magic hasn't been hounding you about security—those house elves of yours are rather prominent giveaways."

Lucius waved it off. "Yes, yes. I had a little chat with them about that, smoothed the whole thing over." He made an expression of distaste, giving his raven-haired counterpart an icy stare. "They put up such a fuss."

Severus remained silent.

"You see," Lucius said conversationally, casually, though every word was laced with a delicate amount of malice, "I find this entire situation absolutely absurd. We are wizards, are we not? Here to witness one of the greatest inventions of our history—Quidditch—and to do so, we are expected to act like Muggles."

He spat the last word out as though it were dirty and unclean, unfit to even be spoken in this elaborate tent which, Severus recalled idly, had been inherited from a royal, conquering ancestor from France.

"Oh, they have their reasons," Lucius continued, "but can you believe it—our own Ministry, telling us that in order to attend a Wizarding event, we must, for all intents and purposes, pretend to be one of those filthy, magic-lacking proletarians? It's insulting to the very core, the very nature of our beings and our culture."

"Muggles are vastly widespread among the world, and we have the Statute of Secrecy to maintain,"
Severus remarked idly, tracing the mantelpiece with one finger. "Where else would they host a stadium to seat this many people without placing it in Antarctica?"

"We have magic," Lucius snapped. "Power at our very fingertips! And rather than pushing the Muggles aside, sending them packing off to their horrible cities, we make concessions for them. We try to fit in, to make it appear to the Muggles that all is normal, and that they need not worry their little heads, to make sure not to inconvenience them too much… when we should be showing them precisely where they belong, not stepping aside and letting them stay!"

Severus pursed his lips, giving Lucius a tight smile as he took this all in. "And what, may I ask, do you expect to do about it?"

Lucius's eyes gleamed. He waved a hand toward the tent flap, where a moment later, several others entered. Severus recognized them immediately. Macnair, followed by the ever-aggravating Carrow twins, Avery, Nott…

"I've prepared a bit of fun for us tonight," Lucius said, raising his glass in a kind of toast before bringing it to his lips. "The fools out there are all celebrating—let us remind them that there are those of us who don't approve of their very Muggle manner of doing so."

There were jeers and murmurs of approval as the other Death Eaters filed in and surrounded them both in a kind of semi-circle. Severus backed away.

"I have no intention of participating in this nonsense," he sneered.

"Surely you won't stand for this," Lucius challenged, eyes glittering in a very unfriendly manner.

"As much as I enjoy sporting with Muggles, Lucius, doing so tonight is pointless and unnecessarily dangerous," Severus responded in a tight, controlled tone. "I have a position at Hogwarts, a wife who I must still keep tabs on— I can't risk getting caught. Not to mention that the Dark Lord would hardly approve of this," he added in snide warning. "He never cared to send us out on such useless jaunts. If you have energy to spare, spend it on finding him."

"The Dark Lord is gone, Severus—"

"And I believe that he will return," Severus responded shortly, before his lips curled into a sardonic smile. "Or do you doubt the Dark Lord's power? Am I alone the only faithful," he continued, delicately stressing the last word, "Death Eater left?"

Several of the assembled people shifted uneasily, but Lucius rallied at once.

"If you want to slither your way out of this, so be it," Lucius responded caustically. "None of us are forcing you to remain here. But if you're such a loyal follower, then by all means," he added sarcastically, "you may go."

"I leave because I fear the Dark Lord's wrath," Severus snarled, whipping around to leave. "He will return, and he will be very upset when he finds us spending our time in pointless endeavors rather than directly assisting him."

"If you want to go searching for him, old friend—"

"I have my position as a spy in Hogwarts; I cannot jeopardize it."

There was a hesitant rumble among the assembled wizards, and then they parted to let him through.
"Enjoy yourselves," Severus stated calmly over his shoulders, casually adjusting the collar of his shirt as he approached the exit. "I look forward to reading your exploits in tomorrow's paper."

A pause, and then Lucius raised his glass in Severus's direction. "So be it—you reasons are enough for me. We, however," he called to the raven-haired man's retreating back, "will be certain to give the Muggles your regards. Isn't that right, my brothers?"

There was a collective, disturbing, murmur of assent. The tent flap closed behind Severus just in time for him to hear jeers and declarations of their plans for tonight. He shook off a shudder that was threatening to shake out his spine, and with a snarl of disgust, stalked past the house elves acting as sentries for the tent and Apparated away.

~o~O~o~

Hermione sat in the kitchen at Tine Cottage, staring longingly at the locket that hung around her neck. Selenius's face smiled up at her from it, motionless but touching all the same, and with a shuddering sigh, she snapped the locket closed. August 31st. It was Selenius's birthday today, the very day before term began, and he had been taken back to Diane and George's earlier that afternoon. Resigning herself to yet several more months without her son, Hermione stood up and walked toward the door to admit Dumbledore, who had knocked just moments before.

"You shouldn't have to knock at your own house, Albus," Hermione told him, with a faint touch of a smile on her lips.

"The property may be mine, but it is hardly my home," Dumbledore responded cheerfully, stepping inside. "You requested my presence?"

Hermione gestured over to one of the chairs in response. The very chair which was occupied by Sirius, poring over the latest letter Harry had sent him. Sirius looked up at the Headmaster's arrival, and with a sigh, folded up the letter and tucked it away. His face was fuller now, and his hair had been cut a bit shorter, now neat and tidy; Hermione had done it herself, and was quite proud of the job she'd managed to do for his appearance.

"Harry's scar has been hurting," Sirius said seriously, leaning back in his chair. "He claims he was doing alright, other than the fact that his pig of a cousin's diet isn't going too well—" At this, he grinned slightly, earning a smile of amusement from both professors in the room, before it died on his face. "I saw the paper from the World Cup—the Death Eaters showed up, didn't they?"

He refused to meet Hermione's eyes as she said this, but knowing that Dumbledore and Sirius were now both listening intently for her to reply, she did so:

"Severus wasn't among them."

"Small favors, then," Sirius responded haughtily. "But Harry needs me nearby. I can't just stay here while things are happening at Hogwarts."

Hermione bit her lower lip, and turned to look at the Headmaster.

"That is, of course, possible to arrange," Dumbledore responded thoughtfully. "It would certainly be good for Harry to have his godfather around this year."

"It's risky," Hermione reminded them both.

"But it can be done," Sirius responded determinedly.
"There's a place beyond Hogsmeade that he could stay," Hermione said, considering, trying to remember the details from so long ago. "I don't recall it exactly, but I'm sure Albus knows of it."

"It just so happens that I do," Dumbledore responded, beaming.

"I'm flying to Hogwarts, then," Sirius declared, getting to his feet. He tore a scrap of paper from the pad on the kitchen counter, and began scrawling on it hurriedly. "I know Hermione has to be getting back, and you're busy, Headmaster, but if you'll just give me directions, I can go with Buckbeak…"

"Just be careful," Hermione reminded him as she gathered up her traveling cloak and threw it over her shoulders. "Try to travel at night only."

"I've been a fugitive for over a decade, Hermione," Sirius responded, brow furrowed in concentration as he wrote furiously. "I know how to get around without having a pair of cuffs slapped on me."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but relented.

"I'll try to visit you," she promised.

"Bring food," Sirius said with a small smile, before summoning one of the owls that had made themselves at home upstairs.

"Will do."

She left.

~o~O~o~

Clunk.

Clunk.

Clunk.

Hermione stared from her shadowy niche in the wall as Mad-Eye Moody stamped his way into the entrance hall, rainwater dripping off of him in rivets, his electric-blue eye swiveling wildly. She ducked directly behind a corner as he stepped forward, not wanting his eye to see through her illusion—

Clunk.

"Who's there?" Moody—or rather, the imposter of him—growled, his tone menacingly convincing. "Show yourself!"

Hermione didn't move a muscle.

Moody's claw-foot clunked in her direction, and resigned to the fact that she had been seen, Hermione stepped out into full view. Moody-the-Imposter's wand was drawn in a moment and aimed directly between her eyes, but her wand was out too, and she jabbed it in his direction.

And then, almost at the same time, they lowered their wands.

"Merlin's beard, Granger," Crouch said, staring at her in blunt amazement, "what are you doing here?"
Hermione removed her Disillusionment Charm, gave him an exasperated look, and then sighed.

"Professor Dumbledore already told you, Alastor," Hermione stated, addressing him by Moody's given name, which she had never done to the real Mad-Eye. "I didn't think you were growing so old that your memory was starting to fail you, too. Is that the reason they kicked you out of Law Enforcement?"

"They kicked me out because I was a damn good Auror and they knew it," Crouch growled, swinging right back into character. "Don't want the mess that comes with the job, when you have someone on your hands who actually knows what they're doing. How dark wizards think."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "And paranoid, to boot. You just keep getting sweeter in your dotage, Alastor."

Crouch snarled at her, but turned away to clunk noisily toward the doors to the Great Hall.

"We'll be having a talk, girl, you and me, once this is sorted," he grumbled.

"I'll be in the staff room with everyone else," Hermione said, slipping away like a shadow. A moment later, she had melded back skillfully into the wall, unseen, nearly undetectable. "I'll enjoy hearing that you got through dinner without discovering three plots to poison you before dessert."

"You're a menace," Crouch growled over his shoulder, as he clunked away.

A moment later, the doors to the Great Hall banged open, and Hermione watched him go in. With a sigh, she made her way toward the staff room, rubbing her hands to warm them as a chill ran through her.

Bloody Crouch. Bloody Barty Crouch Jr. Bloody, buggering budgie. He probably still hasn't forgiven me for turning him into a bloody canary all those years ago, back in school...

Later, everyone returned to the staff room before retiring to bed, and Professor Dumbledore introduced Moody formally to everyone else. Hermione included. Crouch was managing to do a fine job of impersonating the real Moody, aggravatingly so, and the Headmaster did not have a single inkling that Moody might not actually be... Moody.

"Hermione's come to remain at Hogwarts for a bit," Dumbledore told him cheerfully, as Hermione—unmasked and unveiled before all the teachers—stared back up at Moody with a trying smile on her face. "You'll see her in the halls every now and then, and she'll be patrolling often, but you needn't worry about her."

"Not a problem as long as you don't sneak up on me," Crouch said, focusing on Hermione with both his magical and normal eye. His gaze fell upon the ring on her finger, and in Hermione's opinion, he took an enormous gamble when he added, "And still married, I see..."

"Happily," Hermione added unnecessarily.

Crouch harrumphed, and then bade them all good-night before clunking off into the corridor.

As soon as Hermione and Severus returned to their quarters, Hermione pulled Severus aside.

"That Moody is an imposter," she hissed at him quietly.

Severus let out an impatient sound of disbelief. "Pardon?"
"It's true—Barty Crouch, you'll remember him from school—he was in my year—"

"The snot-nosed, straw-haired brat you kept hexing into a canary," Severus sneered. "Yes, I remember him."

"He's got the real Mad-Eye Moody locked up somewhere—he's impersonating him through Polyjuice. That's what he keeps in his hip-flask." Hermione gave him a stony look. "When you're around him, you'll have to be very careful, Severus—very careful."

"He—" Severus broke off for a moment, and then shook his head. "What do I need to do?"

Relieved that he was deferring to her expertise right away, Hermione told him. "You must act as innocently as possible—must be as inconspicuous in regards to your identity as a Death Eater, for he will use that as an excuse to do a thorough and investigative search of your storerooms—"

"For Boomslang skin, no doubt," Severus snarled with frustration, cottoning on immediately.

"—an excuse which will only work once, but he will go through your stuff regularly to try and find the ingredients he needs. Leave nothing incriminating out," Hermione ordered harshly. "Don't keep anything important lying around in your office."

"And the rest?" Severus snapped.

"You have to act like you're innocent, but more than anything, you also need to find a way to convince him that you're still a loyal Death Eater," Hermione told him sharply.

"Madness—"

"He will be reporting directly to the Dark Lord, Severus!" Hermione hissed. "You know this—Crouch is pretending to be Moody, who he presumes would use any excuse to nail you, but he is also your one chance to making a spot for yourself in the Dark Lord's good graces when he returns."

Severus's eyes had narrowed now, calculating and considering. "Indescribably difficult, but I will manage, I'm sure."

"It's a bloody oxymoronic thing to have to do," Hermione agreed sullenly, "but if anyone can pull it off, it's you." Seeing Severus raise an eyebrow in inquiry at this, she added, "You've already been doing it for years. Harry and Ron can never seem to fully decide whether you're evil or just a git who shows up at the right time to save their sorry arses."

At this, Severus turned away and snorted, though he was smirking nonetheless. "Ah, yes. I spend the entire year attempting to spoil their fun, and then bring myself to run after them when they get stuck in the Shrieking Shack with a werewolf and a presumed murderer. That would confuse any dunderhead, I'm sure."

"Harry and Ron are not dunderheads," Hermione retorted, hands on her hips. "They're a bit reckless, yes, and not at all interested in schoolwork—but they're not stupid."

"They have yet to prove otherwise."

"Well, I do confess that the flying car incident wasn't their brightest moment…" Hermione sat down on the nearest armchair and leaned back, curling a lock of hair between her fingers, expression resigned. "This year is going to be a difficult one."

Severus placed a hand on her shoulder. "And tomorrow is just the beginning. Come to bed—we
might as well be well-rested for the brainless twits, tomorrow."

Hermione got to her feet, discarding her robe as she went. "You intend to be well-rested?"

In response, he pulled her roughly toward him, wrapping one arm around her and using the other to tilt her head up toward him. He kissed her thoroughly, dragging her toward the bedroom as he did so.

"No," he said, when he finally released her. "I don't."

The clothes came off.

~o~O~o~

Hermione walked down to Hagrid's later the next day, knocking quietly on the door to his hut and slipping inside quickly before removing the Disillusionment charm. After so many years of practice, her spell had become so singularly powerful that she was all but invisible when she wore it. It was second-nature for her now. Nevertheless, Hagrid recognized her at once, and eagerly let her in.

"How're yeh doing?" He asked airly, as he turned away to find a chair and then bend over a large crate sitting in front of the fire.

"Just fine," Hermione replied, walking over to where he sat. Peering into the crate, she saw a bunch of shiny gray, golf-ball sized objects. She stopped. "Hagrid, what are those?"

"Eggs," Hagrid said happily. "On'y jus' got 'em. They should hatch in the week or so, I reckon."

Hermione winced. "And what, exactly, do they hatch into?"

"I'm not too sure," Hagrid said, leaning back in his chair and stroking his wiry tangle of a beard thoughtfully. "Never had 'em before. They're a cross between manticores and fire crabs, and I've never known anyone ter have 'em." He gave Hermione a grin. "Manticores are hard ter work with, see. That'd be why."

"I suppose this'll be a bit of a project for your fourth years?" Hermione asked, just a bit depressedly.

Hagrid beamed at her. "How'd yeh know?"

"Been there," Hermione said with a sigh, summoning a cup and some tea leaves from one of Hagrid's cupboards. "Done that."

"O' course—I almost forgot," Hagrid said, chuckling. "Can't really surprise yeh at all anymore."

Hermione smiled, and took a seat for herself. "Don't worry. In a couple more years, I'll have caught up with everyone else."

"I don' suppose yeh'd tell me who's going ter be Hogwarts Champion for the upcomin' tournament?" Hagrid asked, helping himself to his own cup of tea.

Hermione winced. "I shouldn't really say anything, except for the fact that everyone's going to be really surprised."

"Ah, well. On'y a couple more weeks ter go until then, eh?" Hagrid said cheerfully.

"To the Tri-Wizard Cup, and a thousand Galleons to go along with it," Hermione said with a grin, raising her mug in a toast.
"Ter the Tri-Wizard Tournament," Hagrid agreed, raising his in turn. "An' the fun ter go along with it!"

They clinked their mugs, and drank.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you," Hermione said, setting her mug down. "Don't be surprised if my younger self comes around asking you to join the House-Elf Liberation Front."

Hagrid snorted into his drink, spluttering in response. "The what?"

~o~O~o~

Hermione was in Severus's office, sitting comfortably in front of the lit fire with a book when there was a series of sharp knocks on the door. Her head jerked around to look at Severus, who was sitting at his desk grading papers, and then they both look up at the door. Hermione stood up quickly, shoving her book onto his desk, and then Disillusioned herself and went to stand at the far corner behind her husband's seat.

With an irritated sigh, Severus sat up in his chair and leaned back. "Come in," he barked.

Crouch entered, dragging a very pink-faced and watery-eyed Draco Malfoy with him. The boy's hair was tousled and messy now, and he was glaring balefully at his imprisoner with a mixture of pain and humiliation. Severus stiffened visibly when he saw who it was, and gave Crouch a wary look as he shoved Draco in front of him.

Severus had been avoiding Crouch as much as possible. He would hardly have bothered to do so with Moody, but Crouch didn't know that; avoiding Moody as much as possible gave Crouch the impression that Severus had something guilty to hide, yet it would not be enough for Moody to take him down, so to speak. It was the perfect ruse. Now, however, Crouch was deliberately seeking him out, and he had one of his protégés at hand.

"What do you want?" he snapped.

Draco pulled roughly away from Crouch, rubbing his arm where the man had grabbed it. Crouch, however, was the first to speak.

"You need to teach your Slytherins some manners," Crouch growled. "Malfoy here attacked Potter when his back was turned."

Hermione could see Severus's mind working furiously to figure out how to extract both himself and Draco from this situation. Moody's magical eye was whirling slowly around the room, and came to an abrupt halt first on her, and then on the book laying on Severus's desk. A craggy smile crossed his lips.

"Potter undoubtedly has far fewer brain cells than you credit him with if he put himself in such a situation," Severus responded tightly. Hermione saw Draco smirk slightly at this. "Nevertheless," Severus continued softly, "what did Potter do to provoke Malfoy? Surely you don't expect me to believe he tried to hex Potter without a good reason."

Crouch bristled at this, but Draco hurried to answer.

"He insulted my mother, Professor," he said quickly.

"Not until after you took a go at the Weasley's," Crouch barked. His magical eye was still locked onto Hermione, and she knew that he was watching her every move. "Potter tried to disengage from
the situation, and that's when Malfoy here tried to get him with his back turned."

"He turned me into a ferret," Malfoy interjected sullenly.

"Potter turned—?"

"I turned him into a ferret," Crouch growled. His magical eye was rotating slowly now, still locked onto Hermione, and she rather had the sense that the Death Eater before her was expecting her to understand the irony and similarity of the situation. "Until McGonagall came and stopped me, of course. Told me we don't use Transfiguration as a punishment. So I'm bringing the lad to you."

"Very well," Severus said dismissively, eyes narrowed with malice in Moody's direction. "Five points from Slytherin for using magic in the halls. If there is a repeat incident, then we will look at ten instead. Let him go, Moody."

Draco was out of the room in a flash. Moody didn't move.

"You can go, too," Severus added snidely, returning his attention to his papers.

"I don't think so," Crouch growled. "I think we need to have a little chat. You've been avoiding me all this time, Snape. Why is that?"

"I don't know what you mean," Severus returned stonily, glaring. "I am a very busy man, Moody, and have more important things to do with my time—"

Crouch banged his fist down on Severus's desk, rattling the inkbottle and the few quills that were lying around on it. Hermione flinched.

"The thing I hate the most in this world," Crouch told him quietly, "is a Death Eater that walks free. You're walking free, Snape, and I want to know why!"

"Because the Wizengamot found me 'not guilty,,'" Severus responded sleekly. "I believe you understand the concept of innocence?"

"More than you, I'll wager."

"Nevertheless, I was cleared of all charges," Severus said silkily, his tone infuriating. "Clearly, there was not sufficient evidence to convince them of my guilt."

Crouch's eyes narrowed calculatingly at this. "I don't trust you, Snape. You've given me hell about searching your office, but if you're so innocent, I don't see why you would stop me."

Severus stood up. "You wish to search my office? Very well—have at it." He gestured around him, and then picked up his grading, shuffling it into a neat stack and then slamming it back down. Hermione immediately made for the door, and Severus followed. He turned around to face Crouch with his hand on the doorknob, his tone mocking. "I'll leave you to it, Moody."

Crouch growled a response, but the two of them were already out the door.

"You haven't let him search your office yet?" Hermione asked.

"I gave him some difficulty about it. Let him interpret it as he will."

Hermione shook her head. In the time between when Severus had first refused to let Moody search his office, and now, he could have moved any number of presumably incriminating objects. His behavior, while not enough to earn him an arrest on any reasonable grounds, had the words 'Guilty'
written all over it.

"Brilliant," she said. And then stopped abruptly.

"Shite," she breathed.

"What?" Severus demanded.

"I left my book in there."

"What was it?"

Hermione bit her lower lip.

"Magical Water Plants of the Mediterranean," she confessed. Harry— well, Harry was going to need its contents, later on in the year, and knowing that he was going to use Gillyweed, Hermione had thought it prudent to take a look at the very book that she knew Crouch would later give to Neville. It paid to know your enemy's movements. But now...

When they returned to Severus's office four hours later—after Crouch had returned and declared that his thorough (and very invasive) search had been completed, grudgingly admitting that it had yielded nothing incriminating—it was to find Hermione's book mysteriously missing.

~o~O~o~

A notice went up in mid-October informing the students directly of the due arrival time for the Durmstrang and Beauxbatons delegates. Everyone was chattering excitedly about it, congregating around the sign that had been posted at the foot of the marble staircase that descended to the entrance hall. Hermione could not get through without the very probably possibility of someone knocking into her, but she managed to slip through quietly when Severus went up for dinner that evening. They were there quite early; the crowd was thick, but the Golden Trio had not arrived yet. Hermione snuck over to the statue over by the other end of the entrance hall and climbed atop of it, seating herself comfortably on the outstretched arm and watching the proceedings from her perch.

Severus, who had swept by the students without so much as a second look in their direction, glanced up briefly at her. Had he not been surrounded by an audience, Hermione was certain he might have given her a look of exasperation. She merely smiled back at him, invisibly, and he disappeared into the Great Hall.

A quarter of an hour later, Hermione saw Granger, Harry, and Ron all stop at the edge of the crowd, unable to get through. Ron stood up on tip-toe to try and read the sign. Hermione watched his lips moving, Granger and Harry's attentive looks in his direction—and Harry's interjection of, "Brilliant! It's Potions last thing of Friday! Snape won't have time to poison us all!"— and when he finished, Ernie Macmillan bustled over to them, pushing his way out of the crowd.

"Only a week away!" he said loudly, eyes gleaming thoughtfully. "I wonder if Cedric knows? Think I'll go tell him…"

"Cedric?" Hermione saw Ron mouth blankly as the Hufflepuff left.

"Diggory," Harry supplied. "He must be entering the tournament."

"That idiot, Hogwarts Champion?" Ron asked as the three of them began pushing their way through the chattering, overexcited crowd.
"He's not an idiot," Hermione heard her younger self say in the Hufflepuff Team Captain's defense. "You just don't like him because he beat Gryffindor at Quidditch…"

Ron made a scathing retort which only earned an indignant response from Granger: "Excuse me, I don't like people just because they're handsome!"

In response, her red-haired friend gave a loud, false cough that sounded oddly like "Lockhart!"

Hermione grinned sheepishly at this from her high perch on the statue. She had married the very opposite of Lockhart, and Ron would have to eat those words eventually, even if it was only years in the future before he would find out. But still, he had made a valid point: Second-year Hermione Granger had been utterly smitten with the fraud.

Hermione watched them force their way through the crowd to get to the opposite staircase to return to their tower. It was too early for dinner for them, and with this crowd, getting into the Great Hall was nearly impossible, unless you could make the students part like the red sea, which only the teachers and prefects seemed able to accomplish. Nevertheless, Hermione sat up there all evening, shifting in slight discomfort and then casting a Cushioning Charm when it became too difficult to sit without her backside becoming sore. It was not until an hour later that Hermione was able to slide down and hurry up the staircase, narrowly avoiding being bumped into by a giggling group of Ravenclaws.

Hermione made her way to the library for some fresh air, and was very surprised to find Harry and Ron there. She recalled that she herself would be in Gryffindor Tower about now, but it seemed that the boys were using the library to get their Transfiguration homework done. She slipped behind the bookcase they were using, clasping her hands behind her back and peering through the gaps in the shelves as Harry and Ron whispered to each other in an undertone.

"Bloody Transfiguration… and Hermione still won't help me with my Herbology," Ron grumbled.

"On the bright side, at least we won't have to test our antidotes in Potions now."

Ron sniggered at this. The sound of pages flipping as they perused one of the books laid out in front of them, and then the redhead asked quietly, "Hey, have you heard back from Sirius yet?"

"Not yet," Harry responded glumly. "And if he gets caught…"

"D'you reckon he has someone helping him?" Ron whispered. "I mean, come off it. There's no way he could fly back here without someone to scout out a good place for him to hide."

"Dumbledore, probably," Harry said. "Or maybe my godmother."

"Have you asked him about her?" Ron asked, lowering his voice even further.

"I asked him about it in one of my letters this summer," Harry muttered. "I didn't get a straight reply."

Hermione wanted to pinch the bridge of her nose in exasperation. Of course, now that Harry knew he had a godmother, he was trying to find her. Harry had lost his family and was trying to reconnect with who he could. Sirius was like an uncle to him, his father's brother in all but blood. Why shouldn't he look for his godmother?

But what concerned her more was that they had not brought this up with Granger. But again, it sort of made sense. In previous years, given that they all believed Sirius to be a murderer at first, Granger would be wary of seeking out this other unknown adult who had not yet made her presence known. She would also be wary of doing it without more information from Sirius, and if Sirius was not
forthcoming with that information, she would take it as a sign that perhaps the venture was a bad idea. She would be more focused on other things. Last year, the incident with Scabbers and the Firebolt had probably been enough to imprint into Harry and Ron's minds that telling Granger everything was a bad idea. They were keeping this a secret from her because they didn't want her to run off on her own conclusions.

Bugger.

"What'd he say?" Ron asked curiously.

Harry shrugged. "I got more questions than answers. He wanted to know how I found out about her, what I already knew, and then said that he couldn't tell me anything until we were face-to-face. Too risky to put in a letter."

"Bugger," Ron swore.

"She's like a ghost," Harry said thoughtfully. He glanced around quickly, and then added, "It's just… I dunno. I get the sense that she's watching, but I never see her."

"You'll get to ask Sirius about her soon, though, right?"

Hermione pulled away from the shelf as though stung. The boys continued their conversation quietly, now returning to the topic of Sirius, and she sank down to the ground, her mind a maelstrom of confusion.

On Friday, Hermione slipped through the entrance hall shortly before the guests were due to arrive. Walking past the teachers on her way to the doors leading to the courtyard, she stopped to observe for a moment as they ordered their students into line.

"Get in line, get in line," Severus drawled lazily as his students made their way into the hall. He didn't look the least bit concerned, quite at odds to the strict last-minute standing orders being made by the other teachers, Minerva in particular.

"Sir," Draco spoke up at once. "Sir, is it true that Viktor Krum is going to be among the Durmstrang delegates?"

Hermione rolled her eyes at this, missing Severus's response as she quietly slipped out the doors. She trotted down the steps, passed the courtyard, and stopped at the stone circle, where she levitated herself onto one of the taller rocks and, after casting a Cushioning Charm for good measure, sat down and made herself comfortable.

A few minutes later, the teachers began to lead their students down the drive, stopping a short distance from the front gates. Hermione was too far away to hear anything but the faint buzz of chatter, but she had a good view of the proceedings. She watched the entire school out on the front lawn, watching and waiting for the guests to arrive.

Crouch clunked out of the courtyard last, taking his own sweet time in making his way down the drive. He did not move to join the students, however, but instead stumped over to the stone circle where Hermione was. He leaned against the pillar Hermione was perched upon, his magical eyes staring up at her through the top of his head without him directly moving to look at her.

"Here to watch, I suppose?" he growled.

"That should be obvious," Hermione responded.
He grunted at this. "I just got to say, but your younger self is a wimp."

Hermione glanced down stonily at him. "People change, Alastor," she told him softly, dangerously. It was a tone she had picked up directly from her husband. "Being thrown back in time forced me to become a bit more wise with my wand, if I wanted to survive."

"Granger spends all her time with her nose in a book," Crouch stated. "From what I know, you were pretty good with a wand back when you were a student some sixteen years ago."

"My younger self here is good with a wand, too," Hermione reminded him. She did not forget for a single moment that the man she was talking to was Death Eater, but the conversation they were having was interesting, to say the least. "She just happens to be very naïve."

Moody let out a bark of laughter that thankfully went unnoticed by the students milling around in the distance. "The House-Elf Liberation Front, eh?"

"Naïve and with good intentions," Hermione said with a sigh.

The sky was steadily growing darker, and the students more restless. Hermione could hear them murmuring uneasily, and a slight October chill was starting to spread across the grounds.

Crouch shook his head, and Hermione had the distinct sense that she was not longer talking to the Mad-Eye mask that the imposter was wearing, but that she was faced with Crouch's real self now. His tone was full of disbelief, and frankly, Hermione could understand it.

"It's hard to pin her down as you," he growled. "Almost impossible."

He had gone to school with her when she had begun to really bloom, to come into her own. She had been aggressive, unyielding, and had grown a spine of steel. She had not lost herself along the way, but had merely fortified her notions of justice and become very powerful with them as motivation. The Granger of this timeline went through everything by sheer determination and a conviction that logic could make anyone see reason. The Granger of Crouch's timeline had developed some real firepower, and the understanding that not everyone cared about logic in the grand scheme of things.

Hermione took a long time to respond.

"Like I said," she responded quietly, "people change. In this timeline, I was young, naïve, and a stickler for the rules. I rarely had to defend myself—the environment here is incredibly sheltered."

She shook her head. "Twenty years ago, Hogwarts was a harder place. There were threats from all sides. I had to adapt."

"You adapted by marrying a Death Eater," Crouch rumbled, his tone menacing.

So this was it. He was trying to feel her out. Severus had raised his suspicions enough—now Hermione had to give it substance. He wanted to know if she had changed her mind regarding the request he had made to her, that day in the Library where he had cornered her. That day that she had told him, very clearly, where she stood.

She needed to supply him with several things: her motivation, her current stance, and her usefulness. She needed to do it in a way that would not have Alastor Moody hauling her off to Azkaban, but in a way that would raise the Auror's suspicions further—and convince Crouch, and by extension the Dark Lord, that she and Severus were loyal. And that she had changed.

She was about to speak when there was a sudden shout from the assembled students. Both Hermione and Crouch's heads snapped up, and a few moments later, a large carriage appeared out of the sky.
and slammed down to earth, with an enormous, clattering crash. The door was promptly opened, and a tall, olive-skinned woman stepped out.

"Madam Maxime," Hermione said, sounding delighted.

Crouch's expression broke into an ill-conceived snarl at this interruption, but he kept his opinion to himself.

A few minutes later, the hub-hub had died down, and the Headmistress of Beauxbatons was striding up to the castle with her charges, all of whom looked as though they wished they had thought to bring something warmer to wear.

As soon as they were gone, Crouch tried again. "You married a Death Eater," he growled. "You survived by attaching yourself to him once the war was over—permanently."

Hermione stared down at him, her expression deliberately blank. He continued, "If you were just interested in the Dark Lord's protection—and a slip of a girl like you, I wouldn't be surprised if you were—you would have left him as soon as you thought you were safe."

"Don't be ridiculous," Hermione said evasively.

Crouch looked ready to demand an explanation when he was again interrupted. He let out a snarl of frustration, and whipped his head around to look at the lake. A muffled rumbling, foreboding in the distance, had begun to shake the air—

"The lake!" Hermione heard Lee Jordan yell in the distance, pointing at the water. "Look at the lake!"

A whirlpool had formed, and out of it, a long black pole emerged. The mast appeared scant moments later, and then the rest of the ship, front-first. It slid regally out of the rushing water and smoothly onto the dark surface of the lake. It reminded Hermione of nothing so much as a resurrected shipwreck, as magical as it was terrifying, the portholes glowing as though possessed by ghostly eyes. It sailed toward the bank; moments later, the splash of an anchor hailed their stop, and in the darkness, Hermione could make out a plank being hauled out.

A thud, as it hit the ground. And then one by one, lined up and striding proudly, the silhouettes of people walked, disembarking. They neared the crowd of spectators, and Hermione recognized the nearest immediately.

"Dumbledore!" Karkaroff called heartily. "How are you, my dear fellow, how are you?"

He was wearing a different set of furs from the ones his students wore; while theirs was matted, almost like bear skin, his was sleek and silver. His goatee, which Hermione faintly remembered being black, was now silver. He was still tall and thin, but he still had that distant, haunted trace that Hermione recognized in those who had been to Azkaban. His was not visible unless you knew what to look for; but the ever-slight prominence of his cheekbones was unmistakable.

There was a sudden uproar among the students when, moments later, they recognized one of the students.

"Krum—Krum—it's Viktor Krum!"

Hermione stared down at Karkaroff with great dislike, her expression near-identical to Crouch's, as the Durmstrang group passed them on their way up to the castle. The Hogwarts students filed up behind their guests as they trudged back up, and Hermione leapt gracefully from her pillar.
"See you around, Alastor," she told him, with false cheerfulness. "You'd better go up to the castle with everyone else."

"And where are you going?" Crouch growled.

Hermione gave him an annoyingly dismissive wave of her hand. "I have things to do. Don't worry about it."

Crouch had no choice but to do as she suggested. His magical eye never left her, however, as he clunked off after the students, and she stood there for quite some time until she saw him disappear into the distant courtyard.

Then she trotted off in the direction of the Hogwarts gates.

~o~O~o~

"Hello, Sirius," Hermione said, slightly out of breath and panting as she reached the entrance of the cave he was living in. She squeezed through the narrow fissure, where she saw a pair of yellow eyes peering out hopefully at her from the gloom. She pulled her robes off, tossing them aside, and began to dig through the pockets, pulling out the food she had packed for him. "How are you?"

The dog immediately transformed back into a man, and Sirius eagerly reached for the shepherd pie. "I wasn't expecting you to stop by so soon," he said, in between ravenous bites.

"I had an opportunity to," Hermione said, taking a seat and leaning against the rock wall. "I wanted to see how you were." She let him finish off a slice of the pie, and then added quietly, "Also, we need to talk."

"I agree," Sirius said, pushing the plate aside. Buckbeak looked up hopefully from where he stood, and nuzzled Sirius's back to ask for food, and he reached for some of the dead ferrets Hermione had thoughtfully brought along with her. "Harry's been asking about you, you know."

"That's what we need to talk about," Hermione said grimly, as Buckbeak crunched on a ferret. "How did he find out about me?"

"He hasn't told me, and I haven't got a clue," Sirius admitted. "But he knows you exist, and he's been asking me about her."

"And—?"

Sirius shrugged. "I haven't told him anything. I wrote that we'd have to talk face to face for that, and that won't be possible for a long time yet."

Hermione bit her lower lip. "What are you planning on telling him?"

Sirius took a bite of his pie thoughtfully. "I think he has a right to know a few things, Hermione. Certainly not who you are," he added hurriedly, seeing the expression on her face, "or anything like that—but I think he ought to know that you care. That you are there for him, even when he doesn't know it. That you're real."

Hermione gave a hesitant nod. "That doesn't sound like too much."

"I know he can't find out much until after you're slotted back into your timeline, at the very least," Sirius told her wisely. "But I think Harry deserves to know something."
Hermione nodded in full agreement now. "Don't encourage him to keep trying to find out about me, but I'd like it if he at least felt secure knowing that he has someone else out there for him."

"That kid doesn't have enough people who really care about him," Sirius said wisely. "The Weasleys are fantastic, and from what I've heard, they're like a family to him. But outside of that, everyone else seems to see him for what he did, not for who he is."

"It's like that with a lot of other famous people, I can tell you," Hermione said glumly.

"Don't worry about it," Sirius reassured her. "At the very least, Molly treats him like a son."

Hermione nodded, satisfied with this simple, comforting truth.

"Thank goodness for that," she said. She got to her feet, finished emptying out her robes, and then slipped them back on. "I've got to go," she added apologetically. "Tonight's the big night—I need to be there."

"No problem," Sirius said, patting the hippogriff's beak as it tried to reach over and steal part of his shepherd pie. He watched as she made her way toward the exit, and then said suddenly, "I almost forgot—how's your Animagus form coming?"

Hermione turned around to give him a secretive smile, and then slipped away.

~o~O~o~

Hermione sat on the floor of the entrance hall, curled up and invisible behind the statue that she had sat on earlier that week. All was quiet. The Goblet of Fire had been presented last night, and throughout the day, various people from Hogwarts had added their names to the dozen or so that had already been put in by the Durmstrang and Beauxbaton delegates.

The day had passed quickly enough, and now she hid here, waiting. The hall was illuminated by the bright blue flame emanating from the goblet, giving it an otherworldly cast. Occasionally, a ghost would pass through the wall, but the hall remained mostly deserted.

*Clunk.*

Hermione started, and then ducked lower toward the ground, hoping she wouldn't be seen.

*Clunk.*

*Clunk.*

*Clunk.*

The sound of the claw foot hitting each step echoed steadily, but surprisingly quietly, through the cavernous hall. Then it stopped abruptly. Hermione could practically see Crouch's magical eye whirling wildly, checking for enemies, and then with a grunt, he clunked over toward the Goblet of Fire. She heard him utter several spells in quick succession, and then there was the rustling, crackling sound of paper being thrown in.

The flames exploded into a haze of bright red for a moment, illuminating the hall in bloody orange, and then steadily reverted back to blue.

*Clunk.*

*Clunk.*
"I know you're there, Snape," Crouch growled. "Come on out."

Hermione had hoped he wouldn't see her, but obviously, he could see through the statue just as well as invisibility cloaks and Disillusionment Spells. With a sigh of reluctance, Hermione slowly stood up, though she pulled her wand out as a precaution.

"That was smart of you," she told him calmly, "to finish your job first before confronting me, just in case I was an enemy."

Crouch froze. His wand was out and pointed straight at her, and Hermione saw the shock on his face. She continued:

"I know you're not the real Mad-Eye Moody," she told him softly. "I've known you weren't the real Moody since you stepped foot in this castle. But I have to say, I wasn't expecting that bit of déjà vu when you Transfigured Malfoy into a ferret."

Crouch's jaw dropped. It was very unflattering to look at on anyone's face, but on Moody's, it gave it a gaping, gobsmacked look. Then seemed to pull himself back together, and lowered his wand ever so slightly. Hermione did the same.

"You didn't stop me," he said. He was no longer growling. He spoke normally now, with his own tone, rather than the menacing, bear-like consistency of Moody's voice. "You could have stopped me from putting Potter's name in the Goblet, but you didn't."

"I knew there was a reason you got so many O.W.L.s," Hermione exclaimed brightly. "Your observation skills are impeccable."

Crouch grunted in annoyance. "Irritating, Mudblood chit."

The slur rolled off of Hermione like water. She shrugged, and took several steps forward until she was standing just a few feet away from him, the Goblet burning brightly between them.

"So now that your cover has been compromised," she asked evenly, "what are you going to do about it?"

Crouch paused, uncertain. "You haven't threatened to go running to Dumbledore yet," he said, licking the side of his mouth nervously.

"I have no intention of running to Dumbledore," Hermione responded loftily.

Crouch's wand shook slightly in his hand, and then quite suddenly, he jabbed it upward in her direction.

"Tell me," he spat, "did Snape go running around with Malfoy's lot at the Quidditch World Cup? Did he go around sporting with Muggles for fun, instead of trying to seek out my master?"

Hermione tilted her head in his direction, unflinching despite the wand pointed at her throat. "You know," she told him conversationally, "that's exactly what Severus told them."

Crouch looked baffled. "What?"

"Severus could never go looking for the Dark Lord, because that would jeopardize his usefulness as a spy," Hermione told him thoughtfully, straightening up. "But he wanted to. And when Lucius asked him to join the others at the World Cup, Severus told him no."
"Snape just didn't want to get caught," Crouch sneered.

"Of course not," Hermione agreed. "But he also told Lucius that the Dark Lord wouldn't have approved of what they were doing. They were just wasting time, after all," she continued. "Not doing anything remotely useful. The Dark Lord would have been disgusted."

Crouch was eyeing her warily now, as though he had never quite seen her properly before.

"The Dark Lord will rise again, Crouch," Hermione intoned. "Severus believes it. I believe it. He's simply too powerful not to. And though my husband cannot overtly assist you…” she leaned forward, hovering over the Goblet to whisper: "I can."

Finally, finally, Crouch lowered his wand.

"We've been waiting for something like this to happen for years," Hermione told him. Severus had taught her a valuable lesson: tell as much of the truth as you can, but twist it to be misleading. She had not yet so far told a single lie: she had no intention of breaking the timeline by running to Dumbledore. Severus had not helped Malfoy at the World Cup and professed it so for the very reasons she had listed. And they had been expecting this to happen for quite some time. And yet, the way she told it to Crouch, it made it seem as though they were his allies. "You could have just asked to borrow my book, you know."

Crouch shook his head slowly.

"You are a menace, Granger," he told her, using Moody's voice once more so that it came out as a menacing growl. "How did I never see it before?"

Hermione gave him a cruel, dark smile. The part of her that was the handler, the part that came to the foreground to handle both Severus and the other Death Eaters, was rising again and sliding itself smoothly back into place.

"I told you," she told him with a nasty sort of smile, "people change."

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Twenty-Seven

A/N: I almost didn't get to upload this during lunch due to a bit of a mishap in-between class periods involving a broken fire extinguisher as a result of skateboarding through the hallway. Long story.

Big thanks goes out to my amazing beta!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review!

"Potter has been made Champion," Severus breathed, shutting the door behind him and locking it securely once they had made their way back to their quarters, following the anointment of not three, but four distinct Triwizard contestants. "Potter made it as fourth champion… how the bloody hell…"

Hermione winced. "It is a bit of a shock, isn't it?"

Severus's face contorted into a snarl. "And he didn't ask for it? He didn't manipulate it? Are you telling me he did not somehow orchestrate it so that his name would get in there?"

"No, Severus," Hermione told him firmly.

"I don't believe it," Severus said. He looked furious. "Potter has always been bending rules, always has to be in the limelight—don't tell me he didn't want this!"

"Severus," Hermione snapped. "Harry's just like every other student who couldn't submit their name. He fantasized about it, sure—I did too, as a matter of fact—but in the end, he never took the idea seriously." Seeing the disbelieving expression on her husband's face, she added sharply, "He was just as surprised as everyone else—probably more, come to that. This isn't Harry's fault!"

"I suppose Crouch did this, then," Severus sneered.

Hermione sighed, and sat back in her armchair. "Yes."

Severus pinched the bridge of his nose, as though to ward off an impending headache. "Shite."

"And after last night, I've muddied the waters a bit more," Hermione agreed sullenly. "You've done an excellent job with Crouch—he believes you're loyal to the Dark Lord, even if you can't help overtly, but that just means that I'm there to help him now…"

"You let him get away with it," Severus pointed out, frustrated. "You didn't directly assist."

"That won't matter in the end," Hermione said. She sounded as though she had a bit of a head cold. "When all of this is over, when I have to confess everything… people might not forgive me."

"You don't have to tell anyone else about this," Severus snapped.

"I'll try," Hermione said, resting her cheek against her hand as she stared into the fire. "But soon, I won't be able to rattle off the future like a grocery list the way I do now. Soon, things will just be unpredictable."
"Pity," Severus remarked.

"Indeed." Hermione twisted around slightly in her chair to look at him. "I've got more bad news for you, still."

"Pray tell," Severus said, as he took the other armchair.

"If we're still trying to hide Selenius's presence from the Dark Lord, we can't see him this Christmas," Hermione told him. "And even if we could, we still have an image to maintain. The castle is going to be full over the holidays." She shook her head. "It would never have worked."

They both lapsed into silence over this, mulling in mutual misery. Hermione pulled the locket out from underneath her shirt, flicking it open to gaze down at the picture of her family.

"I wish this were over already," she told him quietly, sometime later. "Just… over. Everything seems to be dragging out for far too long now."

She snapped the locket shut and slipped it back underneath her shirt. Severus was gazing at her attentively as she spoke.

"Everything is starting to spiral out of control," she added bitterly. "How far will we have to fall?"

~o~O~o~

The next day, Dumbledore requested Hermione's presence in the staff room, where he revealed her to Madam Maxime and Karkaroff. She promptly removed the Disillusionment Charm she had placed upon herself, surprising both of the guest heads, although in slightly different ways.

"She is ze one patrolling ze corridors?" Madam Maxime inquired, looking down at her curiously. Despite the fact that she was seated, her head still threatened to brush the ceiling. "Ze 'idden one you spoke about?"

Karkaroff, on the other hand, had turned deathly pale upon recognizing her. Hermione gave him a cold smile and waved her fingers at him, and then straightened up to turn her attention to Madam Maxime before Dumbledore could discreetly ask her to stop terrorizing the Durmstrang Headmaster.

"That's right," she responded cheerfully. "A bit of a time-turner accident, you see…"

Karkaroff, if anything, turned even whiter.

"Hermione will be keeping an eye on things," Dumbledore told the two of them cordially. "Naturally, the students don't know about her, and I am revealing her existence to you in trust."

"What Dumbledore is saying is that he doesn't want you to start thinking that you must be going mad when you think you see me and then you don't," Hermione told the two stunned Heads brightly. "If you think I'm around, you needn't to whip out your wand and try to hex me."

"I suppose you chanced upon an encounter of that sort with Moody?" Karkaroff said, his tone dry and his expression weak.

"Almost," Hermione said with a shrug.

"Hermione is a very capable witch," Dumbledore said, smiling benignly at the three of them. "If you ever need anything, she will be glad to help you. If she's nearby, of course."

Hermione nodded, and then addressing the half-giant, added politely, "J'espère que vous allez bien."
A pause, as she quickly formulated her words mentally first, and then added, "Et que vous appréciez votre séjour."

Madam Maxime seemed pleased by this, and returned her regards in similar kind. Smiling, Hermione gave the three of them a short bow, and then left the staff room.

She was pleased to note that Karkaroff actually looked insulted.

~o~O~o~

Hermione was in the dungeons a few days later, hunting down Peeves to confront him about stranding Crookshanks on one of the roofs. The Poltergeist had gotten ahold of her cat, and it had taken Hermione some time to find him, and then quite some time longer to rescue him. The half-kneazle had not been pleased. He had begun to spend a lot of time with Hermione, rather than Granger, and he followed her throughout the corridors for the rest of the day yowling unpleasantly in complaint.

She realized a bit too late that she was there during the transition period between classes. She immediately ducked into a niche in the wall, pressing herself against it to avoid being bumped into. Draco Malfoy's pale, pointed face came into view scant moments later, followed by his cronies. They were all wearing bright, red-lettered badges that read:

**Support CEDRIC DIGGORY—the REAL Hogwarts Champion!**

Ron appeared shortly after, and from the sullen look on his face, Hermione realized that he was not on speaking terms with Harry.

That was right, she remembered a bit belatedly, as Granger and Harry appeared last. They had a bit of a temporary falling-out…

"Like them, Potter?" Draco said loudly, as Harry neared the door. "And this isn't all they do—look!"

Hermione closed her eyes and sighed as the badges changed to read **Potter Stinks**. Great. Just great.

"Oh very funny," Hermione heard her younger self's voice cut through the air, aimed toward the giggling Slytherin girls. Pansy Parkinson, in particular. "Really witty."

*Here goes…* Hermione thought dryly, staring up at the ceiling and counting to ten as the discord between Draco and Harry reached a new level for that day.

"*Furnunculus!*"

"*Densaugeo!*"  

There was a bellow of pain from Goyle as great, ugly boils began to appear on his nose. Granger, however, whimpered and clutched her hands to her mouth as her teeth began to grow.

"Hermione!" Ron had hurried forward, and was pulling her hand away to see what was wrong. Hermione grimaced as she took in her younger self: with the teeth growing longer every second, it was not a flattering sight. Frankly, she looked like a beaver now, and her teeth continued to grow at an alarming rate, past her bottom lip, past her chin—

Severus rounded to corner at that moment, and his soft, deadly inquiry quieted the chaos that had been about to break loose, what with the Slytherins and Gryffindors looking quite ready to start hexing each other silly right then and there.
"And what is all this noise about?"

Instead of hexing each other, everyone clamored to explain. Severus calmly looked over their heads, and then pointed a finger at Draco, and uttered, "Explain."

"Potter attacked me, sir—" Draco's tone had turned unctuous, disturbingly much like Karkaroff's.

"We attacked each other at the same time!" Harry shouted.

"—and he hit Goyle—look—"

Severus bent down to examine Goyle's face, which Hermione felt would not look out of place in a book on poisonous fungi, and then dismissed him. "Hospital Wing, Goyle."

"Malf—"

Severus looked coldly at her younger self, his eyes flickering briefly over to where Hermione was pressed against the wall, and then said, "I see no difference."

Granger let out a whimper; her eyes filled with tears, and she abruptly turned and ran. She disappeared down the corridor, rounded the corner, and disappeared from site—no running off to Poppy. Hermione chewed on the side of her lower lip, stung by the insult. It had not been directed at her—not at his wife, merely at one of his students—but it hurt all the same. She had been ridiculously insecure back then, and whether or not he was speaking to her or someone else, that had been exceedingly cruel.

Harry and Ron had begun shouting at Severus. It was lucky, perhaps, that the words they had used echoed throughout the corridor in such a way that they were rather indistinguishable. The word 'bastard' and 'greasy git' featured in there somewhere, she was sure. The gist was clear, however, and Hermione saw Severus smile cruelly at this.

"Let's see," he said, in his silkiest voice. "Fifty points from Gryffindor and a detention each for Potter and Weasley. Now get inside, or it'll be a week's worth of detentions."

Harry and Ron looked mutinous, but the nevertheless walked into the dungeon classroom. Hermione could practically see the steam pouring out of their ears, and at least felt somewhat heartened that despite the secrets they were keeping from Granger, her welfare did matter to them. Severus stood at the door while the other Slytherins filed in, and glanced back once at where she was standing. His eyes were trained to recognize her faint, nearly-undetectable shimmer.

He gave her a slight nod, and then turned away to shut the door behind him.

Hermione let out the breath she hadn't known she'd been holding, and stood there, unmoving. Truth to be told, she was feeling a bit stupid, standing there staring at the dungeon door, but really...

There were times when Severus could be utterly, indescribably horrible. Not just that; he clearly excelled in it. It was at moments like these that she was starkly reminded of just how nasty her husband was toward other people. People who were not his wife. Somehow, he was rarely inclined to spit venom in her direction; but at moments like this, she got glimpses of precisely why other people did not like her husband.

With his looks and temper, he was a difficult person not to dislike. Some people had good looks to help them along, like the Malfoys, and others had good temperament to help them overcome any frightening appearances they might have, like Hagrid. But Severus had neither, nor did he care to try
and exercise one of them; with the greasy, sallow-skinned appearance and the horrible personality to go along with it, he hardly had to manufacture the perfect image of a Death Eater. Voldemort's poster-wizard: unpleasantness all around.

What the Marauders had encountered while in school had been of their own making; but what people encountered now was a combination of necessity and Severus's general liking of causing students to break down in tears. He took advantage of his role's license to cause pain, Hermione daresay he did it with great relish. He made an art out of it, similar to the way he made collecting pickled and preserved things a hobby.

He was gentler with her, though. Kinder. More playful, even. She was the one person, perhaps far more than even Albus Dumbledore, who saw the more human side of him. The part that was not too extreme in its tendency toward sadism, but neither the part that was as sappy and easily crushed as it had been with Lily, back when they were children. The two of them were likely the only ones who ever saw the more balanced, complex side of him—and Hermione more so than even the Headmaster.

It was just that he never lashed out at her without reason. Oh, he made a sport out of antagonizing the students and even the other teachers—but her? No. The shell he had now was not the same one he had worn as a student, and Hermione had not only slipped underneath that one, but had grown with him under the one he presented now. It was just that simple.

And she still loved him. The utterly incomprehensible git that he was.

"Antidotes!" Severus's voice cut through suddenly, drifting through the door and out into the corridor. "You should all have prepared your recipes now…"

The sudden sound of approaching footsteps interrupted, and Hermione turned around to see little Colin Creevy approaching. He was practically half-jogging, half-skipping, and when he had passed Hermione and reached the door, he knocked. He edged inside, beaming, and Hermione wondered how he could look so cheerful while approaching the Potions classroom. As far as she knew, Colin was terrified of Professor Snape—

"Very well!" Severus snapped angrily, his voice carrying on through the door Colin had left partially-open. "Potter—take your bag and get out of my sight!"

Well, Hermione thought dryly. He had been looking forward to poisoning Harry… no wonder he was disappointed. Having Harry's antidote fail would, provided he survived being doubly poisoned by his own poor creation before the real antidote was forced down his throat, teach him to pay better attention in class.

A moment later, Harry emerged, bag slung over his shoulders and hurrying out of the dungeon corridor; Colin was following at his heels, looking wildly excited.

Hermione heard their voices as they faded away, still echoing slightly.

"What do they want photos for, Colin?"

"The Daily Prophet, I think!"

The class ended roughly an hour later. Hermione pulled away from the door and pressed herself against the wall, holding her breath as the class left. Ron was the first one out, his expression sullen and strained. Hermione watched the students all disappear down the corridor, Draco walking with an irritating spring in his step, and then she slipped into the classroom and closed the door.
"Come to gloat about Potter getting away?" Severus sneered, turning to spell away the mess of ingredients and spilled potion the students had left behind. "How goes your search for Peeves?"

"Very badly," Hermione responded promptly, leaning against one of the desks. "I was going to offer my condolences, but if you don't want them, I'm happy to give them to Crookshanks instead. I'm rather under the impression that he was looking forward to seeing Peeves get his comeuppance."

Severus snorted, but his capricious, deeply sour mood had evaporated somewhat.

"I'm sorry you were there for that again... today."

Hermione knew exactly what he meant. She removed her Disillusionment Charm and shrugged.

"It wasn't a total loss," she said, trying to inject some humor into the situation. "I got a nice pair of normal-sized teeth out of it."

"Why did you never change them on your own?" Severus asked, straightening. "You were perfectly capable of doing it yourself."

"My parents are dentists," Hermione said. "They didn't think magic and teeth should mix. They really wanted me to carry on with having braces, and I never really tried to defy them on the matter."

Severus shook his head, smirking in amusement and disbelief. "It's mind-boggling how different you are now compared to how you were when I first met you."

"When I first met you, you were being an arse," Hermione said, just a bit haughtily. "They've always been a special case with me."

"And now?" Severus drawled, sheathing his wand and stalking over to where she was. He was still taller than her, a fact that was only exacerbated by the fact that she was sitting down, and he leaned over her, his face pressed close to hers.

Hermione grinned at him, and brought a hand to grab his leg, before sliding it behind him. "You're a bit of a special case all on your own, I'm afraid." She gave him a slight squeeze, and then added mischievously, "Being an arse is part of your charm."

"Your friends would probably be horrified to hear you say that," Severus purred, pulling her hand away and then pressing it against his lower belly. Hermione got the message, and began to unbutton his robes.

"Mmm," she said, tilting her head to the side thoughtfully, brushing her lips against his. "But my friends aren't here now, are they?"

His mouth covered hers, and after that, Hermione was quite certain that even if her friends were there at the moment, there was the very distinct possibility that she might not have cared. He kissed her hungrily, both hands firmly grasping her hips, and leaned in further to plunder more.

Her fingers had scrambled to get his robes off, and he shrugged them off now, tugging the sleeves down and throwing the garment aside. Free from obstruction, her hands immediately zeroed in on the fly of his trousers, and began to hastily unbutton it. He was not quite hard yet, but she slid off the desk and pulled away, grasping the waistband of his boxers and pulling them down with his pants.

Somehow, he had managed to retrieve his wand, and had spelled her clothing off; it ended up folded in a semi-neat pile on the floor, and she found herself shivering at the sudden chill even as she took him in her hands and began to stroke him.
His hands tangled in her hair; her mouth pulled him in, warm and wet. The air was soon filled with the sounds of saliva slicking over something thick, of moans and whimpers, and then a hiss of impatience as Severus pulled away and dragged her down to the floor. It was cold, freezing actually, and it was the last place Hermione wanted to be while they did this. But he pushed her flat onto her belly, causing her to shudder at the icy contact, and she jumped with surprise when his hand landed on her arse, leaving behind a stinging reminder. It contrasted sharply with the sensation of the cold, unfeeling flagstones beneath her, and despite the fact that Hermione was not all that fond of the floor, it actually felt good.

His lips found purchase on her neck, her shoulder, nibbling and scraping deliciously as his hands smacked into her rump, earning a whimper and squeal of surprise mixed with genuine enjoyment. Occasionally, his fingers would slice through her nether-lips, smearing the coating of juices he found there, before he resumed leaving red prints on her arse.

Hermione could not imagine that he found the cold floor to be at all friendly to his knees, but he did not seem to care at the moment. And when he had finished, he coaxed her up; Hermione tried to get onto her hands and knees, presuming that was what he wanted, but was furthermore surprised when he instead pulled her to him. She wrapped her arms around his neck as he hauled her up, into his chair, and a moment later, she cottoned on. She hooked one arm more securely around his neck, and used the other to guide him into her.

He let out a hissed exclamation as she sank down onto him, and buried his face in her shoulder, his hands tightening their hold on her waist. Their coupling now was slow, slower than they were used to, but neither of them tried to quicken the pace; Hermione relished every twist, every slow caress he made inside her. Their day earlier had been tense, stressful, and several different levels of aggravating; now they pushed all of that aside to instead focus on each other, their intimate two-person circle where everything else became irrelevant, if only for a little while.

Severus's head lowered to pull a nipple into his mouth, and he suckled on it languidly. Hermione's hands came to tangle in his hair, greasy and lanky as it always was, and she encouraged him with moans and occasional jerks of his head with her hands.

Pleasure. Pure, unadulterated, quickening pleasure that assaulted their senses at every part of their joined bodies. Fulfillment did not come quickly enough, but the sensuousness rubbing of their legs and hips against each other seemed to create a steady buzz of electricity between them, like a charge that gradually built up into a crescendo.

It was only when they had come down from their high, pressed tightly against each other and nipping and laving at the curve of the shoulders presented before them that Hermione finally remembered something and pulled away.

"What time is it?" she asked suddenly.

Severus gave her a look that was part annoyance, part exasperation, mixed in with a heavy dose of satiation and lassitude. He closed eyes and leaned in to bury her face in the soft curls, made slightly bushier from their activities; he took a moment to lazily breathe in her scent, and then reluctantly pulled away.

"It was the last class of the day when you came," Severus mumbled distractedly. "We've been here for quite some time."

"You need to tell Harry and Ron when their detentions are," Hermione reminded him.

Severus sighed, closing his eyes and burying his face back into the curve of her neck, as though that
would drown out reality. "Shite. What a lovely way to ruin my evening."

Hermione nuzzled him. "Just send a note to one of them from one of the other students, and then return to our rooms."

"I have to attend the Great Hall for dinner…"

Hermione kissed him gently, nipping on his lower lip. "I'll be waiting."

Severus nodded. He was smiling wryly, slightly, as though to himself. "We have all evening."

"Promise?" Hermione teased him gently.

"Yes."

~o~O~o~

Severus's mood, however, changed drastically the next day when he smacked Rita Skeeter's article onto Hermione's desk, in the middle of her note-taking from *The Twelve Uses of Dragon's Blood*. It was a very interesting read, thoroughly in-depth, and when the text was suddenly interrupted by the newsprint, Hermione hardly even gave it a second glance.

"Don't tell me you're taking that rag seriously," Hermione said without looking up, pushing it aside to resume where she left off. "Let me guess—this is the one where Rita says I'm Harry's girlfriend, right?"

Severus glared at her.

Hermione sighed, and finally looked up.

"Rita has a bit of a bone to pick with me, I'm afraid," she said, with a bit of a grim smile. "But don't worry. I'll still have the last word by the end of the year."

At this, Severus's eyes narrowed in a mixture of wariness and consternation.

"Just how many articles is she planning on writing about you?"

"Oh, a few," Hermione said, leaning back in her chair, expression thoughtful as she tried to recall them. "Only one is remotely accurate, and that's when she's talking about me dating Krum…"

That was apparently the wrong thing to say.

"You dated *Krum*?"

"He asked me out," Hermione said, feeling slightly defensive.

Severus shook his head. "Did you—is that why you offered to get Krum to sign Selenius's poster? Because he's…" he couldn't bring himself to say it. "Because he—because you used to go out with him?"

"What?" Hermione said, eyes widening in surprise at the implication. "No! Of course not. We were only together for less than six months, and then we ended up as penfriends. That's all," she enunciated clearly, narrowing her eyes at him. "He's my friend. We started out as dates because of the upcoming Yule Ball, and because I was the only girl who wasn't fawning over him. We ended up as good friends."
"Nothing more?" Severus clarified sullenly.

"Nothing more," Hermione repeated, her voice firm.

"You weren't—you weren't with him when you got thrown back in time?"

Hermione's eyes widened again. "That's what you're worried about? Merlin's beard, no!"

At this, Severus seemed greatly relieved. Hermione was not certain how long that attitude would last—at the very least, Granger's actions and Skeeter's articles were a surefire way to rile him up—but at least now she was prepared. She didn't think there was much point in warning him in advance. He knew articles would be written about her, and if he had a problem with them, she would be willing to discuss them openly with him. Until then, come what may.

The first task arrived soon after, and while everyone was down on the grounds, Hermione was sneaking into the broom shed.

In typical fashion, none of them had considered the fact that all Quidditch players kept their brooms in the shed locked up, to prevent them from being taken easily. Someone could break them open, certainly, and a strong enough Summoning Charm might free them—but really, if Harry wanted his precious Firebolt to be in good condition when it responded to his summons, he should have thought to unlock it beforehand.

So it was up to her to force open the charms on the broomstick, carry it out of the shed, and set it down carefully on the ground to await Harry's call. In any case, they could avoid the broomstick ramming a hole through one of the walls.

She brought several snacks with her, and sat down on the grass next to the broom munching on a chocolate éclair as three of the champions went through their rounds. She couldn't see, but she heard the roar of the crowd in the distance as each player made a fatal or fantastic move. But when there was a fourth major roar of welcome, Hermione was hard-pressed to duck in time to avoid being gutted by the Firebolt when it promptly took to the air and sped off in her direction.

She watched it disappear. Moments later, she heard Bagman's magnified voice echo all throughout the grounds: "He's summoned a broomstick—my word, is that a Firebolt? Oh, he's mounting it—he's mounting it—he's up!"

And then a few moments later, over the shrieking and gasping of the crowd as Harry pulled out of a particularly dangerous move:

"Great Scott, he can fly! Are you watching this, Mr. Krum?"

Hermione stood there, listening to Bagman's commentary for several minutes, wincing when Harry got burned, before a grin spread across her face when at long last, the roar of the crowd and Bagman's final words signaled Harry's success:

"Look at that!" Hermione could just see Bagman jumping up and down in his seat. "Will you look at that! Our youngest champion is quickest to get the egg! Well, this is going to shorten the odds on Mr. Potter!"

There was a final, angry roar from the Horntail in the distance, and then it subsided as the dragon keepers rushed in to subdue it.

*Nicely done, Harry,* Hermione thought, as she gathered up her things and made her way back up to the castle. *Nicely done...*
That night, the celebrations taking place in Gryffindor Tower could be heard all throughout the castle. It was not, Hermione reflected, at all unlike the one that had been held after Gryffindor’s Quidditch victory over the Slytherins when Hermione was a student, were James and Sirius had been the center of attention for the wild partygoers.

When Hermione made her way down to Hagrid's that evening, it was to find that there were less than a dozen skrewts left; Hermione had not gone to visit them for several weeks, and though Hagrid had given them the kind of attention you might show a litter of particularly precious puppies, they were still apparently quite keen on killing each other and anyone who tried to care for them.

"Goin' ter see if they hibernate," Hagrid told her cheerfully over tea. "Got a load of boxes prepared for them, blankets an’ all, so we'll just see if they fancy a kip in 'em…"

"Not sure if that's such a good idea, Hagrid," Hermione said dubiously.

"Don' worry about it," Hagrid said confidently. "I've got it all covered."

The reported mayhem and wreckage, in addition to the arrival of Rita Skeeter, was enough to make Hermione wish that some other poor sod had thought to breed skrewts long enough to write a manual on their care, if only to save Hagrid and the fourth years the trouble.

The announcement of the Yule Ball meant that the upcoming dance was all that anyone would talk about. All the teachers were expected to attend, and Hermione could hardly remember a time when more students had elected to stay at Hogwarts over the holidays. Not in her living memory, anyway, and she had been at Hogwarts for over a decade.

Karkaroff approached her rather reluctantly at the start of Christmas break to request that she give some of his charges proper dancing lessons. Beauxbatons, it seemed, was a school of more refinery to the point where all the attending delegates were trained in dancing; and over the holidays, several students from Hogwarts had gotten together to practice their dancing for the Yule Ball. Everyone was determined to show off, and Karkaroff seemed determined that he alone not be the one to be shown up.

So Hermione did. She charmed her hair black, changed her eye color to green, and then made her way down to the Durmstrang ship. Karkaroff had pulled out the students who needed her additional tutelage, five in all, and then there were additional volunteers who went out of their way to get some practice in. Thus, Hermione had a dozen students, all male, who were quite lost on how to dance. Krum included: he had not been pulled out, but having asked Granger to go with him, it was clear that he intended to do well.

Her strict, uncompromising demeanor was a bit off-putting for a few of them, but they loosened up when it was clear that she knew what she was doing. She dragged Poliakoff from the crowd first, the boy who could never seem to do anything quite right in his Headmaster's eyes, and who was a bit messy with his food. She hammered him into shape in less than an hour, using him as a demonstration, and then ordered all the other boys to get into pairs.

"Partner up now, no dawdling!" Hermione called, and they hurried to comply, though there were a few sniggers at this command. "Alright—one partner is going to start by leading, the other is going to be led, so pick now…"

There was, thankfully, an even number of students; Hermione had six pairs all practicing at once, and she moved around the room correcting them as she went along. The ones who cottoned on quickly were recruited to tutor the person they were partnered with, and in what Hermione suspected to be one of the rare occasions in Poliakoff's life, he was actually doing quite well. They were all
built along the lines of Crabbe and Goyle, and it was slightly amusing to see them all learning to
dance together.

Krum was just as duck-footed as ever, and it was depressing to see that he rather slow in catching on.
Hermione eventually relieved his partner of him and showed him the steps one-on-one. He was one
of three boys who were taking an inordinately long time to learn, and he frowned at her the whole
time, brows pinched above his beaky nose and dark eyes. But like Poliaikoff, she corrected him at
every turn, and he eventually managed an entire dance properly, if only out of sheer exasperation.

Four hours later, when they were done and Hermione was satisfied that they would all do
Durmstrang justice, she dismissed them. Krum, however, did not leave immediately. Brows still
furrowed, he said:

"I haff seen you before, I am thinking."

Hermione couldn't help grinning as she turned to face him, pulling on her winter cloak. "Perhaps."

"You were the one at the World Cup… with the son with the Bluebottle…"

"Possibly," she responded cheerfully. "I'm impressed that you would remember, though."

His brows unclenched, and instead rose. "I recognize you now. Your hair and eye color haff
changed, but your face is still the same."

Hermione smiled at him, securing her cloak and heading for the doorway. "You would have to be
observant, to be as good a Seeker as you are."

For a moment, he was thrown off by the compliment, but he rallied at once. "What is your name?
You never said."

But Hermione was already at the door, one hand on the knob, and she paused.

"I'm a ghost," she told him finally. "I'm not really supposed to have a name."

He looked baffled in a way that simply defied description. "But—"

"You can't tell anyone that you recognize me," Hermione told him firmly. "You can't try and guess
who I am. You must pretend you never heard of me."

Krum paused, and then he must have decided that her request had a good enough reason to back it,
for he nodded.

"Very vell."

When Karkaroff approached her the next day, it was to give her a stiff and formal thank-you for her
time—and then to request that she send a message along to her husband to ask if he might stop
avoiding him, as he had something urgent to discuss.

Severus was grateful that classes were over now, at least for the holidays, but other aggravations
were fast approaching. His Dark Mark, which had faded the night little Harry had defeated
Voldemort, was growing darker. At least, that was what it looked like to Hermione. The lines on the
blurred shape were becoming more distinct. But Severus said it as feeling as though something were
preparing to come alive inside him, a description that made Hermione's skin crawl.

This was probably what Karkaroff wanted to talk about, but Severus did not care to entertain him at
the moment, and dismissed the message Hermione relayed to him with the equivalency of chucking a
missive into the fire. For the rest of the week, however, it seemed to her that he was brooding over
something, and several times she thought he was going to ask her something, but changed his mind
at the last moment.

Hermione had enough of it after about a week, and decided to take care of what she thought was the
issue once and for all.

"Look, Karkaroff asked me to help," she snapped one evening, "because Dumbledore made that my
job. Yes, I taught Krum how to dance. Is that your problem?"

Severus's mouth had opened and shut at this, and then he said rather sullenly, "No."

The other teachers seemed determined to impress their guests, and it did not go unnoticed by
Hermione. She couldn't sneak by a suit of armor without creaky music humming in her direction;
twice, she had been conscripted by Filch to help him extract Peeves from one of them when he
began inserting his own rude lyrics into the songs. She also helped Filius line the banisters of the
marble staircases with everlasting icicles, and she and Minerva worked together on the trees late one
evening in an effort to make them bloom spectacularly with decorations.

Couch, however, had several things to say to her. Hermione met him one evening, clunking around
the courtyard on patrol, and he spotted her Disillusioned form immediately.

"Now I'm starting to see a bit of you in her," he growled, referring to Hermione's younger self.
Granger. "Not that she knows, mind, but I saw that trick she played on Malfoy a couple days ago."

"The one where I called him a twitchy little ferret, you mean?" Hermione responded coolly.

"That's the one."

"How'd you hear her all the way up at the Staff Table?"

"I didn't," Crouch said, looking smug, which was an odd expression on Moody's face. "I read her
lips."

Hermione shook her head. "Is there anything that eye can't do?"

"It's dead useful," Crouch agreed. "If I ever really do lose an eye, I'll know what to replace it with."

"Lovely," Hermione responded dully.

"Speaking of useful," Crouch growled, leaning in on her and lowering his voice, "the next task isn't
too far off, and Potter still hasn't got a clue. Think he needs a bit of help?"

Hermione resisted the urge to chew on her lower lip, and instead stared stonily back up at him. "Give
Diggory a bit of a push," she suggested quietly. "Good people are easy to manipulate, after all, aren't
they?"

Crouch grinned nastily at her. "Best idea I've had all week. I knew you'd be useful, Snape."

Christmas morning, Hermione woke up fairly early and got out of bed without waking the man
beside her, deciding to let him sleep in a bit. She pulled on one of his white button-up shirts, which
was overly large but suited her just fine. Slipping quietly out of their bedroom, she sleepily made her
way over the fireplace, and her expression immediately brightened as she registered the pile of gifts
laid neatly on their sheepskin rug. She retreated for a moment to make some tea, and by the time she
returned, Severus was up and sitting down next to the presents, one hand outstretched imperiously for his cup. His hair was mussed, his eyes sleepy, but he was grinning in a way that Hermione had not seen him do in quite a while.

"Merry Christmas," he said, his voice rough from sleep. Taking his morning tea from her in one hand and pulling her down for a kiss with the other, he added, "Presents?"

They spent the morning leisurely unwrapping their gifts. Some Honeydukes chocolate from Remus and a letter informing her on how he was doing, along with a sincere thank-you note from "Padfoot" attached to an unusual-looking knife: it was silver and bore the Black family crest, leading Hermione to believe that he had nicked it from Grimmauld Place, with a black leather sheath that attached to any article of clothing and melted into it, making itself unnoticeable until the moment it was needed. It was an odd gift, but Hermione appreciated it all the same, and reflected that it might actually come in handy.

These were the extent of Hermione's gifts from her surviving Marauder friends—yet, she could not have been more delighted. From Hagrid, she received a woven bracelet of unicorn hair. The half-giant was one of those rare people who saw things as they were, and not for their monetary value, and it was especially apparent to Hermione as she slid the silvery, interwoven strands onto her wrist.

She had bought Severus a new pair of boots, made of black durable dragon-hide, and had even been considerate enough to charm the usual extra inch on them. It gave him a fraction of extra height that, if anything, only served to help him intimidate the students even more; when he realized what she had done to his gift, there was no erasing the smirk off his face. She, in return, had received a book called *The Practical Application of Medieval Dark Magic*. It was a book he himself had undoubtedly read, and probably owned illegally, but for all intents and purposes she was certain she would need it.

She didn't get the chance to begin reading that day, however; as soon as she had finished examining it, the wrapping paper and presents were summarily pushed aside, and she found herself being playfully tackled to the sheepskin rug. They tussled for a moment on the rug, and then Hermione found herself being summarily pinned down by her wrists.

"This is just not fair," she complained, even as he lowered his head to nuzzle noses with her, which she happily responded to. "Even after all that dueling practice we've been doing—" and which they had been keeping up with once a week, "—you can still just smack me down without a wand."

"Brute strength, love."

"Brute strength can't make up for an inability of expression," Hermione shot back, grinning at him.

To her surprise, Severus's expression twisted oddly for a moment, and then he said, "Fine."

"Fine?" Hermione asked, bewildered.

"Will you go to the Yule Ball with me?"

Hermione's gaped at him, and spluttered. "I—what?"

"That's what I've been wanting to ask you."

"But I can't… I can't be seen there, you can't be seen—"

"You can disguise yourself," Severus told her easily, "and there are ways of making casual observers… oblivious."
"I don't have anything to go in," Hermione told him weakly. The dress she had worn for her wedding, which had been the set of dress robes Marlene and Alice had given her years before for Slughorn's party, no longer fit her, especially not after having had a baby. She might be in excellent physical shape now, but it didn't change the fact that her shape had changed nonetheless.

"I'm not wearing my dress robes either," Severus told her pedantically. "Nothing fancy, mind. But we can still go together."

Well, if he was so determined that it would work, Hermione had to believe that it would. She pushed her shock aside long enough to smile up at him.

"I'm good for it," she agreed. Seeing the look on his face, she laughed and added, "That's a 'yes', you dolt! Of course I'll go with you."

He kissed her, silencing any other insults that she might have prepared, and proceeded to make good use of the morning to convince her—unnecessarily, but appreciably all the same—why she had made a good choice in agreeing to go. It was not necessarily just sex, although it did include that: but after, they curled up on the sheepskin rug together, angled in such a way that when Hermione finally managed to open up her new book for perusal, Severus could read over her shoulder.

At seven o'clock, however, they were both up and properly dressed. Hermione wore her usual strict, white, button-up blouse tucked in to her skirt, which she had shorted to the knees for the occasion. She charmed her hair black again, pinning it to the back of her head and letting the curls cascade down her back and around her face, but left her eyes alone. She spent ten minutes raiding their bathroom for any make-up she might have, and finally gave up when she considered that even if she did find it, it would be ten years old and probably too messy to even use.

She fiddled through one of her old Seventh-Year Transfiguration books for several minutes before she attempted a Color-Changing Charm on her skin. It worked; she managed to darken it to a rich caramel, and combined with her hair and overall appearance, she would be difficult to recognize in any capacity. If she had thought that Severus would protest at this alteration, she was quite mistaken; if anything, it seemed to drive him to nibble at her neck, as though to check out of pure curiosity if she tasted the same.

Just before eight o'clock, they were lined up with the other teachers, watching the students as they milled around and attempted to hunt down their partners. And then Minerva stepped forward, calling for attention from the champions.

"…over here, please!"

The champions and their partners all lined up at the door, prepared to enter in procession, and the rest of the students all bustled in to find a seat. The walls of the Great Hall had been decorated with sparkling silver frost, with hundreds of garlands of ivy and mistletoe twining across the starry, black, midnight sky. The House tables had been done away with, and in their place were about a hundred smaller, lantern-lit tables intended to seat a dozen each.

Hermione watched with some satisfaction as Harry finally recognized the girl standing beside Krum—and wished she had thought to bring a camera. The sight of him, dropped jaw and all, was priceless. Parvati's less-than-flattering expression of disbelief was a nice image too, but the way Krum's fan club stalked past her with scathing looks was also worth mentioning. The fact that Pansy Parkinson couldn't seem to keep her mouth shut when she passed by was an added bonus, as well; but the fact that not even Draco could seem to come up with a single insult to aim in her direction was the icing on the cake.
Ron, of course, stalked past Granger without looking at her.

"What's Weasley's problem?" Severus muttered into her ear, as he and Hermione followed the other teachers toward the tables reserved for the staff.

"He waited for too long to ask me to the ball, and then I wouldn't tell him who I was going with," Hermione said quietly, as she took her seat. "Now that he's finally figured out that I'm a girl, he's jealous."

"How you managed to stay friends with that boy for four years is beyond me."

"He'll also accuse me of fraternizing with the enemy by the end of the night, too," Hermione whispered, smiling grimly.

The champions and their partners began to walk down toward the large, round table on the dais usually reserved for the staff table, at the very end of the hall. Harry looked as though he were trying very hard not to bump into Parvati, while simultaneously dealing with the issue of tripping over his robes, which were long enough to brush the floor. Granger was grinning nervously on Krum's arm, clearly enjoying herself, and when they reached the table, she took a seat directly between Krum and Harry.

Dumbledore demonstrated how to summon their food, and moments later, the Great Hall was filled with the sound of chatter and people dining. Severus was glancing sullenly in Granger's direction, and stabbed at his food with his fork.

"Oh, not you too," Hermione said, as she took a bite of her own pork chops. "Can't you let it go?"

"I never saw you wear anything of that sort when we were students," Severus muttered.

Hermione rolled her eyes at this.

"Of course, right before I took my little trip back in time, I stopped by my dormitory to pack my trunk," she told him seriously. "I packed myself some honeydukes chocolate because I wasn't sure they'd have it twenty years ago, a year's supply of lingerie just in case I needed to strip dance for money, and of course, my dress robes—and I brought it back with me to 1978."

On her left, two seats away, Minerva and Crouch both snorted into their food with surprise.

Severus maintained an admirably straight face as he responded:

"In that case, you should have brought your cat with you and be done with it."

"Crookshanks didn't want to come," Hermione responded conversationally. "He said time-traveling wasn't really his forte. Which is a shame, really, because he's great at figuring out who's trustworthy and who's not."

Crouch was staring at her now, Moody's magical eye rolling wildly in its socket.

"I mean, he might have told me not to marry you."

"I take it back about the cat," Severus demurred sleekly.

"Which brings us back to why I didn't have my dress robes," Hermione said, discretely pointing at Granger, who was in deep conversation with Krum, grinning unrepentantly. "Couldn't bring the cat, couldn't bring the robes."
"Or the lingerie," Crouch interjected.

Minerva looked scandalized. Professor Sinistra, who was on Severus's other side, had buried her face in one hand and was laughing silently.

The music began shortly after, though Hermione and Severus merely stood up to get out of the way while the students danced. Crouch caught Hermione's eye, grinning before he asked Sinistra for a dance. She mouthed 'bastard' at him where he could read her lips, which only made him grin wider before starting what could only be qualified as a very ungainly, very awkward two-step on the dance floor.

Hermione watched as they danced near Harry—and then she saw Crouch address him.

"Nice socks, Potter," he growled, his magical eye staring right through Harry's robes.

"Oh—yeah, Dobby the house-elf knitted them for me," Harry replied, grinning.

No doubt, Crouch was going to ask her for some more information on that later. The man was a Slytherin, and knew when he had just found information that was ripe to be exploited.

Hermione saw Granger stop dancing to take a seat next to Ron, and was almost horrified when, a few moments later, Victor approached them both. They were standing by the drinks, to be fair, and the two of them were largely hidden by the crowd; but still, it was risky.

He greeted Hermione politely, with a sharp nod and a look in his eyes that told her he wasn't fooled concerning who she was, and then to her surprise, addressed Severus instead.

"Karkaroff asked me to tell you he vishes to speak to you in the garden," Krum told him seriously. "He is waiting for you there now. He says it is important."

Severus stiffened, scowling down at this burly, near-rival counterpart of his, and then gave him a curt nod.

"I'll be back shortly," he told Hermione, and then slipped away. People parted as he passed, and moments later, he had disappeared from Hermione's view.

Krum stood there after a moment, and then turned to look at her.

"You are Herm-own-ninny, are you not?"

Hermione looked at him, startled, and then her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "I thought I told you not to keep looking for answers."

Krum shrugged. "It was obvious," he said by way of explanation. "Karkaroff does not like you, and he does not like Herm-own-ninny over there," he said, gesturing at where Granger was now arguing with Ron. "He treats you the same vay, and the similarities are unmistakable." He paused, and then added, "And you dance the same vay, as well."

Hermione sighed and shook her head, biting her lower lip. Krum raised an eyebrow at this, and she realized a bit too late that this was probably another behavior that he recognized in her younger self. "And do you plan to tell anyone?"

Krum shook his head.

"My business is vith her," he said, nodding in Granger's direction. The argument she was having
with Ron was starting to boil, visibly. "Vatever happens after, vill happen. At the very least, ve are
good friends, and ve are enjoying our time together."

Hermione nodded her head, smiling. "I remember," she said fondly.

Krum smiled, and then gave her a short bow of courtesy and turned to leave.

"Tell your son 'Merry Christmas' from me," he said, grabbing two butterbeers from the table and
making his way back over to where Granger was.

The crowd got in his way for a moment, and he had to pick his way through it; but by the time he
had made it to where Granger had been sitting, she was gone. Krum stopped to ask Ron where she
had gone, and after receiving a distinctly unhelpful answer in response, went off to find her.

When Severus did not return immediately, Hermione began to walk along the edge of the hall,
watching the students and, at one point, grabbing herself a butterbeer. The music only got wilder as
the night wore on, and she couldn't help but wonder what was holding Severus up.

When he finally did return an hour later, he was scowling with such ill-natured intensity that
Hermione was momentarily taken aback.

"What did Karkaroff want?"

"The usual," Severus snapped, pointing a finger at the drinks table and summoning himself a
butterbeer. He turned the bottle over for a quick examination, and then yanked the cap off and took a
sip. He pulled away after a moment to stare down at it disgustedly, before he added, "He's worried
about the Dark Mark. He's deliberating on whether to flee or not."

"That's not enough to get you riled up like this," Hermione said perceptively.

"Potter and Weasley overheard us talking," Severus said with a sneer.

Hermione winced. "Oh."

The music was starting to wind down, as it was nearing midnight. People were starting to leave the
Great Hall, and as the last stragglers left, Dumbledore slowly came up to approach Severus.

"Well?" he murmured.

"Karkaroff's Mark is becoming darker, too," Severus responded quietly. "He is panicking. He fears
retribution; you know how much help he gave the Ministry after the Dark Lord fell."

Severus gave Dumbledore a sideways look, and then added, "Karkaroff intends to flee if the Mark burns."

"Does he?" Dumbledore said softly, as Fleur Delacour and Roger Davies came inside from the
grotto of the courtyard, giggling. "And are you tempted to join him?"

"No," Severus said, his black eyes focused firmly on Hermione, who was standing next to him. "I
am not such a coward."

"No," agreed Dumbledore. "You are a braver man by far than Igor Karkaroff. You know," he
added, as he turned away to leave. "I sometimes think we Sort too soon..."

Severus stared at him, looking rather horrified. Hermione laughed, and pulled the butterbeer from his
hand, setting it aside before pulling him onto the dance floor.

"Don't worry about it," she told him, smiling as she took one hand in hers and placed the other on his
shoulder. "You're a Slytherin through and through—no questions there."

They started dancing in the nearly empty hall, now only inhabited by the teachers who had remained behind to clean up, with no music to guide them. But that hardly stopped them; they had put enough of their lives on hold, and now they could enjoy this moment together.

When the stricken look on his face did not abate, she added, "You know, one would almost think he'd insulted your manhood."

At this, the look on his face was abruptly replaced by his trademark sneer and a scowl, but behind his eyes, he was smirking. "Don't tempt me to prove otherwise."

"Hey," a very tired-looking Sinistra said, interrupting them, not that it stopped them from dancing. "Are you planning on leaving any time soon?"

"Don't bet your sobriety on it," Severus said, eyeing her.

"In that case, I am officially making it your job to take down the garlands," she told them, before making her way toward the entrance hall just a bit unsteadily. "Good night."

She felt a tingle of magic wash over her body—a blinked in surprise a moment later as the rich, caramel color of her skin vanished, to be replaced by milky white. Her hair had returned back to brown, too, and when she looked back up at him, she realized Severus was smirking openly now.

"I want to dance with my wife," he said calmly, as they circled on the now-empty dance floor. "Not her discolored double."

"Why, Severus, I'm flattered," she teased.

Crouch clunked past them on his way out the door.

"So, Mrs. Snape," he said, eyeing them both, "I'd say that your suggestion worked pretty well."

"Take a hint, bird-brain," Severus muttered under his breath, just loud enough for only Crouch to hear, "and go. Away."

Crouch grinned nastily at the both of them, and with a final, mocking salute, he left.

Most of the decorations were taken down shortly after, but until only the garlands were left to remove, Hermione and Severus danced. When they finally stopped to do their part in helping make the Great Hall presentable for normal everyday use again, Severus pointed his wand up at the ceiling, aiming for the mistletoe.

"Incendio—"

Hermione cut him off rather abruptly by pulling him into a kiss. It didn't stop the spell—quite the opposite, rather, for the flames struck one garland and immediately jumped to the next, leaving a trail of burning plants in its wake. The strings weakened, and fell from the ceiling in ashes, like papery snow swirling around them. She released him, breathless, and then smiled.

"Merry Christmas, Severus."

What Hermione said in French: "I hope you are well, and that you enjoy your stay."

Please review!
~Anubis Ankh
Hermione bit her lower lip, fussing with the watch on her wrist, as she deliberated on whether or not to go down and visit Hagrid.

Skeeter's article had come through again, as it had before, and Hagrid was now shut up in his cabin. She was tempted to go and comfort him, but she knew that this was a job for the trio and not her. Dumbledore, too, but she would put that aside for now. The point was that Hagrid needed some comfort and persuading, and she was probably not the person to do it.

Occasionally, she would take a walk out on the grounds, where she would find Krum swimming in the lake. At other times, she would see Thestrals flying in the distance, or catch a glimpse of owls flying to and from the owlery.

They did not have a good opportunity to celebrate Severus's birthday properly that year, nor Hermione's, given the matter of having to keep a particularly sharp eye out on the school while it was packed with students. They did manage to get settled in their quarters with a bottle of good firewhiskey and a book, and they would have gotten more done if it were not for the faint wailing that penetrated the walls.

They were up in a flash. Severus pulled on a long grey nightshirt, for lack of anything quicker to change into, and Hermione followed him out of the dungeons and toward the staircases—

"What—" Severus stopped abruptly, causing Hermione to nearly knock into him as they passed by his office. The wailing was still there, a bit louder now, but that was not what had caught his attention.

The torches along the wall were lit, which shouldn't have been. Suspicious, Severus pushed the door to his office open, and then stopped again.

The door to one of the potions cupboards was ajar.

"Blast it!"

The wailing disappeared quite suddenly, but that meant nothing; Severus slammed the door to the cupboard and doused the torchlights, before prowling quickly up the staircases. Hermione followed, silent and observant as a ghost, and the two of them reached the landing underneath where Filch was standing.

Severus was livid. "Filch? What's going on?"

Filch turned around and spotted Severus.

"It's Peeves, Professor," the old caretaker whispered malevolently, holding up the egg for Severus's inspection. "He threw this egg down the stairs."
Severus climbed the stairs quickly to stop beside Filch, staring down at the egg. Hermione followed him slowly, quietly, and she could practically see the gears turning in Severus's head.

"Peeves?" he said softly. "But Peeves couldn't get into my office…"

"This egg was in your office, Professor?" Filch asked, as though he wanted nothing more than to be able to add 'stealing from teachers' to Peeves' list of crimes.

"Of course not," Severus snapped. "I heard banging and wailing—"

"Yes, Professor, that was the egg—"

"—I was coming to investigate—"

"—Peeves threw it, Professor—"

"—and when I passed my office, I saw that the torches were lit and a cupboard was ajar! Somebody has been searching it!"

"But Peeves couldn't—" Filch spluttered.

"I know he couldn't, Filch!" Severus snapped angrily. "I seal my office with a spell none but a wizard could break!"

Severus glanced up the staircase leading up, and then down the one they had just ascended, before his eyes snapped around the cavernous, stair-filled room around them, seeking any sign of movement. "I want you to come and help me search for the intruder, Filch."

He glanced directly at Hermione, and she understood the implicit signal: You help, too.

But Filch was reticent. "The thing is, Professor," he said plaintively, "the headmaster will have to listen to me this time. Peeves has been stealing from a student, it might be my chance to get him thrown out of the castle once and for all—"

"Filch, I don't give a damn about that wretched poltergeist; it's my office that's—"

Clunk.

Clunk.

Clunk.

Hermione wheeled around in surprise, and Severus stopped talking very abruptly. The three of them snapped their heads around to peer into the figure standing in the gloom at the foot of the stairs. A moment later, Crouch had limped into view, wearing a tattered old traveling cloak over his own nightshirt and leaning on his staff.

"Pajama party, is it?" he growled up the stairs, his magical eye locking onto Hermione.

Hermione strode forward, stopping until she was level with Severus, to glare down at him; Filch began talking at once.

"Professor Snape and I heard noises, Professor—Peeves the Poltergeist, throwing things around as usual—and then Professor Snape discovered that someone has broken into his off—"

"Shut up!" Severus hissed.
Crouch took a step closer to the foot of the stairs, his magical eye traveling between Severus, then Hermione, and then over toward the other staircase that led upward. And stayed there. Then his mouth opened in surprise. Hermione stared at him. Crouch couldn't fool her—he was looking at something there, but what—?

She could see that he was doing some very quick thinking. Obviously, he was in the presence of two people he considered allies, but there was at least one person here who had to leave tonight with Crouch's cover still intact—

At least one person—

Hermione's eyes landed on a piece of old paper—old, but very familiar paper—on the staircase, six steps below the trick step Neville always forgot to leap over.


Hermione glanced up at the hole in the staircase, and then back at Crouch. Of the five of them who were here—six, possibly, if Ron was underneath the cloak… No, Hermione decided swiftly. If Ron were there, he would have helped Harry out of the trick step, grabbed the egg and map, and the two of them would have been out of there before any of them had gotten there.

But of the five of them that were here, only Crouch could see the full ridiculousness of the situation. Two invisible people, one cranky old caretaker, and a furious Potions Master. Add in one imposter masquerading as a mad old Auror, and you had absurdity in spades.

"Did I hear correctly, Snape?" Crouch asked slowly, remaining in character solely for Harry's benefit. "Someone broke into your office?"

"It is unimportant," Severus responded stiffly.

"On the contrary," Crouch growled, "it is very important! Who'd want to break into your office?"

"A student, I daresay." Severus snarled softly. Crouch's insistence on elaborating upon the matter infuriated him to the point where Hermione could see a vein flickering on the side of his temple, and he jaw was held tightly. "It has happened before. Potion ingredients have gone missing from my private store cupboard… students attempting illicit mixtures, no doubt…"

"Reckon they were after potion ingredients, eh?" Crouch said, snorting derisively. "Not hiding anything else in your office, are you?"

Hermione inhaled sharply. Why was Crouch deliberately provoking him? He had to be doing this for a reason—either he was putting on a show for the sole purpose of manipulating Harry, or he was using this as an opportunity to poke the sleeping dragon with a stick while it was effectively muzzled. Hermione was inclined to believe that it was possibly a little bit of both. While Crouch believed that the Snapes were working in Voldemort's best interest, he had never quite gotten over the antagonism that had been present between him and Hermione. They simply tolerated each other while they were working for the Dark Lord, and there had been fierce rivalry among the Slytherins for the Dark Lord's favor. He detested Hermione for her impure heritage and sassy intractability, and Severus for not giving the Dark Lord everything he had when he needed it most.

"You know I'm hiding nothing, Moody," Severus said, his voice dangerously soft, "as you've searched my office pretty thoroughly yourself."

Crouch pulled Moody's scarred, twisted face into a smile. "Auror's privilege, Snape. Dumbledore told me to keep an eye—"
What the fuck is he playing at?

Harry. He must be doing this for the sole purpose of tricking Harry into trusting him. But why go that far…?

A vein pulsed rather dangerously in Severus's temple at this, and he spoke through clenched teeth. "Dumbledore happens to trust me. I refuse to believe that he gave you orders to search my office!"

"Course Dumbledore trusts you," Crouch growled. "He's a trusting man, isn't he? Believes in second chances. But me—I say there are spots that don't come off, Snape. Spots that never come off, d'you know what I mean?"

Hermione stiffened, and Severus clutched his left forearm as though the Dark Mark were burning right then and there. This was coming too close to being an open accusation against him—against them both, come to that—and Hermione had no doubt that Crouch had done something to make Severus's Mark burn. Could he do that? Had Voldemort given him the means to make his followers' marks burn, even in their half-reactivated state?

Crouch laughed, and this time, it was a sound that chilled Hermione to the bone. "Go back to bed, Snape."

"You don't have the authority to send me anywhere!" Severus hissed, letting go of his right arm with such force that it seemed to Hermione as though he were angry with himself. "I have as much right to prowl this school after dark as you do!"

"Prowl away," Crouch riposted. It was not just his voice that was menacing now, but his entire body language spoke volumes of it. Had Hermione not faced men worse than he before, she might have cowered in fright. As it was, she stood her ground, silent and pale as a ghost. I look forward to meeting you in a dark corridor some time… You've dropped something, by the way…"

And that was it. The show should have been over. Crouch's threats had been made, his message had been sent across quite clearly, and he had obviously made his point enough to whoever else watching—that was to say, Harry—that he was letting the two of them go now. But he just had to mention the map, and any moment now Severus was going to recognize it and pounce on it…

Severus slowly reached for it, comprehension dawning across his face, but it was suddenly snapped out from under his fingers when Crouch flicked his wand at it.

"Accio Parchment!"

Somewhere, Hermione was sure, Harry was breathing an enormous, overblown sigh of relief.

"My mistake," Crouch said calmly, clearly covering for Harry. "It's mine—must've dropped it earlier —"

But it was too late. Severus's eyes were darting around, first from the egg in Filch's arms, then to the map in Moody's, then to Hermione herself…

"Potter," he said quietly, eyes glittering with fury.

"What's that?" Crouch said calmly, pocketing the map.

Hermione tried to elbow Severus to get him to be quiet, but he merely gnashed his teeth in her direction, and repeated, this time in a snarl, "Potter!" He looked straight up the stairs where the map had been found, and Hermione could see that he had come to the same conclusion that she had.
Blast, bugger, and damn it all.

"That egg is Potter's egg. That piece of parchment belongs to Potter. I have seen it before, I recognize it! Potter is here!" Severus turned around toward the stairs fully now, and took several steps forward, stretching out his hand into the thin air, as though expecting Harry to be standing less than a foot away from him. "Potter, in his Invisibility Cloak!"

Hermione saw Crouch's eyebrow raise in surprise; he had obviously not expected Severus to be so cunningly observant. But he tried damage control quickly.

"There's nothing there, Snape!" he barked, "but I'll be happy to tell the headmaster how quickly your mind jumped to Harry Potter!"

"Meaning what?" Severus snarled, hand still outstretched and, by Hermione's estimation, just a few inches away from the hole in the floor. Hermione backed away slowly now. This was fast becoming an argument between two Death Eaters who had separate goals, and wanted different things, entirely opposite outcomes to tonight's impending disaster, and it was anyone's guess on which one would prevail over the other without breaking cover.

"Meaning that Dumbledore's very interested to know who's got it in for that boy!" Crouch said, his tone threatening now. He limped closer to the stairs, advancing on them both. "And so am I, Snape… very interested…"

Severus stared down at Crouch for a single long moment, his expression so unreadable that it simply defied description. Crouch was threatening them, threatening them both on so many levels that Hermione was sorely tempted to pull out her wand and kill him herself. Or with the knife that Sirius had given her, which she kept attached to her leg. That would do just as well. But she knew she couldn't without serious, irreparable consequences. And yet, if she were not stuck backwards in time, she would certainly have lunged at him now. She wasn't afraid to kill. But she was afraid of this man, and the many layers of danger that he represented to her and her family.

He could turn Albus Dumbledore against them both. Dumbledore trusted Mad-Eye Moody implicitly, trusted his judgment, and even if they exposed him as an imposter, the damage would already be done—both to the timeline and to their standing in the Headmaster's eyes. Conversely, he could also turn the Dark Lord against the both of them, as well; right now, he had Tom Riddle's ear, and if he wanted to take advantage of it, there was nothing to stop him other than the fact that right now, he needed their assistance.

Crouch had them by the balls. Checkmate. Whatever you wanted to call it, he had them.

Severus capitulated first. He lowered his hands, taking a step back, his expression twisted into a resigned, frustrated snarl; then he managed to school his expression again, for when he turned to face Crouch, his entire demeanor was calm.

"I merely thought," he said, his voice carefully controlled, "that if Potter was wandering around after hours again… it's an unfortunate habit of his… he should be stopped." He glared down at Moody with great dislike, as he gauged the weight of his next words. "For—for his own safety."

"Ah, I see," Crouch said softly. "Got Potter's best interests at heart, have you?"

Hermione tugged on Severus's sleeve, trying to be inconspicuous about it, but urgent all the same.

"Let's go," she said, her voice so low that it was difficult for even Severus to hear. "Please."

Finally, Severus relented. He turned away, and with a sigh of relief, Hermione followed.
"I think I will go back to bed," he stated curtly.

"Best idea you've had all night," Crouch said, giving them both a very un-Moody-like grin with his slash of a mouth before turning his attention to Filch. "Now, Filch, if you'll just give me that egg—"

Hermione and Severus swept down the stairs, leaving Filch behind to argue over the egg with Crouch. They were two flights of stairs away when Hermione stopped Severus to whisper into his ear.

"I need to go follow them…"

"Crouch can see you," Severus hissed.

"I won't stay too close," Hermione replied quietly, "but in a few moments, he'll have sent Filch away. But that means Harry will be with him, alone on a dark staircase, and there's an awful lot that could happen…"

Severus understood her implication immediately.

"Go," he said shortly. "If Crouch asks what you're doing, say… say that you need to speak to him. About something. Anything."

"The second task," Hermione said quietly. "I'll ask if Harry's cracked it yet."

"That will do."

Hermione turned around and began slinking back quietly the way she had just come, until she was back at the landing where they had left Crouch and Filch to their argument. Now, however, Filch was gone, and Hermione could see Crouch standing near the bottom of the staircase, his magical eye whizzing around wildly as he examined the Marauders Map.

"Merlin's beard," he whispered, and Hermione could detect a trace of jealousy in his voice. He had known the Marauders, and the fact that the map bore their title was clearly not lost on him. Hermione could see the gears turning in his head. "This… this some map, Potter!"

"Yeah, it's… quite useful." The voice was coming from beside Crouch, but Hermione couldn't see who—but she recognized it as Harry's, and knew for certain now that he must be under his Invisibility Cloak. "Er—Professor Moody, d'you think you could help me—?"

"Go," he said slowly. "if Crouch asks what you're doing, say… say that you need to speak to him. About something. Anything."

"The second task," Hermione said quietly. "I'll ask if Harry's cracked it yet."

"That will do."

Hermione saw Crouch take ahold of something invisible in front of him, and heave; a flash of legs under the Cloak, and then they disappeared as Harry climbed onto the stair above where he had been trapped. Crouch returned to gazing in abject fascination at the map.

"Potter…" he said slowly. "you didn't happen, by any chancem to see who broke into Snape's office, did you? On this map, I mean?"

"Er…yeah, I did…" Hermione heard Harry admit. "It was Mr. Crouch."

Hermione's jaw drop. This was quite possibly the only time the Crouch standing before her could possibly be thankful that he had his father's exact name, but it was a good thing he did; if Harry had seen someone, anyone else on that map, all hell could have been raised with the knowledge of an actual intruder…
Crouch looked alarmed, and Hermione was, for once, glad to see that he was in some pretty hot water himself now. "Crouch?" he repeated. "You're—you're sure, Potter?"

"Positive," Harry said.

"Well, he's not here anymore," Crouch lied, his magical eye still perusing the map. He seemed to be at a slight loss for words. "Crouch… that's very—very interesting…"

He was silent for a moment, still gazing down at the map with such intensity that it was hard to believe that Harry could not be suspicious of it. One thing was clear, however: that map was a danger to Crouch's cover, and it was clear that he was trying to find a way to get it out of Harry's hands in as inconspicuous a manner as possible.

"Er… Professor Moody…" Crouch almost jumped at this, but nevertheless turned his attention most obligingly toward Harry, "why d'you reckon Mr. Crouch wanted to look around Snape's office?"

Crouch pulled his magical eye away from the map and turned it onto Harry, fixing him with a quivering stare. Hermione had the impression that he was sizing Harry up.

"Put it this way, Potter," Crouch muttered finally, "they say old Mad-Eye's obsessed with catching Dark Wizards… but I'm nothing—nothing—compared to Barty Crouch."

Hermione was certain only she could detect the trace of bitterness in Crouch's voice. His father had thrown him to the Dementors, although after what he and his fellows had done to the Longbottoms—and here, Hermione felt her hands clench in fury at the memory—he most certainly deserved it. But from Crouch's deluded point of view, his father had demonstrated the unforgivable: that he was willing to get rid of anything that got in his way in order to obtain Ministerial power and glory.

Well, Hermione thought. Barty Crouch, Jr. had become just the opposite; he was willing to get rid of anything in his way of reviving the Dark Lord. Like father, like son, through a twisted mirror.

"Professor Moody?" Harry said again, tentatively. "D'you think… could this have anything to do with… maybe Mr. Crouch thinks there's something going on…"

"Like what?" Crouch demanded sharply, a bit too sharply.

There was a slight pause. "I don't know," Harry muttered. "Odd stuff's been happening lately, hasn't it? It's been in the *Daily Prophet*… the Dark Mark at the World Cup, and the Death Eaters and everything…"

Both of Crouch's horribly mismatched eyes widened, and he licked his lips nervously.

"You're a sharp boy, Potter," he said. "Crouch could be thinking along those lines," he continued slowly. "Very possible… there have been some funny rumors flying around lately—helped along by Rita Skeeter, of course. It's making a lot of people nervous, I reckon…"

A grim smile twisted his lopsided gash of a mouth.

"Oh if there's one thing I hate," he muttered quietly, more to himself than Harry, but Hermione saw his magical eye roving across the room and with a start, she realized that it had landed on her—and then it returned to the map, "it's a Death Eater who walked free…"

Hermione's eyebrows rose at this. Crouch wasn't lying. She knew him too well for that now; almost everything he said had some variant of the truth in it, to keep consistency. Much like she did, when she lied to him about her and her husband's loyalty to the Dark Lord.
Severus and Karkaroff were certainly walking free. Out of Azkaban, and not under the punishing blow of the Dark Lord. Hermione was quite possibly the only one there tonight who understood the true implication of his words. If Severus didn't return to the fold as planned… and Karkaroff too, for that matter… there would be blood to pay, by Crouch's estimation.

"And now I want to ask you a question, Potter," Crouch said suddenly, his tone very businesslike. He waved the map in front of Harry, whom Hermione imagined had gone frozen with the fear of precisely what kind of question Moody was talking about—

"Can I borrow this?"

"Oh!" Harry said, sounding surprised. A pause. "Yeah, okay."

"Good boy," Crouch growled, and Hermione detected a trace of victorious relief in his tone. "I can make good use of this… this might be exactly what I've been looking for…"

With a jolt, Hermione realized that Crouch could now know exactly where she and Severus were at all times. Karkaroff too, for that matter. And Harry himself, along with anyone and everyone else who was in the school. Hermione swallowed. She would have to be careful that she was always honest with Crouch about their whereabouts if asked, because if he checked the map beforehand, he could easily know they were lying—damn it, Harry!

The only plus side—if it could even be called a plus side, given the alternative—was that Harry would not accidentally glimpse the name 'Hermione Snape' on the map now. Not that it had ever been much of a threat; there were so many other people at Hogwarts that on the occasions that Harry did look at the map, it was near statistical impossibility that he would accidentally glimpse her name — particularly since she spent the majority of her time in their quarters, which were not on the map, nor did she frequent the corridors Harry expected Hermione to be at during certain times of the day.

Crouch had begun leading Harry up the staircase toward his office, one eye still on the map. Relieved that tonight's utterly disastrous events seemed to be drawing to a close, Hermione followed.

"You ever thought of a career as an Auror, Potter?"

_Don't be a cruel joker, Canary._ Crouch wasn't expecting Harry to survive the end of the year.

"No," Harry said, sounding rather taken aback.

"You might want to consider it," Crouch said, nodding at Harry thoughtfully. "Yes, indeed… and incidentally… I'm guessing you weren't just taking that egg for a walk tonight?"

"Er—no," Harry confessed, grinning. "I've been working out the clue."

Crouch winked at him, his magical eye going haywire again.

"Nothing like a nighttime stroll to give you ideas, Potter… see you in the morning…"

He stepped into his office and closed the door. Harry stood there for a moment, as though he were thinking something over, and then walked off in the direction of Gryffindor Tower.

Hermione stood there, unmoving for several minutes, and then the door opened again, and Crouch poked his head out.
"Well?" he snarled. "Aren't you coming in?"

Hermione ducked her head, and then followed him inside. The door shut behind them both, clicking as it did so.

The trunk in Crouch's office was still there, along with the variety of sneakoscopes and foe-glass. Hermione gingerly found a seat, hoping she wouldn't accidentally set anything off, and Crouch peered into the foe-glass quickly for a moment before turning back to look at her.

"So," he said. "What were you following me for?"

"I take it Harry's figured out the second task?" Hermione asked conversationally.

"Indeed," Crouch said. He gave her a lopsided grin. "Diggory told him how, naturally."

"Good, good." Hermione looked pleased at this. "Does he know how he's going to get past it?"

"Didn't say, but no doubt he'll be sticking his nose in a book for the next few weeks," Crouch said with a laugh. "I already planted the book he needs in his dormitory by the Longbottom boy—the one I nicked from you earlier this year."

Hermione nodded. Crouch examined her face for a moment, and then gave her a nasty grin.

"The Longbottom boy… looks an awful lot like his mother, doesn't he?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but Crouch interrupted her.

"Not even you could change that much, Snape," he sneered. "You and Longbottom's wife were too close in school for that."

Hermione bared her teeth at him, but said nothing. Crouch laughed again; it was an unpleasant sound.

"I know you're not loyal to the Dark Lord, Snape. Your husband? Perhaps. He's certainly employing you as such, and you're pretty damn loyal to him," he said, giving her another stomach-churning, gash-mouthed grin. It was disturbing to see on Moody's face. "But you're only loyal to the Dark Lord so far as you are loyal to your husband. Not unlike the way my mother was to my father, you see…"

Hermione gazed back at him stonily, quickly trying to figure out how to rectify the situation.

"But don't worry," Crouch continued. "You've done good work. I'll put in a good word for you to the Dark Lord—maybe he'll let you serve him as a reward for your help."

Hermione assessed him carefully, and then stood up.

"I turned the Dark Lord down once out of foolishness and naiveté," she told him coldly. "But once I saw the power he had—the power to make people tremble in fear without so much as lifting a hand—I realized my mistake. And I'm rectifying that now."

She wheeled around to leave.

"You may not believe I've changed, Canary," she told him, employing the insulting nickname he had earned from his schoolboy days, when she often hexed him into a yellow budgie. "But you should know that if I didn't need you in order to bring the Dark Lord back, I would have killed you long before now."
The look on Crouch's face was one of sudden, frightening realization, the kind someone wore after they realized they had greatly misjudged the depth of water with both feet. He stood up after a moment, however, and advanced menacingly on her, as though hoping to tear away the illusion he only hoped she was putting up.

"You're not a killer, Snape," he said, pulling out his wand.

In a flash, Hermione had hers out, and pointed straight at his temple. He stopped just several feet from her.

"I've killed before. Don't think I wouldn't if I had to now," she said calmly. "I'd rather not fuck up my timeline if I can avoid it, and that includes your survival. But if you try to endanger mine, I won't hesitate to take your place myself."

It was a bluff, of course. She could impersonate Moody until the end of the year if she had to, but the only way things could be fixed would be if she preserved Crouch's dead body and then somehow managed to switch it with hers after being caught. It was impossible, but only she could know that.

Crouch stared at her, his magical eye whizzing wildly for a moment, and then he turned away.

"You're a menace, but pretty damn determined," he said at last, clunking away. "Go to bed, Snape."

Hermione slowly lowered her wand, and then headed for the door.

"One more thing," she told him lightly, her hand on the knob. "If Harry doesn't make good use of your planting the book he needs in his dorm, just use Dobby."

"Dobby," Crouch repeated, turning to glance back at her. His magical eye swiveled with interest. "Dobby the house elf?"

"That's the one."

Crouch's parting look was considering, as Hermione slipped out of the room and shut the door behind her.

~o~O~o~

Hermione stood by the edge of the water some distance away from the bank where the spectators were watching, observing as Harry sprinted down toward the lake. She watched Madam Maxime and Karkaroff shoot him disapproving glances, and Fleur stared down at her robes, which Harry's sudden halt had splattered with mud; but in a moment, he was being led toward his spot on the bank by a very pleased Ludo Bagman.

Slowly, she walked back into a copse of trees leaning over the edge of the lake, as all four champions dove into the water. Harry was wading out, chewing on something and swallowing; he stood there stupidly for several long moments, looking miserable and ignoring the jeers and catcalls of the Slytherins, and then quite suddenly, he ducked in.

Hermione, Disillusioned, leaned closer to the water to watch. Harry was out of sight now, but the crowd was waiting patiently. She stood there for several minutes, until the sound of a single peg-foot hitting the dirt caused her to turn around.

"Watchful as always, Snape," Crouch growled, as he came up from behind her. He halted several feet from the water's edge. "Think Potter'll come out all right?"
"I hope so, Canary," Hermione said lightly. "We need him, after all."

"That we do," Crouch said with a nasty grin, though Hermione saw a tick appear in his temple. "That we do."

~o~O~o~

"Hold on," Harry told Ron and Hermione, stopping to look at Sirius. "I think I left something behind in the cave—be right back—"

Sirius barked in response, and followed Harry back up several feet into the rocks, leaving Ron and Hermione—sixteen-year-old, fourth-year Hermione—behind to wait for him.

Harry waited until they were back inside before he turned around to face Sirius, who had resumed his human form.

"I didn't get a chance to ask you while Ron and Hermione were here, and you said you wouldn't tell me anything until we were face to face," Harry told Sirius determinedly, getting right to the point. "I want to know about my godmother."

Sirius sighed, walking several steps forward to pat Buckbeak on the shoulder before turning to look at Harry.

"I'm really not allowed to tell you much about her, Harry—"

"'Allowed'?” Harry repeated, with a frown.

"But I'll tell you what I can," Sirius said, taking a seat on the floor.

"Why?” Harry asked, taking a seat next to Sirius. "Why all this secrecy about her? I know no one wanted to tell me about you until the last possible minute because they all reckoned you were a murderer, but it's just—if I hadn't seen her for myself, I wouldn't have known she existed."

Sirius, who had been stroking the hippogriff's beak, spluttered at this.

"You saw her?"

"In my first year," Harry said, examining his godfather's face carefully. "I saw her over by the lake with Snape and—and someone else. A toddler, I think. I also saw her again in the staff room, when Ron and I were hiding in the wardrobe in our second year."

Sirius rubbed his face, shaking his head in disbelief. "That's it?"

"I recognized her from the photo album Hagrid gave me," Harry said quietly. "The one with the curly brown hair."

Sirius let out a ragged sigh. "That's her."

"But why is she such a big secret?” Harry persisted.

Sirius shook his head. "Her situation is a complicated one—"

"What's her connection to Snape, then?"

"Merlin's beard, Harry!" Sirius exploded. "You're not supposed to know this!"
"Well, I do," Harry responded defiantly. "And I'm tired of being treated like a child—it's not like I can't keep a secret, you know!"

"That's not the problem, Harry," Sirius said, a bit more calmly. "The problem isn't that you can't keep a secret—it's just that your godmother's situation is something that is supposed to be kept a secret from the entire world."

Harry's mouth fell open at this, and then he shut it. "Why?"

"Well, it's only temporary, really, but something happened to her when she was young—it's still taking time to run its course."

"You mean she was cursed?"

"Something like that," Sirius said evasively.

Harry sighed, and rubbed his temple. "Alright. What can you tell me about her?"

Sirius leaned back against the wall, gazing at Buckbeak thoughtfully. "Well, she was at school with your dad and I, just a year behind us. She arrived a bit late because she was a transfer student, but she fit right in."

"She arrived late?" Harry asked, curious. "What year?"

"Near the end of our sixth year," Sirius said, and then grinned as he recalled something else. "She got put in detention on her second day of school for fighting in the corridors. It was brilliant. She was a bit of an odd duck at first, but she was scary smart."

"So, she arrived after you guys made the Marauders Map?" Harry asked, grinning at Sirius's recollection.

"That's right," Sirius said.

Harry leaned back, thoughtfully. "So she became the fifth Marauder?"

"More like the fourth, really," Sirius admitted. "I actually think her arrival was what caused Pettigrew to grow apart from us—not that he wasn't an odious little worm to begin with," he added with a growl, "but she just sort of… took his place. She was good-looking, smart, engaging, and in need of real friends and we just—kind of took her on." Sirius scratched at the stubble on his chin, deep in thought for a moment, and then added, "She was like a little sister to us, actually. And she's the one who made us all grow up, I think."

"Are you still in contact with her?"

"Well, I'm not really supposed to say—"

"You are," Harry said, with a sigh, resting his chin on his arms.

"Your godmother loves you, Harry," Sirius said quietly. "Eventually, she'll be able to reveal herself to you, but she can't right now."

Harry didn't respond. Sirius tried another tactic.

"D'you know who rescued you from the wreckage of the house after you defeated You-Know-Who?"
"Hagrid," Harry said at once.

Sirius shook his head. "Hagrid was there, all right, but if it hadn't been for her, the house would have collapsed right on top of you before anyone could have gotten you out. He found her climbing into the window of your room to try and retrieve you, and helped her up. Hagrid helped, and he delivered you to Dumbledore, but it was your godmother who got you out of there."

Harry was staring at him now, gazing at Sirius in amazement.

Sirius paused, and then said quietly, "I didn't escape from Azkaban alone, Harry. It was your godmother who helped me get out."

"You're kidding," Harry whispered.

"I'm not," Sirius responded in an undertone. "She knew I was innocent. Your godmother is a good woman, Harry, and like I already said—she loves you more than you can possibly realize. Just because you can't see her doesn't mean she doesn't see you."

He stood up then, and pulled Harry to his feet.

"We'd better get back," he said. "We've kept your friends waiting long enough."

"One more question," Harry said. "Everyone I know who does know about her doesn't call her by her name—they just call her, 'The Professor'. Why is that?"

Sirius chuckled, as he made his way toward the fissure in the wall that led the way out. "Because she used to teach at Hogwarts, Harry. Years ago. Two years or so after your father and I graduated." He grinned at this. "We always poked fun at her for it—never let her live it down."

Harry grinned back at him, and Sirius transformed into a large, black dog and wriggled through the crack in the wall, indicating that the conversation was now over, and that Harry should follow.

~o~O~o~

"Well," Crouch told Hermione, clunking into step behind her as they wandered around the grounds one night. "The fat's really in the fire now."

"You killed your father," Hermione said with a sigh, rubbing her temple. "Attacked Krum. Put everyone on high alert. And now Harry's training up for the third task."

Crouch grinned at her. "Good work, eh?"

"How are you planning on getting Harry to the Dark Lord, though?"

Crouch paused to look at her, his expression thoughtful.

"You know, I don't think I'm going to tell you," he said slowly.

Hermione shrugged, but inside, her heart was beating faster. "Why not? What have you got to lose?"

"We're at the final stage, Snape," Crouch said confidently. "You could have been helping me along this far just to set me up. All you'd need to know is how to sabotage me."

Hermione sighed. "If you won't tell me about it, at least tell me how to help you. Where do you want me for the third task?"
Crouch waved his hand dismissively. "Your job's done for now, Snape. I'll handle the rest." He leered at her. "Go home, give a warm welcome to your husband—I'm sure he'll appreciate it."

Hermione's face burned hot. "You've been keeping an eye on the map," she accused acidly.

"'Course I have," Crouch growled. "You and Snape—you don't think I've missed the number of times your dots have overlapped in some obscure niche? You've been keeping busy—when you're not spying on Potter, that is," he added with a nasty sort of smile. "Your husband's been teaching you tricks, no doubt."

In a flash, Hermione had whipped out the silver knife Sirius had given her, and had the tip pressed dangerously into Crouch's throat.

"What you hate most in the world," Hermione said softly, "is a Death Eater who walked free. I've got something for you myself, Crouch; I hate people who stick their nose in my business, particularly when it doesn't belong there. After tomorrow night, I won't need to hold back anymore." She trailed the tip across Crouch's jugular, and she watched him gulp. "You've been very helpful in making sure the Dark Lord rises again, Canary, but when you're no longer needed…"

"I can take you on," Crouch said with a sneer, but Hermione could tell he wasn't entirely confident on that matter. She had always been good—too good—for him, and he knew it. "You think I'm afraid of you?"

"Tomorrow night," Hermione whispered. "Tomorrow night is when we either make it or break it. If we succeed, and you do something sufficient enough to get on my nerves, I won't hesitate to show you precisely what tricks my husband has been teaching me. If we fail, I'll kill you regardless. Am I clear?"

Crouch was staring at her now as though he had never quite seen her before. It was a look that Hermione was no longer a stranger to, but it seemed now as though she had finally frightened him. Before, she had been an annoyance, an ally, a lackey; before, everything she had done, he had considered to be merely a bluff. An illusion, maybe. Trickery and deceit. Possibly just a show. But he seemed to finally believe her now, and he was afraid.

He was afraid of her because now he believed her.

"Get lost, Snape," he spat, and turned away, magical eye whizzing wildly in its socket. "If you want to help, you make sure that Dumbledore gives me the Triwizard Cup to place in the center of the maze. I'll ask him, but if he doesn't let me, then it's all over."

Hermione gave him a stony look. "Very well."

~o~O~o~

Hermione paced along the outside of the maze, growing more and more nervous with each step. Harry had gone into the maze more than half an hour ago, and he and Cedric had disappeared from view not twenty minutes ago. People in the stands claimed the saw him grasp the cup at the same time as the Hufflepuff champion, and then the two suddenly vanished. The audience was not particularly worried; they simply thought that it was another part of the third task. But the teachers and judges, who knew that this was not part of the final task, were growing increasingly worried and agitated, though they were trying to ensure that the crowd did not realize this. The last thing they needed was for all hell to break loose.

And then, quite suddenly, all hell did break loose.
Hermione heard the sound of screams. And then minutes later, a cry went up— "Dead! Diggory's dead!"

More screaming and shouting. It was mayhem, chaos, confusion. And in the thick of it all, was Harry. But instead of running toward the scene like everyone else, Hermione instead slipped away. She snuck behind one of the hedges closest to the path leading up toward the castle, heart beating wildly in her chest as she waited—waited…

"What happened, Harry?" Crouch asked, as he half-carried, half-dragged Harry along with him, up toward the castle.

This was it. Crouch had gotten Harry from Dumbledore—Dumbledore who was probably distracted now, dealing with Diggory's parents, and then stopping Granger from using her time-turner too early. But he couldn't be; Harry needed him. Hermione once again made her way toward the crowd, this time removing her Disillusionment charm—in the current chaos, her disguise was both useless and unnecessary—and pushed her way past a group of sobbing, hysterical third-year girls…

"Headmaster," she gasped, grabbing the sleeve of Dumbledore's robes. The old man wheeled around to look at her. "Harry—Harry and Moody—"

"Where did he take him?" Dumbledore demanded, his tone thunderously quiet, but clear enough for Hermione to hear.

"His office. I'll go get Minerva and Severus, you go on up—"

Dumbledore quickly tried to extract himself from the people around him, but it was difficult.

"Minister, if you'll excuse me for a moment—kindly go and speak to Mrs. Diggory, please—"

"But Dumbledore, you can't—"

"Dumbledore, sir—!"

"I must, Cornelius—Hagrid, please make sure none of the Blast-End Skrewts get out—"

He managed, however, and nearly flew up to the castle, such was his speed; Hermione sank away into the crowd, and found Minerva. She pulled the older witch away by her arm, muttering quickly to her what was going on, and then did the same with Severus. Moments later, the three of them were sprinting after the Headmaster, and they caught up with him at the courtyard.

"Albus, what—?" Minerva asked, quite out of breath as they pushed their way past the doors and into the entrance hall.

"I'm afraid, Minerva, that we either have an imposter among us at best, or a traitor at worst," Dumbledore said, running up the stairs, with the three of them at his heels. "There is no time to explain—"

They stopped in front of the door to Crouch's office, and Dumbledore did not hesitate for a single moment. He brandished his wand, and Hermione did the same; their spells, however, were different. Hermione quickly Disillusioned herself, while Dumbledore aimed his wand at the door.

"Reducto!"
There was a flash of light, and the door splintered and was summarily blasted off its hinges; Hermione shrank back from the force for a moment, as she had been closest, and then peered inside. Harry was sitting there, staring at the Foe-Glass in front of him, eyes wide in shock and fear. Hermione chanced a look at Dumbledore, and at that moment, she understood—that was, if she had not already understood before. The benign smile he usually wore, the air of benevolence he usually carried that acted like a soothing balm to those around him, much like Fawkes' Phoenix song—it was gone; it had instead been replaced by a sense of ancient, burning, almost hellish power that boiled down and coalesced into radiating, cold fury.

He entered first, stepping into the office, where he placed a foot underneath Crouch's unconscious body and kicked him over onto his back so that he was face-up. Hermione and Severus followed next, where she saw their reflections skulking in the mirror right back at them, despite her Disillusionment. They exchanged subtle glances, and then Hermione quickly stepped aside as Minerva nearly knocked her over as she made her way straight to Harry.

"Come along, Potter," she whispered weakly. The idea that Mad-Eye Moody was before her, a traitor and who nearly killed her charge, had her mouth pressed into a thin line that twitched slightly, as though she were about to cry. "Come along… hospital wing…"

"No," Dumbledore said sharply.

"Dumbledore, he ought to—look at him—he's been through enough tonight—"

"He will stay, Minerva, because he needs to understand," Dumbledore said curtly, his tone brooking no further argument. He bent over Crouch for a moment, examining him carefully.

"Moody," Harry whispered, and at that moment, Hermione wanted nothing more than to pull him into her arms and comfort him. He looked so lost—so disbelieving— "How can it have been Moody?"

"This is not Alastor Moody," Dumbledore said quietly, having finally reached the conclusion. He glanced over at Hermione, whose slinking double in the Foe-Glass gave him a short nod of affirmation. "You have never known Alastor Moody. The real Moody would not have removed you from my sight after what happened tonight." This, Hermione knew, was true; however, the situation following the imposter's removal of Harry had been so chaotic that it required Hermione to come in and bodily collect him before he could act upon that realization. And this final examination had confirmed it for him. "The moment he took you, I knew—and followed."

Dumbledore fished through Crouch's robes, and retrieved the hip flask and a set of keys on a ring. He turned them over in his hands for a moment, and then turned to Severus and Minerva.

"Severus, please fetch me the strongest Truth Potion you possess, and then go down to the kitchens and bring up a house-elf called Winky. Minerva, kindly go down to Hagrid's house, where you will find a large black dog sitting in the pumpkin patch. Take the dog up to my office, tell him I will be with him shortly, and then come back here."

The look he gave Hermione indicated to her that she should follow them and take up one of the three tasks he had just assigned. All three of them turned at once and left, and as soon as they were a staircase away, Hermione turned to Minerva.

"I'll go get the dog," she said quietly.

"I'll retrieve Winky, then," Minerva said, still looking rather shaken. They abruptly went off their separate ways, and Hermione ran down to the entrance hall. She passed the courtyard, the bridge,
and made it down to Hagrid's in the space of ten minutes. Sirius was lying down just where Dumbledore had said he would be, and when he saw her, he stood up and wagged his tail.

"Dumbledore asked me to bring you up to his office," Hermione said, rolling back her sleeve. "He said to tell you he will be with you shortly. Give me your paw, will you?"

Sirius held out a paw, as though to shake, and Hermione grasped it with one hand while she used the other to fiddle with the third dial on her watch. A moment later, the there was a sharp yank behind her navel, and they spun around for a moment—and landed in the Headmaster's Office. She cordially pulled out a chair for Sirius, and bowed, and then left.

She quickly made her way back to where Harry and Dumbledore were, and stopped at the doorway just in time to nearly bump into Severus, and almost trip over Winky, who was at his heels. Minerva came up right behind her, and Severus stopped abruptly to stared into the room.

"Crouch," he said. "Barty Crouch!"

"Good heavens," Minerva said, stopping dead in the doorway next to him, and staring down at the man on the floor. A man whose real face Hermione had not seen throughout the entire year, but one she knew well enough. He was pale, slightly freckled, and with a mop of straw-colored hair just as Hermione remembered, but he was older too, which she had not yet seen…

Winky let out a shriek ("Master Barty, Master Barty, what is you doing here?") and flung herself on Crouch's chest, and began to wail.

"You is killed him! You is killed him! You is killed Master's son!"

"He is simply Stunned, Winky," Dumbledore said calmly. "Step aside, please. Severus, you have the potion?"

Severus handed him the vial of clear, water-like potion, and Dumbledore got up from where he had been sitting to kneel beside Crouch on the floor. He pulled him up into a sitting position, directly beneath the Foe-Glass hanging on the wall, and uncorked the bottle of Veritaserum. He poured three drops into Crouch's mouth, pointed his wand at the blond man's chest, and murmured, "Ennervate."

Crouch slowly opened his eyes; his face had gone slack, and his eyes were disturbingly unfocused.

"Can you hear me?" Dumbledore asked quietly.

Crouch's eyelids flickered. "Yes."

"I would like you to tell us," Dumbledore said softly, "how you came to be here. How did you escape from Azkaban?"

Crouch took a deep, shuddering breath, his eyes flickering unsteadily through the room, and he began to speak. His tone was flat, expressionless, but for the next quarter of an hour, he told them about everything: how his mother had begged his father to trade her life for his, how he spent years under the control of his father's Imperius, how Winky had begged for him to be allowed to attend the World Cup. How Bertha Jorkins had discovered his existence, and his father had been forced to place a Memory Charm on her to keep her quiet—a Memory Charm that was so strong that it had permanently damaged her brain. Something which Hermione suspected had only made her all the more susceptible to being ensnared by Voldemort, but she kept quiet throughout the telling. Silent and invisible as a ghost, as Crouch unfolded, giving them answers to the many mysteries that had plagued them throughout the year…
Near the end, there was almost complete silence, save for Winky's hysterical sobs; and then Dumbledore said quietly, "And tonight…"

"I offered to carry the Triwizard Cup into the maze before dinner," Crouch whispered, a mad smile creeping along his face. "Turned it into a Portkey. I didn't need her help after all. My master's plan worked. He is returned to power and I will be honored by him beyond the dreams of wizards."

An insane, drugged smile lit his features, and then his head dropped, his eyes fluttering shut.

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Hermione slowly slipped through the doors to the hospital wing, closing them behind her quietly. The Weasleys had left an hour earlier, to let Harry have some time to himself, particularly since he would be having an interview with the Diggory's the next day. She crossed the room, passing his bed, and stopped next to Moody's.

"Hey," she whispered quietly.

Moody's eyes snapped open in alarm, and he shot up, scrambling around for his wand. Thankfully, however, Poppy had the good sense to remove it beforehand, and put it in her safekeeping until he was discharged. Upon realizing this, Moody turned to look at her squarely, face drawn into a snarl.

"How do I know it's you?" he growled.

Hermione carefully pulled out a chair for herself and sat down. Just because Moody was in bed and without a wand didn't mean he wasn't still capable of throwing a mean right-hook if he felt threatened—and at this point, almost anything could be considered a threat. More than usual, anyway. "Because you're one of the only people who know I'm Severus's handler," she whispered. "And because you and Kingsley trained me, during the summer, back when I was still a student. You were also at my wedding, too."

Moody relaxed only marginally. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to see how you were doing."

"Well," Moody said, "I was locked inside my own trunk for nine months, and I have to tell you that it wasn't all that kind to my joints. How do you think I'm doing?"

"Much better then, I take it?"

Moody snorted. "What are you really here for, Snape?"

"Well," Hermione said quietly, "I've already told the Headmaster this—along with Sirius, Minerva, and a few others—that I was working with Crouch all along to help him bring the Dark Lord back."

Moody's lopsided gash of a mouth dropped open, and for one wild moment, it looked like he was going to actually try to bodily remove her head from her shoulders. But Hermione hurried on quickly.

"You know that I was sent back in time," Hermione told him. "You know the whole story. And in my timeline, this is exactly how it played out—Crouch impersonates you for a year. And I needed to make sure it stayed that way to keep the timeline playing out as it should."

Moody stared at her. "Bloody hell," he whispered croakily.
"Do you think I haven't felt guilty about it?" Hermione said miserably. "Because the idea of letting you rot in a trunk for nine months never really sat well with me."

Moody inhaled sharply. "I believe you."

"I thought you had the right to know," she said. "I also wanted to see how you're faring now—and if—and if you're angry enough at me to try and deliver my head to the headmaster on a platter."

Moody waved a hand at her tiredly. "Just forget it, Snape," he growled. "We all do what we have to do—I know that more than anyone else here."

"If there's anything I can do…"

"There is, actually." Moody sat up a bit straighter, leaning against the headboard. "Why don't you start by telling me exactly what you did all year while I was being impersonated?"

Hermione blinked in surprise. "What?"

"I want to know exactly what was going on while I was locked up, girl," Moody ordered. "Everything."

And so Hermione did.

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Hermione could not help but stare in revulsion at the grotesque shape branded into his arm. She had noticed it growing darker throughout the year—it would have been impossible not to—but it had been a long time since she had seen it so dark and clear on her husband's arm. He had gone back to the Dark Lord at the nearest opportunity, and had returned upwards of an hour later by Floo, directly into their quarters, where she had been waiting.

It was a good thing she had been expecting him, because he was barely conscious when he did arrive. The Dark Lord had been furious at his delay, on top of the anger he was expected to direct to his lacking followers. Severus had not been there when the Mark first burned, and had thus avoided the initial punishment that had followed the Death Eaters' collective failures to stop Harry from escaping.

Voldemort had rarely ever punished his followers so violently in the past, but thirteen years of pent-up frustration was liable to take effect on his patience and self-restraint. Severus's delay only compounded the other grievances Tom Riddle had against him—such as why he had not sought him out, why he had not been there to help stop Potter, why he had prevented him from claiming the Philosopher's Stone…

By his own admission, Severus had only been tortured briefly; Voldemort had given him a chance to get down on his knees and beg for an opportunity to explain himself. And he must have managed to do a satisfactory job, for he not only redeemed himself by pointing out his usefulness as a spy by keeping his post at Hogwarts intact, he also added that he had been helping Crouch all year. That alone had been enough to give the Dark Lord pause—pause enough to consider that he might have been faintly remiss in punishing Severus when he had effectively been following his own orders all along.

He tore through Severus's mind as well, which was to be expected; the Dark Lord wanted confirmed veracity of his loyalties. Severus's Occlumency held up, and it was the only reason he was still alive. Had the Dark Lord detected any trace of deceit in his mind, he probably would have been killed right there. As it was, the combination of his earlier torture as well as the rough, mental attack was enough
to explain the condition he came back to her in.

He slept for two days, but he was up again soon enough, snarling at students and staff alike, and generally being his normally unpleasant self. But the thing for which they had all been holding their breath was done: Severus was back in the Dark Lord's good graces, if only as tentatively as the other Death Eaters, and the side of the Light had the man on the inside that they needed to track Voldemort's movements. They had succeeded.

And Igor Karkaroff had fled.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
The castle was empty again now, and to Hermione, it was more of a foreboding notion than one of relief. She had her notebook constantly on hand now, and she and Severus had not left Hogwarts; oftentimes, he would be summoned away for a meeting with the Dark Lord, and she would be in a meeting with the remaining Order of the Phoenix, trying to decide what to do.

They were assembled in the Great Hall today, at one long table that could seat three dozen. Moody was there, a bit twitchier and a good deal jumpier than before, but in comparatively good health. Kingsley was there as well, sitting on Dumbledore's immediate right. Sirius was present as a large, rather friendly-looking black dog with extraordinarily good table manners for a mutt. Tonks was there as well—Tonks, who had never met Hermione before, at least not quite yet, was happy to meet her, was immediately let in on the secret of Hermione's existence, and solemnly swore to keep her mouth shut. Hagrid, who took up enough seats for five people, was present. As well as the other three Heads of House. In addition were Elphias Dodge, Dedalus Diggle, who couldn't seem to keep hold of his hat for long, and Hestia Jones, whom Hermione remembered from her own school days—and who remembered her, likewise.

Remus was there, too, and Hermione quickly found herself sitting between her two surviving best friends. Remus greeted her with an embrace, and a whispered, "How have you been?"; Sirius went a bit too far and decided to slobber all over her face, much to everyone else's amusement.

There were other Order members present, but Hermione couldn't be bothered to name them all; further others were not present, like the Weasleys, for other reasons.

"We need to find a new headquarters, and it can't be Tine Cottage," Moody growled. "That one's compromised."

"It's too risky to use someone's house…"

"We need someplace big enough, too."

Sirius woofed.

"We could switch between houses," Dodge suggested.

"Too risky," Tonks said at once. "We need somewhere that is a reliable return-to base, not a merry-go-round."

Hermione waited until several more suggestions had been thrown out, each more unsatisfactory than the last, when she finally spoke up.

"Sirius has a house in London," she announced. "He inherited it from his parents after they died, and the Ministry doesn't have any claim to it. It's probably already got loads of protection on it, too," she said with a glance down at Sirius for confirmation. He barked in agreement. "Furthermore, it would be easier for people to stop by London rather than have to Portkey to some obscure part of the
"Why hasn't anyone said so before?" Moody asked with a growl.

Remus looked as though he were about to speak up, but changed his mind rather quickly, and gave Hermione a meaningful glance.

She sighed.

"It might require a bit of cleaning," she said.

"I believe Hermione has made a rather viable suggestion, considering the circumstances," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Let's look into it, shall we?"

~o~O~o~

The Weasleys immediately volunteered to help pull Grimmauld Place into shape, which included volunteering their youngest son and his friend, Hermione Granger. Harry had not arrived yet, which meant that Hermione was able to help the other adults make the kitchen inhabitable again. It required a fair bit of cleaning and exterminating, which Hermione already had a rather unpleasant experience with given what she and Severus had gone through making Spinner's End livable again.

Thinking of Spinner's End made Hermione's heart ache just a bit. Since leaving Hogwarts, Hermione had not seen nor heard from Severus, and while she was helping with Grimmauld Place, her husband was undoubtedly with Voldemort and the other Death Eaters, paying penance. They managed to make most of the downstairs accessible again, and as soon as Hermione could pass off the cleaning chores on someone else, she took up duty as administrative organizer. Harry needed someone to keep watch on him at all times, and it would be her job to figure out everyone's schedules and figure out who had enough time off to take a shift without overlapping people.

There was hardly any time to sit around and daydream, with the excess of work that needed to be done, but Hermione could not stop her mind from straying to her son. She needed to be available at all times to the Order now, and Spinner's End was no longer sacrosanct from Voldemort or his Death Eaters, which meant there was simply no conceivable way to have him stay with Hermione and Severus over the summer. Not to mention the fact that Severus was often gone, which would have meant Hermione would have to leave Selenius alone in the house—which was inconceivable to her—or bring her along to Grimmauld Place, which was equally untenable.

Selenius's existence needed to remain a carefully guarded secret from the Dark Lord. He was the kind of leverage that, if the Dark Lord ever got an inkling of him, he would use him to his full extent. Every Order member was at risk for being followed or watched, which meant that Hermione simply could not bring herself to endanger her son by visiting him. It did not sit well on her conscience, and she could often be seen fiddling uneasily with her watch, lost in thought—but she did it because she knew she must.

The summer days dragged on with agonizing slowness. Eventually, Hermione had to all but leave Grimmauld Place, because her appearances were becoming too regular, and she ran the real risk that Ron and Granger might actually recognize or remember her. At the very least, they might find her too familiar. So she left to return to Spinner's End, and only arrived for the actual meetings, which took place in the kitchen.

Sometime in mid-June, Severus came back with an important piece of information; one that, in Hermione's opinion, would both change the direction of the upcoming war and also explain why Voldemort's forces had been so quiescent: The Dark Lord was seeking to hear the entire prophecy.
He had only heard part of it, never the whole, and before he sought out Harry Potter for another confrontation, he wanted to hear all of the very thing that had sent him to seek out the Potters in the first place.

Knowledge was a weapon, and it was hidden in the Department of Mysteries. Even in meetings, they spoke of everything by codewords in case anyone should overhear them (anyone who was supposed to be cleaning and not eavesdropping, for example) and always referred to the Prophecy as 'The Weapon'.

"The Dark Lord realized his mistake in attempting to attack Potter without knowing the full prophecy," Severus told Hermione late one evening, after returning from Malfoy Manor. His face was paler than usual, and the firelight from their living room flickered oddly across his face, making it look strained even as he scowled. "It has put me in a rather difficult position."

Though Severus's efforts to help the Dark Lord rise again had been recognized—at the very least, he had done nothing to stop it, certainly—his failure to deliver the entire prophecy to Voldemort put him in a very tenuous situation. Tom Riddle had rewarded him for the assistance he gave Crouch by agreeing to spare his wife, despite her decidedly less-than-pure bloodline, but it did not stop him from punishing him for his failures.

The Dark Lord was using punishment more often and more capriciously now than he had ever done before. After the first few weeks, Severus had managed to avoid being the subject of any further Crucius Curses, but others were not so lucky. Others who had done nothing more to prove their loyalty except for taking sport with a few Muggles at the Quidditch World Cup. Severus, at least, had retained his post as a spy and helped him rise again when the opportunity presented itself, but the others had not, and they were all paying dearly for it.

Molly Weasley was surprisingly very happy to have Hermione in the kitchen with her, on those occasions where she stayed after a meeting and helped prepare dinner. Sirius had recommended her cooking skills very highly, and given that Molly knew Hermione from their days in the first Order of the Phoenix, they got along rather smashingly. Molly felt that it was good to have another woman around, a notion which made Hermione feel every bit of her thirty-six years.

Mrs. Figg was also an enormous help, for though she was a squib, her proximity to the Dursleys' home and the fact that her cats made excellent look-outs gave Hermione a bit of breathing room. There were only so many people who could risk time off of work during the daytime, and at the very least, Mrs. Figg's cats were capable of keeping an eye on an understandably sullen and restless fifteen-year-old boy, though they couldn't do much more than watch and provide a limited report.

Dumbledore had done his utmost to make the Ministry see reason, which had eventually resulted in his being summarily removed from the Wizengamot. Hermione had known this would happen, but it was no less horrifying to hear from the headmaster's own mouth.

But Dumbledore didn't seem too concerned about that.

"As long as they don't take me off the chocolate frog cards," he told them solemnly, but with a faint twinkle in his eyes, "I shall still have hope left."

Kreacher was his typical, intolerable self and Sirius had to very explicitly order him to silence concerning Hermione's presence. He and Hermione got along just as well as ever, but being cooped up in his parents' house wasn't doing much good for his sanity. He was starting to get rather claustrophobic and restless, given that he wasn't allowed outside. He had been free to enjoy fresh air at Tine Cottage, but given Grimmauld Place was in the heart of London, it simply was not feasible. Additionally, his relationship with Severus had not improved one bit since they had been forced to
shake hands at the end of last year, and given his current state of lockup and Severus's tendency to antagonize him, he was not doing all that well.

Hermione did her utmost to get Severus to stop taunting Sirius, but it was like trying to tell a chicken-killing dog not to kill chickens. It was rather like the time she had been forced to tell James and Sirius to lay off of Severus while they were students, and now the situation was in reverse, and it was Hermione telling Severus to leave Sirius alone.

Severus stopped by Grimmauld Place rather often to give his reports. He would seek out Hermione, and they would sit in the kitchen and record the entire thing into her notebook. He would deliver it again at the next meeting, but as always, Hermione received it first. He glared at the Weasley twins whenever he saw them, quite possibly because he knew they were employing Extendable Ears, and though Bill was friendly to Hermione, it was clear that he didn't really like her husband.

Hermione knew to expect it, and she was prepared for it, but when early August came around and Mundungus wasn't on his shift like he was supposed to be, she was quite prepared to murder him.

Dumbledore had left Grimmauld Place immediately upon hearing Mundungus's quickly hashed-out report, and it was essentially up to Hermione and Molly to make sure he suffered while the headmaster paid the Ministry a visit to ensure that Harry got a proper hearing, rather than having his wand immediately snapped, which was what Fudge was undoubtedly hoping for.

Arthur quickly scrawled a note to Harry to tell him not to leave the Dursleys'—and most importantly, not to perform any more magic or surrender his wand—and then rushed off to send it, before going through the house to inform everyone of the situation. Hermione and Molly spent several fruitless minutes in the kitchen, building up steam and ranting quite furiously about what they thought Mundungus ought to get. Many of the Order members were actually quite wary of coming into the kitchen at this time, and only Remus dared to, if only to tell them very briefly that there would be an emergency Order meeting in twenty minutes' time, and they needed the meeting room—aka, the kitchen. He left very quickly after that.

Severus came into the kitchen long enough to sneer, however informatively, that Black had sent another note to Potter to ensure that the same important message Arthur had sent made it through his thick head, in regards to not leaving his aunt and uncle's house. This only made Hermione feel slightly better; if there was anyone Harry was likely to listen to, if no one else, it was Sirius.

Mundungus had the misfortune to come into the kitchen at that moment, no doubt intending to sneak out by the Floo, and Severus had to physically restrain Hermione to stop her from attempting homicide. That did absolutely nothing to stop Molly from smacking the bandy-legged, baggy-eyed man on the head with a pan.

"'Old it, 'old it—"

"You should have been tailing Harry, you bloody moron!"

"Geroff—I'm going, I'm going—!"

A quarter of an hour later, he was crawling back in time for the impromptu meeting, where the two women glared stonily at him, but did not attempt to drive him out again. The fact that Severus was standing to Hermione's left, with one hand gripping her shoulder tightly, perhaps prevented her from an impromptu attempt at animagus transformation to try and take a chunk out of Mundungus's face. They assembled, and the first item on hand was, understandably: Harry.

"He can't stay at the Dursleys' for the rest of the summer," Remus told the room seriously. "If You-
Know-Who is sending Dementors, then Harry's presence there is as much of a threat to himself as it is to the other residents of Little Whinging."

"But we can't bring him here," Tonks said at once. She looked around the room uncertainly. "I mean—can we?"

"It wasn't exactly our original plan, but we'll have to now," Moody said gruffly. "He can't stay there, which makes here the only other option."

"The Burrow, perhaps—" Bill Weasley suggested.

"Not protected enough!" Moody growled, slamming his fist down on the table, making all but Hermione jump. "We'll have to bring him here, and make sure he doesn't overhear anything he shouldn't—"

"What do you think, Professor?" Remus asked, and they all turned to look at her.

Hermione slowly turned her watch around on her wrist, looking at them through narrowed eyes, her expression thoughtful. "We'll have to bring him here. Imperturbable Charms on the kitchen door ought to be sufficient enough—" she eyed the door in question warily, and immediately, a bit of flesh-colored string ducked out from underneath. She might not have seen it if she hadn't known what to look for. Molly stood up immediately, and looked quite ready to open the door and yank the strings out of their users' ears, but Hermione held up a hand to stop her. "Let me finish. We'll bring him here, and keep him here for the rest of the summer."

"His hearing—"

"He will be acquitted," Hermione replied confidently. Severus snorted at this, but did not respond to the contrary. "The Wizengamot has no case against him, not if they abide by their own laws, and Dumbledore will be there to make sure that they do."

"That's settled, then," Moody growled. "Now we just need to figure out how we're going to bring him here."

Hermione raised her hand. "Broomsticks," she said.

~o~O~o~

While Remus left with his assembled volunteers to retrieve Harry, Hermione retreated to the kitchen while Dumbledore confronted Mundungus for leaving his shift. Hermione might have watched the whole thing with glee were it not for the fact that the look on the headmaster's face was quite frightening. She had rarely ever seen him so angry, and she could only stand to stay and watch for a minute before she queasily returned downstairs to help Molly start dinner.

She checked her watch just as she heard Harry and his entourage come in.

"Molly, I'm going to have to go," she said apologetically.

"Not a problem, dear. Are you planning on stopping by again?"

"Not unless it's for a meeting or a report, I'm afraid—I can't be seen here..." Hermione gave her a sideways glance. "I'm afraid your sons' Extendable Ears have already revealed my presence. I can't risk more."

"Oh—yes, of course." Molly looked slightly flustered at this. "Not that I won't be binning those
things, of course…"

Hermione laughed. "I wish you luck, Molly."

She fetched Severus, and the two of them left through the same fireplace Mundungus had been hoping to make his escape in earlier. They left just in time to hear other people come into the kitchen, no doubt for the meeting that was supposed to be a bit more in-depth on the issues they had been facing tonight, and which neither of the Snapes were required or needed for.

Hermione made a beeline for their own kitchen, and flicked her wand to charm the kettle, cup, and leaves into taking care of themselves to make her some tea, and then sat down tiredly at the table.

"What a mess," she said, with a weary sigh.

"Potter, as usual, makes everything more difficult than it has to be."

"The Dementors were not his fault," Hermione shot back.

"The decision to leave the safety of the house, however, was," Severus responded sullenly, pulling out a chair next to her. "His presence at Grimmauld Place will likely restrict our movements there now. I have no desire to see him, and it is imperative that he not see you."

Hermione rubbed her temple, hoping to ward off an impending headache. "This year is going to be a difficult one," she muttered. "Even with knowing everything that's going to happen most of the time…"

Neither of them knew what to say about that, so they sat in silence and sipped their tea, when it was ready. Eventually, however, Hermione set her mug down a little too forcefully, and looked up.

"The Dark Lord knows I'm Muggle-born," she said quietly. "He'll know about my family. My aunt and uncle aren't too far a link, either."

Severus stiffened. "Should we move him?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, fretfully. "I mean, I don't have any memory of him attacking my family this year, but he could change his mind."

Severus drummed his fingers on the table, deep in thought. "Potter and Weasley will not be at Grimmauld Place forever. Neither will Granger. It's possible that he could stay there during the school year."

"But the holidays…"

"I will make arrangements for the holidays."

Hermione bit her lower lip, thinking it through. "It seems like a good enough idea. I can't think of anywhere safer than Grimmauld Place. The only problem…"

"The only problem is that other people will know about him." Severus's face twisted into one of distaste. "But they can be spelled to silence, if we must. I don't particularly trust Mundungus Fletcher, after tonight—not that I ever have."

"Sirius and Remus are the only ones who are always there," Hermione deadpanned. "We can restrict other people from going beyond the first floor if we have to. They only need the kitchen for meetings, anyway—they have no business wandering around the house."
Severus smirked.

"Let's bring the subject up with the headmaster, shall we?"

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The remaining few weeks of Harry, Ron, and Granger's stay at Grimmauld Place dragged by. Hermione was only able to attend three meetings, all said and told, because she could not risk being seen by Harry. In that time, Molly had another go at Mundungus after he tried to stash some stolen cauldrons in the house ("The idiot," Hermione remarked lazily when Sirius told her about it), and they had gotten a good deal more work done in the house.

The house (which, if Hermione said so herself) was waging a veritable war against being made fit for human habitation, for which Kreacher was no help at all. But by the end of August, it was all but won, save for the occasional odd creature lurking here and there. The house was still rather gloomy, however, and no amount of cleaning could possibly change that.

Hermione managed to intercept Molly on her way to Diagon Alley to get their school supplies, and recalling that she had offered to get Ron a new broomstick, Hermione offered to pay for it. Broomsticks were expensive, and though Molly wanted to get her son something special as a reward for being made Prefect, she also knew that it was not all that affordable for the Weasleys.

Molly's mouth opened in surprise, but she quickly shut it. "You don't have to do that, you know…"

"Don't forget that Ron's one of my best friends," Hermione pointed out with a friendly smile. "Being made Prefect is a big deal, Molly. Just let me pay for it. Think of it as a celebration present from me."

It took a few more moments of persuasion, but eventually Molly relented, looking rather happier and less harried about the whole thing as a result.

When she arrived at Grimmauld Place the day Harry and the others had left on the train, she was a bit surprised when Sirius stuffed an old Wizarding photograph under her nose.

"Thought you might want to take a look at this," he said shortly.

Confused, Hermione slowly turned it over, and realized that it was a picture of the first Order of the Phoenix. She couldn't help but smile a bit tearfully when she saw Alice and Frank grinning at them out from the photograph, along with Marlene. Her breath caught when she slowly recognized James—James, who his son looked so much like—and Lily. Beside them was Pettigrew, whose presence in the picture made Hermione want to burn a hole through his watery-eyed face. Not that it would do any good, she knew. Sirius himself was in there, along with the Bones, Dearborns…

And then she recalled, just a bit late, that she herself was standing in the photo. She could scarcely remember it, it had been so long ago… but she was standing right beside Marlene. She was partially hidden by Alice, who was standing just a bit in front of her, but when she poked at the figures to move aside, she saw herself clearly.

"Where did you get this?"

"Moody showed it to Harry last night."

"Harry?" Hermione said, alarmed. "Why?"

"Wanted to show him a picture of James and Lily, didn't he?" Sirius said heavily. "I don't know whether he saw you in there or not. But he did come to find me later, to ask if I knew of any records
in the library that kept track of former teachers."

Hermione winced, and handed the picture back. "Why would he ask that?"

Sirius rubbed his temple. "I may have let it slip that you used to teach, years ago. I'm only telling you now so that you can try and hide the records before he gets a chance to look at them."

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut in frustration, and then opened them. "Thank you. I'll add that to the million things I already have to do on my list."

"I'm sorry—"

"Just try not to let anything else slip, alright?" Hermione asked tiredly.

A moment later, there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for an answer, Severus strode in—followed quickly by Selenius, whose eyes were so intensely focused on the portraits lining the wall that he nearly tripped over his own feet. Hermione had sent him to collect Selenius earlier, since that would be his only opportunity to see him for some time yet, and now that he was here…

"Mum!"

Sirius grinned as he watched Selenius run up to his mother, whose exhaustion seemed to drain away the moment she saw him. She pulled him into a hug, and tried to pick him up, grimacing after a moment and then setting him back down. "Goodness—you're too heavy for me now—"

Selenius hugged her tightly for a moment, and then ran to Sirius, whose eyes lit up for the first time in weeks as he hefted the nine-year-old into his arms and swung him around, laughing. Severus scowled so blackly at this display that Hermione thought she might have to restrain him from hexing Sirius; the idea that his son was still—still—on good terms with Sirius irked him to no end.

"I have to leave now," he said sourly, glancing at Selenius. "Are you staying here or returning to Hogwarts with me?"

"I'll be staying with Selenius for a little bit," Hermione said breathlessly. She kissed him on the cheek, and leaned her head on his shoulder. "It's his birthday, after all. Although if you're going to Hogwarts," she added quickly, "there is one tiny favor you could do for me…"

"Hmm, yes," he drawled, although there was a nasty glint in his eyes as they locked onto Sirius. "Two more years before he becomes one of the annoying brats I have to teach." He straightened. "What is this favor, incidentally?"

Hermione told him. His expression turned from darkly playful to brooding and sour in the time it took for her to explain. They stood there watching for a moment as Sirius transformed into a large, black dog, and then began bounding around the room, circling Selenius playfully and causing him to chase after him. As much as Sirius and Severus despised each other, with ill-disguised contempt, there was no doubt in Hermione's mind that Sirius loved Selenius the same way he loved Harry.

Severus left a few minutes later with a final glare in Sirius's direction, intending to make it to Hogwarts before the train did, which left Hermione alone in Grimmauld Place with Sirius and her son on the latter's ninth birthday. Selenius did not seem at all bothered by the gloomy disposition of the house. On the contrary, he seemed to prefer it, and spent his birthday curled up on the couch with Sirius, a slice of birthday cake, and a book. If there was anything that could have shaken Sirius out of his restless, dull existence stuck inside the house, however temporarily, it was Selenius—Selenius who had also had quite enough of living with Muggles.
Hermione spent the evening watching Selenius and Sirius play chess, chewing on her lower lip. Her mind was clearly elsewhere, and with good reason. She was not certain she could return to Hogwarts. With Umbridge there—Umbridge, who most certainly could not be let in on the secret of Hermione's existence—she was not certain it was safe for her to wander around invisible. It had also brought up another issue, concerning the fact that Fudge might tell Umbrige about her, but Hermione had already taken care of that with a swift trip to the Ministry and a Memory Charm later, with help from Kingsley Shacklebolt in getting in undetected. Perfectly illegal, but effective.

She had the opportunity to stay in Grimmauld Place with Selenius and Sirius. She could spend time with the former, who she had not gotten to see enough of last year, and try to keep the latter's morale up.

But it also meant she would not get to see Severus as often. Other than it being an obviously undesirable situation, given that they would rather not be separated, the fact that she was his handler and that he was being summoned more often than not meant she needed to have easy contact with him.

She toyed with several ideas, and discarded them all immediately before she settled on one that was actually quite possible. She could Floo directly from their quarters to Grimmauld Place and back again. Severus was usually summoned in the evening, after classes had been concluded, which meant that was the time she needed to be there to receive his report. She could spent the night with Severus, and the day with Selenius and Sirius. It was probably best if Selenius remained at Grimmauld Place—they had already set up a room for him...

But she also knew that Selenius was not going to enjoy being cooped up in here for long. Sirius was already getting a bit stir-crazy to begin with. Tine House was compromised, but that didn't mean it couldn't be fixed.

Hermione watched Selenius's knight tackle one of Sirius's bishops, dragging it kicking and squealing off the chessboard, and decided she would have to bring the matter up with Dumbledore.

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Arrangements with Dumbledore were made on several matters. Firstly, he allowed Hermione to have the fireplaces between Grimmauld Place and their quarters in the dungeons connected, with the additional caveat of having a password placed on access to the latter, which Hermione greatly appreciated. He agreed that Hermione's suggestion of dividing her time between Hogwarts and Headquarters was perfectly acceptable—preferable, even—and gave her his full support on that front.

Secondly, he was more than willing to allow Hermione to turn Tine Cottage into her next project ("Who knows?" he said genially. "We may need it in the near future, and that's hardly possible if we leave it as unprotected as it is now.") but he did not want Sirius leaving the house. Selenius was more than welcome to, as he was both easier to hide and explain, but there was nothing that could mitigate the presence of a wanted murderer. This declaration infuriated Hermione on Sirius's behalf, and she tried to appeal, but Dumbledore's decision on the matter was final.

"Not even if we shave Sirius bald, grow him a goatee, and get him some new robes?" Hermione asked, out of desperation.

Dumbledore had stared at her for a moment, and then responded in the negative.

The first week in, after hearing about Harry's upcoming detention with Umbridge ("That foul, evil cow," Hermione had hissed when she and Sirius heard the news) Hermione took her son to Tine
Cottage and allowed him to fly on his Bluebottle while she restored and added protections to the cottage. She did not own the property, but Dumbledore had given her permission to make alterations to it, which was enough for it to accept her first-ever attempt at a Fidelius Charm. It involved removing the original Fidelius, which was a tricky disaster waiting to happen all on its own, and then recasting a new one.

Yet Hermione had not been the best in her academic courses for nothing, and she managed it the same determination that got her through all her courses. She sent Dumbledore a missive with the Secret of Tine Cottage written upon it, letting him in on his own property, and informed Selenius directly. She then put her efforts toward expanding the Fidelius to go beyond the doorstep, so that anyone who knew the secret could Apparate outside without being made vulnerable. It was tricky, and she only managed to get it thirty feet away from the cottage, where the charm refused to be placed further than the mailbox. She simply did not have the magical power to make it go further.

In a way, that was understandable. The mailbox was effectively the boundary line of the property. Nevertheless, it was an impressive job, and Hermione was rather pleased with herself.

Selenius spent the entire afternoon flying, and was in a rather upbeat mood by the time they had to leave. Still, Hermione did not feel it was fair to leave Sirius behind, and was quietly deliberating whether or not she ought to go against Dumbledore's wishes. If he remained as a dog the entire time, and stayed close to the boundary of the property, he could duck inside the Fidelius in an instant if he had to. It seemed perfectly reasonable to her.

She made dinner for Sirius and Selenius that evening, reminded Sirius to make sure that her son got to bed at a reasonable hour ("No later than nine o'clock," Hermione warned him) and then left for Hogwarts.

Severus was there, looking distinctly irritated as he gathered up his things to take to his office, with the intention of getting some work done. Hermione Disillusioned herself and immediately followed him, as they made their way through the dungeons, until they reached the staircase that passed directly by Severus's office. They slipped inside quietly, the door clicking shut behind her as she locked it.

"Any news?" she asked, taking off her traveling cloak and setting it aside.

Severus gritted his teeth as he circled around to the other side of his desk and took his seat. "The Dark Lord is centering all his efforts on retrieving the Prophecy and breaking several of his other followers out of Azkaban. As you can guess, both prospects are equally undesirable, not to mention difficult to achieve."

Hermione sighed, wincing at this. She took a seat in the only other chair in the room, though she took a moment to transfigure it into something a bit more comfortable. "What are your specific orders?"

"To remain at my post," Severus said, his voice low. "Spy on Dumbledore and report—and continue to employ your usefulness."

"What?" Hermione said, somewhat alarmed by this. "Me?"

"He has come to the conclusion that you are neither loyal to him, nor Dumbledore, but to me alone," Severus said, his face darkening at this. "He believes that I have spent the last thirteen years cleverly manipulating you into becoming a cat's paw, so to speak."

"He believes you've gained complete control over me," Hermione said with a sigh. "Taken away my
free will too, probably."

Severus's expression contorted painfully as he replied, "Yes."

"Well," Hermione said slowly, "what does that mean? In the grand scheme of things, I mean."

"It means you'll have to remain low-key and unobtrusive," Severus said, with a slight sneer. "He doesn't know that you'll be slotting yourself back into your proper timeline yet—it probably hasn't even occurred to him. I'll still need to think of a way to explain your de-aging in a way that won't have me punished, nor imply that it can be replicated."

Hermione folded her arms across her chest thoughtfully. "What if I Obliviated the knowledge from your mind?" she proposed. "Then you could honestly say you don't know. At that point, I'll probably be establishing myself more firmly on the Order's side, so it would become your pet project to try and bring me back under control and find out how I did it, in the process."

Severus folded his arms across his chest. "Pet project," he repeated. "Obliviation aside, of course."

Hermione formed her response carefully. "It would be a good explanation for why I am both de-aged and no longer working in the Dark Lord's best interests. People fight off the Imperius curse—that could be your excuse along with a battery of other coercion methods, I'm sure. Say you've been keeping me under the Imperius for several years—it wouldn't be surprising if it started weakening now."

"It would mean putting us on opposite sides," Severus warned, his voice quiet.

"It might have to be that way," Hermione replied softly. "Someone has to look after Selenius, Severus, and you can't do that while trying to please the Dark Lord. You'll also need someone on the inside, when things come to a head—as we both know it must."

"You don't know the future beyond this year," Severus countered.

"No," Hermione agreed calmly, "but I know enough of the past to predict what might happen in the future."

"You never did put much stock in Divination."

Hermione shook her head slowly.

"History doesn't repeat itself, but hums a familiar tune."

Severus gave her a look of pure consternation, and then turned away with a relenting, reluctant sigh.

"Very well," he said curtly.

Hermione stood up and walked over to his desk, where she placed her hand upon his.

They stared into each other's eyes, unspeaking.

And then they leaned forward and kissed, sealing their fate.

~o~O~o~

A few days later, they sat in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place while Sirius read out his latest letter from Harry:
Dear Snuffles,

Hope you're okay, the first week back here's been terrible, I'm really glad it's the weekend.

We've got a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Umbridge. She's nearly as nice as your mum (At this, Sirius snorted, but continued reading nonetheless) I'm writing because that thing I wrote to you about last summer happened against last night when I was doing a detention with Umbridge ("His scar," Hermione said at once).

We're all missing our biggest friend, we hope he'll be back soon.

Please write back quickly.

Best,

Harry

"Hagrid," Hermione said. "He wants to know about Hagrid."

"So I gathered," Sirius grumbled, folding up the letter. "Hagrid still hasn't come back with Madam Maxime yet. We haven't heard word from him."

"He'll be okay," Hermione said determinedly. "A bit beat up, perhaps, but he can take care of himself."

"You remember your time there before you got chucked back in time, right?" Sirius said, leaning back in his chair. "Care to tell me how 'nice' this woman is, if she can be compared to my dear old mum?"

Hermione sighed, and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Umbridge is a foul, mad, toadyimg old cow who ought to be hung from the rafters by that awful pink cardigan she wears."

"I remember her," Remus said, entering the room and making his way directly for the cupboard. He pulled out a cutting board and a bit of chicken, and began cutting himself a piece. It was nearing the full moon, and his appetite for meat was increasing accordingly. "She drafted a bit of anti-werewolf legislation that's made it nearly impossible for me to find a job."

"Werewolf?" Selenius repeated, pulling himself up on the counter by his arms to get a better look at what Remus was doing. The ketchup, which had been sitting on the side to the plate of sausages he was eating for lunch, was suddenly knocked over by his elbows. He didn't bother to right it.

"I'm a werewolf," Remus told the boy with a bit of a wry, self-deprecating smile. "I transform into one at the full moon. At any rate, I have to remain isolated from humans at that time or I risk biting them."

Selenius frowned, and then released the counter, landing back down on the floor. "Why would that stop you from getting a job?"

"Because people are afraid of werewolves," Hermione responded calmly. "They're only dangerous when they're transformed, and that only happens once a month, but there's so much misinformation and propaganda about them that even when they're human, people don't want anything to do with them."

"Why?"
"Because people are under the mistaken impression that they're all evil," Sirius said, standing up and raising his hands above his head and crooking them into claws. He grinned and made a face at Selenius, and pretended to lunge at him. "That they'll make off with their children—they'll attack them in the night—"

Selenius let out a half-scream of laughter as he dodged Sirius's hands; Sirius dropped the act immediately, though he was still grinning rather wolfishly.

"That's stupid," Selenius deadpanned, schooling his expression into a serious one, but he was still smiling. "Remus is nice."

"If only everyone else saw things as you do, Selenius," Hermione said with a sigh, before reaching for her cup of tea and taking a sip. "I have a feeling the world would be a better place."

"Why are people such dunderheads about it, then?"

"For the same reason that a lot of people are afraid of Hagrid, too," Hermione told him. "You remember him, don't you?" Selenius knew Hagrid, though he had not seen the half-giant for several years; and though Selenius was tiny compared to him, he rather liked the man who could fill up an entire hall with just his presence.

"Hagrid's nice, too," Selenius said, as though any of them needed reminding.

"And people are still afraid of him for being half-giant," she pointed out.

Selenius folded his arms across his chest.

"Then people are idiots," he said.

Hermione's lips twitched in a grin, and she looked away. Selenius's last report card had been very good, academic-wise. But the teacher had also made a very pointed note at the end stating that Selenius needed to learn better people skills, because he had a bad habit of bluntly insulting other kids when they disagreed. In a manner that Hermione recognized was all too much like his father, in fact.

Sirius had placed his head face-down on the table and was shaking with laughter when Hermione showed him that report card.

Hermione waved at Selenius.

"It's past noon," she reminded him. "Time to get started on work."

Without another word, Selenius got up to leave.

Hermione called him back.

"Why is the ketchup on its side?" she asked, pointing to the bottle in question, which was resting rather haphazardly on its side near the edge of the table.

Selenius didn't blink once as he replied, "It's playing possum."

"Well, go put the possum back in the refrigerator if you please."

He silently did so, albeit with a silly grin on his face, and then left the room.

He was not attending primary school this year, given that he was staying at Grimmauld Place, so
Hermione had assigned him a slew of daily assignments to do—reading, a set of math problems, and more of Severus's logic puzzles. In truth, the homework she was assigning him was probably far more advanced than what most nine-year-olds were doing at the moment, which meant that Hermione did not feel one bit guilty about pulling him out and homeschooling him herself. He was doing work that was on his level and pushed him to think more, rather than merely meeting what Hermione and Severus both considered to be the base mediocre standards of the Muggle school he had been attending.

Sirius and Remus were both grinning, and as soon as Selenius had left, Sirius spoke up:

"I think he spends too much time listening to his father."

"Shut up, Sirius." Hermione said half-heartedly, giving him a requisite glare before reaching for the newspaper that had been delivered earlier that morning. She flapped it open for a moment, scanning it.

"Anything interesting?" Remus asked mildly.

"Trespass at the Ministry… Sturgis Podmore's been arrested…" Hermione said. "I remember that—and he still has Moody's best Invisibility Cloak…"

"Arrested?" Sirius repeated disbelievingly.

"For trying to force his way into a top-security door," Hermione said grimly. "At one o'clock in the morning, no less. But that doesn't make sense…"

"No, it doesn't," Remus said firmly. "Did it say what door?"

"No, no details…" Hermione set the paper down and rested her cheek against her hand thoughtfully, staring at the print in front of her. "Let me see—say, didn't Harry tell us he saw Lucius Malfoy at the Ministry the day of his hearing?"

"Malfoy's always at the Ministry these days," Sirius said contemptuously.

"But Malfoy's a Death Eater," Hermione said slowly, recalling a conversation she'd had with Harry and Ron all those years ago, not too long before she had been thrown back in time. "Even if he hasn't Imperiused the Minister—we all thought he was sneaking down to see the outcome of Harry's trial, but what if he wasn't? What if he realized that Sturgis was standing guard there?"

"Bloody, buggering hell," Sirius swore. "That slimy git Imperiused him!"

"Malfoy tried to use Sturgis to get the Weapon?" Remus said quietly.

"That's my line of thinking." Something else suddenly caught her eye, and Hermione flipped and folded the paper down. "Oh shite—I almost forgot about this."

"What now?"

Hermione shoved the paper toward Sirius. "If it's not enough that Malfoy's put Sturgis in Azkaban, it looks to me like he's tipped off the Ministry that you're in London."

Sirius cursed violently at this under his breath as he read the article. "Great," he snarled. "Just great. If there was any chance of Dumbledore letting me out for a bit… damn it…"

Hermione winced in sympathy. "I'm sorry, Sirius."
Sirius did not respond. Instead, he stood up, grabbing the paper with him, and slouched off, no doubt to retreat to Buckbeak's room to be alone. After a moment, Hermione stood up as well.

"Where are you going?" Remus asked, eyeing her warily.

"To talk to him," Hermione said shortly. "He needs to give Harry a reply to his letter, and we need to figure out how he's going to do that without putting security at risk."

"That'll cheer him right up," Remus said gloomily, as Hermione left.

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Molly had been adamantly against the idea of Sirius using the Floo to contact Harry, declaring that it was too dangerous, and that after the *Daily Prophet* article revealing his whereabouts to be in London, he had ought not to be doing anything that risky. Remus had had to leave shortly after that rather enlightening conversation, as did a very disgruntled Molly, which left Sirius alone in the house with Hermione and Selenius. And, of course, Kreacher.

While Sirius was using the Floo, checking the Gryffindor common room every hour that evening, Hermione sat at the kitchen table and reviewed Selenius's work. Kreacher had passed through the kitchen once already, muttering a string of nasty and uncomplimentary things under his breath. Hermione twitched an ear in his direction, but otherwise ignored him until he came through a second time and saw Selenius sitting at the table.

"Mudbloods and blood traitors and their spawn to boot," he muttered furiously, glaring up at Selenius with great dislike as he shuffled through the kitchen again, no doubt trying to find something to keep that had not yet been thrown away. "My poor mistress, if only she knew, what would she say, what she would tell Kreacher if she knew that there were two of the same filthy Mudblood in her house, and with it its swine of a son—"

Sirius popped his head out of the fire to round on the house-elf.

"Get out, Kreacher," he snapped. He had managed to make Kreacher keep Hermione a secret, but only around people who did not already know—and no amount of explicit orders would stop Kreacher from finding a loophole with which to insult them.

Kreacher, who did not seem to dare disobey a direct order, began to shuffle away, still muttering under his breath.

Selenius watched Kreacher leave with a stony look on his face that did not hide his intense dislike for the house-elf. Hermione pursed her lips. As foul-mouthed as Kreacher was, Hermione could not help feeling some pity for him. Her experiences with house-elves before now had been mostly pleasant ones, when it became clear to her that house elves lived to serve. Even Dobby, despite being free, still wanted to serve—though he did it of his own free will to those he liked, rather than being forcibly bound to do so.

Dobby had defied his masters because they were cruel to him, but happily served Harry and his friends because Harry was kind to him. Harry treated Dobby as a friend, which meant that even though Dobby was free, Dobby wanted to serve Harry, help Harry, protect Harry, because he liked Harry. Kreacher had been a nasty piece of work when they first met him, but Hermione deep down suspected that he had been alone for too long—taking mad orders from Sirius's mother's portrait, as Sirius had so aptly put it—and few of them made the effort to try and make reconciliations with the grouchy old creature. Granger's attempts were futile, in Hermione's opinion, because she was not offering Kreacher anything that the house-elf really valued. And anything the elf did value,
Sirius threw into the rubbish sack.

All in all, not the best arrangement, and Hermione sorely wished it could be different.

It didn't stop her from wanting to throttle him when he said such things to her son, however. At the very least, it was building Selenius a thicker skin, something that Severus had both lacked and paid dearly for as a child—but Hermione would much rather not have to hunt around for a silver lining in this kind of situation to begin with.

Sirius finally did get ahold of Harry, and Hermione and Selenius left the room to give him some privacy.

The next day, there was another Daily Prophet, although the article of interest this time was splashed right across the headlines.

Ministry Seeks Educational Reform: Dolores Umbridge Appointed First-Ever 'High Inquisitor'

Hermione read through the paper once for a refresher, and then chucked the entire thing into the fire.

Severus was having no easier of a time. Umbridge had been sitting in on the other teachers' classes for 'inspections', and though his had come last, it had been no less aggravating. Umbridge strode around the room as though she owned the place, asking obnoxious questions with equally obvious answers, and insinuating that the fact that Severus held the class to a higher standard than most for their level was something to be suspicious of. He had finished classes that day in a remarkably dark and foul mood, and was summoned directly afterward.

Hermione tried giving him a backrub that night on the sheepskin rug, in the hopes of cheering him up slightly, but given the situation they were in, it was rather useless.

"I could have hexed her," Severus snarled softly under his breath, as Hermione pressed circles into his shoulders with her thumb and the side of her hand. He was leaning forward, bracing himself against his legs as she worked. "I could have poisoned her, the odious, toadying…"

"You have to deal with Umbridge, I have to deal with Kreacher," Hermione said with a sigh. "In this case, however, I rather think you have it worse."

Severus sneered something in response that Hermione did not think was appropriate to repeat.

Next Hogsmeade Weekend brought on Educational Degree Twenty-Four. The Order had called a meeting immediately after, with Mundungus present to give his report. Every sat there, shaking their heads in disbelief, and a few of them even gave Hermione searching, incomprehensible looks that seemed to generously label her as 'Troublemaker'.

"I can't believe this was Granger's idea," Sirius said, snorting with laughter. "Last I remembered, you were such a stickler for the rules."

"Not until I got a month's detention for sneaking out of the castle to go to Diagon Alley," Hermione muttered under her breath. "And I didn't turn you in for tearing up Severus's Transfiguration notes, if you don't mind."

Sirius only looked remotely abashed at this recall of his misdemeanor.

Molly had something to say about the whole idea, and it was not complimentary. However, at the end of the meeting, it was revealed that she had guard duty, which meant she ordered Sirius to pass along the message to Ron that he was, on no account whatsoever, to take part in it. The last thing she
needed was having her youngest son expelled.

Following that, Sirius had arranged a Floo time with Harry, and this time, Hermione remained kneeling next to him, listening in and quite prepared for what she knew was going to happen.

"—which means you'd have been harder to overhear," Sirius was saying to Granger. He was grinning, despite himself. "You've got a lot to learn, Hermione."

In the background, Hermione snorted.

"Who overheard us?" Granger demanded.

"Mundungus, of course…"

Hermione snorted again, in amusement. Really, when she looked back on her younger self's attempts at subtlety, they were laughably pathetic. She had certainly learned a lot after being sent back in time, to say the least.

"…so it's fallen to me to be the messenger and make sure you tell her I passed it all on, because I don't think she trusts me to," Sirius finished. He ducked his head to the side as Crookshanks took a curious swipe at his head, not all that familiar with the concept of the Floo, and then Harry responded.

"So you want me to say I'm not going to take part in the defense group?"

Hermione checked her watch. They only had a few more minutes before Umbridge discovered Sirius and tried to grab him, if her memory served her right.

"Well, better expelled and able to defend yourselves than sitting safely in school without a clue," Sirius deadpanned, in response to Granger's query.

It was not a long shot to say that at that point, Granger did not really trust Sirius. Or rather, she did not trust his judgment. Hermione remembered what it was like: the distinct impression that Sirius tended to confuse Harry with James, that he had been alone for too long, and that being stuck inside with no one but Kreacher for company was not doing him one whit of good… restless, bored, reckless…

It was a pretty perceptive outlook on how Sirius was doing, and Hermione had to agree with her younger self's judgment. She would trust Sirius with her life, as well as her son's life, but she did not think that Sirius was doing well. Being locked up for so long beforehand in Tine Cottage, with restricted and limited access outside, had only suited him because he had just left Azkaban. After being mostly free to roam last year, keeping to the mountains beyond Hogsmeade, being kept in Grimmauld Place was not doing him any good. Quite the opposite, really. He was depressed and restless, and the one thing he needed most—freedom—was constantly being denied to him.

His only coping mechanism, it seemed, was to think of James. To remember all those times they had spent together, outside, being boys and having fun… and frankly, it did seem to make him more prone to confusing James with Harry. Harry, who resembled his father so much…

"…Well, I'll have a think and get back to—"

He suddenly broke off, and Hermione could see his expression tense and alarmed, and he peered sideways into the brick of the fireplace. He hesitated for a moment, like a deer caught in the headlights, and at that moment, Hermione reached forward, grabbed the back of his robes, and yanked him out just in time to avoid being caught by Umbridge. He fell backwards, coughing as his
knees scuffed ash and soot into the air, and the two of them stared at the fireplace in horror.

Umbridge's hand was still in Hogwarts, only able to access that one—but Hermione had caught a glimpse of it before they'd broken the connection, and it was a terrifying notion to behold, those stubby fingers with those ugly old rings, trying to grab Sirius's head…

"We can't do this again," Hermione croaked unnecessarily, still staring at the flames.

Sirius shook his head, his expression both terrified and bitter.

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That weekend, Hermione took Selenius with her to Tine Cottage for a bit of flying. After having thought it through carefully for the past few days, following the incident with the Floo, she took Sirius along with her. He stared at her in disbelief when she told him, and when they arrived, he let out a whoop of delight, glad to be out of the dark, musty house and in the bright October sun once more.

"You'll have to stay behind the mailbox, though," Hermione warned him, as Selenius mounted his broomstick and took off. "That's as far as the Fidelius Charm goes."

Sirius agreed to these conditions readily, and transformed into a large, black dog to sit in the grass. He wagged his tail, black lips pulled back into a canine smile as he watched Selenius dive low toward the ground and pull up just in time so that he was racing the sandlogged grass, feet brushing the tallest fronds. Hermione knew Dumbledore would be furious if he ever found out, but Hermione felt that this at least was reasonable. Sirius was still within the confines of an uncompromised Fidelius Charm, and in his animagus form. The odds of him being found were impossible ones.

At one point, he got up and began loping around the cottage, getting a bit of exercise out of their excursion while he could. He seemed to relish the feel of grassy earth underneath his feet, and he stayed exactly within the Fidelius, trotting easily and looking increasingly refreshed. It was at that point that Hermione made the decision to start bringing him with her whenever they went out. It even occurred to her that if she could place more protective charms on the area around them, and if she disguised Sirius effectively—perhaps shaved his fur shorter and charmed it white, maybe changed the shape of his snout—he could venture outside the reach of the Fidelius. It was certainly possible. The disguises would be temporary but effective, and even if his Animagus form was known, no one would recognize a well-clipped white dog when they were looking for a shaggy black one.

It was a thought. She would have to bring it up with Sirius later.

When they returned that evening, the house was empty, and no one had recognized Sirius's absence. All three of them were quite pleased with themselves for that evening, and after making dinner for them both, Hermione left to return to Hogwarts.

Things were starting to heat up back at the castle. Dumbledore's Army had been formed and Hermione knew that regular meetings would be taking place in the Room of Requirement by now. When she wandered through the halls one evening for a bit of a patrol, she saw Harry striding along with a determined look on his face, as though he were carrying something heavy and important. It was a far better expression for him to have on his face than the hopeless, angry one Hermione often remembered seeing.

Still, however, he was doing poorly in Potions. Severus never lost an opportunity to make snide remarks about his substandard brewing skills, poor attention, and lack of discipline. Despite it all, however, Hermione found an opportunity to sneak into the library for a couple hours and comb
through the records. Severus had already taken care of them, but it had been a rush job, and she wanted to be certain.

In several places, her name had been blacked out, mostly when listing the accomplishments she had made while under Hogwarts employ—such as the fact that one year, her seventh-year students had achieved the highest class average in over twenty years. There was also the simple time-listing of employment for each subject; understandably, the Defense Against the Dark Arts position was the one with the longest list covering the last half-century. In the few places where her picture should have been, they had been carefully carved out. Flipping through them, Hermione was satisfied that there was nothing Harry could have possibly gleaned, assuming he had bothered to look.

Hagrid returned after what was reportedly a disastrous Quidditch match, which resulted in Harry, Fred, and George all being subsequently banned from playing. Hermione managed to stop by and pay him a visit, where she saw that he was still wearing a steak over his eye. He looked rather battered and beaten, but otherwise alright. Umbridge had paid him a visit, and what Hagrid told her as a result made Hermione suspect that someone was giving her inside information from the Death Eaters’ sides.

Was Umbridge a Death Eater? Hermione doubted it. As Sirius so smartly put it, the world was not divided between good people and Death Eaters. But she was pretty sure the woman was evil enough to take whatever ammo she could get, from whatever sources, if it meant helping herself.

Hermione was awoken one night, after having just fallen asleep in her husband's arms, by the sound of the fireplace flaring to life. Dumbledore's voice reverberated through her sleepy mind, and she was up in an instant, pulling on her husband's shirt and a pair of slacks that were too large for her before rushing out to their living room.

"Arthur Weasley has just been attacked," the headmaster told her seriously, as she came into view, her husband not far behind. "He has been sent to St. Mungo's, and Harry and four of the Weasley children are returning to Grimmauld Place in the interim. I need you to be there. Severus, Minerva has gone to head off Dolores, but a bit of help would be appreciated."

Hermione left immediately to get dressed properly, while Severus did the same, before they left to fulfill their separate orders. She arrived, Disillusioned, in time to wipe the soot off her robes before she saw four familiar figures spin into place. Kreacher had peered his head into the room, his eyes narrowed with malice, as Sirius passed him to attend to the new arrivals.

"Back again, the blood traitor brats, is it true their father's dying…?"

"OUT!" Sirius roared, as he helped Ginny to her feet. Kreacher scuttled away, and he threw Hermione a meaningful glance before turning to address the students. "What's going on? Phineas Nigellus said Arthur's been badly injured—"

"Ask Harry," Fred said quickly.

"Yeah, I want to hear this for myself," George said. He and his twin were pale, their faces set, and neither looked at all in the mood for a joke.

"It was—" Harry began. "I had a—a kind of—vision…"

Hermione slowly made her way around the room, until she had come to stand just behind Sirius, wide-eyed and listening as Harry explained what he had seen. When he finished, they all stared at him in silence for a moment, and then Fred turned to Sirius.
"Is Mum here?"

"She probably doesn't even know yet," Sirius said. "The important thing was to get you away before Umbridge could interfere. I expect Dumbledore's letting Molly know now."

"We've got to go to St. Mungo's," Ginny said urgently. She glanced around at her brothers long enough to recognize that they, too, were all still in their pajamas, and added, "Sirius, can you lend us cloaks or anything—?"

"Hang on," Sirius said sternly, "you can't go tearing off to St. Mungo's!"

A few weeks ago, Hermione suspected that was exactly what he would have done. The weekend bouts of fresh air, however, seemed to have grounded him in reality again, and he was being admirably sensible here.

"Course we can go to St. Mungo's if we want," Fred said, his expression set and mulish. "He's our dad!"

"And how are you going to explain how you knew Arthur was attacked before the hospital even let his wife know?" Sirius asked, attempting to head them off with reason.

"What does that matter?" George retorted.

"It matters because we don't want to draw attention to the fact that Harry is having visions of things that are happening hundreds of miles away," Sirius responded angrily. "Have you any idea what the Ministry would make of that information?"

Hermione inhaled sharply at this, a movement that thankfully went unnoticed. Oh yes, the Ministry would have a field day with that if they found out…

"—Listen," Sirius said, growing visibly impatient, "your dad's been hurt while on duty for the Order and the circumstances are fishy enough without his children knowing about it seconds after it happened, you could seriously damage the Order's—"

"We don't care about the dumb Order!" Fred said belligerently.

"It's our dad dying we're talking about!" George bellowed.

"Your father knew what he was getting into, and he won't thank you for messing things up for the Order!" Sirius said, his anger starting to get the better of him. Hermione glanced at the doorway, afraid that all this shouting would draw Selenius's attention—but he should be in bed now, and he was used to visitors coming into Grimmauld Place, he knew that he wasn't supposed to be seen—"There are things worth dying for!"

"Easy for you to say, stuck here!" Fred shouted. "I don't see you risking your neck!"

If Hermione had not been Disillusioned, she was sure that all the color would have drained from her face at this comment; as it was, Sirius turned deathly pale, and for a moment, she was afraid that she might have to restrain him from hitting Fred. But then he took a deep breath, and when he spoke, it was with determined calm and patience that she had not known he possessed. "I know it's hard, but we've all got to act as though we don't know anything yet. We've got to stay put, at least until we hear from your mother, alright?"

Hermione heard the sound of footsteps slowly descending in the moment of silence that followed, with a host of mutinous glares being aimed at Sirius's direction, and knew that they would mistake it
for Kreacher wandering about the house—but Kreacher was not that heavy, and he did not walk with shoes. She backed out of the room to slip into the hallway, where she saw Selenius halt at the top of the next landing, quite well placed to flee if he saw anyone come through the doorway, but close enough to hear what was going on.

"That's right," she heard Sirius, his voice growing fainter as she approached the foot of the stairs and, unmasking herself, began to climb. Selenius startled slightly when he saw her, but he did not run away. "Come on, let's all... let's all have a drink while we're waiting..."

"I thought I told you not to sneak out of bed when we have guests over," she hissed at him quietly.

"I heard yelling," Selenius whispered in his defense. "I couldn't sleep with that racket." He gestured at where he was standing. "And I'm fine where I am—no one can see me..."

"I don't care. I want you back in your room—now."

"Who are those people?" Selenius hissed back, as he slowly started heading back up the way he had come. "They were yelling at Sirius. I heard what they said—he didn't deserve it."

"Sirius didn't deserve it, but those kids are under a lot of stress right now," Hermione told him in an undertone as they reached the next floor, and started down the hall, for Selenius's room. "Their father is dying. People say things they don't mean when they're upset."

"Is father alright?" Selenius asked, looking suddenly alarmed.

"He's fine," Hermione reassured him, as she opened the door to his room, and they slipped inside. "It was Mr. Weasley who got bitten. You know him—Molly's husband. You've gotten a glimpse of him a few times."

"I remember him. He's the one who collects the Muggle plugs."

"That's right."

Hermione glanced around at his room. It had a four-poster bed with a plain, simple coverlet. The handkerchief-quilt that Hagrid had given Hermione and Severus as a wedding gift was folded neatly at the foot of the bed—Selenius no longer needed a security blanket, he had thought himself too old for one since he was six, but he still kept it. Along one wall, there was a bookshelf that was moderately filled, with occasional bits of parchment sticking out between tomes. A small figure of Krum stood guard over a pair of Omnioculars on the uppermost shelf, preventing a stack of books from falling over into a heap. He had a desk, which was so messy that it ought to be fined, for it was stacked with several layers of parchment, all scribbled to death on with red and black ink. The only reason none of it fell to the floor from an odd gust of wind was because several different books—the elementary Arithmantic puzzle book Severus had given him included—weighed the whole mess down. In the corner was a stack of games, including Wizard Chess, Scrabble, and Exploding Snap.

There were also some pictures, attached to the wall above the bed with Spell-o-tape. There was one of Selenius and Sirius along the beach near Tine Cottage, with Selenius on his broomstick and Sirius racing after him, leaving paw prints in the sand. There was one with Remus quickly ducking out of the doorway to the kitchen as Selenius raced past on a large, familiar-looking black dog. There was also one with Sirius sitting on the floor in front of the fireplace, drinking a butterbeer while he watched Selenius and Remus play Wizard Chess. There was also one of Hermione sitting at the table, checking over Selenius's work, while he sat in the chair next to her, his legs dangling several inches off the floor (that had been taken by Sirius.) There was a more recent one of Selenius hugging a large, freshly-shaved, snow-white dog with round, floppy ears and laughing eyes on the doorstep.
of Tine Cottage. There was also one of three-year-old Selenius petting Fang, whose tail was thumping happily, on the floor of Hagrid’s hut.

Another picture showed Severus standing beside Hermione in the staff room, with Selenius in her arms. It was the same picture that Hermione kept in her locket and treasured, but Selenius had gotten a copy of the original photo. It was the only picture he had of both his parents together, and so it was the only one of them that he put up.

Hermione gazed at the wall, and it took her a moment to snap back to the present. She pulled the covers back on Selenius’s bed, and made to douse the lights.

"Isn’t it almost Christmas?" Selenius said suddenly, as he climbed back into bed.

"Yes," Hermione answered, uncertain about where this was going.

"Are we doing anything special this year?" Selenius asked hopefully. He had been seriously upset last year when his parents had not rescued him from his relatives’ home, and it was clear to him that the four older kids downstairs would be staying for quite a while, which would restrict his movements through the house.

Hermione gave him a thoughtful look, and then a nod. It was certainly possible.

"We’ll see," she told him.

She left the room, closing the door carefully behind her. She heard the lock click, as it was supposed to when Selenius was going to bed, and then made her way back downstairs.

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There were no excursions to Tine Cottage for Sirius while Harry and the Weasleys were over. There was also very little point in Hermione staying there, and so after checking in with Severus on the matter, she snuck Selenius out of there and brought him back to Spinner’s End.

"Just bring a few books, it’s only for the holidays," she told him airily, as he eagerly packed up his things. He had spent the last three days stuck in his room, and was quite eager to be gone. "We’re staying at our house for a bit."

Severus had ensured beforehand that there would be no unwelcome visits there over the holidays by his colleagues, and had thus declared it safe for Selenius to come. She took her son with her to a tree farm a few miles away to pick one out, and they brought it back and set it up in the living room, spilling a good deal of pine needles on the floor in the process. She could have charmed decorations onto it with a flick of her wand, but took the time to stop by Diagon Alley to buy a set so that Selenius could have the fun of doing it himself.

Severus sneered derisively at the tree when he came home a few days later and saw it, until Hermione elbowed him and hissed into his ear that Selenius had done the decorating himself. After that, he managed to keep his facial expression in check. Not that it mattered; Severus could have been glaring like Medusa, and Selenius would still have turned to give his father a happy grin before hugging him.

Severus was becoming edgier and touchy as of late, due to the increasing stress of his job—his many jobs—but he seemed to gradually leave his nettles behind when he came home. When he was with his family, there was no need to be unnecessarily cruel or snarky, and though it took a few days to settle into that, he eventually did relax. Enough so that when Selenius hugged him, he could place his hand on top of his son’s head and ruffle his hair in a show of affection. It had been so long since he
had seen his son that it was as though he had forgotten how to act around him, but when it became clear that Selenius was no less distant as a result of the separation, it became easier for Severus to act like a father.

This year's holiday was his opportunity to reconnect with his son, and Severus took advantage of it to do so. It was an opportunity for all of them to reconnect as a family, which is why they could be found playing Wizard Chess in the living room, surrounded by books scattered on the floor, and three mugs on the coffee table. Christmas morning, Selenius got up early to find a stack of presents for him waiting underneath the tree—from Sirius, Remus, his parents, Hagrid, and even some of the professors at Hogwarts. He tore off the wrapping paper eagerly while Hermione sleepily made her way to the kitchen to get herself a glass of pumpkin juice, and Severus stayed in bed with the pillow pressed over his ears. Eventually, however, they were all assembled in front of the tree, opening their separate gifts.

Selenius got wooden carving the size of a Galleon from Hagrid, depicting a thestral in flight. Sirius had ordered him a copy of *Flying With The Cannons*, while Remus gave him *Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them*. The other teachers had sent him a variety of sweets from Honeydukes, which he stashed protectively under his thestral before his mother could confiscate them all. From his father, in what was fast becoming tradition, he received another set of logic books, more complex and advanced than the previous ones, but no less enthralling. From his mother, a Headless Hat, which earned her an odd look from Severus as their son glanced at it warily before putting it on.

"Where—no, I should ask how…"

"Fred and George's owl order forms," Hermione admitted grudgingly, as both hat and Selenius's head disappeared.

Aside from the pink feathers, Selenius thought the hat was fantastic, and planned to scare Sirius and Remus with it as soon as he saw them again.

Toward the end of the holidays, Dumbledore paid them a visit by floo call, stepping in to speak to Severus. He came bearing gifts, and Selenius graciously accepted the pair of thick, woolen socks the headmaster gave him. Socks were not particularly exciting as far as gifts went, but these had a Golden Snidget on one that flittered about over the knitwork, and it was actually quite fascinating to watch. Whenever you tried to slap your hand over the fluttering thing, it would duck out of the way just in time, reappearing on the other sock; it was quite a challenge to beat. Selenius considered himself challenged, and spent a good quarter of an hour trying to trap the golden bird within while Dumbledore spoke with Severus.

"I fear that Harry's connection to Tom's mind is growing stronger," Dumbledore told him gravely, as Selenius let out an exclamation of frustration from the next room. "He must begin taking Occlumency immediately."

Severus sneered. "Why me? Why not you?"

"You are perfectly capable of teaching him, Severus—"

"Potter is just like his father," Severus snapped. "He hates me, and I have no particular desire to spend more time futilely trying to teach him. He listens to you."

Dumbledore eyed Severus sternly, his expression severe. "I cannot risk Tom attempting to get to me through Harry, which he will do if he learns that I am going out of my way to give him private lessons myself."
Severus gritted his teeth, but did not refute this.

Dumbledore left a few minutes later, and Severus reluctantly got his traveling cloak and left as well, no doubt to pay Grimmauld Place a visit.

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Severus was in a foul mood when he returned, and shortly after, he had to pack his things to leave for Hogwarts. Hermione honestly did not blame him: he was looking forward to giving Harry extra lessons almost as much as Harry was eager to have them. Hermione stopped him before he left, having sent Selenius up to his room to collect his own things, to talk to him privately.

"What happened?" she asked quietly.

"Black started trying to throw his weight around," Severus sneered. "Things got out of hand."

"Don't tell me you got in a fight," she admonished.

"Very nearly," he said.

Hermione sighed, leaning her head against his chest and closing her eyes in exasperation. "I can't let the two of you stay in the same room alone without you going after each other's throats."

"Black is a dog," Severus snapped. "What do you expect?"

"I expect my husband to try and be the mature one, then," Hermione retorted.

Severus fell silent at this, and after a moment, pushed himself away.

"I'll see you tonight, then," he said dully.

Hermione grabbed his arm. "Don't be so sour."

His expression twisted at this, "Yes, wife."

She rolled her eyes. They had not had a lot of time to spend together intimately. The amount of time she spent with Selenius and Sirius at Grimmauld Place, his job as a teacher, his position in the Dark Lord's camp, and the evenings that he had to spend grading mediocre assignments left a very small window of opportunity for the both of them—and oftentimes, they were simply too stressed, or too tired, to take advantage of it.

She kissed him, not on the cheek, but on the lips. He let out a muffled huff of surprise at this, but responded immediately, grasping her face between his hands and tilting it upward for a better angle, deepening the kiss. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him, deliberately, reminding him of just what typically came with the territory of having a wife…

"Mum—Dad—what are you doing?" Selenius had come back downstairs, bag in hand, and was in the doorway. He was staring at them. They reluctantly broke apart, and turned to face him.

"Nothing," Severus responded smoothly. Hermione flushed. He turned to glance back at her, and then said rather curtly, "I'll see you tonight," before picking up a handful of floo powder and stepping through the fireplace.

Once he had gone, Selenius raised an eyebrow at Hermione in a way that was disturbingly like that of his father.
"That was 'nothing'?

Hermione's face heated even further. "That's none of your business—have you got all your stuff? Because once we go, we're not coming back to collect something if you've forgotten it."

Selenius hurried ran back upstairs to double-check, and Hermione sat back on the living room couch, shaking her head with a sigh.

When they finally returned to Grimmauld Place, it was to find Sirius more moody, sullen, and depressed than ever. Molly was still hanging around for another day, and going out on an excursion would be impossible under her watchful eye. Hermione sent Selenius up to his room to put his things away while she distracted Molly, not wanting the Weasley matriarch to catch sight of Selenius. She trusted the Weasleys, but the fewer who knew about him, the better.

Molly and Arthur fortunately left the next day, and Hermione took one look at Sirius and declared that they would be going to Tine Cottage. Selenius eagerly ran to grab his broomstick, while Sirius immediately transformed into a large, black dog. Hermione quickly transfigured his fur and ears, changed his color, and was ready to leave with him when Selenius came back down.

Sirius was in nearly as foul a mood as Severus had been, but when they landed in front of Tine Cottage, his mood seemed to improve. They spent the evening there, and when Sirius flopped down on the ground just behind the mailbox, exhausted, Hermione changed him back to normal, and he reverted to human form.

"Thank you," he said hoarsely, still panting hard. He sat back on the ground. "I needed this."

"I could tell," Hermione responded honestly.

Sirius shook his head, and then after a moment, asked rather bluntly, "How do you stand your husband?"

Hermione gave him a careful look.

"I know the two of you got into a fight, but surely it wasn't that bad—"

"He's going to use every opportunity he has to needle Harry and make him miserable," Sirius said angrily. "He insulted Harry and James in one go, taunted me for staying inside. He called me a coward, to boot…"

Given how much Severus himself hated to be called a coward—the very implication was enough to make his temple throb dangerously—Hermione was surprised that he had opened himself up to attack by implying that Sirius was one. But a moment later, her anger set in. It was not Sirius's fault that he had to remain hidden. Her husband was also aware of the fact that Sirius was steadily growing worse the longer he remained kept inside. Why, then, was he goading him so? Did he actually want Sirius do to something rash and get himself caught?

"You're not a coward," Hermione told Sirius at once. "If you had the choice, you'd be out there with the rest of us doing what we're doing to stop Voldemort."

"At least you think so," Sirius said gloomily.

He glanced up at her.

"What would I do without you?" he asked finally. "You're the only one who ever believed in me, even when others thought me guilty—and you're always sticking out your neck for me, to let me
come out here and have some air…”

"We're friends," Hermione told him gently. "Best friends. We look out for each other. Remember that summer after I first came to Hogwarts in your time, and you just paid for my stuff?"

"Interest collected," Sirius said, a bit of a smile making its way across his face. "Arm, leg, first-born child. On a broomstick, no less."

Hermione laughed. A moment later, Sirius began laughing too.

~o~O~o~

"You shouldn't have attacked Sirius like that," Hermione told Severus that evening, when she returned. She shook the snow off her boots, and then tugged them off, setting them aside. "When you went to Grimmauld Place to inform Harry of his Occlumency lessons, I mean. You shouldn't have had a go at him."

Severus stood up from where he had been grading. If he had any intentions of being at all welcoming, they had just died a withering death. "Black just as much implied that the headmaster is wrong to trust me," he said in a low voice. "And then he called me Lucius Malfoy's lapdog."

"Oh, this is so stupid!" Hermione threw her hands up into the air. "You're on the same side! You should be working together, not acting like petty schoolboys on the playground!"

Severus sneered. "I suppose he whined to you about the big, bad Potions Master picking on him? How noble."

Hermione glared at him, and then she said, very quietly, "Sirius said some things to you that he shouldn't have, Severus—but you also said a good deal of things to him that would have been better left unsaid. He's stuck in his mother's house because he has to be, Severus, not because he wants to be, and he's doing all he can from there. You might not like each other, and I don't ever expect you to be friends, but I would appreciate it if you would at least show a bit of consideration for his situation. Goading him helps no one."

Severus snorted contemptuously, and turned away. Hermione took several steps forward and placed her hand on his shoulder to get his attention, and he wheeled back around.

"Black treats Potter as though he's the most precious thing in the world," he snarled. "Gryffindor's Golden Boy. In his eyes, Potter can do no wrong, just as his father before him—"

"He treats Harry the same way he treats Selenius!" Hermione said fiercely. "Harry is his godson, Severus, just as he is mine! It's practically his job to look after him—and it's not as though you fill him with confidence, either!"

"Fine!" Severus spat. "Go stay with the mutt, then—you can both whine about how the Greasy Git of the dungeons is going to hurt poor, precious Potter's feelings."

"You—you unreasonable…"

"But of course," Severus added silkily, his eyes glittering with malice, "if Black wants something from you, Black gets it. That's what best friends are for, after all—are they not?"

Hermione stared at him, stiff-backed, expression stony and unreadable for a moment.

And then she slapped him.
She wheeled around and stomped back to the fireplace, not bothering to put her boots back on, before she picked up a handful of Floo powder, tossed it into the flames, and left.

As she whirled around in the green flames, she saw the expression on his face. It was one that was not at all unlike the one he had worn when she had first slapped him, the first time they had detention together in the Potions classroom all those years ago—only this time, it was mixed with raw, visible pain, regret, and the realization that he had perhaps made a big mistake.

Sirius was surprised when Hermione stepped through the fireplace, tossed her traveling cloak onto the kitchen chair, charmed the soot off the bottom of her socks, and informed him that she would be staying the night. He did not, however, resent this intrusion one bit: on the contrary, he was pleased to have her company. And when she was up early the next morning, preparing a breakfast of deliciously wafting, warm blueberry pancakes, he and Selenius were both delighted to pieces.

Hermione did not inform either of them of why she had made the sudden decision to stay.

There was another Order meeting two days later, in which everyone was updated on the status of the Weapon's security. Sturgis Podmore was looking forward to being released soon, which was good news. On the whole, very little had changed: Voldemort was focused almost entirely on one thing, and had little interest in anything else.

Hermione remained at Grimmauld Place for the next fortnight. It was not at all unlike the time she and Severus had not spoken to each other after he discovered she had known beforehand that Lily Potter was slated to die—although this time, Hermione rather felt that it was Severus who was clearly in the wrong. She had no intention of returning to Hogwarts to try and make up with him when it was he who had the apologizing to do and not her.

Remus returned within that time, and made plans to stay at Grimmauld Place for a week before he had to leave again. He did have time to play Scrabble with Selenius, though, and when the boy tore down the stairs carrying a box, Remus could not help but stare at his feet.

"Nice socks," he said, as he took the box and set it down to take out the board.

"Oh—er, thanks," Selenius said, as he took a seat. He grinned. "Professor Dumbledore gave them to me for Christmas."

"The headmaster has good taste," Remus agreed, as the Golden Snidget on the wool flittered rapidly from one stocking to the other.

Valentine's Day arrived. Hermione sat in the kitchen trying not to think about it too much while Tonks stopped by Headquarters to leave Remus a card. It changed colors depending on your mood, and when Remus picked it up to read, the card went from modest blue to increasingly bright red until, his face just as flushed as the card, he snapped it shut and pocketed it quickly.

Selenius told Sirius he was quite glad that he was not at school right now, because they always had a bit of a class celebration for Valentine's Day, and in his opinion, it was stupid. Hermione had to wonder exactly what they did at his school to make Selenius think that, particularly since he saw any opportunity to get free candy as a good thing.

Hermione was surprised when the flames turned green that evening, and Severus stepped into the kitchen. For one moment, she thought perhaps he had come to continue their argument; but then he pressed a single rose into her hand. She stared at it for a moment, not quite believing the implication, and then looked up at him.
He grimaced when he saw Sirius and Selenius peer in through the doorway, scowling at them discouragingly, but then turned his attention back to Hermione.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Behind her, Sirius and Selenius's eyebrows both rose questioningly.

Hermione looked at him, and then snapped the stem of the rose off half-way, and handed it back to him. He took it from her, and then brought both hands behind her head to secure it in her chignon, as he usually did.

"I… should have given your words a bit more thought than that," he muttered, still glaring at the two blatant eavesdroppers in the doorway. They took the hint and retreated, amazingly, and he turned back to Hermione, his expression softening.

"I cannot promise that I will not provoke Black again, but I will not imply that he is a coward due to his unfortunate…situation."

Hermione placed her hand on his cheek, smiling. "You're forgiven," she said.

"Does that mean you'll come back?" Severus asked, a bit desperately. At that moment, he reminded her of nothing so much as when they were students, trying to repair their friendship at the many points that it had been fractured due to differences in philosophy. It was almost cute—almost.

She kissed him passionately, pulling away to nuzzle at the underside of his chin. "Of course."

They kissed again, and it was much more like the snog they'd had back at Spinner's End, right before Selenius had walked in on them. Hermione was lost to the feeling of having him with her again, of breathing in his scent, warm against her face, of being able to wrap her arms around his neck and have his solid presence in front of her… it felt too good for words. She needed him, and had not realized how much she had missed him over the last two weeks until now—until now that she had him back, and was reminded of just what she had not had in that time.

There was a clearing of someone's throat from the doorway, but they ignored it. Severus's lips broke away from hers to trail down the side of her neck, sucking, licking, and nipping determinedly—

"I don't think they can hear you."

"Bloody hell…"

There was a slight shuffling noise, and then Kreacher's voice broke through the haze in their minds.

"…Nasty Mudblood with her ugly blood traitor of a husband, oh my poor mistress, if only she knew, what would she say, if she saw the scum treating the noble and most ancient house of Black like a filthy whorehouse, a veritable nest for the maggots they spawn…"

Their eyes snapped open, and they broke apart to look at the house-elf.

"Go away, Kreacher," Sirius snapped.

There was a crack of Apparition, and then the four of them stared at each other. Selenius was hiding behind Sirius, as though that would somehow afford him extra protection from his father's smoldering glare.

Sirius looked torn between amusement and disgust.
"Well," he said, after a moment of silence, looking at Severus with an expression of utmost loathing, "if you—er—would like to go somewhere else to spend the evening together—because it is Valentine's Day, I suppose—I would be happy to make sure someone actually makes Selenius dinner. Like a responsible adult, I mean."

Severus scowled at him, and his fingers twitched, as though to go for his wand, but Hermione stopped him with a finger against his lips. She then turned to Sirius.

"We'll be at Hogwarts," she told him. A glance at her son, and added, "Don't let him eat too much candy before bedtime, either. I know he's still got a stash of Honeydukes chocolate somewhere."

Selenius grinned guiltily at this, and Sirius relaxed ever so slightly, though he and Severus were still eyeing each other with great dislike.

"See you tomorrow," she said, dragging Severus toward the fireplace and picking up a handful of floo powder. "Good night!"

As soon as they had left, Selenius moved from his place behind Sirius to look up at him.

"Did you hear the thing about the candy?"

"I didn't hear a thing about the candy," Sirius said, with a grim smile of his own.

"But I still have to have dinner first."

"That you do," Sirius said briskly. "Come on, let's go see what we've got…"

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Thirty

Big thanks goes out to my wonderful beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review.

Antonin Dolohov, read the caption beneath a picture of a pockmarked, greasy-haired man who was leaning against the frame of the poster, looking supremely bored. He grinned nastily up at the viewer, exposing his teeth. Convicted of the brutal murders of Gideon and Fabian Prewett.

Hermione set the paper down, staring stonily at the headlines. Mass Breakout From Azkaban. Ministry Fears Black Is "Rallying Point" For Old Death Eaters. Hermione recognized every single person whose face was shown on today's edition of the Daily Prophet. Bellatrix Black—now Lestrange, Hermione had to remind herself. It was difficult to forget the sleek, black-haired woman who had harassed her while they were students. Hermione remembered her as a fanatic—and as one of the people responsible for taking away one of her closest friends. Convicted of the torture and permanent incapacitation of Frank and Alice Longbottom...

"Oh, this is ridiculous," Hermione snapped, shoving the article aside. "Sirius would no more be a rallying point for Death Eaters than the Dark Lord would invite Albus Dumbledore for tea."

"All ten escaped," Severus said quietly, coming up from behind her.

"I noticed," Hermione said coldly.

"Hermione—"

"I'm angry because there are ten more Death Eaters in Voldemort's ranks, Severus," Hermione snapped, ignoring the slapping of Severus's hand over his left arm, and the warning exclamation of using the Dark Lord's name. "Ten more—at least two of whom I personally helped put in there—and there was nothing we could do to stop them!"

Severus did not respond immediately. He silently finished adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves, pulled on his robes, before he said, very quietly, "If it's any distraction—bad news though it may be—Hagrid has been put on probation."

Hermione sat up very quickly. "Already?"

"It would appear so."

Hermione shook her head, and leaned back in the chair with a moan of disbelief. "I'd honestly very nearly forgotten just how bad things had gotten at this point."

And it was not until later, while she was cajoling Selenius to finish the homework she had assigned him for the day that she recalled that another Hogsmeade visit was coming up. A Hogsmeade visit— Harry and Cho—Rita Skeeter...

Umbridge. Hermione suddenly stopped in mid-sentence, straightening up and looking rather gleeful for the first time in several days. The cow wouldn't know what hit her. Of course, she would fight against it, but the damage would have already been done. She strode away then, leaving Selenius
sitting on the floor of his room, mouth half-open in surprise as the argument he'd been about to present became quite unnecessary. Beside him, the small figure of Krum sitting atop the wooden thestral turned to give him a shrug.

Selenius decided not to waste his good luck—the smile his mother had been wearing did not seem to bode well at all, in his opinion, and he knew she would be back—and immediately tried to squeeze the goodness out of whatever free time he had left before it came to an untimely end.

Hermione's mood improved marginally the next day as she stopped by Diagon Alley for a copy of *The Quibbler*. She brought it back to Grimmauld Place, opened it to the appropriate page, and proudly spread it out on the table for all to see.

"Don't tell me this is your doing," Remus said with amazement as he read it.

"Granger's, actually, but yes," Hermione responded smugly.

Sirius grinned.

"Brilliant," he said, "Bloody brilliant!"

The rest of the Order seemed to think so, too. They all cheered and chortled amongst themselves when they stopped by for another meeting that day, and someone—Sirius, probably—even tacked it to the kitchen door. Kreacher occasionally walked by, muttering mutinously to himself, and when he saw the article, he tried to take it down.

"What are you doing?" Sirius asked suddenly, as the house-elf reached up with knobbly fingers for the *Quibbler*.

"Kreacher is cleaning," Kreacher replied evasively.

"That article is right where it's supposed to be," Sirius told him with a frown. "Keep your filthy little hands off it."

Kreacher gave Sirius a look of utmost loathing, and then shuffled out of the room.

When Selenius passed by the door later that day, he did a double-take and backtracked a few steps to look up at it. Then he pulled it down, smoothed it out, and carried it with him to the table to read while Hermione made him an afternoon snack.

"Mum, what are Death Eaters?"

Hermione froze. Sirius, who had been sitting at the table with a cup of tea and reading the *Evening Prophet*, spluttered, sloshing his drink over himself.

For a long moment, Hermione did not know what to say. She and Severus had never told Selenius a word of what was going on in the world outside Grimmauld Place and Tine Cottage, and neither had Sirius. In previous years, Selenius had been too young, and Hermione had not wanted him to mistake his father for a Death Eater; or worse, translate his admiration of his father into admiration of Death Eaters. She had believed him incapable of making those distinctions then. In later years, there had never seemed to be a good enough opportunity to explain it to him, particularly with the short amount of time they had to spend with him. And even then, he had seemed too young.

But he was nine now, almost ten. He would be going Hogwarts himself in a little over a year. By eleven, Harry had learned that Voldemort was evil, and the truth about his parents—and he had handled it well. He had developed an understanding then, and maintained it distinctly to this day.
Even at eleven, he had understood the drastic seriousness of Lord Voldemort. But Selenius?

Hermione felt it was possible that she was underestimating her son's intelligence, but she could not help but be wary at opening this kind of door to him. She did not believe in keeping him in perpetual ignorance, and given the current political environment, he certainly needed to know. But she was also afraid to tell him. If she put it off now, it would only make it more difficult to tell him later, especially given that this was something he was specifically asking about. If she made a big deal out of not answering it, it would only be worse.

Sirius had cleaned himself up and already begun answering.

"They're bad guys," he supplied.

"I gathered as much," Selenius said self-importantly, in a way that was once more rather reflective of his father. "But that doesn't tell me what they are."

"Well..." Sirius said, turning to look at Hermione.

Hermione braced herself.

"They're part of a pureblood supremacy movement," she responded, dropping a handful of freshly-chopped, out-of-season strawberries into a bowl and sliding them over to Selenius. "They believe that only purebloods—people whose parents are all witches and wizards, without a trace of Muggle heritage in them—are worthy of learning magic. They don't like half-bloods or Muggle-borns."

Selenius's brows furrowed. "So?"

"So they go around killing people who don't agree with them," Hermione said. "They hurt people who aren't pureblood just because they exist. They try to marginalize and delegate them to being second-class citizens."

Selenius's mouth opened in surprise for a moment, and then he shut it. "Oh."

"They've got a leader," Sirius said. "No one says his name, though. They're all too afraid."

"He's called Voldemort," Hermione added, "but everyone just calls him He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Most of his followers address him as the Dark Lord."

"So," Selenius said. "Vol——"

"Don't say his name," Sirius said quickly.

Selenius looked annoyed. "So, He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is just going around killing people?"

"It's a bit more complicated than that," Hermione interjected delicately, "but that's about it."

"Because they're not pureblood?"

"That's right."

Selenius took a moment to let this sink in.

"I'm a pureblood, right?" he asked finally. "Both my parents are magical."

"Not quite," Hermione said quietly. "Your grandmother on your father's side was a pureblood, but all your other grandparents are Muggles. Your father is a half-blood, and I'm Muggle-born. That
would make you a half-blood, too."

Selenius nodded, his expression thoughtful. He looked back down at the article, reading through the rest of it, and then flipped it over to read the rest, occasionally dipping his finger into the bowl of strawberries his mother had put out for him.

"So He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named is back?" he asked, finally looking up.

"That's right," Sirius said.

"That means he's going around trying to hurt people like—like mum?"

"Er..." Sirius exchanged momentary glances with Hermione at this, and then nodded in the affirmative. "Yes. I'm afraid so."

"Well, he can go stuff himself," Selenius said crossly, closing the magazine and setting it aside to finish his snack. "He's off his rocker."

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The conversation with Selenius concerning Voldemort had gone significantly better than Hermione could have ever expected. Selenius was not terrified out of his wits that Voldemort was going to hunt him down, but he wasn't refusing to take the situation seriously either. In fact, if anything, he seemed to grow thoughtful over the next few days, as he continued to absorb and mull over this new information in his head.

Occasionally, he would ask her further questions about it out of the blue, but if it were not for that, Hermione might have thought he had abandoned all concern about the conversation. Later that day, Severus stopped by for the nine o'clock Order meeting, where he gave them all his report on the Dark Lord's movements.

"Not only has he gained ten Death Eaters to add to his ranks, among them is Augustus Rookwood," he told them silkily, "formerly of the Department of Mysteries. He has told the Dark Lord how to obtain the Weapon."

There was a murmur of alarm, followed by a ripple of unease through the assembled Order members.

"Now, I don't quite understand here, if you'll just give me a sec," Tonks spoke up. "I thought you had to be the one a prophecy was made about in order to take it?"

"That leaves him with two options," Moody growled. "He can either go in himself—"

"—or manipulate Potter into doing so," Severus finished smoothly. "Yes, I know."

"Severus?" Dumbledore asked calmly. For all his tone indicated, he might have been reading the newspaper and discussing the weather. "How is Harry's Occlumency coming along?"

Severus stiffened visibly for a moment. After the debacle in which Trelawney had been sacked, Severus had returned in more foul a mood than Hermione could have ever predicted. Harry had breached Severus's defenses during their lesson and reversed the Legilimency on him quite by accident. Nothing truly incriminating had been seen—Severus as a child while his parents were fighting, Severus attempting to get on a bucking broomstick, Severus as a teenager...

"Very badly, Headmaster," Severus sneered. "He has no talent, no discipline, no real understanding of just how serious his situation is. His progress is stilted, and the boy wears his heart on his sleeve
for all to see—he has only a modicum of self-restraint. And he does not practice as he should."

"Keep working with him, then," Dumbledore said with a sigh.

The meeting broke up, and they dispersed. Severus and Hermione left to return to Hogwarts. Hagrid on probation, Harry continuing to see a dark corridor, the interview with the Quibbler… everything was starting to come to a head once more, and Hermione could not help but wring her hands in anxiety as she felt the clock nearing midnight for her. Soon—very soon—she would have to take the de-aging elixir, from the Fountain of Youth, and return to being seventeen once more. The time for that was drawing alarmingly close, like a great black shadow that she had only seen out of the corner of her eye before—

"Hermione?"

"Wha—oh, yes, Headmaster?" Hermione said, rubbing her temple, snapping out of her contemplation. "I—er—you were saying?"

Dumbledore gave her a bemused look, as he gestured for her to take a seat. Hermione took one of the comfy chintz armchairs, crossing her legs and trying to look completely fine as Dumbledore folded his hands on his desk. Beside him, an odd, spindly-silver instrument hummed determinedly.

"I was just suggesting that perhaps the time is not far off concerning when you ought to take your medicine," he said, eyes twinkling slightly at this.

"I—oh, yes," Hermione said, her heart sinking quickly at the thought. "No—not far off at all."

"That's why I would therefore like to suggest that you take it today."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief, mentally calculating how many days more before she would step in as seventeen-year-old Hermione Granger once more. It was nearing the end of March, and she had fled the Room of Requirement in early April…

Two weeks. She had two weeks before her life turned upside-down again. Or rightside-up. However you wanted to look at it.

"You will need time to prepare," Dumbledore told her gently. "You will need to be de-aged, dressed, and ready to make your way back to the very corridor from whence you tripped into the past. Everything must be in order."

Hermione could not deny the reason of his words, but neither could she speak in affirmation. Her mouth was dry. Dumbledore, sensing that he would probably not get an answer out of her, stood up and made his way toward a cabinet, unhooking it and setting it slightly ajar. He reached in, and moments later, retrieved a small tumbler filled to the brim with a shiny, opalescent, watery liquid. He carefully set it down on the desk, and Hermione stared at it.

"Nicolas was kind enough to leave me with specific instructions concerning exactly how much you would need," Dumbledore told her calmly. He conjured a small cup with little measuring marks ticked on the side and a ladle out of thin air, scooping the latter into the potion and withdrawing it carefully to pour into the cup. It reached a mark a little over three-quarters of the way, and he set it down in front of her.

"That should be enough, I think."

Hermione swallowed. "Can't I… can't I do this in our quarters, with Severus around? You know—because—"
"Of course," Dumbledore told her, looking rather surprised, as though he had been waiting for her to ask this question much earlier than now. "I rather expected you to. It would be quite awkward for you to suddenly shrink out of those robes you're wearing now."

Hermione let out a slightly hysterical laugh. "Right." She stood up, carefully scooping up the cup in her hand, and tapping it to spell a thin, invisible barrier over it so that none would spill. "I'll head down right now, shall I?"

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Severus's foul mood, which he had brought home with him that evening, immediately evaporated to be replaced with one of dire concern when he found himself face-to-face with his wife's stony, disbelieving gaze. For a moment, he was rather tempted to ask her who had died, but kept his mouth shut as she began undressing.

But when she reached for the cup of shimmering potion on the desk, he understood. His lower lip curled, but he nevertheless stepped forward and began unbuttoning the front of her shirt, helping her get out of her clothes. Of course she would not want to drink the potion while still wearing her teaching robes. They would probably be too big. There were a set of school robes, complete with a set of jeans, fresh undergarments, and a t-shirt hanging over one of the armchairs. She stepped out of her skirt, tossed it aside, and then crossed the room—perfectly stark naked—to retrieve the little cup sitting on her desk.

She fingered it for a moment, and then threw him a glance over her shoulder.

"Any last words?" she asked, as though she were trying to find some humor in the situation.

Severus's lips twitched slightly upward at this, as he recalled a memory that had occurred some nineteen years back. "At least I'll get to see more of you this time."

She gave him a blank stare that clearly said she didn't understand the reference, and he clarified: "For your sixth-year Defense Against the Dark Arts exam. When I hung you upside down, all I got to see—while you were choking me, incidentally—were your breasts." Realization suddenly crossed her face, and he saw her grin despite herself as she recalled the incident. "And much to my nineteen-year-old self's immense displeasure, you were wearing a bra."

"Yes, that's right," Hermione remarked, a bit of dry humor in her voice. "Let a girl know you like her by hexing her."

"I didn't say it was an effective way to communicate," Severus muttered. He was blushing slightly at the memory, but he hid it well with a sneer. "I was a teenager—an unpopular and decidedly unattractive one at that. I was lucky enough that you were willing to be my friend to begin with."

In response, Hermione lifted the cup to her mouth, tilting it back, and took three big gulps. Her eyes watered slightly as the potion burned at the back of her throat, and then she set it down—and crossed over to her husband, until she was pressed against him, arms winding around his neck.

"No," she said, gazing up at him contemplatively. "I'm the one who was lucky to have you as a friend."

And before he could respond, she kissed him.

His hands came to rest on her hips, as he deepened it, and scant seconds later, the potion finally seemed to take effect. His grip almost slipped as her hips slimmed ever so slightly, but he readjusted it and pulled away in time to watch the years slowly melt away. Twenty years of wrinkles and
tension lines vanished rather rapidly from her face, and when she took a step back to look at her hands, it also became quickly apparent that her stretch marks were also disappearing. She had been rather fit for a woman nearing forty, but now—now…

Her breasts, which had understandably never been quite the same again after giving birth, shrank slightly. As the alterations to her body began to come to a halt, it became very apparent to Hermione that though the potion was youthening her body, it was not erasing all trace of the changes it had undergone. Her hips, which had grown wider by necessity due to pregnancy, were still a bit bigger than they should have been if she were actually seventeen and untouched. Her breasts, too, had not returned entirely to the way they had been when she was a teenager. They were admittedly a bit fuller, now that she had age on her side to help, but the marks of having carried and given birth to Selenius was still apparent. Even time would not erase that.

In a way, Hermione found she was both relieved and disappointed by this. She was comfortable with her body the way it had been before she had ingested the potion, but she had been looking forward to at least gaining back the physical benefits of being young and nubile. Obviously, the Fountain of Youth did not erase the experiences that the body had gone through, but rather reduced them back to the condition they would have been in had they occurred at the age that the potion brought the drinker back to.

Severus raised an eyebrow at her as he took in the changes the potion had wrought on his wife. She looked almost exactly as he recalled from when they were both students together, with slight changes. There were still small scars on her body, from her previous years as a member of the Order. But her face was young again, and she just—her entire appearance was slightly unnerving. She was truly seventeen again, by all appearances, and when she strode over to the armchair to don her school uniform, he could not help wondering if he would ever be able to have sex with her again.

She was attractive—so attractive, in fact, that he wanted to stop her before she got her shirt on—but now he would forever feel as though he were having an affair with Granger rather than making love (or fucking—sometimes they preferred that instead) with his wife. But as she pulled her jeans on (she had to make a slight adjustment to them to make them wider at the hips) she happened to glance at him in time to interpret the expression on his face.

"What's your problem?" she asked.

Severus scowled. "Every time I look at you, I won't be able to help but think that I could be your father."

"Yes, and I'm old enough to be my own mother," Hermione told him, tone laced with sarcasm. She clearly was not interested in debating the ethics of her being both his thirty-eight-year-old wife and seventeen-year-old student. "What's your point?"

Well. Hermione Granger would never have spoken to him in those tones, much less used those words. Definitely Hermione Snape behind them through and through. In fact, with that attitude and her current appearance, Severus rather felt as though he were seeing her as he remembered from their joint schooldays, rather than her as her younger, naïve, in-her-proper-timeline self that he had been dealing with for the past five years. He had been attracted to her then, when they were both students. At once, he felt an overwhelming sense of relief—and a flare of arousal at the possibilities now laid out before him.

"Well?" Hermione snapped, bringing him back to the present. "Your point?"

"No longer valid."
"Good."

Hermione started to pull on her bra, but was stopped when Severus crossed the room and laid a hand on her arm. She looked up at him, and was not sure whether to be reliever or alarmed at the subtle glitter of interest in his eyes. She did not have long to ponder the matter, for a moment later, he had covered her mouth with hers, and all thoughts of getting dressed were promptly dismissed. His hands twitched slightly as they slid across her body, as though they were itching to explore.

"Take off your jeans." The order came out as something between a purr and a drawl.

"But—"

"You can pay the headmaster a visit in your new form once I'm through reacquainting myself with it."

At this, Hermione twisted her head around to give him a mischievous smile.

Three minutes later, the jeans hit the floor, followed shortly after by the rest of their clothes, which became strewn debris around the living room area as the two of them mutually attempted to drag each other to the floor.

~o~O~o~

Sirius' jaw dropped open when he saw her the next morning.

"What are you doing here?" he asked her, standing up at once. "I thought you were supposed to be at school. Is Harry alright?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, and at once, he seemed to grow uncertain.

"That's Mrs. Snape to you," she told him coolly. Obviously, he thought she was Granger, secretly Flooing into Headquarters to deliver a message or notice of emergency. At this, Sirius's mouth opened and shut for several moments, like a goldfish, as he stared at her in disbelief. "Granger will be taking an otherwise unexpected trip back in time in roughly two weeks. I'll be stepping in to take her place."

Sirius goggled at her, and then choked out weakly, "Bloody hell. Hermione?"

"That's me," Hermione said with a sigh, removing her traveling cloak and hanging it over a chair. 

"But—but—but how?"

"It's a long story, and I don't really want to go into detail about it," Hermione said, pursing her lips. "Suffice to say, I am now prepared to continue where I left off in what amounts to almost twenty years ago for me. Where's Selenius?"

"In his room. But blimey," Sirius said, still looking her up and down with an expression of disbelief, "you look exactly as I remember from school. And exactly as Granger does now."

Hermione laughed as she left the kitchen to find her son. "That's the point, I'm afraid."

She made her way upstairs, strode down the hall, and then knocked twice on the door to her son's room before letting herself in. Selenius was sitting on the bed, reading *The Hobbit*, and when he looked up, his face froze. He stared at her for a full minute, and then lowered the book into his lap.

"Who are you?"
Hermione smiled at him. "I'm your mother, silly."

Selenius's eyes searched her features for a moment, dawning with a comprehension. He sat up a bit straighter, and his jaw had dropped slightly. He looked as though he didn't quite know what to say.

"I've been de-aged," Hermione said, taking a seat at the foot of his bed. "Certain circumstances forced it to become a necessity, and very soon, once summer starts, you're going to have to return to Diane and George's—and I'll have to return to my parents' home."

"I... but I don't understand," Selenius said, looking both baffled and unnerved. "You—you look just like my cousin Hermione, but you can't be..."

"I am your cousin Hermione," she told him, with a bit of a sad smile, "but she's not actually your cousin. She's your mother."

"But you—"

"We're both your mother."

Selenius shoved his book aside and got onto his knees, leaning forward. "I don't understand," he said. "How is this possible?"

Hermione took a deep breath. This was it. "When I was seventeen, I was in an accident that caused me to be thrown back twenty years into the past. That's how I met your father. And all this time, I've been waiting for time to catch itself up so that I can resume where I left off at seventeen."

It took Selenius a full minute to process this, to work this out, and then he nodded cautiously. "There would be two of you at the same time?"

"That's right."

"And now... and now there's only going to be one?"

Hermione nodded.

Selenius suddenly gave her a calculating look. "How do I know you're really my mother?"

Hermione ruffled his hair. "Because I'm the one who takes you to Tine Cottage every weekend so that you and Sirius can fly for a bit." She cupped his cheek with his hand, and gave him a stern look. "But all of this is supposed to be kept quiet. Let's keep this between us and Sirius, shall we?"

Selenius nodded eagerly. Hermione stood up, and then pointed at his desk.

"And now... I believe it's time for you to start homework?"

~o~O~o~

On the whole, Severus and Selenius had both taken her de-aging extremely well. She had expected far more resistance from the latter, but when you were nine-and-three-quarters and growing up in a world full of magic, where people turned into dogs and portraits talked, she expected that almost anything would seem possible. Selenius was actually rather excited about the whole thing, because it was what he understood to be a big secret that he was responsible for keeping quiet.

So big a secret, in fact, that he had to talk over it with Sirius. It ended with Sirius telling him all sorts of stories about Hermione as a student, from the fact that she had snuck out of school to visit Diagon Alley with Severus to her helping him escape on a condemned hippogriff. For Selenius, this was all
wildly exciting, and to have a person he considered to be like an uncle confirming every bit of his mother's story—well—it was an understatement to say that he was thrilled.

Hermione, however, was not so pleased. The days were flying by far too quickly for her liking, and she had to spend all that time meeting with various, trusted Order members and informing them of her change in appearance and situation. Tonks, Moody, Kingsley, and Remus among them. It was difficult enough to explain alone to those who, like Sirius, already knew her situation; to someone like Tonks, it was nearly impossible to compress Hermione's time-turner accident and subsequent mitigation of it into a short story that got the point across as quickly as possible. It was stressful, to say the least, not to mention that she was heartily not looking forward to being a student again.

She spent as much time with Severus as possible. The two spent the weekend before she was expected to step in as Hermione Granger alone in their quarters, vigorously trying to make up for the time that they knew they would not have later. To Hermione, it felt as though they were being faced with the end of the world, an intractable and immovable force to be reckoned with, and their solution was to engage in last-minute carnal activity. And given the state of fluctuation her hormones were in—thirty-eight-year-old woman in a seventeen-year-old girl's body—she rather felt as though she were in a perpetual state of wantonness.

She could not get enough of her husband in the final days before her departure. She begged him, fucked him, kissed him, was tied up and spanked by him, made love with him, rode and was ridden by him, and pleaded for him to torture her deliciously, in the hope that doing so might at least alleviate some of the intense, bone-deep need she felt for him, and knew she would continue to feel even after they separated. There was no denying that she was definitely a bit sore from it all, but she was past the point of caring.

The day she was supposed to leave, she woke up to find Severus had already climbed over her, and was suckling determinedly at one nipple while massaging the other between his fingers, and grinding himself against her core. It was a pleasant way to wake up, and she took full advantage of it with a sort of desperation, begging him vocally to continue. He sliced a finger through her folds, found her already wet for him, and slipped it into her mouth to have a taste while he slid into her.

She licked his finger clean. The taste of herself was not particularly sumptuous to her, but feeling Severus harden inside her just a bit more from watching it was worth it well enough. She took the opportunity to further swirl her tongue around the digit, paying special attention to the slightly more sensitive underside, and causing him to shudder and jerk his hips unevenly when she did so. Mouths mated hungrily, hands were pinned to the bed, fingers twined together, and hips moved in undulation against each other.

When they finally did leave the bed, it was with great reluctance. But the day would not wait to begin at their leisure, and Severus still had classes to get ready for. Hermione went to pay Grimmauld Place a final visit.

She sat Selenius and Sirius both down at the table, and informed them both that she would not be able to take them to Tine Cottage again until the end of the year.

If Sirius was interested in Flooing them both there, he had her permission to do so. But while she was not there, he was not to go beyond the boundaries of the Fidelius Charm. Selenius was not to fly out of Sirius's line of sight. Their visits to the cottage with a boy who should not have been born yet and one of the most wanted men in Great Britain was to remain still a carefully-guarded secret.

Selenius was still to go to bed at a reasonable hour, eat three square meals a day, and get his homework done. Sirius was to make sure that happened. She was entrusting her son into the care of a man who was like an older brother to her. Selenius could write letters to her, but he must address it
as though to his cousin, and sign it as Sirrah. Sirius was to check over those letters to ensure that nothing incriminating was in them.

They both assured her that they understood, and then Hermione made her final good-byes and left.

She spent the day counting down the hours in their quarters. She was restless, nervous, edgy and ill at ease. She tried to take a nap, but found it useless. Several times, she stepped into the bathroom to look at herself in the mirror, as though trying to check that she did indeed look like Hermione Granger. She wrung her watch nervously around her wrist. Breaking tradition, she took off her wedding ring and held it, trembling, to her lips despite the fact that it was not their anniversary. She re-read the runes on it, easily remembering the thoughts, hopes, and dreams she had imbued each one with.

Memories of younger days flooded her mind. The time they had been partnered up in Arithmancy and earned both their houses fifty points apiece, sneaking out to Diagon Alley for his birthday, the way he had kissed her the day of his graduation; all of them stuck out vividly. The way he worked to seduce her while she helped him make Spinner's End livable again, when she had still been asking herself if it was a good idea, and while he had already been irrevocably convinced that it was. And he had been right. He had been so, deliciously right…

The way he had tied her to the bed while she was four months pregnant, and caressed her with silken, almost worshipful touches. The exasperated way he had looked at her after finding out that she had given birth the very day after he had left for Hogwarts for the start of term. The manner in which he had always stood by her, wanted her, loved her, despite all the troubles they had gone through together…

The clock finally chimed to let her know that it was dinnertime. She put her ring back on and stood up with a determined air about her, taking in one last look at the sheepskin rug on the floor before she strode for the door. She Disillusioned herself, and made her way to the Seventh Floor. She stopped there, and then began to carefully retrace her steps, until she stopped at the very stairwell where she had tripped.

She leaned against the wall, pressing against it so that no one would bump into her in passing, and then waited.

Two hours later, the sound of pounding feet jolted her out of the bored stupor she had fallen into while whittling the time away. She finally saw herself hurtling down the corridor above, fiddling with the time-turner around her neck, not watching where she was going. She looked panic-stricken, and as she descended the stairs, Hermione watched her hands get caught in the chain, causing her to lose her balance. She tripped, and hit the bottom of the stairs—there was a vaguely familiar cracking sound—and then Hermione watched as Granger's body suddenly disappeared.

Hermione quickly removed her Disillusionment Charm, cast one last glance at the place where she fallen twenty seconds and twenty years ago, and ran back to Gryffindor Tower. She made it inside in time to find Neville there, panting and out of breath, looking scared.

"Hermione!" he said fearfully. "I made it here alright, but Harry—where's Harry?"

"I don't know," Hermione said, trying to look worried. She was too busy trying to adjust to the fact that she now had to deal with these people face to face again. In fact, it was a bit disorienting, but she rallied at once. "I expect he'll be all right. He should be here any moment—"

As she spoke, the portrait hole swung open again, and Ginny and Seamus both climbed in, followed a moment later by Dean, all of whom looked as though they had just run a race. They wore
expressions of mixed relief and edgy nervousness.

"Oy," Seamus muttered as he made his way through. "I almost got caught by one of those Slytherin blokes—what a nightmare—"

"Someone betrayed us, they had to," Dean said, still panting. "But we'll never know who, will we?"

"We'll know," Hermione told him sternly, "because whoever snitched is going to have their face jinxed full of boils to prove it."

"So we'll find out who it is sooner or later," Ginny said grimly. "But that doesn't tell us where Harry is."

They all exchanged glances at this, and then Neville said timidly, "Maybe he got caught?"

Hermione chewed her lower lip for a moment, and then straightened up and headed straight for the portrait hole.

"Where are you going?"

"To find out what's happened," Hermione said coolly.

"But if you get caught—"

"I can take care of myself, Dean."

The portrait hole swung shut behind her just as she heard him mutter in response, "Blimey, what's gotten into her?"

She Disillusioned herself out of habit and then made the decision to go to the Headmaster's office. Dumbledore would be there, and Hermione would be able to ask the portraits there if any of them had heard word about where Harry was. She fiddled with the third knob on her watch, and then there was a familiar yank behind her navel, and she spun away.

She landed in the Headmaster's office and opened her eyes in time to find herself no less than three feet away from the Minister of Magic. It took all her self-restraint to stop from letting out a strangled gasp of surprise, and she slowly moved back. Dumbledore was standing right behind her, as was Minerva, and when she twisted her head around, she saw them both staring at her. Dumbledore looked calm, and his eyes were twinkling ever so slightly; Minerva's lips, on the other hand, had pressed themselves into a thin white line.

Fawkes let out a faint, musical trill and fluttered on his perch, looking thoroughly curious.

Hermione quickly turned back around to find Kingsley eyeing her from where he stood by the door, making no indication that he actually knew she was there, but observing all the same. On the other side of the door was a man with short, wiry grey hair. He looked tough, in the same way that Mad-Eye Moody came off as intimidating, but he had obviously not seen her. This was perhaps helped by the fact that he had been picking his nose at the time, but—

Percy Weasley squinted at her for a moment, and then coughed. "You know, Minister, I think it's a bit warm in here. The fireplace…"

"Right you are, Weasley," Fudge said, leaning back on the balls of his feet. He had been squinting at her too, but had apparent dismissed her as a trick of the firelight. Sometimes, a bit of smoke and heat caused the air to shimmer hazily, and it was usually a sign that the fire needed to be lowered.
Dumbledore made no move to adjust the fire crackling merrily to the side. On the contrary, he smiled. "My apologies, Cornelius, but I'm a bit of an old man now, and find that unless I keep the room very warm, I tend to get a bit cold. You understand, of course."

"Yes, yes…" Fudge said dismissively, as the door to the office suddenly opened.

Hermione used the momentary distraction as an opportunity to quickly move to stand beside Kingsley, who still gave no indication that he had noticed, though she thought she saw his lips quirk slightly. Harry entered a moment later, looking grim, followed by Umbridge, who was looking revoltingly gleeful, like a smiling toad that had just captured a particularly juicy fly. Harry jerked himself free of her grasp, and stood there, looking defiant as Fudge turned to look at him. The way he glared at Harry, with a kind of vicious satisfaction, made Hermione want to kick him, but she restrained herself and simply stood there and watched. She was in enough trouble as it was. She had thought Dumbledore's office would be empty, but on the contrary—

"Well," Fudge said, giving Harry a bit of a nasty smile. "Well, well, well…"

Harry gave him a dirty look, and Umbridge hurried to give her side of the story.

"He was heading back to Gryffindor Tower," Umbridge said. Her voice was laced with excitement, with a slightly simpering edge to the callous way she had when announcing the capture of her prey. It was not at all unlike the way Hermione recalled her treating Trelawney when she had sacked her. "The Malfoy boy cornered him."

"Did he, did he?" Fudge said appreciatively. "I must remember to tell Lucius. Well, Potter… I expect you know why you are here?"

Hermione fully expected Harry to respond with a defiant, "Yes." His mouth had opened to form the words. But at the last second, he seemed to change his mind.

"Yeh—no."

"I beg your pardon?" Fudge said, looking incredulous.

"No," Harry repeated firmly.

"You don't know why you are here?"

"No, I don't," Harry said determinedly.

Fudge gave him a look of absolute disbelief intermingled with disgust, glanced at Umbridge for a moment, and then turned back to Harry.

"So you have no idea," he said, in a voice that was positively sagging with sarcasm, "why Professor Umbridge has brought you to this office? You are not aware that you have broken any school rules?"

"School rules?" Harry repeated, affecting a tone of blank surprise. "No."

"Or Ministry decrees?" Fudge added angrily.

"Not that I'm aware of," Harry said blandly.

Hermione watched with grim amusement as Fudge's face began to turn red. It was like watching someone fill him with boiling water. Any moment now, she would almost expect to see steam pouring out of his ears.
"So it's news to you, is it, that an illegal student organization has been discovered within this school?"

"Yes, it is," Harry said, his expression of innocent surprise baldly transparent.

"I think, Minister," Umbridge said sleekly, "we might make better progress if I fetch our informant."

"Yes, yes, do," Fudge said, nodding as he cast Dumbledore a scathing look. "There's nothing like a good witness, is there, Dumbledore?"

"Nothing at all, Cornelius," Dumbledore responded gravely. He inclined his head, and Hermione frowned as the portrait hanging opposite of where he was standing waved to her from behind the Minister's back. Hermione blinked, as she realized that he was mouthing something to her. Dumbledore was trying to signal her to do something through the portrait, but what—

At that moment, a curly-haired girl Hermione remembered as Marietta walked in, led by Umbridge's hand gripping her shoulder. She was hiding her face in her hands, and Hermione did not doubt why. Marietta was clearly the traitor, and the moment she spilled, it would be all over for Harry and everyone else unless… unless…

If she didn't know better, she would guess that the portrait was mouthing the words, "Memory charm, you blithering fool! Memory charm!"

At once, Hermione understood, and slowly retrieved her wand.

"Jolly good, jolly good," Fudge was saying heartily, as Umbridge explained their informant to him. "Like mother, like daughter, eh? Well, come on, now, dear, look up, don't be shy, let's hear what you've got to—galloping gargoyles!"

Hermione smiled in grim satisfaction as Marietta looked up long enough for Hermione to see the word "SNEAK" emblazoned across her face in close-set purple pustules that started from one cheek to the other, so that it was impossible not to see. Fudge stamped out the flames that had latched onto the hem of his robes, courtesy of jumping backwards into the fire in shock, and turned back to Umbridge, who was now trying to persuade the girl to ignore the spots and tell them what they wanted to know. But Marietta merely pressed her robes against her face, let out a muffled wail, and refused to speak.

"Oh, very well, you silly girl, I'll tell him," Umbridge snapped. She hitched her sickly smile back onto her face and said, "Well, Minister, Miss Edgecomb came to my office shortly after dinner this evening and told me she had something she wanted to tell me…"

Hermione shuffled slightly to the left so that the back of Dumbledore's head, along with his wizard hat, was not in her way. Marietta was facing away from her, but when Hermione moved left just a bit more, she could get a better shot—

Marietta shook her head again in negation when Fudge began to press her to answer, and took a step back, her eyes wide and fearful. Hermione let out a silent hiss of frustration. If she moved any further to the left, there was the possibility of the wiry-haired Auror catching sight of her in his peripheral vision.

"—you will remember, Minister, that I sent you a report back in October that Potter had met a number of fellow students in the Hog's Head in Hogsmeade—"

"And what is your evidence for that?" Minerva cut in.
"I have testimony from Willy Widdershins…"

Hermione bared her teeth in completely silent, invisible snarl of frustration. Willy Widdershins had been giving Arthur and his department a good deal of trouble with his regurgitating toilets, and to find now that he had managed to cut a deal with the Ministry—

"Blatant corruption!" roared the wizard who had been silently mouthing to Hermione earlier. "The Ministry did not cut deals with petty criminals in my day, no sir, they did not!"

"Thank you, Fortescue, that will due," Dumbledore said softly.

"The purpose of Potter's meeting with these students," continued Umbridge, with a nasty look at Fortescue, who merely sneered down his reddened nose at her in contempt, "was to persuade them to join an illegal society, whose aim was to learn spells and curses the Ministry has decided are inappropriate for school age——"

_Inappropriate, my ass_, Hermione thought mutinously.

"I think you'll find you're wrong there, Dolores," said Dumbledore quietly, peering at her over the half-moon spectacles now perched precariously on his crooked nose.

"Oho!" Fudge jumped in at once, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. "Yes, do let us hear the latest cock-and-bull story designed to pull Potter out of trouble! Willy Widdershins was lying, was he? Or was it Potter's identical twin in the Hog's Head that day? Or is there the usual simple explanation involving a reversal of time, a dead man coming back to life, and a couple of invisible dementors?"

Percy Weasley let out a hearty laugh.

"Oh, very good, Minister, very good!"

Hermione, who had been re-adjusting her aim toward Marietta once more, was sorely tempted to turn her wand on him and hex him instead. Percy had hurt Molly very badly, and though she and the Weasley matriarch did not always see eye to eye, they were good friends and comrades. Furthermore, Hermione could only dare to imagine how heart-wrenching it must have been for Molly, to have Percy practically disown his entire family.

Dumbledore, however, was smiling gently. "Cornelius, I do not deny—and nor, I am sure, does Harry— that he was in the Hog's Head that day, nor that he was trying to recruit students to a Defence Against the Dark Arts group. I am merely pointing out that Dolores is quite wrong to suggest that such a group was, at that time, illegal. If you remember, the Ministry Decree banning all student societies was not put into effect until two days after Harry's Hogsmeade meeting, so he was not breaking any rules at all in the Hog's Head."

Percy looked as though he had been struck in the face by something very heavy. Fudge remained motionless in mid-bounce, his mouth hanging open.

Umbridge recovered first.

"That's all very fine, Headmaster," she said, with that sickly sweet, toad-like smile of hers, "but we are now nearly six months on from the introduction of Educational Decree Number Twenty-four. If the first meeting was not illegal, all those that have happened since most certainly are."

"Well," said Dumbledore, surveying her with polite interest over the top of his interlocked fingers, "they certainly would be, if they had continued after the Decree came into effect. Do you have any
evidence that any such meetings continued?"

Mariette shifted slightly as she turned to look at him, and Hermione saw her chance. She flicked her wand subtly in the girl's direction, with a silent command of 'Obliviate!' and watched as her eyes turned oddly blank. Harry looked down, as though he had felt something brush past him, and then looked up again.

"Evidence?" Umbridge repeated, still smiling, although there was a slight tic of irritation to it now. "Have you not been listening, Dumbledore? Why do you think Miss Edgecombe is here?"

"Oh, can she tell us about six months' worth of meetings?"

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. Her spell had gone completely unnoticed by all except Dumbledore, and now that she had finally gotten the job done, he could stop dancing around the issue. He had been waiting for her, he knew, and now he could finally put this ridiculous conference to rest.

"Miss Edgecomb," Umbridge asked sweetly, her voice breaking into Hermione's thoughts as she turned to face Marietta, "tell us how long these meetings have been going on, dear. You can simply nod or shake your head, I'm sure that won't make the spots worse. Have they been happening regularly over the last six months? Just nod or shake your head, dear," she added coaxingly, as Marietta hesitated. "Come on, now, that won't activate the jinx further…"

Marietta peered blankly at the room over the top of her pulled-up robes, and then shook her head.

Hermione grinned as she saw Umbridge look quickly to Fudge, and then back to Marietta.

"I don't think you understood the question, did you, dear? I'm asking whether you've been going to these meetings for the past six months? You have, haven't you?"

Again, Marietta shook her head. Hermione's grin grew.

"What do you mean by shaking your head, dear?" Umbridge demanded testily.

"I would have thought her meaning was quite clear," Minerva interjected harshly, "there have been no secret meetings for the past six months. Is that correct, Miss Edgecombe?"

Marietta nodded.

"But there was a meeting tonight!" Umbridge said furiously. "There was a meeting, Miss Edgecombe, you told me about it, in the Room of Requirement! And Potter was the leader, was he not, Potter organized it, Potter—why are you shaking your head, girl?"

"Well, usually when a person shakes their head," Minerva said coldly, "they mean 'no'. So unless Miss Edgecombe is using a form of sign-language as yet unknown to humans—"

Umbridge seized the front of Marietta's robes, and almost by instinct, Hermione whipped her wand out again. She was a teacher of this school, first and foremost, and her priority was the students' safety. Umbridge was shaking Marietta, and Hermione would have hexed her but for the fact that Dumbledore had also risen to his feet, wand raised, and Kingsley had stepped forward. Umbridge leapt back from Marietta, waving her hand as though burned, and Hermione slowly lowered her wand.

"I cannot allow you to manhandle my students, Dolores," Dumbledore said. Hermione could not see his face, but for the first time, he sounded angry. Umbridge could put up her decrees all she liked,
sack teachers, and ensure her classroom taught the students absolutely nothing about defense—but she had crossed the line when she finally laid her hands on them.

"You want to calm yourself, Madam Umbridge," Kingsley said, his deep voice having a calming effect on them all. "You don't want to get yourself in trouble now."

"No," Umbridge said breathlessly, glancing up at Kingsley. "I mean, yes—you're right, Shacklebolt—I—I forgot myself."

Hermione gave her a smoldering glare that went unseen, and pocketed her wand. Traitor though Marietta was, Hermione now saw everything from very high up, from an adult's point of view, and in the grand scheme of things, this truly did not matter to her. Marietta had been facing pressure on many sides and caved in. Not that Hermione had any intention of undoing her jinx, but this outlook did cause her to be concerned about the curly-haired girl's welfare. But Marietta seemed to be all right for the most part, if a bit dazed and glassy-eyed.

"Dolores," Fudge said, with the air of someone trying to settle something once and for all, "the meeting tonight—the one we know definitely happened—"

Nice way to ignore the fact that your senior undersecretary just grabbed and started shaking a student, Hermione thought bitterly.

Umbridge pulled herself together.

"Yes," she said. "Yes… well, Miss Edgecombe tipped me off and I proceeded at once to the seventh floor, accompanied by certain trustworthy students, so as to catch those in the meeting red-handed. It appears that they were forewarned of my arrival, however, because when we reached the seventh floor they were running in every direction. It does not matter, however. I have all their names here, Miss Parkinson ran into the Room of Requirement for me to see if they had left anything behind. We needed evidence and the room provided…"

To Hermione's horror, she pulled out the list of names that Hermione had insisted everyone sign, and handed it to Fudge. She had no doubt that the room had provided the list to Umbridge, quite literally, and desperately wished she had thought—that her younger self had thought—to bring it with her…

"The moment I saw Potter's name on the list, I knew what we were dealing with," she said softly.

"Excellent," Fudge saw, a slow smile spreading across his face as he perused it. "Excellent, Dolores. And… by thunder…"

He looked up at Dumbledore, and held out the list to him.

"See what they've named themselves?" he asked quietly. "Dumbledore's Army."

Dumbledore took it from it, and gazed at the heading Hermione herself had scribbled out on it. She had the impression that he was doing some very quick thinking, and wondered if he suspected that this had been her idea…

"Well, the game is up," he said simply. "Would you like a written confession from me, Cornelius—or will a statement before these witnesses suffice?"

Hermione stared at him uncomprehendingly for a moment. She saw Minerva and Shacklebolt look at each other with identical looks of fear on their face, and she felt her stomach drop. Was this what it had come to? Was Dumbledore preparing to take the fall for Harry? But no—he couldn't—the Order needed him—Hogwarts needed him—it was the very reason she had gone back in time in the first
"Statement?" Fudge repeated slowly. "What—I don't—"

"Dumbledore's Army, Cornelius," Dumbledore said, waving the parchment in the Minister's face. He was smiling. "Not Potter's Army. Dumbledore's Army."

"But—but—"

Fudge, who had been remarkably slow on the uptake, suddenly understood. He took a horrified step backward, and then yelped as the hem of his robe once again caught fire.

"You?" he whispered, stamping on the edge of his smoldering, sputtering cloak.

"That's right?" Dumbledore responded pleasantly.

"You organized this?"

"I did," Dumbledore said happily.

"You recruited these students for—for your army?"

Hermione wanted to bury her face in her hands as Dumbledore once again responded in the affirmative.

"I see now that it was a mistake to invite Miss Edgecombe, of course."

Marietta nodded, although Hermione suspected that was more out of the confusion the Memory Charm had wrought on her than any actual agreement. Fudge looked from her to Dumbledore, and he seemed to inflate with realization.

"Then you have been plotting against me!" he yelled.

"That's right," the headmaster responded cheerfully.

"NO!" Harry shouted, stepping forward. He had finally cottoned on, and Minerva and Shacklebolt both gave him a look of warning, which he ignored. "No—Professor Dumbledore!"

"Be quiet, Harry, or I am afraid you will have to leave my office," Dumbledore told him calmly.

"Yes, shut up, Potter!" Fudge barked, who was still staring at Dumbledore with a kind of horrified delight. "Well, well, well—I came here tonight expecting to expel Potter and instead—"

"Instead, you get to arrest me," Dumbledore finished, still smiling. "It's like losing a knut and finding a galleon, isn't it?"

"Weasley!" cried Fudge, now positively quivering with delight. "Weasley, have you written it all down, everything he's said, his confession, have you got it?"

"Yes, sir, I think so, sir!"

"The bit about how he's been trying to build up an army against the Ministry, how he's been working to destabilize me?"

"Yes, sir, I've got it, yes!" Percy said, scanning his notes with such a look of indecent joy on his face that Hermione thought it ought to be fined.
"Very well, then," said Fudge, now radiant with glee, "duplicate your notes, Weasley, and send a copy to the Daily Prophet at once. If we send a fast owl we should make the morning edition!" Percy practically threw himself from the room, slamming the door behind him, and Fudge turned back to Dumbledore. "You will now be escorted back to the Ministry, where you will be formally charged, then sent to Azkaban to await trial!"

"Minerva," Hermione hissed, leaning forward into the Deputy Headmistress's ear. "Surely not…?"

Minerva responded with a slight jerk of her head, but she need not have answered.

"Ah," Dumbledore said gently, "yes. Yes, I thought we might hit that little snag."

"Snag?" said Fudge, his voice still vibrating with joy. "I see no snag, Dumbledore!"

"Well," said Dumbledore apologetically, "I'm afraid I do."

"Oh, really?"

"Well—it's just that you seem to be laboring under the delusion that I am going to—what is the phrase?—come quietly. I am afraid I am not going to come quietly at all, Cornelius. I have absolutely no intention of being sent to Azkaban. I could break out, of course," he added thoughtfully, "but what a waste of time, and frankly, I can think of a whole host of things I would rather be doing."

Fudge stared at Dumbledore with a very silly expression on his visage, as though the Headmaster had just smacked him on the face with his high-heeled boot, and he could not quite believe he had done it. He made a small spluttering noise, then turned to look at Kingsley and the man with short grey hair. The latter gave Fudge a reassuring nod and moved forward a little, his hand drifting almost casually toward his pocket.

_I idiot_, Hermione thought critically, looking at the man. If you were preparing to hex someone, or going to threaten to do so, it was smart to retrieve your wand as swiftly as possible. The grey-haired fool here was giving them all too much warning. Dumbledore, too, apparently thought so.

"Don't be silly, Dawlish," he told the other man kindly. "I'm sure you are an excellent Auror—I seem to remember that you achieved 'Outstanding' in all your NEWTs—but if you attempt to—er—bring me in by force, I will have to hurt you."

Dawlish blinked, looking exceedingly foolish, and turned to Fudge as though for reassurance on what he should do. It was like watching someone trying to train a very bewildered hunting dog, the trainer being equally incompetent.

"So," Fudge sneered, recovering himself, "you intend to take on Dawlish, Shacklebolt, Dolores, and myself single-handed, do you, Dumbledore?"

"Merlin's beard, no," Dumbledore said, still smiling. Hermione could tell his calm demeanor was only making the Minister's blood pressure run higher, and found herself smiling herself as he added, "Not unless you are foolish enough to force me to."

Hermione didn't kid herself. She knew Dumbledore was perfectly capable of taking them all on. If it were a choice between dueling Dumbledore and wrestling the giant squid, she would prefer to have a round with the squid.

"He will not be single-handed!" Minerva said, plunging her hand inside her robes for her wand.

"Oh yes he will, Minerva!" Dumbledore told her sharply, and he chanced a glance at Hermione from
over the Transfiguration teacher's shoulder, in silent signal for her to not interfere, either. Somehow, he seemed to have guessed that Hermione had once again pulled out her wand. "Hogwarts needs you!"

"Enough of this rubbish!" Fudge snapped, pulling out his own wand. "Dawlish! Shacklebolt! Take him!"

A streak of silver light flashed around the room; there was a bang like a gunshot and the floor trembled; Hermione ducked forward to grab the scruff of Harry's neck while Minerva grabbed Marietta's, and forced him down on the floor as a second silver flash went off. Several of the portraits yelled, Fawkes screeched, and a cloud of dust filled the air. Coughing, Hermione saw someone fall to the ground with a crash in front of her; there was a shriek and another crash, and she heard Umbridge scream, 'No!'; then there was the sound of breaking glass, frantically scuffling footsteps, a groan ... and silence.

Yep, Hermione thought with a sigh, as she quickly released Harry, and backed away quickly. And that's why if anyone asks, I'll definitely take Giant Squid instead.

Dust was still floating gently back down to the ground, and it was clearing up just enough for Hermione to see the kind of damage that had been wrought on the room. Dumbledore's desk had been overturned, with many of his odd spindly tables and silver instruments that rested atop of them on the floor in pieces. Fudge, Umbridge, Dawlish, and Kingsley all lay motionless on the floor. Fawkes had taken to the air, and was soaring in wide circles around the room, trilling softly.

A pair of high-heeled boots entered her clouded vision from where she knelt down on the floor, and Hermione quickly pulled away from the group, retreating before Harry could realize that it was not Minerva who had yanked him down, standing up and brushing her robes off as she turned to Dumbledore.

"Unfortunately, I had to hex Kingsley too, or it would have looked very suspicious," Dumbledore said in a low voice, addressing Minerva. He turned to look at Hermione, peering through the dust for signs of her, and she stepped forward into his view, still Disillusioned. "He was remarkably quick on the uptake, modifying Miss Edgecombe's memory like that while everyone was looking the other way—thank him for me, won't you, Minerva?

He could not thank her directly, not while Harry was in the room; but Hermione understood that what he really meant was to thank her, while also placing Harry's attention as to why Marietta had not given them up entirely on Kingsley. Hermione had been the one to perform it, after all, but she couldn't be given the credit. Nevertheless, she appreciated his sentiments.

"Now, they will all awake very soon and it will be best if they do not know that we had time to communicate—you must act as though no time has passed, as though they were merely knocked to the ground, they will not remember—"

"Where will you go, Dumbledore?" Minerva whispered. "Grimmauld Place?"

"Oh no," Dumbledore said with a grim smile, "I am not leaving to go into hiding. Fudge will soon wish he'd never dislodged me from Hogwarts, I promise you."

"Professor Dumbledore..." Harry began.

"Listen to me, Harry," he said urgently. "You must study Occlumency as hard as you can, do you understand me? Do everything Professor Snape tells you and practice it particularly every night before sleeping so that you can close your mind to bad dreams—you will understand why soon
enough, but you must promise me—"

Dawlish began to stir. Dumbledore grabbed Harry's wrist, jerking his attention from the waking Auror and back to him.

"Remember—close your mind—"

Hermione stepped over, and as Dawlish's eyes fluttered open, gave him a sharp kick to the head. It thumped back onto the rug, but no one else seemed to have noticed.

"—You will understand," Dumbledore whispered.

Fawkes swooped down toward Dumbledore, who released Harry, raised a hand, and grasped the Phoenix's long golden tail. There was a flash of fire, and the pair of them vanished.

"Where is he?" Fudge demanded, pushing himself up from the ground. "Where is he?"

"I don't know!" Kingsley shouted, also leaping to his feet.

"Well, he can't have Disapparated!" Umbridge cried, struggling to get to her stubby legs. "You can't inside this school—"

"The stairs!" Dawlish said, rubbing the back of his head as he got to his feet, and then flinging himself toward the door, wrenching it open. He disappeared, followed by Kingsley hot on his heels, and then Umbridge. Fudge got to his feet slowly, brushing dust from his front. There was a long, painful silence.

"Well, Minerva," Fudge said nastily, straightening his torn shirtsleeve, "I'm afraid this is the end of your friend Dumbledore."

"You think so, do you?" Minerva responded scornfully.

Fudge ignored her. He was staring around the wreckage of the room. Several of the portraits were hissing, and Hermione even saw one or two make rude hand gestures at him. The Minister seemed to pull himself together enough to not show that he was affronted.

"You'd better get those two off to bed," he said, with a dismissive nod at Harry and Marietta.

Minerva said nothing, but marched the two of them to the door.

"You know, Minister, I disagree with Dumbledore on many counts…" Phineas Nigellus said, as the door closed behind them. "But you cannot deny he's got style."

Hermione watched Fudge shake his head, retrieve his bowler hat, and then grab a pinch of Floo powder to return to the Ministry. Hermione watched him leave, and then after a moment, unmasked herself. Many of the portraits clapped when they saw her, and Hermione gave them all a faint smile as she moved about setting the room to rights again. Once it was orderly once more, she turned to look at the various portraits in the room.

"Minerva is the new Headmistress now, right?"

"Not necessarily," Phineas told her, his voice snide. "Dumbledore has hardly abdicated, and there's no doubt that those Ministry popinjays will put up another decree declaring otherwise."

"I figured as much," Hermione said with a sigh.
"Besides," Phineas added, glancing down at her contemptuously, "I believe he entrusted Hogwarts to you while he was away."

"I—what?" Hermione said, bewildered. "But that was three years ago!"

"Did he put a time-limit on it?" Phineas asked.

"Well—no—"

"Then it's still your job, I'm afraid. I suppose I should pity you—you won't even get a nice portrait out of it if you die in the line of duty," he added in a bored tone.

The other portraits immediately began to admonish him, but Hermione held up a hand to silence them. It was much to her surprise that they actually complied.

"I'm currently passing as a student now, which might make that a bit difficult, but I will certainly try," she told them calmly. She made her way toward the door, placing her hand on the knob. "First things first, of course—sealing off this office so that foul woman can't get back in here."

There were loud murmurs of agreement at this.

~o~O~o~

It was remarkable how quickly word spread through Hogwarts. By the next morning, every single student seemed to know that Dumbledore had overcome two Aurors, the High Inquisitor, the Minister of Magic, and his Junior assistance in his escape. It was the sole topic of conversation, and Hermione spent the better part of her day pretending that she knew no more about it than anyone else.

Given that Marietta Edgecombe was now in the hospital wing, everyone was stopping Harry at every opportunity to question him about what had happened last night. Ernie Macmillian was one of them, and he walked with them back up to the castle on the way from Herbology so that he could hear Harry's firsthand account.

"Dumbledore will be back before long," he said confidently. "They couldn't keep him away in our second year and they won't be able to do it this time. The Fat Friar told me…" he added, dropping his voice conspiratorially, so that Harry, Ron, and Hermione all had to lean in to listen, "…that Umbridge tried to get back into his office last night after they'd searched the castle and grounds for him. Couldn't get past the gargoyle. The Head's office has sealed itself against her." He smirked. "Apparently, she had a right little tantrum…"

Hermione was glad that she had the forethought to ensure that Umbridge would not be in Dumbledore's office, rifling through his things, and stood up a bit straighter as they ascended the stairs into the entrance hall.

"Oh, I expect she really fancied herself sitting up there in the Head's office," she said viciously. "Lording it over all the other teachers, the stupid puffed-up, power-crazy old—"

"Now, do you really want to finish that sentence, Granger?"

Draco Malfoy appeared from behind the door, followed by his two brainless bodyguards, his face positively glowing with malice.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to dock a few points from Gryffindor and Hufflepuff," he drawled.
Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but Ernie got there first. "You can't dock points from fellow prefects, Malfoy."

"I know prefects can't dock points from each other," Malfoy sneered. "But members of the Inquisitorial Squad—"

"The what?" Hermione interrupted sharply.

"The Inquisitorial Squad, Granger," Malfoy said smugly, pointing to a tiny silver I pinned just beneath his prefect's badge. "A select group of students who are supportive of the Ministry of Magic, handpicked by Professor Umbridge. Anyway, members of the Inquisitorial Squad do have the power to dock points…"

Hermione stared at him in an expression of stony horror as he proceeded to dock points from the lot of them. Ron pulled out his wand, prepared to hex him when he docked her ten for being a Mudblood, but Hermione gripped his arm.

"Don't!" she hissed.

"Wise move, Granger," breathed Malfoy. "New Head, new times… Be good now, Potty… Weasel King…"

He strode away, laughing, with Crabbe and Goyle at his side.

"He was bluffing," Ernie said, looking absolutely appalled. "He can't be allowed to dock points… that would be ridiculous… It would completely undermine the prefect system…"

But Hermione turned around to look at the giant hourglasses hanging on the wall behind them, watching as red rubies flew upwards. Gryffindor was almost out of points. It was shocking, to say the least.

"Noticed, have you?" Fred asked, coming up from behind them.

Hermione whipped around in time to see the twins striding toward them, having just come down the marble staircases.

"Malfoy just docked us all about fifty points," Harry said furiously.

"Yeah, Montague tried to do us during break," George said airily.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him, but it was Ron who asked, "What do you mean, 'tried'?"

"He never managed to get all the words out," said Fred with a grin, "due to the fact that we forced him headfirst into that Vanishing Cabinet on the first floor."

"But you'll get into terrible trouble!" Hermione said, trying to look shocked. Frankly, she wasn't, but the application of a few acting skills here were necessary.

"Not until Montague reappears, and that could take weeks, I dunno where we sent him," Fred responded coolly. "Anyway… we've decided we don't care about getting into trouble anymore."

"Have you ever?" Hermione asked, raising an eyebrow at them.

"Course we have," George said in their defense. "Never been expelled, have we?"

"We've always known where to draw the line," Fred agreed.
"We might have put a toe across it occasionally."

"But we've always stopped short of causing real mayhem."

"And now?" Hermione pressed.

"Well, now—" George began.

"—what with Dumbledore gone—"

"—we reckon a bit of mayhem—"

"—is exactly what our dear new Head deserves," finished Fred.

"You mustn't!" Hermione whispered. If they went through with this, they were almost guaranteed to be expelled, and she could not possibly imagine how Molly would handle that, in addition to the fiasco that was Percy. "You really mustn't! She'd love a reason to expel you!"

"You don't get it, Hermione, do you?" Fred said, smiling. "We don't care about staying anymore. We'd walk out right now if we weren't determined to do our bit for Dumbledore first. So, anyway," he checked his watch, "phase one is about to begin. I'd get in the Great Hall for lunch, if I were you, that way the teachers will see you can't have had anything to do with it."

"Anything to do with what?" Hermione asked anxiously.

"You'll see," said George. "Run along, now."

Fred and George turned away and disappeared into the growing crowd that was now making its way toward the Great Hall for lunch. Looking highly disconcerted, Ernie muttered something about unfinished Transfiguration homework and scurried away.

"I think we should get out of here, you know," Hermione said nervously. "Just in case..."

They made their way to lunch, but they had not gone more than a couple steps when Harry whipped around and then jumped back when he saw the caretaker tapping on his shoulder.

"The Headmistress would like to see you, Potter," he leered.

"I didn't do it," Harry responded automatically. Filch chuckled nastily.

"Guilty conscience, eh?" he wheezed. "Follow me…"

Harry glanced back at the two of them, and then left with the old caretaker.

Hermione glanced back at Ron, thinking quickly. "I'm going to go to the library—I've got Arithmancy homework..."

"Yeah, alright," Ron said, glancing up the stone steps where Harry and Filch had disappeared before turning away.

Hermione quickly flew up the stairs, following Harry and Filch. She stopped when they passed by the Weasley twins, who had hastily hidden themselves behind a tapestry. They saw her, and quickly ducked back again.

"What are you two doing?" Hermione demanded, slipping behind the tapestry with them, which led to another, lesser-known corridor.
"I thought we told you to run along?" George said, glancing over at her.

It was only then that Hermione realized that several enormous crates of what appeared to be fireworks were stacked along the corridor. All of them read *Weasleys Wizard Wheezes* and had various subheadings like *Basic Blaze*, *Deflagration Deluxe*, and *Premium Poppers*. They quickly tried to hide it, but Hermione merely placed her hands on her hips.

"You're doing this one floor underneath Umbridge's office?"

"Maximum impact," Fred said, with a nod. He gave her a look. "You're not going to turn us in, are you?"

Hermione deliberated for a single moment, and then shook her head. She strode over toward one of the boxes, opened it, and read the package. And then she turned to look back at the twins, a wicked smile crossing her face.

"For Umbridge, you say?"

"Yep," said George.

"I'll help you," Hermione said, pulling out her wand. "Tell me what to do."

The twins stared at her with looks of utter disbelief on their face, and then they grinned in unison.

"Well, look at that," George said. "Our Hermione's got potential after all."

"I always knew she had it in her," Fred said, with a sanctimonious little nod.

Five minutes later, Hermione was helping to lay out the last of the fireworks along the corridor, while Fred and George kept lookout on either end of the corridor. She gave George, who was at the far end of the corridor leading toward Umbridge's office, a thumbs up before running for the tapestry, followed shortly by Fred. A moment later, the sound of about fifty different fireworks hissing in warning permeated the air, and the first explosion went off just in time for George to duck behind the tapestry. They covered their ears, and a moment later, the entire corridor shook violently as the fireworks went off in quick succession.

"You're not to tell another soul about this!" Hermione yelled above the din, as they crouched down.

"Right you are, Hermione!" Fred shouted cheerfully. The sound of the fireworks going off ceased slightly, just enough for them to remove their hands, and they peered through the tapestry. Green-and-gold dragons soared and boomed through the corridor, emitting loud fiery blasts and bangs as they went. Shocking-pink Catherine wheels whizzed through the air like lethal, five-foot Frisbees. Rockets ricocheted off the walls, leaving trails of silver stairs exploding in their wake, and sparklers were writing swearwords in mid-air. Firecrackers were being pooped out by the dragons, hitting the ground before letting off their own enormous bangs.

"Brilliant," Hermione breathed, grinning. "Bloody brilliant!"

She gasped and pulled away as she saw Umbridge and Filch appear, and quickly scrambled to escape.

"Thanks for helping!" Fred called to her retreating back.

She made it through the corridor, up the stairs, down another corridor and several flights of marble staircases, and managed to make her way back to the entrance hall in time for the other students to
start leaving for their next class. The explosions were audible throughout the entire school, and
students had frozen in mid-step to better listen to the ominous booms. Moments later, an enormous
dragon burst through one of the doors, followed by a pair of Catherine wheels, which began
careening around the staircases.

Pandemonium reigned. Some of the students stood there to watch and laugh, others screamed and
tried to get away as quickly as possible, knocking into their fellows in their hurry. More fireworks
followed the first three, bursting out through other doors and filling the entrance hall. Hermione
cought a distant glimpse of the word, "Bollocks" being written in bright red as she was shunted out
the door.

The fireworks continued to spread, burn, and gain momentum in the school throughout the entire
day. None of the teachers seemed particularly bothered. They would send a student along to inform
the Headmistress that they had an escaped firework, a cursing sparkler, or a rogue rocket that needed
taking care of, and all of them acted as though they could not possibly be expected to get rid of them
on their own.

Hermione was heading down for Potions that afternoon, the first opportunity she’d had to see her
husband, and as the students filed in, a sparkler whizzed in after them, just before the door slammed
shut. It crackled around the room for a full minute, determinedly writing out a series of inappropriate
words, and Severus angrily slammed his book down and yanked the door open. The sparkler flew
through it, as though it knew that it had worn out its welcome, and then he banged the door shut.

"Get to work!" he snarled at the students, who all jumped and immediately began following the
instructions that had been written on the board.

Hermione caught his eye, grinning as she bent down to light a fire underneath her cauldron.

"Granger!" Severus snapped, jolting her up again as the sound of sharp bangs echoed through the
dungeon corridor outside. "Go fetch our new Headmistress and tell her to get rid of the damn
things!"

"But sir," Hermione said, keeping her face perfectly straight, "my potion—"

"I've no doubt that you could brew it from memory alone, if the regurgitative quality of your essay is
anything to go by," he hissed. "Five points from Gryffindor for dawdling. It will be another five if
you don't get moving."

The Slytherins sniggered. Hermione quickly dropped her things, banked the fire she had just started
underneath her cauldron, and left the room. Outside, it was pure chaos, and she had to duck to
narrowly avoid having a dragon drop several firecrackers right on top of her. She made it up the
stairs in time to find Umbridge attempting to get rid of a rocket, six sparklers, and two dragons in her
classroom. She was covered head to foot in soot, and her pink cardigan was no longer pink but a
charred black.

"What do you want?" she snarled, as Hermione peered through the open door to her classroom.

"Professor Snape asked me to tell you that there are some fireworks down in the dungeons that need
taking care of," Hermione told her pleasantly.

"He can't get rid of them himself?" Umbridge asked, red in the face as she aimed her wand at one of
the dragons, which had just tried to dive-bomb her.

"Well, he's teaching class, and the teachers are all under the impression that it's your job—"
The rest of Hermione's words were drowned out as Umbridge let out a little scream and threw herself sideways as one of the rockets smashed into the floor where she had been standing. The students were all hiding under their desks, some wearing grins as they watched their Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher struggle.

Hermione took the momentary distraction as an opportunity to duck away from the door and head back the way she had come, whistling to herself as she left.

The final bell rang moments before she entered the classroom, and she stepped to the side to let the other students pass by first. Malfoy was the last to leave, and he gave her a nasty grin as he strode past her.

"Five points from Gryffindor for missing class, Granger," he crowed. Crabbe and Goyle laughed sycophantically at this.

"Go stuff yourself, Malfoy," Hermione responded easily, as she stalked past him to enter the classroom.

"Five points for rudeness!" he called to her over his shoulder as he disappeared down the corridor.

Hermione watched his retreating back, hesitated, and then whipped out her wand and pointed it at him. A moment later, there was a yelp of surprise, and she quickly slipped back inside the classroom and shut the door behind her. She was about to retrieve her things from her desk when there was an audible click as the door locked itself. Strong hands pressed her up against the wall, and she felt her lips being plundered ruthlessly before her brain finally caught up to the fact that Severus was, indeed, very pleased to see her.

"I thought we couldn't do this anymore," she said breathlessly, when he pulled away.

He let go of her suddenly, as though burned. She saw his jaw tighten as he moved away. He looked perilously close to snarling, but when he spoke, his voice was controlled. "We can't."

For some reason, that felt like a slap in the face to her. She bit her lower lip. That was really brilliant of you, Hermione. Now she was desperately wishing she had kept her mouth shut, but the damage was already done. He stalked over to his desk to retrieve the essays he had collected earlier, gesturing for her to grab her things, and then they left with hardly another word to each other.

They parted as they left the dungeons, Hermione casting him a wistful, apologetic glance at him that he seemed to ignore before she made her way back to Gryffindor tower.

Fred and George were heroes that night in the Gryffindor common room. True to their word, they did not mention a word of Hermione's involvement, and everyone was congratulating them. Even Hermione fought through the crowd to speak to them.

"They were wonderful fireworks," she told them, with a knowing smile.

"Thanks," George said, looking both surprised and pleased.

Hermione returned to the table, where she and her two best friends were sitting. They were staring at their schoolbags as though they were hoping their homework might hop out of it and start doing itself.

"Oh, why don't we have a night off?" she asked, glancing at her bookbag and trying to sound chipper about the whole thing. A silver-tailed Weasley rocket zoomed past the window. "After all, the Easter holidays start on Friday, we'll have plenty of time then…"
"Hermione, are you feeling alright?" Ron asked, looking at her with a mixture of disbelief and alarm.

Hermione grinned at him. "Now that you mention it…"

When she finally managed to make her way upstairs, she was grateful to find that her dorm was empty. Lavender and Parvati were clearly still downstairs celebrating. She got undressed for bed, and for the first time in nearly ten years, had to remember to pull on a pair of pajamas before climbing in. She pulled the hanging around her shut, laid back, and tried to get some sleep.

But sleep was impossible with the noise the fireworks were making. Regardless, Hermione was still having difficulty being able to fall asleep. Last night, she had been too tired, her mind too busy with whirling thoughts to pay much attention to it, but now she was sleeping alone. She was used to having Severus at her side, used to using his shoulder as a pillow, and it was extremely hard for her to not jump or startle at every odd noise that was made in the night. Sleeping with her husband had always given her a sense of comfort—no, scratch that, just being around Severus had always given her a sense of strong sense of security. Without him, she was actually a bit wary of falling asleep.

She punched her pillow and tossed for a while, until the pillow was too flat and shapeless to even be remotely helpful, and her body was too worked up to relax. She tried to think of something calming or, barring that, something that would at least be a bit of a comfort to her. Her mind instantly flew to Severus—the way he used to sneak up on her at Spinner's End and ambush her with his arms around her waist and his lips on her neck. The way his hand would drift down to her crotch, while his lips plundered hers—the very same way he had done so in the dungeons today, in fact…

Unthinkingly, her fingers slipped underneath her pajamas and pressed against her slit. He had wanted her—he had wanted her still…

Thoughts of her husband spurred her fingers into motion, and she rubbed herself into a frenzy. At one point, when even her fingers were not enough to fulfill the fantasies in her mind, she grabbed her shapeless and beaten pillow, and ground herself against it, imagining for a moment that it was Severus leaning over her, driving himself into her…

Minutes later, she flopped down on the bed, sweaty and smelling of sex, with one thought going through her mind: whatever the necessity was for keeping up appearances, she was not going to hold up this way for long.

~o~O~o~

She was thankful that it was Friday. Classes went through rather swiftly for her, and Hermione managed to recuperate a total of fifty points back into the Gryffindor hour glass by the end of the day. She spent the evening in the library, getting all of her assignments done in a quiet venue, and had finished and left. She was heading for Gryffindor Tower when she passed Severus, and he held out a hand to stop her.

He checked the corridor, and then leaned over to very quietly hiss into her ear between clenched teeth, "We need to talk."

Hermione did not say a word, but gave a subtle nod and continued walking. He strode away, robes billowing behind him, and Hermione dropped her things off in her dorm before she snuck down toward the dungeons. She opened the door to his office slipped inside. A quarter of an hour later, he was there as well. The door locked shut behind him, and before she could say anything, he pointed a finger at the pensieve sitting at his desk.

"Potter," he spat.
"What happened?" Hermione asked, taking a seat and crossing her legs. Surely—surely whatever Harry had done this time was not so bad as to garner this reaction from her husband…

But apparently, it was. "Draco interrupted our Occlumency lesson to inform me that Montague had been located and that my assistance was needed. I left Potter here while I went to deal with the situation." He inhaled deeply, nostrils flaring with rage. "When I returned, I found him still here, sticking his nose into my memories."

Hermione stared at him in disbelief. "No."

"Yes," Severus said viciously.

"What memories?" Hermione asked, a bit too sharply.

Severus made a sound like an angry snake. "Two. The first was the night you came after me in the tunnel leading to the Shrieking Shack, after Black tricked me into going. That," he said, narrowing his eyes angrily at her, "was out of consideration for you. Because you care so much for Potter that you don't want him to see what his godfather was really like back in school, and it's one less memory of you that he might have glimpsed from my mind, were he to reverse my Legilimency again."

Hermione waved that aside. "That doesn't matter—did he recognize me?"

"He asked me if I knew his godmother," Severus sneered.

"So he knows it's me," Hermione breathed. She quickly amended, "I mean, he doesn't know that it's me, Hermione Granger, but he knows—he probably knows it was his godmother."

"And the second," Severus said, with the air of getting the worst over, "was at the end of my fifth year. When Black and Potter hung me upside-down in front of the lake. "His expression twisted in a rictus of pain. "When I called Lily a Mudblood."

Hermione winced. "Shite."

"I threw him out after that," Severus said in a low voice.

"No!" Hermione said, jumping to her feet at once. "You can't!"

"I can and will!" he snarled. "He has neither the aptitude nor the interest in mastering Occlumency, and he is a bloody menace! I am through."

"Severus," Hermione said, her voice shaking slightly. "I'm not requesting that you not stop his Occlumency lessons. I am telling you, right now, as your handler, that you will continue them."

She saw Severus's knuckles whiten, heard his teeth grind together as he deliberated whether to obey or not. There was a long moment of tense, painful silence, and then he bowed his head.

"If Potter returns the first Monday following Easter break at seven and asks me to continue giving him lessons, I will," he said bitterly. "You, however, will have to be the one to convince him."

There was a pause, and then Severus added, very quietly, "Albus stopped by Headquarters yesterday. He… did not look happy. He wishes to speak with you."

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "Why? What happened?"

"I don't know."
"Did he find out that I helped Fred and George set off the fireworks?"

"I said I—pardon me?" Severus gave her a look of consternation. "You helped?"

Hermione tried not to look guilty, but given that she had just confessed, it was rather pointless. Severus drummed his fingers against his desk thoughtfully, and then shook his head.

"You had better get back to Gryffindor tower," he muttered, and straightened up. "Tomorrow, I will be paying Headquarters a visit—you will accompany me for that. The headmaster will be there."

"What time?" Hermione asked. "What will be my excuse?"

"Right after dinner. Come up with whatever excuse you can find."

"All right." Hermione paused, but didn't leave. After a moment, she came around the other side of the desk, and wrapped her arms around him.

He breathed in sharply. "Hermione—"

"I miss you," she told him simply, kissing him on the cheek before heading toward the door. "I just wanted you to know that. And," she added quietly, "I know we can't do much together while I'm disguised as a student, but... if I can find a time during the Easter hols to drop by our quarters, or perhaps while we're at Grimmauld Place..."

Severus understood. His arms came around her, pulling her tightly to him, and they stood there quietly for a moment, before reluctantly pulling apart.

"I'll see you tomorrow evening," she told him, heading for the door.

When she returned to Gryffindor Tower, it was to find Harry and Ron playing a game of Wizard Chess before dinner. They greeted her when they saw her, but it was clear that her absence had not been much noticed. Hermione's memories of them were a bit fuzzy after a twenty-year absence, so she had almost forgotten how used the boys were to her disappearing at random times, usually to take a quick nip down to the library.

Dinnertime arrived and Hermione, trying to at least pretend to be a part of the herd again, followed them as they all traipsed down to the Great Hall.

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Please Review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Thirty-One

I give thanks to many things, but here, I will send some out to my amazing beta...

And to all you wonderful readers and reviewers. ^-^

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review.

"But why haven't you got Occlumency lessons anymore?" Hermione asked, frowning. She had spent the last ten minutes trying to wheedle what had happened in the dungeons out of Harry so that she could get him to go back—perhaps even with an apology—and ask for lessons to be continued. "It just doesn't—"

"I've told you," Harry muttered, "Snape reckons I can carry on by myself now I've got the basics."

What rubbish, Hermione thought angrily. Furthermore, it angered her that Harry was lying to her face about it. He was lying his fool arse off, and if she did not know the full situation, he probably could have fooled her about it too. That was, if she had not been sent back in time and gotten to know Severus well enough to say with confidence that barring the situation that had gotten Harry thrown out in the first place, he would not have stopped the lessons until he was certain Harry could handle himself.

She tried another tactic.

"So you've stopped having funny dreams?" she asked skeptically.

"Pretty much," Harry said, refusing to look at her.

"Well, I don't think Snape should stop until you're absolutely sure you can control them!" she said indignantly. "Harry, I think you should go back to him and ask—"

"No," Harry said forcefully. "Just drop it, Hermione, okay?"

Hermione ground her teeth together in frustration. "Harry, learning Occlumency is your most important focus now, because it's what's keeping Voldemort out of your head. Why can't you stuff your pride long enough to ask Professor Snape to make sure—"

"Look, d'you think I liked having those lessons?" Harry asked, rounding on her. "It's not like I had fun with him digging through my head, and if he says I've got the basics, then I don't need—"

"And do you really think 'basics' will keep out the most dangerous wizard of our time?" Hermione snapped. "He has access to your head, Harry. I don't know if you've realized what that means, but it means that until you've mastered Occlumency as a whole—not just the basics—you're a danger to yourself and your friends!"

Harry slammed down Defensive Magical Theory on the table and turned to look at her, eyes blazing.

"You act like you know what it's like to have someone inside your head, but you don't!" he shouted. "You sound like I should be having a grand old time, with the Greasy Git ransacking my mind—"
"I don't expect it to be fun, I expect you to buck up and think about someone besides yourself!" Hermione said coolly. "As long as you're connected to the Dark Lord, you're in more danger than anyone else—and people around you are at risk, as well!" Harry glared at her mutinously, and she snarled, "Think of Ginny! When Voldemort was possessing her, she attacked several people—"

"I'm not possessed!"

"If you continue to have those dreams—"

"I'm not!"

"If that were true," Hermione said, shaking with barely-suppressed rage, "then why did Ron tell me you were muttering in your sleep again?"

Harry turned to glare angrily at Ron, who held up his hands in self-defense. "She asked, mate."

He turned to look back at Hermione.

"Just because I was muttering in my sleep doesn't mean it was because I was having funny dreams," he said quietly.

"Oh yes," Hermione said, throwing her hands up into the air, her voice filled with a kind of hysterical sarcasm, "you have a long history of muttering in your sleep before the link between you and Voldemort became an issue! Of course! So blindingly obvious—how could I not see it?"

Harry turned away without answering and picked up his book, flipping it open as though to check something up on the index. Frustrated beyond description, Hermione tapped the schedules, color-coding them, and then thrust them into each boy's hand. Crookshanks, who had been trying to get Harry to pet him, slunk away to hide under one of the armchairs, looking decided annoyed.

Harry glanced down at his schedule, and then said, in a calmer voice, "I'm not going back to Snape to ask if he'll continue giving me lessons, Hermione. I've got the basics. I can practice on my own."

Hermione glared at him, made a clicking noise with her tongue to lure Crookshanks out, and then left the tower with her cat at her heels.

"Hey!" Ron said, calling after her as he looked up from his schedule. "You gave me an evening off every week!"

"That's for Quidditch practice," she snapped over her shoulder.

The portrait door slammed shut.

"Blimey, Harry," Ron said, shaking his head. "Y'know, maybe she does have a point. I mean, I know it's with Snape and all, but she's right on several things…"

"Lessons with Snape always made the dreams worse," Harry muttered.

"Yeah, I s'pose you're right," Ron said, still looking at the portrait hole where Hermione had disappeared through. "But still…"

"Just drop it, Ron."

"But those evenings off every week for practice… what's the point?" Ron said dejectedly. "We've got about as much chance of winning the Quidditch Cup this year as Dad's got of becoming Minister of Magic… say," he added, turning to glance at Harry, "have you talked to Cho?"
"Yeah…"

~o~O~o~

When Hermione saw Dumbledore that evening, the first thing she registered was that he looked angry. He did not smile when she entered the kitchen of Grimmauld Place, and cold fire had replaced the usual twinkling in his eyes. He gestured for her to take a seat at the table, and then folded his hands on top of it.

"It has come to my attention that you have been enabling Sirius to leave Grimmauld Place," he said shortly.

For a moment, Hermione's brain froze. She did not know what to say. Her first thought was how Dumbledore had found that out, but he seemed to guess at what was going through her head, for he answered immediately.

"I happened to be paying Tine Cottage a visit when I chanced to see the two of them outside."

"Was Sirius sitting on the side of the mailbox closest to the cottage?" Hermione asked carefully. "Because if he was, that meant he was under the protection of the Fidelius Charm—he wouldn't have been in any danger."

"I appreciate that you took measures to increase security on Tine Cottage, and laid down effective ground rules, but the fact that you allowed Sirius to leave Grimmauld Place—against my explicit orders to the contrary—"

"You can't keep a man locked up in house arrest forever," Hermione said, trying to keep her voice from shaking. Dumbledore was not yelling, but his calm, infuriated demeanor frightened her. It was obvious to anyone who was looking that he was very angry. "Sirius isn't made for sitting inside twiddling his thumbs. You've seen what happens—he gets moody, depressed—it makes him ill, sir. I gave—I gave him an opportunity to get fresh air, once a week, and always under my supervision until… until now."

Dumbledore eyed her calmly. "Did you ever let him venture beyond the reach of the boundaries of the Fidelius Charm?"

Hermione swallowed. "I would shave his fur, charm it white, and transfigure other parts of his body before he crossed, sir. And he was always in his Animagus form—and I never let him out of my sight."

"Nevertheless, Hermione, you let him leave the protection of Grimmauld Place, and even the secondary protection placed on Tine Cottage," Dumbledore said quietly. There was disappointment in his voice. "You've broken my trust in you, by going behind my back and endangering the Order."

Hermione clenched her fists, and strove to remain calm. "Sir, I think you have a rather unreasonable perspective on the matter."

"Oh?" Dumbledore said, his tone surprisingly mild. "Do tell."

"Well, sir, you have a habit of treating people like chess pieces. I don't mean that as an insult, but I do mean to say that you sometimes seem to forget that there are other—other things that need to be looked at," Hermione said bravely. "Like I said, Sirius needed fresh air. He was going stir-crazy. And I always kept him behind the Fidelius Charm unless I specifically altered his appearance. And even when I wasn't there, I made certain that Sirius understood that he was not go beyond the boundaries I had set for him."
"And what if Sirius had left those boundaries?" Dumbledore asked her quietly. "You know he has a tendency to be hot-headed and reckless."

"I placed my trust in him to not step beyond those boundaries," Hermione said firmly. "And I placed my trust in you not to do so, either."

"Sirius has not betrayed my trust," Hermione said carefully, a frisson of fear still running through her. "I would never do anything to endanger the Order, Professor, but I think you overlooked some crucial aspects of the plan when you consigned Sirius to remain at Headquarters. I actually think that in trying to keep Headquarters as secure as possible, you've endangered it by restricting its principal occupant."

Dumbledore steepled his fingertips, his expression thoughtful. He was still angry, but he seemed to be giving her words some careful consideration. Hermione sat there silently, praying with every fiber of her being that she could come out of this with her skin—and the headmaster's trust—intact.

Hermione valued the faith Dumbledore had in her, and she had the sense that she had violated it greatly by helping Sirius.

Yet, she stood solidly by her actions. She had taken a series of safety precautions that, if properly followed, meant that Sirius was in no danger of being exposed. It was clear to her that had she not taken it upon herself to help him, Sirius would be a basket-case by now, someone they could neither handle nor work with. Instead, right now, he was someone the Order could rely on to pass messages along to other members when they stopped by, someone who they could discuss plans and ideas with. Instead of being constantly locked up with Buckbeak, he was in the center of their operations, helping wherever he could. And in his spare time, he ensured that Selenius was well looked-after when Hermione and Severus were unable to do it themselves.

Finally, Dumbledore spoke.

"I do not wish for Sirius to leave Grimmauld Place until term has been concluded," he said, quiet but firm. "That includes your son. This is not intended as punishment for him, but I think it is safe to say that he should not be out alone, and without Sirius or yourself to supervise him, he has no alternatives."

Hermione nodded slowly.

"Afterwards, we shall discuss different arrangements for Sirius. Ones that may possibly be less restrictive than what I initially laid out."

That seemed fair enough to Hermione. "That would be most agreeable, sir."

Dumbledore then sat up in his chair, with a sigh.

"I believe you are right in saying that I made a mistake in regards to Sirius," he said, slowly getting to his feet, "and I understand that had you brought the topic up with me—in fact, I recall that you have brought it up with me," he amended, "and I flat-out refused to allow him to visit Tine Cottage." He gazed at her seriously for a moment. "I only wish that things had been done differently."

"As do I, Headmaster," Hermione said, sighing in relief.

For the first time since their conversation began, Dumbledore smiled.

"And now, as it is a holiday, I expect that your family is in the other room waiting for you."
Hermione could not help but brighten at the prospect. "Most likely. Thank you, sir."

As she turned to leave, Dumbledore asked after her, "How are Harry's Occlumency lessons progressing?"

"Very badly, sir," Hermione called to him, as she shut the door behind her.

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Given that Harry was still angry at her and that Ron was still moping about Quidditch, neither of them really seemed to notice or care about Hermione's absence for the rest of the night. She had an uninterrupted, enjoyable evening with her husband and son, and when Selenius's bedtime rolled around, it left Hermione and Severus with time alone for each other. This they spent in their quarters, after making their excuses to leave Headquarters (Sirius gave her a kind of forced, painful smile as though he were having difficulty swallowing something), and it was the kind of evening where the world around them became meaningless and diminished.

In the sanctuary of their quarters, Voldemort did not exist. The fact that Hermione was quite literally undercover as a student was meaningless. The issues with Harry, Ron, the Order, and even Selenius were simply placed aside, left hanging on the armchair with their clothes, and ignored for the time being.

But all good things had to come to an end, and Hermione left their quarters that night, feeling physically whole, but mentally ragged. She was used to settling down with Severus at night, not leaving him for another bed—an empty bed in a room Hermione shared with other girls. She slipped inside late that night, unnoticed, and crawled into bed.

She fell asleep to the sound of Lavender's soft, whistling snore.

Harry seemed rather depressed over the next few days, and Hermione took every opportunity available to her to try and convince him to resume Occlumency lessons. It was vitally important that he do so, and though it caused a strain in their friendship, Hermione was relentless. This seemed to give Harry the perfect reason to try and avoid her, much to her frustration, though Hermione had to admit that she knew exactly why.

Eventually, seeing that continuing to press the subject in that direction would not work, she began urging him to at least practice on his own, because it was abundantly clear to her that he was not. It occurred to her that perhaps he even enjoyed having those dreams, and it disturbed her, particularly since she knew that they had to stop. She didn't want to lose her godson because he was being too stubborn to try and protect himself properly.

Hermione saw very little of Severus over the holidays. Mostly because she was spending her time with the boys, and also because she and Severus both knew very well that they both had jobs to do. Hermione's job was to keep an eye on Harry, to ensure his safety and protection while Dumbledore could not, and Severus's was to maintain his position among the Death Eaters. Every two or three days, however, they would bump into each other in the library—in the very corner between bookshelves that had serviced them with privacy in the past—and she would bring her notebook so that he could update it with his latest report.

Toward the end of the holidays, a notice went up on the board in Gryffindor Tower:

**Career Advice**

**All fifth years will be required to attend a short meeting with their Head of House during the**
first week of the Summer term, in which they will be given the opportunity to discuss their future careers. Times of individual appointments are listed below.

Hermione looked at the list to find that she was expected in Minerva's office at one the following Tuesday, and would result in her missing History of Magic. Normally, she would be rather upset at this, but the alternative would have been to miss Potions or Arithmancy. She cheered herself up with the fact that she had already taken the class twenty years ago, and given the fact that Binns never changed his lesson plan, it was not as though she were missing anything new.

She had not given much thought about what she wanted to do for a career. It was not that it hadn't come up, but that she had not been able to give it a serious mind when there was so much else going on in her life. She had always considered a spot in the Department of Mysteries—she had the right kind of mind to be a researcher for them, but the nagging thought that she did not want to find herself working for the Ministry kept her from taking the idea seriously. She had done private research of her own while she was in hiding from the world, which would serve her well if she chose to join the private sector, but the only place she could possibly flourish in that would be if she took up Charms work. She was perfectly capable of developing her own spells, rather creatively if she said so herself, and modifying already existing ones—it was not so different from the knack Severus had with Potions.

She had taught Defense Against the Dark Arts before, and though she had been an efficient and capable teacher, it was not her true calling. She had excelled in it the way she excelled in all else that she did: with sheer determination and a will, as well as the intelligence to do it correctly. But it was not her passion. Teaching was not her passion. It was not Severus's passion, either. It was a job they were both required to do in order to achieve a larger means. It was not unlike the way Hermione had taken what amounted to a mind-numbing job at the Three Broomsticks to try and keep money from becoming too tight. Working as a barmaid had its charms, and there were a few moments that Hermione always recalled fondly, but it was not what she wanted to do with her life.

Life after Hogwarts—after this war was concluded—would be very different from the life Hermione and her husband had been forced to lead for the past fifteen years. New opportunities would be available for them, and they could start anew in something they both truly liked. Hermione loved Hogwarts, and she would protect the students as a part of her duty to the school and her own conscience, but she did not want to remain tied to the school for the rest of her life.

And then there was Selenius to think about. In a few years' time, he would be a student here. What would it be like for him to have to deal with at least one parent who taught there? Undoubtedly, he would be picked on—or at the very least, treated differently—for it, and Hermione did not want herself or Severus to be the underlying cause of that. Hogwarts was also no place to raise a child, in Hermione's opinion. Thus, it would be best if once Voldemort was dealt with, she and Severus left to build a fresh start for themselves, and let Selenius begin his magical schooling on the same level as his fellows.

Her own classmates, however, had a much lighter attitude toward the whole thing.

"Well, I don't fancy Healing," Ron said on the last evening of the holidays, tossing aside a pamphlet that bore the crossed bone-and-wand emblem of St. Mungo's. "It says here you need at least an E at NEWT level in Potions, Herbology, Transfiguration, Charms, and Defense Against the Dark Arts. I mean… blimey… Don't want much, do they?"

"Well, it's a very responsible job, isn't it?" Hermione prodded. "You would have to really apply yourself."
"Well, yeah, but being around sick people all day…" he picked up a bright pink-and-orange leaflet that was boldly headed, 'so you think you'd like to work in muggle relations'? "Look at this, you don't need much to liaise with Muggles. All they want is an OWL in Muggle Studies… here—'much more important is your enthusiasm, patience, and good sense of fun!'"

"You'd need more than a good sense of fun to liaise with my uncle," Harry said darkly. "Good sense of when to duck, more like…"

They flipped through the many papers littering the table, reading portions out loud and having a good laugh over them for several minutes, until Ginny, Fred, and George came up behind them. Fred leaned down to whisper into Harry's ear; Hermione only heard the latter part of his words, but it was enough to have her bolting upright.

"What?" she asked sharply.

"Yeah…" Harry said, trying to sound casual, "yeah, I thought I'd like—"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, looking at him as though she could not believe her eyes—or her ears, for that matter. "With Umbridge groping around in the fires and frisking all the owls?"

"Well, we think we can find a way around that," George said, smiling and stretching his arms with a slight yawn. "It's a simple matter of causing a diversion. Now, you might have noticed that we have been rather quiet on the mayhem front during the Easter holidays?"

"What was the point, we asked ourselves, of disrupting leisure time?" continued Fred, giving Hermione a wink. "No point at all, we answered ourselves. And of course, we'd have messed up people's studying too, which would be the very last thing we'd want to do."

He gave her a sanctimonious little nod, and Hermione raised an eyebrow in response, rather taken a bit aback by this thoughtfulness. Perhaps that was their way of repaying her for the volunteer work she had done for them with their fireworks.

"But it's business as usual from tomorrow," Fred continued briskly. "And if we're going to be causing a bit of an uproar, why not do it so that Harry can have his chat with Sirius?"

"Yes, but still," Hermione said, exasperatedly, "even if you do cause a diversion, how is Harry supposed to talk to him?"

"Umbridge's office," Harry said quietly.

Hermione gaped at him. "Are—you—insane?" she asked, her voice hushed.

"I don't think so," Harry said with a shrug.

"And how are you going to get in there in the first place?" Hermione demanded.

"Sirius's knife," he said quietly.

"Excuse me?"

"Christmas before last Sirius gave me a knife that'll open any lock," Harry said, his expression thoughtful.

Sirius had given Harry a knife? Aside from the dagger she always carried on the inside of her leg, she had not been aware of the fact that Sirius had been handing out weapons. Forget
Harry; she would need to have a talk with Sirius sometime soon.

"So even if she's bewitched the door so Alohomora wouldn't work, which I bet she has—"

"What do you think about this?" Hermione said, rounding on Ron, who had lowered a leaflet singing the praises of the cultivated fungus trade and job market to watch their discussion warily. She was counting on him to back her up, although it was a slim hope— even if Harry wouldn't listen to her, he might listen to Ron—

"I dunno," Ron said, and he looked slightly alarmed at being asked to give an opinion. "If Harry wants to do it, it's up to him, isn't it?"

"Spoken like a true friend and Weasley," Fred said, clapping Ron hard on the back. "Right, then. We're thinking of doing it tomorrow, just after lessons, because it should cause maximum impact if everybody's in the corridors…"

But Hermione wasn't listening. She was instead wondering furiously how she was going to dissuade Harry from going through with such a foolhardy plan. He was his own worst enemy right now, and the last thing he needed was to get himself expelled.

~o~O~o~

First thing the next morning, Hermione cornered the Weasley twins just before breakfast, blocking them on their way down for breakfast.

"If Harry gets expelled because of this, it will be your fault!" she hissed angrily at them, trying to keep her voice down.

"Look," George said, "Harry needs to talk to Sirius—"

"There is a very distinct difference between need and want," Hermione said icily, "and right now, I don't think Harry can tell the difference. This is just plain irresponsible! It's all fine and well if you're planning on leaving the school in a blaze of glory—because at this point, there's no stopping you, and I know you both too well to think that you haven't been preparing for this for ages—" Fred and George exchanged glances with each other at this "—but I can't let you drag Harry into this! Umbridge will be looking for any excuse to have him expelled, and even if the two of you don't care anymore—"

"Hermione—"

"You're way off base—"

"We're not trying to get Harry expelled—"

"You're doing a fairly good job of it!" Hermione snapped.

"Look," Fred said, "if you want to make sure Harry doesn't get caught, help us."

"Help you?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. We'll be setting off a diversion in the east wing, which will draw Umbridge away for a while—twenty minutes, at the least—"

"But there's no guarantee that Harry will be done with his little chat before then," Fred said seriously. "If you can keep an eye out on the corridor just before Umbridge's office, and try to delay her if
Harry isn't done before she gets back…"

"Give him some warning, you mean," Hermione said, cottoning on.

"By Forge, I think she's got it."

"Gred, you mean."

Hermione nodded slowly, a look of resignation slowly crossing over her face as she considered this option. Harry desperately wanted to talk to Sirius, though it was not strictly necessary to do so, but perhaps if they succeeded now, Harry might have whatever answers he needed, and let it go. Perhaps he would then spend more time staying out of trouble, if she relented just this once.

"Fine," she said coolly. "I'll do as you suggested. But don't think I won't try to change Harry's mind, either."

"You know," George said slowly, "you've changed a lot, Hermione. A year before now, you wouldn't have even considered this."

"Yeah, you would have gone running off to Mum."

"Or McGonagall."

Hermione gave them both the stony, expressionless appearance that she had mastered over the last twenty years.

"I'm not interested in getting the two of you in trouble," she told them, her voice barely audible. "I'm interested in stopping you from getting other people in trouble. I just think it's wrong of you to enable Harry to do something that could potentially get him expelled—especially given the fact that we have an enormous threat knocking on our doors from the outside."

The two of them had the grace to look slightly abashed.

"I will talk to Harry, and you can go through with your diversion," Hermione said, turning away to leave. "If I cannot dissuade him, at the very least, I will try to stop him from getting caught. But I think the two of you at least ought to reconsider the difference between following the rules because they keep order, and following the rules because they're meant to stop people from getting hurt."

She went down to breakfast, and began her campaign of appealing to Harry to not go through with the plan. He finally slammed his bacon down and turned to look at her, thoroughly fed up after twenty minutes of her stating her case.

"Can't I eat without you nagging me half to death?"

Hermione pursed her lips together, considering his request, and then turned away to refill her glass of pumpkin juice. Once they were out of the Great Hall, however, she started right back up again. She was determined to get Harry to give up, even if only by the virtue of him getting so fed up with listening that he relented if it meant shutting her up. Harry, however, held out, all throughout their classes.

She was still whispering dire warnings rapidly into his ear as they arrived to Potions. Neither Harry nor Ron were speaking to her at that point, but she was undeterred. Several times, Severus looked up from the book he was reading to frown at her, but he said nothing; Seamus wasted five minutes checking his cauldron for leaks, and she rather suspected it might be her fault, such was the steady stream of her hissing into Harry's ears.
Severus seemed to be acting as though he did not see Harry, as though the person Hermione was whispering dire warnings to frantically under her breath was simply invisible. But when Harry had taken up his sample of Invigoration Draught, and Hermione had cleaned up, she saw Severus subtly knock his elbow aside just enough—

She stared at him as she watched the potion crash to the floor. Malfoy let out a whoop of laughter, and Severus was surveying Harry with a look of gloating pleasure.

"Whoops," he said softly. "Another zero, then, Potter…"

If Hermione had not known better, she might have thought it was an accident. But there was no doubt in her mind that it was not an accident, and that Severus had deliberately knocked it over. But she did not have time to react to this; Harry was stalking over to his cauldron to try and fill another flask, and she had already cleaned it up——

She clapped her hands over her mouth as she saw Harry's burning look of horror and anger fixate itself first on his empty cauldron, and then on her. He did not answer, but instead grabbed his bag, and was the first one out of the dungeons when the bell rang. Hermione turned to throw Severus a dirty look—on top of having set back her campaign to get Harry back into Occlumency lessons, he had just ruined almost any chance she had of deterring him from breaking into Umbridge's office—and then left for lunch.

It was no use, however. Harry was now making a concentrated effort to avoid her. He saw between Seamus and Neville and lunch just to get away with it. Hermione knew her efforts were futile and fruitless, and she wanted to scream: getting Harry to do something he didn't want to do was like trying to herd a cat into going to the vet's. Rage-inducing insanity.

Harry and Ron left for Divination after lunch, and Hermione dithered for a moment, before making the difficult decision to skive off Arithmancy. Aurora Sinistra knew she was a teacher and not really a student, and given the top marks she had made in her class almost two decades ago, she would not be concerned about Hermione falling behind on the material. All the teachers were aware of Hermione's special circumstances, which meant that if she were absent from a class, they were automatically to assume it was because Hermione needed an opportunity to move about the school undetected.

She made her way toward the east wing, where she found Fred and George kneeling quietly on the floor, whispering to each other as they laid out what looked like swamp-colored boxes. They turned around in alarm when they saw her, but relaxed marginally when they recognized who it was.

"You're not in class?" George asked, looking at her in amazement.

"You're not either," Hermione responded curtly.

"Fair point. We used one of our Skiving Snackboxes," Fred said, rubbing his hands together. "But why are you here?"

"Hermione," George said urgently, getting to his feet. For the first time, he was looking genuinely worried. "You should be in class. I know you helped us with the fireworks, and I know you want to make sure Harry gets his chat with Sirius all right if you can't dissuade him, but—"

"I've got everything under control," Hermione said, holding up a hand to silence him.

Fred and George exchanged dubious looks, and then turned to look back at her.

"So…" Fred prompted.
"What are you doing here?"

"When classes let out, Umbridge is going to zero in on you the minute you start setting off whatever those things are," Hermione said, gesturing at the boxes on the floor. She would have nudged them with her foot to indicate so, but common sense told her that if they were another crate of fireworks, that would not be a very intelligent thing to do. "She'll cut your antics short."

"So you're offering to take these and spread them around the school as a diversion to our diversion?" George said, raising an eyebrow. "Doesn't that mean you'll probably get caught, to?"

"No," Hermione said, smiling. She pulled out her wand. "I was going to suggest placing a Protean Charm on them all, and then placing them at strategic points around the school—"

"So that if we send one off, they'll all go off!" Fred said, looking as though Christmas had come early. "Bloody brilliant! She won't know where to begin!"

Fifteen minutes later, Hermione was carrying an armful of Portable Swamp Boxes, and making short stops along the way from the east wing to the Entrance Hall to drop a package here and there.

She made her way toward the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom once she had emptied her inventory of joke items, where she was currently supposed to be, had she chosen to attend class. Disillusioning herself with the ease of someone who was used to doing it out of pure habit, she began to wait. An hour and a half ticked by with agonizing slowness, and the bell rang. Students left their classrooms and moments later, unmistakable yells and screams reverberated through the corridors. Umbridge came sprinting from her classroom, running as fast as her stubby legs would carry her, and Hermione saw Harry watch her go, dithering at the doorway for a moment before pelting off in the direction of Umbridge's office.

Hermione followed, staying ten feet behind him at all times, and watched as he stopped in front of Umbridge's door and pulled out the odd-looking knife Harry told her Sirius had given him. He pulled on his invisibility cloak, and a moment later, there was a tiny click, and the door swung open. It shut quickly behind him, and Hermione pressed her ear against the door to listen, twisting the handle and opening it just a crack to let more sound through.

"Number Twelve, Grimmauld Place!"

A moment later— "Sirius?"

Remus's voice floated through instead.

"...Yeah, I just wondered—I mean, I just fancied a—a chat with Sirius."

Remus's voice murmured through the door, and then there was silence again. Two or three minutes later, however, Sirius's voice broke through. "Are you all right? Do you need help?"

"No," Harry said, "it's nothing like that... I just wanted to talk about my dad... and...my godmother..."

And he proceeded to relay to them exactly what he had seen in the pensieve, starting with the first memory.

"It was dark, and I couldn't see very well, because we were in the tunnel under the Shrieking Shack..."

"I caught a glimpse of her face, though I didn't hear her name because she grabbed his hair... or
smacked him, I think; it was hard to tell…"

An audible snort of amusement from the other side of the connection was Harry's only interruption.

"It's just… I know Snape's always said my dad was the one who rescued him, but you were the one who set up the prank. Only it wasn't much of a prank, was it? I mean," Harry pressed on, and Hermione heard something akin to anguish in his voice, "he almost—I mean, if my godmother hadn't been there to stop him, he would have been killed… and I don't remember the tunnel to the Shrieking Shack ever being that small, either. And where was my dad in all of this?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Sirius spoke.

"When we were in school, Snape and I hated each other," he said. "I thought it would be fun to give him a bit of a scare, it didn't even occur to me that he might get close enough for Remus to possibly reach him. I was young and stupid—it doesn't excuse my actions, and when I think back on such memories, I shudder at how idiotic I was, how close I came to actually getting Snape killed.

"When James found out about what I had done, he was livid. But he also figured that it was too late for him to go and try and reason with Snape. He would already be halfway-through by the time he got there, and Snape was more likely to do just the opposite of whatever James told him to do… plus, James was bigger than Her—much bigger than her, I mean, which would make it harder for him to get through. So he snuck into the Girls' dormitory and woke her up, told her what I had done, and sent her to stop Snape."

"But why would he listen to her?" Harry pressed.

"Your godmother and Snape were pretty close in school," Sirius said carefully. "She was practically Peter's replacement, so she hung out with us quite a bit, but if there was anything she and Snape had in common, it was the fact that they were both frighteningly intelligent. Very clever. There probably wasn't anyone else in the school who could have matched either of them the way they did each other—they were interested in the same subjects, and she never had a problem with standing up to him. I think he liked that he couldn't intimidate her. They got along.

"Of course," he added, "they'd only known each other for a few months when this happened, so they just barely knew each other—but whatever she saw in him didn't matter as much as what he saw in her. He respected her. So of course, he'd listen to her—although I never imagined that it would involve that much hair-pulling," he added, as a humorous afterthought.

Harry seemed to be thinking this over for a moment, and then said, "If she was friends with Snape—and she knew that you were the one who set him up—then why did she remain friends with you?"

"I admit, for a long time, she was furious with me," Sirius confessed. "The minute they were out of danger, and she saw me, she slapped me across the face and proceeded to tell me what a colossal idiot I was. Our friendship repaired itself after I was able to prove that I'd grown up and that my swollen head had been cut down to size."

"And even after my dad sent her to save him, Snape still hated him?"

"Well, things were more complicated than that. Snape always believed that James was in on the joke, and only ran to get her to save his own skin—and because he was too afraid to stop him himself."

"Rubbish!" Harry said forcefully.

"I know that, but Snape believes what he wants," Sirius said. "As for the tunnel being smaller, it didn't become bigger until it almost caved in a couple years back. Dumbledore fixed it, I think, just
before Remus took his teaching position there."

"And the second memory..." Harry took a moment to recount what he had seen after the memory of the Shrieking Shack. When he had finished, Sirius said quietly, "I wouldn't want you to judge your father on what you saw there, Harry. He was only fifteen—"

"I'm fifteen!" Harry said heatedly.

"Look, Harry, what happened there was a year before the Shrieking Shack. You can already tell that there's a big difference between the James who hung Snape upside down for fun, and the James who did everything he could to try and stop him from being killed because of my stupidity," Sirius said bluntly. "James and Snape hated each other from the moment they set eyes on each other..."

The creaking of one of the suits of armor nearby momentarily drowned out what he said, but Hermione stretched to hear more, and was able to make out the rest of his words. "...James was everything Snape wanted to be—he was popular, had loads of friends, he was good at Quidditch, good at pretty much everything. And at that point, Snape was pretty much alone and friendless."

"My godmother wasn't there yet?"

"Your godmother didn't arrive until a year later, Harry. Snape was just this little oddball who was up to his eyes in the Dark Arts and James—whatever else he may have appeared to you, Harry—always hated the Dark Arts."

"Yeah," Harry said, "but he just attacked Snape for no good reason just because—well, just because you said you were bored," he finished with a slightly apologetic note in his voice.

"I'm not proud of it," Sirius said quickly.

"Look, Harry," Remus interjected. "What you've got to understand is that your father and Sirius were the best in school at whatever they did—everyone thought they were the height of cool—if they sometimes go a bit carried away—"

"If we were sometimes arrogant little berks, you mean," Sirius said, with a laugh.

The armor creaked again, and Hermione sat back on her haunches, thinking. She had never seen the memory where James had tormented Severus by hoisting him up into the air, but she knew it was one that burned in the back of her husband's mind with shame on several levels. Both because he had been publicly humiliated—James had removed his pants in front of a group of onlookers, the only thing most wizards in those days wore under their robes—and because of what he had said to Lily.

"Even Snape?" Harry asked, his voice floating through the door. Hermione pressed against it to hear better.

"Well," Lupin said slowly, "Snape was a special case. I mean, he never lost an opportunity to curse James, so you couldn't really expect James to take that lying down, could you?"

"Drove your godmother nuts," Sirius said fondly.

"And my mum was okay with that?"

Hermione's memories of trying to convince Sirius and James to stop compulsively attacking Severus were fraught with exasperation, not fondness, but of course Sirius would find it almost funny years after the fact.
"Look," Sirius said, "your father was the best friend I ever had, and he was a good person. A lot of people are idiots at the age of fifteen. He grew out of it."

"Yeah, okay," Harry said, and there was a note of heaviness in his tone, as he added, "I just never thought I'd feel sorry for Snape."

"Now you mention it," Lupin said, a faint note of worry in his tone, "how did Snape react when you found you'd seen all that?"

"He told me he'd never teach me Occlumency again," Harry said indifferently, "like that's a big disappoint—"

Wrong thing to say, Harry, Hermione thought happily as Sirius and Remus immediately set into him, their voices clashing among the sound of the crackling fire. That's right, you two, lay it on thick—thick enough to get it through his head, that is. Even if he won't listen to me, he might listen to you…

"Harry, there is nothing as important as you learning Occlumency!" Lupin's voice snapped through the air, his tone stern. "Do you understand me? Nothing!"

"Okay, okay," Harry said, sounding thoroughly discomposed, and then a moment later, disappointed and annoyed. "You sound just like Hermione… since she found out, she hasn't stopped nagging me to go back and ask…"

There was a moment of silence, where Hermione could only assume that Sirius and Remus were exchanging silent glances with each other, and then Remus said very quietly, "Hermione is right, Harry. You ought to listen to her more often. Go back and ask Snape to continue your Occlumency lessons—apologize to him for invading his privacy, but you must continue them. Do you understand?"

Hermione suddenly heard distant footsteps. She quickly stood up, and tapped her foot on the floor to get Harry's attention.

"I'll… I'll try and say something to him," Harry muttered doubtfully. "But it won't be…"

He trailed off. The footsteps were getting louder. Hermione tapped again, a quiet rapping sound that gave the impression that someone was approaching. "Is that Kreacher coming downstairs?"

"No, it must be somebody on your end…"

"I'd better go!"

There was a jerky pause and then Hermione heard the sound of Harry cough ash as he pulled out of the fireplace.

"Quickly, quickly," Filch wheezed, rounding the corner and shuffling right past Hermione, a look of incandescent glee on his face. "Ah, she left it open…"

Hermione pressed herself against the wall. She could hear Filch muttering excitedly to himself, but as there was no exclamation of 'Ah-hah!' it was safe to assume that the creaky old caretaker had not spotted Harry. The sounds of him riffling through Umbridge's desk echoed in Hermione's ears for several moments, and then the door open and Filch limped out, hobbling along the corridor faster than Hermione had ever seen him go.

A moment later, the door shut, and Hermione listened to the sound of Harry's footsteps echoing away. She followed him. One landing from Umbridge's office, he tugged off the Invisibility Cloak,
stowing it away in his bag and hurrying down toward the entrance hall where Hermione could detect a great deal of shouting and indescribable pandemonium coming from. She became visible just as they descended the marble staircase, and stopped beside Harry to take in the sight before them.

What appeared to be the entire school was assembled, standing along the wall in a great ring. Teachers and ghosts were present. The Inquisitorial Squad were all looking exceptionally pleased with themselves, despite the fact that some of them had an odd, gooey substance clinging to their hair and the sides of their faces that Hermione very much believed to be stinksap. Even Peeves was there, floating overhead, gazing down upon Fred and George, who stood in the middle of the floor with the unmistakable look of two people who had just been cornered.

"So!" Umbridge said triumphantly, and Hermione was pleased to realize that her pink cardigan—a new one, undoubtedly, since the last wardrobe-full of them had been incinerated by the Twins' fireworks—was stained with stinksap as well. "So… you think it amusing to turn school corridors into swamps, do you?"

"Pretty amusing, yeah," Fred said, looking up at her without the slightest sign of fear. Hermione and Harry were standing several steps above Umbridge, and Fred's eyes landed on her with a big of a mischievous smile.

Filch elbowed his way through to Umbridge, carrying a familiar-looking form, and almost crying with relief.

"I've got the form, Headmistress. I've got the form and I've got the whips waiting… oh, let me do it now…"

"Whips?" Hermione thought with a jolt of visceral horror. Filch was being given approval for whipping?

"Very good, Argus," Umbridge said. "You two," she went on, gazing down at the twins with her beady, toad-like eyes, "are about to learn what happens to wrongdoers in my school."

"You know what?" Fred said cheerfully. "I don't think we are."

He turned to face his twin.

"George," Fred said seriously, "I think we've outgrown full-time education."

"Yeah, I've been feeling that way myself," George responded lightly.

"Time to test our talents in the real world, d'you reckon?"

Dawning comprehension sunk into Hermione's mind, and she stared at them, a grin slowly spreading across her face.

"Definitely," George said.

Both of them raised their wands high into the air in unison, and shouted, "Accio Brooms!"

A loud crash made itself known in the distance, and she and Harry ducked just in time to avoid being conked on the head with the iron peg and chain still dangling from the pair of broomsticks that were hurtling toward the twins. They stopped abruptly in front of their owners, the chain clattering loudly on the floor.

"We won't be seeing you," Fred said, as he swung a leg over his broomstick.
"Yeah, don't bother to keep in touch," George commented, as he climbed onto his own.

Fred looked around at the assembled students, a grin slowly spreading across his face.

"If anyone fancies buying a Portable Swamp, as demonstrated earlier, come to number ninety-three, Diagon Alley—Weasleys Wizard Wheezes," he announced, and then declared triumphantly, "our new premises!"

"Special discount to Hogwarts students who swear they're going to use our products to get rid of this old bat," George added, pointing the finger at Umbridge.

"STOP THEM!" Umbridge shrieked, finally realizing what was about to happen, but her words were useless; Fred and George shot upward into the air, narrowly avoiding the Inquisitorial Squad, and knocking one of them on the side of the head with the end of the chain. They rose fifteen feet, and then Fred turned to look at Peeves, who was still bobbing above the crowd.

"Give her hell from us, Peeves."

And Peeves, who Hermione had never seen take orders from a student in her life, swept his belled hat from his head and sprang into a salute, bowing as low as he could go. The crowd—teachers, students, and ghosts alike—broke into tumultuous applause as Fred and George sped out through the open front door. Hermione scurried down toward the bottom of the stairs for a better look, and she saw them fly above the courtyard, over the lake, and disappear into the glorious sunset sinking below to Hogsmeade.

And she cheered.

~o~O~o~

"Should we say something?" Hermione asked in a worried voice one morning, pressing her cheek against the Charms window so that she could see Mr. and Mrs. Montague marching inside, looking rather angry. "'Course not, he'll recover," Ron said indifferently.

"Anyway, more trouble for Umbridge, isn't it?" Harry said, sounding very satisfied.

Hermione watched them tap the teacups they were supposed to be charming with their wands, and sighed as the legs on Ron's quivered and then snapped underneath its own weight. She repaired the cup when it cracked in two, and then turned back to them.

"That's all very well, but what if Montague's permanently injured?"

"Who cares?" Ron said irritably, as his teacup attempted to stand up again. "Montague shouldn't have tried to take all those points from Gryffindor, should've he? If you want to worry about anyone, Hermione, worry about me!"

"You?" Hermione asked, bewildered. "Why should I worry about you?"

"When Mum's next letter finally gets through Umbridge's screening process," Ron said bitterly, "I'm going to be in deep trouble, I wouldn't be surprised if she's sent a Howler again."

"But—"

"It'll be my fault Fred and George left, you wait," Ron continued darkly. "She'll say I should've
stopped them leaving, I should've grabbed the ends of their brooms and hung on or something…
Yeah, it'll be all my fault…"

"Well, if she does say that, it'll be very unfair," Hermione said supportively. "You couldn't have
done anything. But I'm sure she won't. I mean, if it's really true they've got premises in Diagon Alley
now, they must have been planning this for ages…"

"Yeah, but that's another thing, how did they get the premises?" He smacked his teacup with his
wand again, hitting it so hard that its twiggy legs collapsed underneath it again, and it lay there,
twitching feebly. "It's a bit dodgy, isn't it…"

Hermione bit her lower lip thoughtfully. It was true that rent in Diagon Alley was expensive, and last
she knew, the Weasleys were not all that rich. They couldn't possibly have gotten start-up money
from their parents, not to mention that they would not have been at all supportive of the venture to
begin with. It did, indeed, beg the question of how the two had acquired enough gold to make their
products, pay for ingredients, and rent premises in the most populated street in Wizarding London.
Perhaps Mundungus had convinced the two of them to start selling stolen goods…

She must have asked the out loud, for Harry answered shortly, "He hasn't."

"How do you know?"

"Because—" Harry paused, and then came right out with it. "Because they got the gold from me. I
gave them my Triwizard winnings last June."

Hermione and Ron stared at him in shocked silence, which was broken only by the sound of her
teacup jogging off the desk, making a leap for freedom, and promptly crashing to the floor.

"Oh, Harry, you didn't!"

Harry's response was a mutinous one, but Ron looked decidedly pleased and relieved, and declared
he would be writing to his mum before she could send a Howler to him first. Hermione said nothing
more about giving his winnings away all throughout the lesson—in truth, she was neither all that
surprised nor disappointed. She could only imagine how Harry had felt about the idea of walking
away with a thousand galleons that he had planned to split with Cedric Diggory. The more she
thought about it, the more it made sense, and by the time the lesson had ended, her mind was already
on other, more important things.

"It's no good nagging me, it's done," Harry said firmly, when she opened her mouth to speak. "Fred
and George have got the gold—spent a good bit of it too, by the sounds of it—and I can't get it back
from them and I don't want to. So save your breath, Hermione."

"I wasn't going to say anything about Fred and George!" Hermione said indignantly.

Ron snorted disbelievingly, and Hermione threw him a very dirty look.

"No, I wasn't!" she snapped, anger getting the better of her. "As a matter of fact, I was going to ask
Harry when he's going to go back to Snape and ask for Occlumency lessons again!"

The look on Harry's face was a despairing one. It was depressing to see him deflate so quickly.

"You can't tell me you've stopped having funny dreams," Hermione continued urgently, "because
Ron told me last night you were muttering in your sleep again…"
Harry threw Ron a furious look that all but wrote a confession on his face. It was quite obvious to her that he was neither practicing nor capable of Occlumency.

"You were only muttering a bit," Ron mumbled apologetically. "Something about 'just a bit farther.'"

"I dreamed I was watching you lot play Quidditch," Harry said. "I was trying to get you to stretch out a bit further to grab the Quaffle."

Hermione knew he was lying.

She had tried everything with him. Absolutely everything. And if Harry wasn't going to go on his own…

"Look," Hermione said, anger seething dangerously into her words. She was completely out of patience now. "If you don't go back to ask Snape yourself by this afternoon… Harry… I will drag you down there myself."

Harry gave her an odd, disturbed look. "No," he said flatly.

"Harry, you have got to learn Occlumency, and it's obvious you haven't even been bothering to practice!" Hermione cried. "I let it alone for a bit because I thought perhaps you might do better at figuring out how to do it if you practiced on your own, worked it out in your own time, but you're obviously either too lazy or unmotivated to do it yourself!"

"I'm not lazy," Harry said vindictively. "Snape always made it worse, and anyway, how do you know if those dreams aren't useful? They saved Mr. Weasley!"

Hermione's hands balled up at her sides. "Harry, why do you think learning Occlumency is so unimportant when Sirius, Remus, Dumbledore—when everyone who knows about these lessons is constantly urging you to practice?"

"I dunno—they don't want me to learn what's in the Department of Mysteries…"

"That's not it," Hermione said quietly. "Those dreams create a link between you and Voldemort. Blocking them out is what keeps Voldemort out of your head. If you keep obsessing over those dreams, you're only inviting Voldemort to get inside your mind and manipulate you—"

Harry tried to interrupt her, but Ron got there first.

"You know, Harry, she might have a point," he said seriously. "When you told us about Dad being attacked, you said it was as though you were watching the snake… but that doesn't make sense," he said, brows furrowing. "I mean, I know you said it like from above, but the way you described it attacking dad… wasn't it like you were the snake?"

Whatever color that was in Harry's face drained immediately. Ron had hit on the mark, but he didn't seem to notice. Expression thoughtful, he continued, "And that would make sense, because if you were in V-Voldemort's mind," he said, stuttering slightly over the name, "and Vol… if he were possessing the snake, then that would mean he could do the same. To you, I mean."

Harry looked as though he had just taken a sledgehammer across the face.

"Which means that if you keep up—keep up that connection you've got between the two of you, he could get to you, mate," Ron said slowly. "But if you use Occlumency and block him out of your mind, stop seeing those funny dreams—"
Hermione had never been so grateful for Ron as she was now. She could have thrown her arms around him and hugged him for this. There were times when he was a colossal, oblivious idiot, but he was not entirely stupid: he was a logical chess player, and there were some things his mind turned sharp on, things he grasped with frightening agility. And on something as important as this, having him work everything out aloud to Harry meant that perhaps—just perhaps—Harry might listen to him.

Hermione's mind was whirling. Classes were over for the day. If she could recruit Ron, he could help her drag Harry down to see Severus, catch him right after class, and schedule Harry's next Occlumency lesson.

Harry was shaking, but whether from anger or fear, Hermione couldn't tell. "No," he said.

"Harry—"

"If I hadn't seen Mr. Weasley being attacked—"

"Harry—"

"D'you know what it's like, knowing that everyone is telling you to ignore it, to just ignore the fact that someone we know may be dying?" Harry hissed angrily. "I'm constantly being told I shouldn't see this stuff, to just think about myself, to pretend there might not be someone out there who needs help—"

"Harry," Hermione whispered.

"You don't know what it's like to be told that you're not supposed to see your friends dying, or to even stand by and watch someone—or even a load of people—be killed and do nothing!"

A painful memory of Hermione sitting at a chair, watching Death Eaters torturing Muggle women on Voldemort's orders, flashed through her mind. Her throat caught, and the urge to retch surged up in her, but she pushed it down.

"I—neither of us know that that's like," Hermione lied weakly. "But Harry, think about it—Aurors can kill if they're confronted with someone they suspect to be a Dark Wizard, and on very rare occasions, they do kill in order to protect innocent bystanders—but they can't kill indiscriminately. They can't go around waving their wand and—and just killing anyone they see because they think they might be a Dark Wizard. And that's what you're doing, Harry, you're egging these dreams on because you only think you might see something that makes digging into the Dark Lord's head worth the risk."

Harry stared at her, and swallowed.

"O-okay," he finally said. "I'll—I'll ask him after class tomorrow, we have double potions in the afternoon…"

"No," Hermione said grimly, grasping his arm. "We're going down to ask him now."

"Now? Are you crazy, Hermione? He'd kill me—"

"He can't kill you if there are witnesses," Hermione said calmly, as she began dragging him toward the front doors leading to the entrance hall. They passed by a group of Ravenclaws, and Hermione saw Harry gaze at them distractedly for a moment—no doubt suddenly thinking of Cho Chang—before making a last desperate attempt to back out.
"No buts," Hermione told him, glaring at Ron pointedly, who got the message and took hold of Harry's other arm. 'I'm not giving you time to change your mind. We know for a fact that Professor Snape will be in the dungeons right now, and since classes are over, we have plenty of time to negotiate the terms of your next lesson with him. And you need to apologize," she stressed to him, as they descended the marble staircase leading to the dungeon door. "You did invade his privacy—show a little humility, Harry, that will go a long way—"

"It would go a long way with anyone else," Ron said darkly, as they marched Harry down the stairs, past Severus's office, and toward the Potions classroom.

"I've been in his mind," Harry said, wrenching his arm from Hermione's grasp. "A more hate-filled cesspool would be hard to find. He's not going to start being nice to me just because I apologized."  

"Well, at least it'd be a start," Hermione said, throwing open the door to the classroom.

Severus looked up in surprise when he saw her, but his expression immediately darkened when his eyes landed on Harry, who was still being forced forward by Ron's hand on his back and shoulder. His lip curled into a sneer, and he straightened up from the melted, gooey black puddle that Hermione could only presume had been a second-year's cauldron.

"What do you want?" he asked curtly.

"Harry has something to say to you," Hermione responded promptly.

"What—oh, yeah," Harry said, wincing when Hermione stepped down hard on his foot. "I—I'm sorry for invading your privacy by going into your Pensieve…"

Hermione saw Severus's nostrils flare angrily at this, his eyes flickering between Harry and Ron. Ron raised an eyebrow in surprise at this; Harry had not told him exactly what he had been thrown out for. He had certainly not mentioned anything about a Pensieve to either of them, though Harry thankfully did not seem to question why Hermione knew such details.

"And I'm here to ask if you'll—if you'll resume giving me Occlumency lessons," he finished lamely, refusing to look Severus in the eye.

Severus stood there, gazing at Harry with an incomprehensible expression. Hermione could sense that he was doing some very careful calculating. When he caught her eye, however, he finally relented.

"Next Monday, five o'clock, my office," he said softly. "I expect you to start practicing very hard before then."

"Yes, sir," Harry muttered, starting to turn away.

"And be warned, Potter," he continued quietly, lips curling into a snarl, "that if you ever invade my privacy like that again, I will do far worse than to simply throw you out."

"I understand—"

"Now get out!" They quickly wheeled around to obey, but Severus called her back. "Except for you, Granger! I need a word with you—privately."

The two of them cast Hermione a worried look, decided they didn't want to stay here for longer than they had to, and fled the room, leaving her at the mercy of the Potions Master. The door slammed shut behind them. Hermione crossed her arms.
"That wasn't so bad, was it?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

"I don't know how you convinced him to return, but I can assure you, the next few weeks of my life are certain to be absolutely horrible," Severus snapped, returning to his attempt to reconstruct the melted cauldron. He was never one to waste good supplies if they could be salvaged. "But that's not what I wanted to talk to you about. Do you have your notebook on you?"

"In here," Hermione said, digging through her bag for a moment before pulling it out. "Do you have your report?"

"Three weeks' worth," Severus said irritably, "and no one to give it to."

"I'll ensure that the Headmaster gets it," Hermione said, opening it up to a fresh page and pulling out a quill and inkbottle. Quietly, very quietly, she added under her breath, "How have you been doing?"

"Miserably," Severus muttered, as he came to hover over her shoulder. "I miss you."

"I miss you too," Hermione said quietly, standing up straight to turn and look at him. Now that they were alone and in private, he had dropped his defenses enough that Hermione could register the pained, lonely, forlorn expression that lined his face. She cupped his cheek, massaging it slightly with her thumb, before she kissed him.

It was not heated passion. It was an exchange of loneliness and relief, and Severus grasped her shoulders and pulled her tightly against him, more for comfort than anything else. The feel of his warm body pressed against hers was soothing to Hermione's frayed nerves, and they stood there in silence, relishing this moment where they could drop their roles for just a short time. Reluctantly, Severus nuzzled her hair, breathing in her scent one last time before withdrawing.

"We have work to do," he said hoarsely.

Hermione nodded. The lump had risen again in her throat, and this time, it refused to go away. She turned around, picked up her quill, inked it, and then held it over the page.

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"What did Snape want with you?" Harry asked, when Hermione returned to the common room half an hour later. Hermione had anticipated this, and already had an answer prepared.

"Last time I turned my essay in, I wrote a note at the bottom asking if he could deliver a message to Snuffles," she said quietly. "I thought that if he's always dropping by headquarters, he could do it."

"Are you crazy, Hermione?" Ron asked, staring at her in disbelief. "Snape?"

"If he's a member of the Order, he'll do as I ask, there's no risk involved," Hermione sniffed. "I just thought it would be a better alternative to Harry constantly trying to sneak a chat in the old cow's fireplace."

Harry looked amazed. "You'd ask Snape that for me?"

Hermione felt no guilt or compunction about lying to him. Harry had been lying steadily for the past few weeks about his ability to control his dreams. "Naturally, of course. He delivered the last message I sent, and gave me a response, but then he snarled at me that he wasn't an owl."

"What did Sirius say?" Harry asked excitedly, as he and Ron gathered around.
"He said the Headmaster's stopped by once or twice for a few things, but he doesn't know where he is or what he's doing," Hermione said, lying through her teeth. "He's a bit bored, but since Remus is with him now, it's not too bad. He says he hopes you've resumed Occlumency lessons."

"That's it?" Harry said, sounding somewhat disappointed.

"Well, Harry, did you want me to pour out my heart to Sirius in a letter that Professor Snape would be delivering?" Hermione asked dryly.

Harry and Ron both quickly shook their heads in negation at this.

But something, however, had jogged Hermione's mind, and set off a light bulb in it.

The next day, during double Potions, Hermione wrote a tiny, cramped note at the bottom of the essay she was turning in.

*Give me your reports, written in invisible ink, when you return my homework.*

Hermione watched Severus throughout the entire lesson. It took him some time to get to her essay, but when he flipped it over and got to the bottom, he turned very still. Then his eyes flickered up at her, and Hermione saw a smile curl his lips.

Three days later, on Monday morning, she got her essay back. Aside from the usual marks of red ink here and there to bloody up her paper, Hermione saw that the spare inches on the back that he usually used for making comments appeared to be devoid of any markings. Most of them had been cramped into the top corner on the first page. But when she tapped it with her wand, muttering "Aparecium" words slowly darkened on the page, until Hermione could read everything clearly outlined.

She smiled.

________________________

**Please review!**

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Thirty-Two

Enormous thanks to my wonderful beta, the amazing SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review.

It was impossible to say precisely what made Hermione's week worse.

Hagrid taking them into the Forbidden Forest during the last Quidditch match of the season, or the news from Severus concerning their son. Hermione could not help but constantly fret over him almost the same way she worried about Harry—she was very much like Molly, in that regard, whose mind was always on the welfare of her children. But to learn directly from her husband, after a harrowing day, that their son was sick with dragonpox, was the very last thing she needed to hear.

She couldn't simply get up and leave school to be with him. Which meant that after a sleepless night of wringing her hands and pacing about the common room, she wrote a note to Severus telling him to request Molly Weasley's help. Molly was not yet aware of Selenius's existence, but they could not send Selenius to St. Mungo's, and the only one Hermione trusted to know what to do and to keep Selenius's existence a secret was Ron's mother. Undoubtedly, she had dealt with Dragonpox before, and she was the only motherly figure Hermione could find present to take her place.

Severus did as she said, dropping by Headquarters during lunch, and after Flooing Molly, he led her to Selenius's room. Molly took one look at Selenius, who was sneezing sparks, and wheeled around to order Severus to go down to the kitchen and set a pot of water on the stove. Sirius was sitting at the foot of Selenius's bed, wagging his tail, and trying not to make himself too bothersome while Molly fussed over Selenius.

It was only after she had prepared Selenius a bowl of tantalizingly delicious chicken noodle soup and sent a skittering Dedalus Diggle to St. Mungo's for a flask of Dragonpox cure that she demanded an explanation from Severus. Additionally, she refused to keep a secret from her husband, but after being made aware of yet another aspect of Hermione's situation, she easily agreed that the two of them would hold their silence.

"Most of them don't even know about the two of you to begin with—it would be difficult to explain on top of everything else," she said, looking slightly flustered as she tried to take this all in.

Molly was the best person in the world Hermione could have possibly asked for help from in looking after their son. But it also meant that yet more people knew about Selenius's existence—a circle that was growing ever-wider as Selenius grew older—and Hermione worried about the dangers this presented. It was vital the Dark Lord never hear a faint, whispered wind of word concerning the fact that Hermione and Severus might not be the only two in the House of Snape.

Severus slipped a letter into Hermione's returned homework a week later informing her that Selenius quite liked Molly, thought her food was outstanding, and that he was getting better. He only had a mild case of Dragonpox, and he was mostly better now save for the occasional sneezing of sparks and the green-and-purple pustules that were still fading from his skin.

And throughout this entire time, her friends were not aware of the source of her distress, nor were they themselves very happy; Ron's euphoria about scraping the Quidditch Cup for Gryffindor
received a blow when Hermione and Harry finally got around to telling him that Hagrid had a giant for a brother, and should he be sacked, he wanted them to carry on giving him English lessons. It was, to put it bluntly, quite a mess.

Additionally, there were upcoming OWLs to be concerned with. Hermione had taken hers nearly two decades ago, and though she would still have to participate in the actual exams, they would count for nothing. She would still be owled the very same scores she had received twenty ago. It did not, however, change the fact that as before, a black market trade had sprung up among the fifth and seventh years. Hermione recognized the same old tricks, and went around trying to rescue her fellow students from themselves.

Everyone was cramming for exams. It was hell on earth. Hermione had to keep up the pretense that she did not know precisely everything that was already on the exams, and that she therefore must study like the mad bookworm that she was while her mind was concerned with things elsewhere. Such as the fact that though Harry had resumed once-a-week Occlumency lessons, he was still doing abysmally, and it forced Hermione to question whether or not there was actually any point in his continuing. Severus could be doing more useful things in the two hours that he spent tutoring Harry rather than wasting them on someone who was still unmotivated to learn. She was fairly certain Harry would have made more progress by now if some part of him were not still painfully interested in those dreams he saw through his shared link with Voldemort.

There was also Selenius to think about. By the time Hermione's Charms exam arrived, he was fully recovered and doing quite well under Molly's care—Molly who now elected to spend more time at Headquarters to ensure that Selenius actually ate a healthy meal, because to put it in her words, "One could only survive on Sirius's cooking for so long."

Sirius did not take this slight to his cooking with very good cheer.

Severus was being summoned on an almost daily basis throughout the exam week, and his reports—which were slipped on Hermione's desk while she pretended to study in the library—became consistently more worrisome. The Dark Lord was planning on making a more direct move now that the end of the year was approaching. It was clear that he had already expected Harry to act, to do something, and now that he had failed to do so, he was taking it upon himself to be more direct. He was scheming.

During their Astronomy exam, however, Hermione snapped.

They were focusing steadily on their start charts when noises from the grounds began to catch their attention, not to mention the fact that several figures—one of which was stubby and disturbingly plump in a rather saggy sort of way—shuffled down toward Hagrid's hut, sneaking their way through in the dead of night. Fang's muffled barking finally caused Hermione to set down her quill and look up, now visibly no longer working, to peer into the darkness of the grounds.

"Ahem—twenty minutes to go," Professor Tofty said, passing by her.

Hermione jumped and tried to return to her star chart, but moments later, a loud bang echoed sharply through the grounds, and her head snapped up at once. Several people muttered "ouch!" as they poked themselves in the eye with their quills and telescopes, but that was the least of Hermione's concerns. Down below, light shone down on the lawn from Hagrid's door, and he was standing at the steps, roaring and brandishing his fists with fury. Whatever Umbridge had said or done had been sufficient to tick off the normally very pacific, gentle half-giant. He was surrounded by six people, clearly outnumbered, and yet the jets of red light being shot in his direction merely seemed to bounce off.
"No!" Hermione cried, leaving her post and dashing toward the other side of the wall for a better look.

"My dear!" Professor Tofty said, sounding scandalized by her behavior. "This is an examination!"

Hermione wasn't listening. Jets of red light were flying across the grounds now, and she couldn't see any way for Hagrid to get out of this intact. Umbridge and her cohorts had wands. Hagrid did not—or at least, if he revealed that his umbrella had some very unusual properties, he would be chucked into Azkaban for illegal magic among whatever trumped-up charges the Ministry intended to tack him with.

At once, Hermione made her decision. She pulled out her own wand, ignoring Professor Tofty's exclamation of admonishment, and snapped it in the direction of the six figures attempting to bring Hagrid down. Wordlessly, a jet of white light struck the man next to Dawlish—Dawlish, who Hermione recognized as his hood had been thrown off, showing his wiry gray hair—and he crumpled to the ground, clutching his neck, as though trying to fight off a pair of invisible hands strangling him.

"Reasonable be damned, yeh won' take me like this, Dawlish!" Hagrid roared, as the Auror seemingly tried to reason with him. Hermione's eyes widened in horror as she came to the realization that they were not just sacking Hagrid—they were attempting to arrest him. No wonder Umbridge had not wanted a scene—and no wonder Hagrid was so furious! Renewed rage lighting her eyes, Hermione aimed yet another spell at one of the Aurors still standing—but a strong, thin-fingered grip on her wrist halted her.

"Miss Granger, if you cast one more spell—"

Hermione yanked free, casting Professor Tofty a look of utter contempt, and turned back to the scene playing out before them. The man Hermione's first spell had hit was lying on the ground, very still, but Hermione was unconcerned; she had not intended to kill him. Hagrid, however, had sent another man flying just moments ago for striking Fang, and he hit the ground with a hard thump and did not get up again.

"Now, really!" Professor Tofty said anxiously, with a glance at the hourglass on the wall. "Only sixteen minutes left, you know! And I will be forced to count your examination null and void if—"

"Yes, we know," Hermione snapped, pointing her wand at one of the four smaller figures that were still standing and attempting to stupefy Hagrid. "What I don't know, however, is how you can stand here and be more concerned about our exam than what's happening down there—Incarcerous terram!"

There was a yell as a figure stumbled and tripped over himself as ropes of twined vines shot out from the soft earth of Hagrid's pumpkin patch, pulling him to the ground and dragging him back to the watermelons Hagrid had been tending to, pinning him down securely. She saw him grappling for his wand, and raised hers in preparation to disarm him again, but suddenly drew back as the castle doors burst open again, and another figure sprinted out.

"How dare you!" Minerva shouted, as she ran toward Hagrid's hut. "How dare you!"

"Professor McGonagall," Hermione breathed, lowering her wand.

"Leave him alone! Alone, I say!"

"Hermione," Ron hissed into her ear, as he yanked her away from the wall. "What did you think you
"Helping Hagrid," Hermione hissed back, eyeing him with a nasty glint to her gaze, "because some things are more important than examinations."

"Blimey…"

"He has done nothing, nothing to warrant such—"

Hermione was not the only one who screamed at that moment. Lavender and Parvati, who were right next to her, shrieked with horror as no less than four stunners shot in Minerva's direction. They struck her squarely in the chest, and she froze in place; for a moment, they illuminated her in a sickening red glow upon colliding, and then was lifted off her feet, thrown back into the air, and laid still.

"Galloping Gargoyles!"

"COWARDS!" Hagrid bellowed. "RUDDY COWARDS!"

Hermione stared down at her in stupefied shock, unable to speak and trembling for words, and then she whipped around and tore past Professor Tofty, who seemed too shocked by what he had just witnessed to protest.

"Hermione!" Ron shouted after her.

"Stay put!" Hermione screamed back at him, before she began sprinting down the stairs. She didn't wait to see if Harry and Ron were following her—she prayed that they would not, and most likely, they would remain. There were times when they had smarter sense than her, and as Hermione's footsteps echoed through the corridors, it seemed to her that this was one of those occasions.

She sprinted down the marble staircase leading to the entrance hall, and saw Filius and Pomona standing there, equally white-faced and horror-struck. Poppy appeared behind her scant seconds later and they made their way out to the lawn where Minerva lay.

"You shouldn't be here," squeaked the tiny Charms teacher. "You ought to be at your exam—"

"My examination grades don't count, and you know it," Hermione said through gritted teeth. "Besides, after I started hexing the people down there, Professor Tofty pretty much told me that any grades I might have received would be null and void."

There was no more arguing after that, and pulling the hood of her school robe over her head, Hermione and the other teachers bent down to examine Minerva. Her face was ghostly white, frozen in a state of shock and disproval, and as Hermione gingerly lifted her arm to feel for a pulse, she noticed very faintly that the Transfiguration teacher was still breathing. Faintly.

"Out of the way," Poppy snapped, and Hermione quickly stepped aside so the matron could wave her wand over Minerva's still form. The three teachers stood by, holding their breath—and then Poppy immediately went to work, casting several spells that seemed to sink gently into Minerva's chest, and steady her breathing. Poppy placed a hand on her heart, silently counting the beats, and then pulled away.

"She's alive, and she should survive, though with four stunners to the chest, she'll be very weak…"

"We should get her up to the Hospital Wing," Hermione said firmly.
"That will do for now, but I may even need to make some arrangements with St. Mungo's... Filius, conjure up a stretcher, would you?"

They quietly carried Minerva back up to the castle, and it was not until an hour later that Hermione returned to Gryffindor tower. The moment she shut the door, the rage that had steadily built up through the course of the night seemed to pour itself out into her words.

"That foul, evil woman!" she gasped, finding it difficult to talk due to shaking fury. "Trying to sneak up on Hagrid in the dead of night—and Min—McGonagall..."

"Hagrid got away," Ron said, immediately getting up from one of the armchairs. "The spells kept bouncing off him, though—wonder why?"

"It'll be his giant blood," Hermione said shakily as she took his seat. "It's very hard to Stun a giant, they're like trolls, really tough... But poor Professor McGonagall... Four stunners straight to the chest, and she's not exactly young, is she?"

"At least they didn't get to take Hagrid off to Azkaban," Harry said grimly, from his seat by the fire. "That's what they were there for, right? That's why they wanted to avoid making a scene."

"He's probably gone to join Dumbledore," Ron said reasonably.

"But why sack Hagrid now?" Angelina Johnson asked, coming to stand by Hermione's chair. She shook her head. "It's not like Trelawney, he's been teaching much better than usual this year!"

"Umbridge hates part-humans," Hermione said bitterly, digging her nails into the side of the armchair. Her knuckles turned white. "She was always going to try and get Hagrid out."

"And she thought Hagrid was the one putting nifflers in her office..."

"Oh blimey," Lee Jordan said, covering his mouth. "It's me's been putting the nifflers in her office, Fred and George left me a couple, I've been levitating them in through her window..."

"She'd have sacked him anyway," Dean said wisely. "He was too close to Dumbledore."

The truth of this sank into the room with a depressing effect, and then at last, Hermione stood up. "I'm going to bed," she said quietly, making her way toward the girls' dormitory. "Good night."

The conversation from downstairs floated up to the next floor even as Hermione got ready for bed. "I just hope Professor McGonagall's alright," she heard Lavender say tearfully.

"They carried her back up to the castle, we watched through the dormitory windows..."

Hermione tried to go to sleep that night, but it was difficult. The night's events replayed themselves over in her head, and now that her white-hot fury had settled into a pit of cold anger in her belly, she was able to realize how close she had come to blowing her cover. The Strangling Hex was not something taught to fifth-year students at Hogwarts—probably not even Seventh-Years, at that, not even when she had been a student under Faulkner, who had been extraordinarily lax about preventing the students from learning Dark Magic themselves—and with good reason. Furthermore, she had allowed her rage to risk breaking her cover as an ordinary, if overly studious, fifth-year. That could not happen again. She needed to remain calm, collected, and in control. Firing off hexes at Umbridge's cohorts had probably done more harm than good in the long run. She was fairly upset with herself now, and spent a good long while berating herself for it.
Just as she was about to drift off, Lavender and Parvati came in, and Hermione was once again wide awake as the two girls continued to talk until they crawled into bed.

The lights finally turned off, and Hermione, desperate for some sleep, closed her eyes and tried not to think of the coming morrow.

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Harry began screaming in the middle of their History of Magic exam.

It was a scream of anguish and terror, one that caused several people, Hermione included, to knock their inkwells to the floor in surprise. This time, however, she restrained herself from getting up and rushing over to him and merely leaned over in her seat for a better look at him. She wasn't the only one. Everyone had stopped writing to peer down at Harry, who was on the floor and by now being helped to his feet.

"Yes," he said wildly, in response to one of the examiners who had come to take a look at him. "I mean… no… I've done—done as much as I can, I think…"

He left, and Hermione had no choice but to exchange glances with Ron from six seats away, and then put her head back down to her paper. The exam was over half an hour later, and the two of them rushed out of the hall, trying to push their way through the crowd to get to the marble staircase.

"Harry—we need to find Harry—"

"There he is," Ron said, dragging toward the top of the staircase, where Harry was peering through the room.

"Harry!" Hermione said, taking hold of his arm and causing him to wheel around. "What happened? Are you ill?"

"Where have you been?" Ron demanded, moving to stand at Harry's other side.

"Come with me," Harry said quickly. "Come on, I've got to tell you something…"

They worked their way through the hall of students all trying to leave their examination room, going up the nearest staircase and to the first-floor corridor before pulling them into an empty classroom. He shut the door behind him, and then turned around to look at them. His face was pale, and he looked just as frightened as Hermione felt.

"Voldemort's got Sirius."

This was not what Hermione had been expecting to hear. Cold fear shot through her, coiling like a poisonous viper in her belly. If Voldemort had Sirius, it was also likely that he had Selenius, because Sirius almost never left the house without him—

"How d'you—?"

"Saw it. Just now. When I fell asleep in the exam."

"But—but where? How? Did you—did you see anyone else there?"

"I dunno how, but I know exactly where," Harry said, his face set. "There's a room in the Department of Mysteries full of shelves covered in these little glass balls, and they're at the end of row ninety-seven. Just Voldemort and Sirius—no one else knows they're there. He's trying to use
Sirius to get whatever he wants from in there... He's torturing him..." his throat caught. "Says he'll end by killing him..."

His voice shook, and Hermione tried to get her jumbled and fired thoughts into order as Harry weakly took a seat at a desk.

"How're we going to get there?" he asked.

A moment of silence followed as Hermione once again tried to make sense of the situation. And then Ron said, "G-Get there?"

"Get into the Department of Mysteries, so we can rescue Sirius!" Harry said loudly, as though this were obvious.

Hermione and Ron stared at him, and for a moment, the mad thought occurred to her that Harry was looking at them as though he knew they thought he was suggesting something totally unreasonable, but could not understand why. It was frightening. This whole situation was frightening. Harry should not have seen Sirius being tortured, she had no idea if what he had seen was even real, and if it was, who else had been endangered in Voldemort's capture of him? Thoughts of Selenius flashed through her mind, and her breathing quickened as panic began to set in.

What she needed to do was find a way to contact Grimmauld Place herself. Best case scenario, this was Voldemort attempting to manipulate Harry into going into the Department of Mysteries, and Sirius and Selenius were both perfectly safe and sound and perhaps even playing chess, at this time of day. But she could not hope to do that if Harry was urging them to help him leave the grounds of Hogwarts, go to the Ministry of Magic, spur them into breaking into the Department of Mysteries—

The gears in Hermione's brain were turning very quickly, and the rational part of her mind was herding her thoughts toward the logical, reasonable thing to do: verify everything before they went tearing off to the Department of Mysteries.

And beyond all of that, the not-so-distinct panic at the thought of her son being in danger pervaded.

She needed to contact Grimmauld Place before they did anything stupid.

"Harry," Hermione said, trying to get Harry to think reasonably, "how did Voldemort get into the Ministry of Magic without anyone realizing he's there?"

"How do I know?" Harry said, his voice rising with his anger and frustration. He was on the verge of bellowing. "The question is how we're going to get in there!"

"But Harry, think about this," Hermione said, taking a step toward him and holding her hands up, trying to convince him to calm down, as much as for his sake as it was for hers. "It's five o'clock in the afternoon, the Ministry of Magic must be full of workers..."

Harry's response was just as ill-thought out and equally unlikely as his proposition that they go to the Ministry in the first place, and Hermione was not doing all that well at convincing him otherwise at the moment. He was acting as though she didn't give a damn about Sirius, when she of all people cared about him like a brother, and on top of everything else—

"Anyway," Harry continued, "the Department of Mysteries has always been empty whenever I've been—"

Hermione interrupted him.
"You've never been there, Harry," she said quietly. She knew time was of the essence, but somewhere in her swirling mind, the idea that Sirius was being tortured by Voldemort seemed less and less likely. "You've only ever dreamed about it."

"They're not normal dreams!" Harry shouted in her face, standing up and taking a step closer to her in turn. He looked as though he wanted to shake her. "How d'you explain Ron's dad then, what was all that about? How come I knew what had happened to him?"

"He's got a point," said Ron quietly, turning to look at her.

"But this is just— just so unlikely!" Hermione said desperately. "Harry, how on earth could Voldemort have got hold of Sirius when he's been in Grimmauld Place all the time?"

"Sirius might've cracked and just wanted to get some fresh air," Ron said, looking worried. While Hermione was becoming less convinced by the minute, Ron seemed to be more fully on board with the idea. "He's been desperate to get out of that house for ages…"

"But why," Hermione persisted, "why on earth would Voldemort want to use Sirius to get the weapon, or whatever the thing is?"

"I dunno, there could be loads of reasons!" Harry yelled at her. "Maybe Sirius is just someone Voldemort doesn't care about seeing hurt!"

Hermione stared at him in stupefied shock. That was quite possibly one of the most stupid things Harry had said all year, and given the number of asinine things that had been expressed, that was topping quite a lot.

"You know what, I've just thought of something," said Ron in a hushed voice. "Sirius's brother was a Death Eater, wasn't he? Maybe he told Sirius the secret of how to get the weapon!"

"Yeah— and that's why Dumbledore's been so keen to keep Sirius locked up all the time!" Harry said angrily.

Now they were onto conspiracy theories, and in the meantime, their arguing was accomplishing nothing. Absolutely nothing. Hermione closed her eyes, inhaled deeply, and then spoke.

"Look, I'm sorry, but neither of you are making sense," she said slowly, "and we've got no proof for this, no proof Voldemort and Sirius are even there—"

"Hermione, Harry's seen them!"

"Okay," Hermione said, taking a step back. She had hoped for Ron to be on her side in this, but obviously, that would not be the case. "Alright, but Harry, I've just got to say this."

"What?" Harry demanded.

"You—this isn't a criticism, Harry! But you do… sort of… I mean—don't you think you've got bit of a—a—saving-people-thing?"

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

The expression on Harry's face told her that she might as well have slapped him, but she plowed on, reminding him of Fleur Delacour's sister, who he had rescued in the second task in the Triwizard Tournament the previous year.
"I mean, it was really great of you and everything, everyone thought it was a wonderful thing to do—"

They were getting nowhere. They were just wasting time. Hermione couldn't let Harry go tearing off to the Ministry like a half-cocked headless rooster, but her words were having no effect other than to make him angry. And, if possible, even more unreasonable.

"You reckon I want to act the hero again?" Harry asked through gritted teeth.

"No, no, no!" Hermione said quickly. "That's not what I mean at all!"

"Well, spit out what you've got to say, because we're wasting time here!"

"I'm trying to say—Voldemort knows you, Harry!" Harry stared at her, and Hermione bit her lower lip in frustration. Ron started to say something, but Hermione cut him off. "He took Ginny down into the Chamber of Secrets to lure you there, it's the kind of thing he does, he knows you're the—" she cast around for the appropriate words "—the sort of person who'd go to Sirius's aid! What if he's just trying to get you into the department of Myst—"

"Hermione, it doesn't matter if he's done it to get me there or not—"

"It does matter, Harry!"

"They've taken McGonagall to St. Mungo's, there isn't anyone left from the Order at Hogwarts who we can tell, and if we don't go, Sirius is dead!"

"But Harry—what if you dream was—was just that, a dream?"

Harry let out a roar of frustration, and Hermione actually took a step back, frightened and thinking quickly. She needed to contact Grimmauld Place, and she couldn't do so herself—

She glanced down at the ring on her hand, and then looked up at Harry, who had rounded on Ron now.

"When it was your sister I was saving from the basilisk—"

"I never said I had a problem!" Ron said heatedly.

"But Harry," Hermione said, her mind quickly whirring as to how she could contact Severus, "you've just said it. Dumbledore wanted you to learn to shut these things out of your mind—it's why we've been making you go back to Occlumency lessons with Professor Snape—"

Harry snapped.

"IF YOU THINK I'M JUST GOING TO ACT LIKE I HAVEN'T SEEN—"

"Sirius told you there was nothing more important than you learning to close your mind!"

"WELL, I EXPECT HE'D SAY SOMETHING DIFFERENT IF HE KNEW WHAT I'D JUST —"

At that moment, the classroom door opened. All three of them whipped around in time to see Ginny and Luna walk in, although the latter looked, as usual, as though she had simply floated into the room quite by accident.

"Hi," Ginny said uncertainly. "We recognized Harry's voice—what are you yelling about?"
Hermione turned away, grateful for the distraction, and looked down at her watch. It could Porkey her to the Headmaster's office, but that wasn't what she needed right now. She needed something—something else—perhaps it would be possible to send Kingsley Shacklebolt or Mad-Eye Moody a patronus, they would recognize it and act immediately on her orders to check the state of Grimmauld Place and its inhabitants. It also occurred to her now that with the ring on her finger, they ought to have altered it so that they could communicate through it. They would have to fix that later, for it was a brilliant but time-consuming idea that required preparation, and now it was too late because Hermione was horribly unprepared for this moment—

"I was only wondering whether I could help," Ginny said coolly.

"Well, you can't."

"You're being rather rude, you know," Luna responded serenely.

Harry swore and turned away, but Hermione was suddenly struck by an idea.

"Wait… harry, they can help."

Harry and Ron both wheeled around to look at her.

"Listen," she said urgently, "Harry, we need to establish whether Sirius really has left headquarters—"

"I told you, I saw—"

"Harry, I'm begging you, please!" Harry hesitated, and she plowed on, appealing desperately. "Please, let's just check that Sirius isn't at home before we go charging off to London—if we find out that he's not there then I swear—I swear I won't try and stop you, I'll come, I'll do whatever it takes to try and—and save him—"

"Sirius is being tortured NOW! We haven't got time to waste—"

"But if this is a trick of the Dark—of Voldemort's—Harry, we've got to check, we've got to—"

"How? How are we going to check?"

There was a painful pause.

"We'll have to use Umbridge's fire and see if we can contact him," Hermione admitted at last, already quite terrified at the prospect. The first time Harry did it was a disaster waiting to happen, but now… "We'll need to draw Umbridge away again, but we'll also need lookouts, and that's where we can use Ginny and Luna."

"Yeah, we'll do it!" Ginny agreed immediately, although it was clear she was still struggling to put together precisely what was going on.

"When you say 'Sirius,' are you talking about Stubby Boardman?" Luna asked, quirking her head to the side at this.

"Okay," Harry said aggressively, ignoring Luna's question, "Okay, if you can think of a way of doing this quickly, I'm with you, otherwise I'm going to the Department of Mysteries right now—"

"Right," Hermione said. "Right… well… one of us has to go and find Umbridge and—and send her off in the wrong direction…"
The further they could send Umbridge from her office, the better. Unfortunately, right now, they were short one pair of Weasley twins when they need them most.

"I'll do it," Ron said at once. "I'll tell her Peeves is smashing up the Transfiguration department or something, it's miles away from her office. Come to think of it, I could probably persuade Peeves to do it if I meet him on the way…"

Hermione mentally winced at the prospect of the Transfiguration department being smashed up, but did not linger on the thought for long. "Okay," she said, brow furrowed. "Now, we need to keep students away from her office while we force entry…"

~o~O~o~

Hermione stood in Umbridge's office, wringing her hands as Harry stuck his head in the fireplace. She had a bad feeling, a very bad feeling about this, and all of her senses—which had been sharply honed from her days in the first war—were going haywire on her. She was jumpy, nervous, and straining to hear any glimpse of Sirius or Selenius while also keeping an ear out for a chorus of 'Weasley Is Our King', which was the agreed-upon signal.

Her thoughts were firmly on Severus and Selenius. If Harry was right, and Sirius was not there, they needed to find a way to contact Severus to let him know, and she also needed to find out if Selenius was alright.

The door opened quite suddenly a moment later, and Hermione whipped around in time to find herself slammed against the wall by Millicent Bulstrode. She wriggled free and kicked the girl in the leg, causing her to grip it tightly in pain, and then grabbed her arm, twisted it over, and pressed the Slytherin girl to the ground. Her weekly duels with Severus while still out of her proper timeline had proven effective in teaching both physical and magical techniques of handling an attacker—though it could be difficult to do so when an opponent was literally on you—

Umbridge had yanked Harry's head out of the fire, pulling it back so far that it looked as though she were preparing to slit his throat. Realizing the seriousness of the situation—that they had been well and truly caught—Hermione did not retaliate when Bulstrode staggered to her feet and attempted to wrest her wand away from her.

Umbridge was shouting at Harry, yanking at his hair with every word, when there was a commotion outside and several large Slytherins entered, each of them dragging a prisoner in with them. Ron, Ginny, Luna, and—to Hermione's surprise—Neville. The latter looked as though he were being strangled by Crabbe, who did not seem to care or notice in the least.

"Got 'em all," Warrington said, shoving Ron roughly forward. He and Hermione exchanged fearful yet defiant glances that clearly told the other, This is not over yet. "That one tried to stop me from taking her," the Slytherin continued, poking Neville and then Ginny, who was still struggling valiantly against the Slytherin pinning her, "so I brought him along, too."

Ron's eyes were apologetic. Sorry.

Hermione narrowed hers thoughtfully, and bit her lower lip, and then gave a tiny jerk of her head. I'll think of something, her expression said.

Ron did not smile, a clear sign that he understood the seriousness of the situation all too well. Better think fast, then.

Hermione glanced quickly around the room, whimpering as Bulstrode tightened her grip on her
shoulder. She was tempted to grab the Slytherin’s fingers and break them, for she was more than capable of such a maneuver—she knew where the weak spots on the human body were, and she knew that the girl would not be expecting it—but blasting their way out of Umbridge's office right now was not the answer. They needed to lure her out and away, and then give the others time to take down their individual captors.

Umbridge’s slack face suddenly tightened warningly, and Hermione whipped her attention back to Harry. What? What had he just said?

"Very well," Umbridge said, her voice as dangerous as it was falsely sweet, like poisoned honey. "Very well, Mr. Potter… I offered you the chance to tell me freely. You refused. I have no alternative but to force you. Draco—fetch Professor Snape."

Hermione’s heart leapt. Now she wouldn’t need to seek out Severus herself—he would be coming here. She could convey through Legilimency what could otherwise not be said with words in front of Umbridge and her Inquisitorial Squad lackeys. Draco left, and the office was silent for several moments, save for the scuffling as Ron and Ginny continued to struggle, not allowing their captors to become complacent.

Hermione suddenly yanked at Bulstrode’s arms, not to get free, but to maneuver herself around so that she could face the door. It took a bit of struggling, but Bulstrode eventually swung her around sharply in an attempt to disorient her, and Hermione quieted, now able to fully face the doorway.

Harry seemed to be attempting to keep his face deliberately smooth, amazingly blank. Hermione fleetingly wondered why he could not have put that same effort into disciplining his mind before footsteps were heard coming down the corridor. Draco entered the room, followed closely by Severus.

"You wanted to see me, Headmistress?" he asked, looking around at them with an expression of complete indifference. The way he stood, head slightly bent forward in what Umbridge might have interpreted as a nod of deference, his face was partially curtained by his greasy black hair, making it difficult for Hermione to make eye contact with him.

"Ah, Professor Snape," Umbridge said, smiling widely as she got to her feet again. "Yes, I would like another bottle of Veritaserum, as quickly as you can, please."

"Look at me!" Hermione thought desperately, gazing at her husband’s face. Look at me—look at me, damn it!

"You took my last bottle to interrogate Potter," Severus responded coolly. "Surely you did not use it all? I told you that three drops would be sufficient."

Hermione stared. It was doubtful that Severus had given Umbridge Veritaserum—that was too powerful a tool for even him to hand over. Most likely, he had given her a bottle of water, as the two were easily disguised as the other, and there was no chance at all that Umbridge would test it on herself. But still—

"You can make some more, can’t you?" Umbridge said, her face turning red, her voice becoming more sweetly girlish as it always did when she was furious.

"Certainly," Severus said, his lip curling with contempt. "It takes a full moon cycle to mature, so I should have it ready for you in around a month."

"A month?" Umbridge squawked. "A month? But I need it this evening, Snape! I have just found
Potter using my fire to communicate with a person or persons unknown!"

"Really?" Severus said, and showing the first flicker of interest as he turned to glance at Harry. "Well, it doesn't surprise me. Potter has never shown much inclination to follow school rules."

Hermione wanted to stamp her foot. Look at me, you idiot! Over here!

But Severus did not hear her mental plea. Until they made eye contact and established the connection, Hermione might as well have been screaming at the wind.

"I wish to interrogate him!" Umbridge said angrily, and Severus turned his attention back to her. Behind Umbridge's shoulder, Hermione began to mouth words, her lips barely moving, in the hope that Severus would see. Look at me, look at me—

"I have already told you," Severus said smoothly, "that I have no further stocks of Veritaserum. Unless you wish to poison Potter—and I would assure you I would have the greatest sympathy if you did—I cannot help you."

He was clearly enjoying this, the bastard.

"The only trouble is that most venoms act too fast to give the victim much time for truth-telling…"

Severus turned to glance back at Harry, and Hermione let out a snarl of pure frustration and tried to step on Bulstrode's foot.

"You are on probation!" Umbridge shrieked, and Severus once again turned to look at her, eyebrow raised. A spark of connection—Severus's eyes finally locked onto hers—and she frantically pulled their minds together.

Harry was checking to see if Sirius is still at Grimmauld Place! She conveyed quickly. He saw a vision of the Dark Lord and Sirius in the Department of Mysteries and we needed to see if it was real. He's not there—Severus, if he's got Sirius—Selenius—

She saw a muscle tighten in Severus's jaw, and she felt alarm spike out from him, but he gave no other indication that he had understood.

"You are being deliberately unhelpful!"

Are you sure? He shot back at her.

Harry checked!

"I expected better, Lucius Malfoy always speaks most highly of you!"

I will pay Headquarters a visit myself to ascertain the situation.

Hermione's relief was palpable. Thank you, love.

"Now get out of my office!"

Severus snapped his eyes away from Hermione, gave Umbridge a sardonic bow, and then turned to leave. At that moment, Harry lunged forward, straining against Draco, who was pinning him to the chair.

"He's got Padfoot!" Harry shouted desperately. "He's got Padfoot in the place where it's hidden!"
Severus stopped with his hand on the door, and turned to look around at Harry.

"Padfoot?" Umbridge cried, looking eagerly from Harry to Severus. "What is Padfoot? Where what is hidden? What does he mean, Snape?"

Severus's expression was inscrutable as he surveyed Harry, and then uttered coldly, "I have no idea." He shoved the door open. "Potter, when I want nonsense shouted at me I shall give you a Babbling Beverage. And Crabbe," he added, with an indifferent look at where Neville was still struggling, "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 ever you apply for a job."

The door closed behind him with a snap, and Hermione saw Harry's face fall. She could practically see his spirits sinking to the floor. A glance at Umbridge showed that she was feeling just the same way; she had deflated somewhat, though she was still heaving with rage and frustration.

"Very well," she said, pulling out her wand. "Very well… I am left with no alternative…"

But Hermione was not listening. Severus had gotten her message—and Harry's rather unnecessarily shouted one—quite clearly, and was undoubtedly going to pay Headquarters a visit now. She silently prayed that Selenius was still there, uninjured, or that perhaps Sirius was really there and that whoever had told Harry that he was not had been lying…

But who in the Order would lie to Harry about such a thing?

Umbridge's muttering caught her attention again. It seemed as though the toad-like woman was talking herself into something, justifying something horrible that she was about to do—

"You are forcing me, Potter… I do not want to," Umbridge breathed, "but sometimes circumstances justify the use… I am sure the Minister will understand that I had no choice…"

Hermione's expression twisted onto one of utter confusion, but Umbridge's next words wiped it blank and replaced it with pure, ghostly horror.

"The Cruciatus Curse ought to loosen your tongue," Umbridge said quietly.

Hermione blood ran cold.

"No!" She whispered, fear and urgency now entering her voice. "Professor Umbridge—it's illegal —"

But Umbridge ignored her, now gazing down at Harry with a predatory, eager look and a nasty glint in her eyes. The moment she raised her wand, Hermione knew she had to act. She had to protect Harry—she did not give a damn if Umbridge went down for the use of an Unforgivable, but she could not stand by and watch the children who were both her friends and her charges be subjected to it.

"The Minister wouldn't want you to break the law, Professor Umbridge!" Hermione cried, aiming for the other woman's weak points.

That did get Umbridge's attention.

"What Cornelius doesn't know won't hurt him," she said, now panting slightly as she pointed her wand at different parts of Harry's body in turn, as though trying to decide where it would hurt the most. At that moment, however, it became clear to Hermione that she had never cast an Unforgivable in her life; the Cruciatus caused pain throughout the entire body no matter where it struck. For a
moment, Hermione found the other woman's disgusting ineptness irritating, but it also clicked something important in her mind. Umbridge was nervous about casting it. She could be talked—or tricked—out of doing it.

Her next words, however, caught Hermione off-guard.

"He never knew I ordered dementors after Potter last summer, but he was delighted to be given the chance to expel him, all the same…"

No. This woman—this foul, horrid, poisoned-honey toad of a woman had never cast an Unforgivable in her life, but she was still malicious enough to do it now.

"It was you?" Harry gasped. "You sent the dementors after me?"

"Somebody had to act," Umbridge breathed, as her wand came to point directly at Harry's forehead, directly at his scar. "They were all bleating about silencing you somehow—discrediting you—but I was the one who actually did something about it…"

Oh my god.

"Only you wriggled out of that one, didn't you, Potter? Not today, though, not now…"

And she raised her wand, taking a deep breath, and cried "Cruc—"

"NO!" Hermione shouted. Umbridge's wand halted in mid-cast, like an executioner's blade stayed. In that moment, she stopped attempting to plead or talk reason into a person who was too merciless, too full of hate and bloated prejudice to take any notice, and switched tactics like lighting. "No—Harry—Harry, we'll have to tell her!"

"No way!" Harry yelled back at her.

"We'll have to, Harry, she'll force it out of you anyway," Hermione said, affecting a tone of brokenness, "what's the point…?"

And she turned her head around to start sniffing, choking on whimpers as she buried her face into Millicent Bulstrode's sleeve. The Slytherin yanked herself away immediately, looking disgusted, and Hermione took the opportunity to sink to her knees and hide her face in her hands, as though sobbing.

"Well, well, well!" Umbridge said above her, sounding triumphant. "Little Miss Question-All is going to give us some answers! Come on then, girl, come on!"

"Er—my—nee—no!" Ron shouted through his gag. The Slytherin holding him yanked on his collar, silencing him.

She could feel the stares of her fellow D.A members on her, but now was no time to let them know, by word or action, that this was all an act. "I'm—I'm sorry everyone," she whimpered, "But—I can't stand it—"

"That's right, that's right, girl!" Umbridge said, seizing her shoulder and hauling to her feet, thrusting her into the abandoned chintz chair by her desk. Umbridge had seized the bait; now all Hermione had to do was follow through with it. "Now then… with whom was Potter communicating just now?"

"Well," Hermione said, gulping into her hands even as her brain worked furiously to churn out a
feasible plan. "Well, he was trying to speak to Professor Dumbledore…"

Everyone except Umbridge and her Slytherins froze, or—if they were Luna—looked mildly surprised. Now they knew that this was a trick, and they ceased their struggling, if only to listen to her in amazement as she boldly began to spin her web of lies.

"Dumbledore?" Umbridge repeated eagerly. "You know where Dumbledore is, then?"

"Well… no!" Hermione whimpered, as she sobbed exaggeratedly into her hands. "We've tried the Leaky Cauldron in Diagon Alley and the Three Broomsticks and even the Hog's Head—"

"Idiot girl, Dumbledore won't be sitting in a pub when the whole Ministry's looking for him!" Umbridge shouted at her, her face slack and disappointment etched into every sagging line.

She had taken the bait, but Hermione needed to hold her attention while she could. She needed this woman out of the office so that her friends could take down their captors, and so that they could get to Sirius in a more timely manner.

"But—but we needed to tell him something important!" she wailed.

"Yes?" Umbridge pressed, with a sudden resurgence of excitement in her voice. "What was it you wanted to tell him?"

"We… we wanted to tell him it's r-ready!" she choked.

"What's ready? What's ready, girl?" Umbridge had grabbed her shoulders now, and was shaking her, although not with the same force she had done to Marietta on that fateful evening so many weeks ago.

"The… the weapon," Hermione whispered.

"Weapon?" Umbridge's beady eyes seemed to pop with excitement. "Weapon? You have been developing some method of resistance? A weapon you could use against the Ministry? On Professor Dumbledore's orders, of course?"

"Y-y-yes," Hermione gasped, knowing her hesitation was all that was holding Umbridge captive, keeping her from using her wand. Infuriate the woman with her reluctance in divulging, and then reveal her lies in bits and pieces to trick her, and take her attention away from Harry. If she could manage it, she would lure Umbridge out of the room alone.

"What kind of weapon is it?" Umbridge demanded.

Hermione had not quite thought that through, although in this case, ambiguity might very well be on her side in luring Umbridge to go and 'see' it. "We don't r-r-really understand it," she said, with a loud sniffle. "We j-j-just did what P-P-Professor Dumbledore told us t-t-to do…"

Umbridge straightened, looking exuberant.

"Lead me to the weapon," she said victoriously.

"I'm not showing… them," Hermione said shrilly, looking at the room through her fingers. "A-and no one else here knows about it either, r-really… H-H-Harry was just supposed t-t-to tell Professor Dumbledore, I—I was the one who d-did all the work… and Luna and Ginny were just l-lookouts…"
Harry, Ron, Ginny, and Neville were all gaping at her in astonishment. Luna had tilted her head curiously to the side, but thankfully did not say a word to the contrary.

"It is not for you to set conditions," Umbridge said harshly.

"F-fine," Hermione sobbed, her face firmly buried in her hands again, "fine… let them see it, I hope they use it on you! In fact, I wish you'd invite loads and loads of people to come and see!" she added childishly. "Th-that would serve you right—oh, I'd love it if the wh-whole school knew where it was, and how to u-use it, and then if you annoy any of them they'll be able to s-sort you out!"

As hoped, those childish words had a powerful effect on Umbridge, who glanced first at Harry, then at Draco. The former's look of utter amazement seemed to translate into something of high suspicion to Umbridge, and the latter's hungry, greedy expression was not lost on her. The toady woman contemplated her for a moment, and then in what she clearly thought was a motherly voice, spoke.

"All right, dear, let's just make it you and me… get up, now—"

"Professor," Malfoy said eagerly, "Professor Umbridge, I think some of the squad should come with you to look after—"

"I am a fully qualified Ministry official, Malfoy, do you really think I cannot manage a single wandless teenager alone?" Umbridge asked sharply. "In any case, it does not sound as though this weapon is something that schoolchildren should see. You will remain here until I return and make sure none of these—" she said, gesturing at Harry, Ron, Neville, Ginny, and Luna "—escape."

"Alright," Malfoy said, looking sulky and disappointed.

"Hermione…" Harry said weakly.

"It's in the Forbidden Forest," Hermione told Umbridge swiftly, ignoring Harry, hoping that he understood she was luring the other woman out of the room to give them a chance to escape, as well as possibly save them all from incurring legal repercussions if things continued to go pear-shaped. "I'll lead you there."

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione led Umbridge out of her office, along the corridor, down several flights of stairs, and out the front doors. The din of clattering plates and happily chattering students floated in from the Great Hall, and Hermione found herself wondering whether Severus had yet found a way to contact Grimmauld Place and confirm the situation when Umbridge poked her in the back with her stubby wand.

Hermione could do wandless magic. Not easily, and not powerfully, and not with any kind of skill that she would want to place her life on it—but it was a talent that she had honed over the last two decades, and most certainly a capability that she had no intention of sharing with Umbridge. Teenagers were not supposed to have such precise control over their magic—hell, even adult wizards were not supposed to. It was something that took extensive discipline and magical talent, along with years, if not decades, of practice. Professor Dumbledore was the kind of person you would expect to be well accomplished in that field. Not presumably sixteen-year-old Hermione Jane Granger. Which meant that she could not simply break cover and disarm Umbridge.

"Where are we going?" Umbridge huffed, as she jogged slightly to keep up.

"I already told you," Hermione said patiently, as she strode purposefully in the direction of forest, "it's in the Forbidden Forest."

"Not in Hagrid's, then?" Umbridge said, sounding slightly disappointed as they passed the empty house.

"Of course not!" Hermione responded, with a contemptuous look over her shoulder. "Hagrid might have set it off accidentally."

"Yes, yes he would have, the great oaf…"

They had reached the edge of the forest, and here, Hermione paused for a moment in hesitation. Umbridge jabbed her in the back with her wand, urging her on.

"It is in there, isn't it?" she asked sleekly.

"I was just thinking," Hermione said slowly, scanning the darkness beyond the trees, "that if I'm going in first, ought I not to have your wand? After all," she pressed, "I'll need it in order to get past the security I've set up…"

"That you've set up?"

"Yes," Hermione said firmly.

"Well, I'm afraid that as the Ministry places a rather higher value on my life than yours, I will have to
say no," Umbridge said sweetly. "You will show me how to get past your...security, when we get there."

Hermione pressed her lips together into a thin line, but merely plunged forward past the trees, catching Umbridge off guard so that she had to trot behind in order to keep up, panting as her short legs hindered her from setting the same easy pace as the younger witch.

"Is it very far in?" Umbridge asked, as she tore her robe on a bush, stumbling through the undergrowth. Where she had been able to stride with importance through the widened halls of the school, here she was being forced to waddle and wade through, completely out of her element.

"Oh, yes," Hermione said, sounding pleased. "Yes, it's well hidden. It would have to be, so that students wouldn't find it accidentally, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, yes..."

They continued to stumble through the forest for quite some time, Umbridge tripping over the roots and brambles that Hermione easily sidestepped or slipped quietly through, and the further they went in, the more Umbridge's misgivings seemed to increase.

"How much further in?" she asked angrily, when they had gone so deep that light could barely be seen through the top of the trees due to the density of the canopy. If Hermione left Umbridge here, she had no doubt that the woman would be well and truly lost for quite some time.

And she had an ace up her sleeve. Or her wrist, anyway. She would bring Umbridge in just a bit farther, tell her to wait a moment while she ventured forward to check the weapon, and as soon as she was behind the nearest tree, she would Portkey away.

"Not far now," Hermione called loudly, as they stepped into a dimly lit, deep-set and dank clearing. "Just a little bit—"

_Thwang, Thok._

An arrow flew through the air and sank with a menacing thud into the tree just inches above Hermione's head. She froze, and the sound of hoofbeats broke the silence, growing louder, the ground trembling slightly—

Umbridge let out a little scream and pushed Hermione more firmly in front of her. She wrenched herself free and turned around, in time to see about fifty centaurs emerging from the trees on all sides. They looked angry and territorial, hoofs stamping and pawing at the earth, and all were carrying weapons of some sort—most typically, bows. Umbridge was letting out odd whimpers of terror and backing away into the clearing, leaving Hermione to face the denizens of the forest.

"Who are you?" one chestnut-colored centaur demanded, coming up to her from her right. But he was not addressing her, but Umbridge.

Umbridge whimpered again, and Magorian—for Hermione remembered that was his name—repeated more harshly, "I asked who you are, human!"

"I am Dolores Umbridge!" Umbridge said, her voice high and terrified. "Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic and Headmistress and High Inquisitor of Hogwarts!"

"You are from the Ministry of Magic?" Magorian asked, pawing at the ground. He was not the only one. Hermione saw many of the centaurs shifting restlessly, exchanging mutinous and dissenting murmurs among themselves.
"That's right!" Umbridge said, her voice so high that she was squeaking. "So be very careful! By the laws laid down by the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, any attack by half-breeds such as yourselves on a human—"

"Don't call them that!" Hermione hissed, whipping around to face Umbridge, but it was too late—and it was also exactly what Hermione had been banking on the minute she realized they had company. She was familiar with the centaurs' pride, which was surpassed only by that of a Hippogriff's, and Umbridge's prejudice was about to come back and earn her some comeuppance. "What did you call us?" shouted a wild-looking black centaur, who Hermione took a moment to recognize as Bane. The tweaking of tightening bowstrings and furious mutterings passed through the air, and Hermione could sense the tension rising around her.

Umbridge appeared to have ignored her. "Law Fifteen B states clearly that 'Any attack by a magical creature who is deemed to have near-human intelligence, and therefore considered responsible for its actions—'"

"'Near-human intelligence'?" Magorian repeated, as Bane and several other centaurs reacted to this with rage and an increased, furious pawing at the ground. "We consider that a great insult, human! Our intelligence, thankfully, far outstrips your own—"

"What are you doing in our forest?" bellowed a hard-faced, dapple-gray centaur whom Hermione recalled from her last trip in the forest—which had been during their first visit with Grawp. 

"Your forest?" Umbridge said, shaking with renewed, self-righteous indignation.

Hermione blinked, trying not to quirk her lips in the merest trace of a smile. Oh, and the fun is about to begin...

"I would remind you that you live here only because the Ministry of Magic permits you certain areas of land—"

Umbridge's words were drowned out, unfinished, when she let out an earsplitting scream as an arrow flew through the air, snatching through her mousy brown hair in passing before landing in the tree several yards behind her. Hermione quickly backed away, scrambling up the roots of the tree and holding onto the arrow to keep her balance as Bane bellowed, "Whose forest is it now, human?"

The other centaurs responded to this with wild, raucous, neighing laughter.

Umbridge completely lost it. "Half-breeds!" she screamed. "Beasts! Uncontrolled animals—Incarcerous!"

Ropes flew out of her wand like snakes, whipping through the air and wrapping themselves tightly around Magorian's hooves and torso. The centaur let out a scream of rage, trying to free himself, and stumbled to the ground as his fellows let out an equal cry of fury and charged past, bows and arrows strung tightly and hooves pounding angrily on the ground. They all surrounded Umbridge, who was shrieking in terror as she tried to take on the entire herd.

Hermione quickly slid down from where she had been pressed high up against a tree by its enormous roots, and began tugging at Magorian's bindings, pulling a loop over his struggling hooves and then yanking out the knife Sirius had given her from the inside of her leg and sawing it loose. Magorian struggled to his feet, ripping the ropes free as Umbridge's protesting shrieks and whimpers cut through the air.
"Noooooo… I am Senior Undersecretary… you cannot… unhand me, you animals… nooooo!
"

A flash of light told Hermione that Umbridge had just attempted to Stun one of the centaurs, and it was followed by a loud scream. Then the forest fell silent, save for the beating of hooves against the earth, as Umbridge was lifted up into the air, wriggling and yelling with fright. Hermione saw her wand drop to the ground, but before she could entertain any hopes of retrieving it, a hoof came down and broke it cleanly in two.

"Now!" Magorian roared, as he regained his footing and yanked Hermione up to her feet as well.

Hermione watched with almost passive interest as Umbridge was borne away through the forest by Bane, her screams dying away as she disappeared, and then all was silent. Inside, she found herself extremely pleased at how neatly Umbridge had just been sorted out. Another part of her was uneasy, however, as she turned back to look at the centaurs.

"And her?" asked the hard-faced grey centaur, glaring down distrustfully at Hermione.

"She is young," Ronan said dolefully, coming up from behind them. "We do not attack foals."

"She brought her here, Ronan, and she is hardly a foal—she is a teacher up at the castle. Her face has merely changed. Professor Granger, was it not?"

"Yes, that's right," Hermione said, slowly stowing her knife away, aware that every centaur's eyes were on her. "I've been de-aged, but it is still me." Knowing that the Centaurs would not be pleased at the fact that she had brought Umbridge here, much less that she had hoped Umbridge's hatred of half-breeds would invoke their ire, she twisted her story and lied, "I did not mean to run by your herd. I merely meant to lure her in deep enough, and then escape to help my charges back up at the castle." She bowed her head in respect, a bit uncomfortable at baring her neck, but hoping she looked contrite. "I did not expect to get any of you involved, and I am sorry if you are angry that you were. I apologize deeply for the offense Umbridge did you."

Magorian pawed the ground restlessly, his hoof flattening the ropes he had struggled with moments ago into the earth. "She meant no harm, and given what we have just seen, it seems that she had great need of riding herself of the other human."

"We just rendered her a service!" the grey centaur spat angrily. "She used us!"

"I do not believe so," Ronan said mournfully. "We may have driven off the human from the Ministry of Magic, and it is true that she was attempting the same, but it does not appear that our interference was her intention… It was merely a coincidence that we should have the same priorities…"

"Please," Hermione said breathlessly. "I need to return to the castle. If you would—if you would consider me deeply in your debt for unintentionally helping me," she continued, warily getting down on her knees before them, "I would happily consider myself so. But believe me when I say that I would never do you the offense of using you."

It was partially true, what she had said. She had not meant to involve them, but when they had involved themselves, she had taken advantage of their pride and Umbridge's stupidity.

There was a moment of silence, only broken by the snort of disbelief from the hard-faced grey centaur, and then somewhat more gently than expected, Magorian bent down and pulled her back up to her feet.

"We will consider you in our debt, human," he said, "and we will let you go to take care of your foals."
“Thank you,” Hermione said. She bowed her neck once more and then straightened, yanked up her sleeve, and began twisting the dial on her watch. "Thank you."

A twist and press of the third dial, and in the midst of all the centaurs, she spun away.

~o~O~o~

Umbridge's office was empty, save for the groaning, unconscious Slytherins strewn on the floor, and Hermione found herself rushing right back outside in time to see Harry and the others tearing down the hill, no doubt about to go into the Forbidden Forest to find her. She sprinted after them, and managed to stop them just before they reached the shade of the first trees.

"I managed to get back," she panted, coming up behind them, out of breath. "I saw what you did to Malfoy—good Bat-Boogey Hex, Ginny. Umbridge's taken care of, but how are we going to get to the Ministry?"

"Umbridge's taken care of?" Ron repeated, looking at her in amazement as he tossed her wand back to her, which Hermione caught gratefully. "Blimey, Hermione, what the hell did you do to her?"

"Ran straight into a herd of centaurs," Hermione said darkly. "She got a bit carried away."

Ron nodded, and rubbed at his lip, which was still bleeding. "Well, we won't have to worry about her then, but that still doesn't answer how we're going to get to London."

"Well, we'll have to fly, won't we?" Luna said, in the closest thing to a matter-of-fact voice Hermione had ever heard.

Hermione saw something shifting through the trees, and peered past to try and discern it better.

"Okay," Harry said irritably, "first off, 'we' aren't doing anything if you're including yourself in that —"

"Harry," Hermione said slowly.

"—and second of all, Ron's the only one with a broomstick that isn't being guarded by a security troll, so—"

"I've got a broom!" Ginny said angrily.

"Yeah, but you're not coming," Ron said.

"Excuse me, but I care about what happens to Sirius just as much as you do!"

"You're too—"

"I'm three years older than you were when you fought You-Know-Who over the Philosopher's Stone!" Ginny said, jaw set stubbornly, "and it's because of me Malfoy's stuck back in Umbridge's office with giant flying bogeys attacking him!"

"Yeah, but—"

"Harry," Hermione repeated more urgently, as a dragon-faced, skeletal horse with giant, leather wings padded slowly from the trees, ambling curiously in Ron's direction. It stopped for a moment to sniff the air.

"We were all in the D.A together," Neville said quietly. "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—or was that all just a game or something?"

"No—of course it wasn't—"

"Then we should come too," Neville said simply. "We want to help."

"Well, it doesn't matter anyway, because we still don't know how to get there—"

"I thought we had already settled that?" Luna said maddeningly. "We're flying!"

Ron looked ready to round on Luna, but he suddenly yelped and fell over backwards as a long, pink tongue came out to lick the blood on his chin. But of course, he could not see the tongue; the thestral licking him was perfectly invisible to those who had not witnessed death. But Hermione, who was not a stranger to death, saw them as plainly as the nose on her husband's face.

"Thestrals," she said plainly. "We can ride thestrals—Hagrid said they're very good at finding places their riders are looking for. Isn't that right?"

"That's right!" Luna said proudly.

Harry stared at the thestral licking Ron for a moment, and then his head snapped in the direction of the trees as two, three, now four—no, five—shapes emerged.

"That's right," Hermione repeated, as a thestral walked by her and nudged its companion aside for another lick at the blood dribbling down Ron's chin. "Thestrals like meat—they're very good at scenting it out…"

"It's those mad horse things, isn't it?" Ron croaked, as he hurried back to his feet, and promptly knocked heads with the thestral still trying to lick him. "Bloody hell—"

"There's enough of them here now," Hermione said determinedly, stepping forward and pulling Ron away from the thestral he couldn't see so that he wouldn't knock into it again. She turned to look at Harry. "I'm afraid to say it, Harry, but we're wasting time here—Neville, you can come along, but Ginny and Luna—"

Ginny immediately began to protest, but Hermione cut her off.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley, this is not a game! If we're going to the Ministry, we're doing it with the assumption that we might run into the Dark Lord—you and Luna are good, Ginny, but this isn't a field trip, and I cannot simply allow you to just tag along—"

"You're not my mother," Ginny said, lower lip trembling with anger. "I know what I'm getting into. I want to help!"

"I may not be your mother, but—"

"But nothing! You can't make me stay— I'm coming!"

"Don't be stupid, we can't all go!" Harry interjected angrily. "Look, you three—you're not involved in this, you're not—"

All three of them burst into protest, and Hermione saw Harry grimace before he wheeled away from them.

"Okay, fine, it's your choice," he said shortly, "but unless we can find more thestrals—"
"There are enough of them here already," Luna pointed out.

"Six," Hermione agreed with a regretful sigh, turning to glance at Ginny, still trying to think of a way to dissuade the girl.

"All right, pick one and get on, then," Harry said angrily. He made to mount the nearest one, but Hermione stopped him.

"Harry, the rest of them can't see them—"

He shoved past her and went to help Ginny climb on, and Hermione moved to help Ron find and mount his thestral, before climbing onto his own. Hermione tightly gripped the mane of hers, swung herself on, and seated herself easily.

"This is mad," Ron said faintly, moving his hand gingerly up and down his horse's invisible neck. "Mad… if I could just see it—"

"You'd better hope it stays invisible," Harry said darkly. "We all ready, then?"

They all nodded, tightening their grips and adjusting their seats, and then Harry looked down at his thestral. Hermione saw him swallow, and looking rather foolish, muttered, "Ministry of Magic, visitors' entrance, London, then." He added uncertainly, "Er… if you know… where to go…"

For a moment, the thestrals did nothing; then with a powerful snap of their wings, they took off.

~o~O~o~

Hermione had spent the duration of the ride worrying frantically about the madness of bringing along Ginny, Luna, and Neville.

Neville had improved greatly, and though Hermione never showed nor gave any indication of it, he was all she had left of Alice. All she had left of a brave, lively woman who had been one of her best friends in school and in the Order. She still saw Alice in the shape of Neville's face, the way his eyes scrunched up with determination when he put his every effort into accomplishing something. If Harry was right, and Voldemort was at the Ministry, Hermione was afraid of what would happen when they brought this round-faced, somewhat incompetent boy who had a tendency to let his emotions drive him into sudden acts of rashness that he could not quite back up with power yet.

Not to mention Ginny… what would Molly have to say? Ron—Ron was another matter, Ron had been getting into these sorts of situations with Harry for years—but Ginny had not. Hermione would have much rather left the girl behind. She was skilled with her wand, quick and sharp, but it was not enough. It would never be enough. But there was no stopping Ginny now, not without Stunning her and leaving her behind, and it was too late anyways, not to mention the fact that Harry—and Ron, especially—would have thrown a fit if she had.

Luna—Luna was a bit too dreamy for Hermione's liking. She did not always seem alert or aware enough of her surroundings, not in the way that one needed to be when they were in the middle of a life-or-death situation. And if she died, Hermione would personally hold herself responsible for it. She had to admit the girl had a knack for seeing things in people that others often overlooked, and she was not a bad hand with a wand, but she was just not was the kind of person Hermione would have wanted to bring along on a mission like this.

In fact, Hermione would have preferred to have gone alone. She would have been able to come in by stealth, have been able to employ magic without worrying about how advanced it was and what her fellow students would say when they saw it, and be able to nip in and out without raising a ruckus.
She had become a master at sneaking in and out of places undetected, and she had the power behind her to take the Dark Lord by surprise and Portkey herself and Sirius out of there in no time at all. But there was no way she would have ever succeeded in dissuading Harry and Ron, and not only were they in for a knut, but they had come in carrying several galleons…

And now they were standing in a large, circular room filled with doors.

Doors.

Hermione had never seen anything like it.

There had been times she had fantasized about working in the Department of Mysteries. She had grasped onto the secretive whispers about the place, what it meant to be an Unspeakable, and perceived it to be a little gold mine of research on mysteries of the world yet unknown to mankind. It was the stuff of dreams for her. She felt like Alexander the Great contemplating a land of untold wealth and wonder.

But with five young, impulsive, and—for the most part—ignorant students, Hermione was as frightened as hell. They had gone through several doors now, and Hermione's blood had nearly run cold when she had come across the veil. It had been difficult to drag Harry away. She lied to him when she said she couldn't hear the voices, but even as she pulled him away, she did…

A faint whispering, a murmur of people who were ticklingly familiar. Alice's voice whispered into her ear, though Hermione could not make out the words. Fabian and Gideon too, though they faded away as Marlene said something quietly, liltingly—and James. Hermione thought she heard James…

She heard so many voices, combined with the feeling that there was someone standing just on the other side of the archway, urging her to walk into it to find out. It terrified her just looking at it; it was as hauntingly beautiful and equally seductive as a Veela, although much more subtle, and everything about it made the hair on the back of Hermione's neck bristle with the sensation of danger.

But once that door was shut, and they had given up on another door which was locked, they made it into a room that held a strange glass bell jar.

"This is it!"

As soon as Hermione had pulled her eyes away from the odd sight of a hummingbird emerging from an egg, flying toward the top of the jar until age and weariness dragged it back down to the egg, where it encased itself again to repeat the cycle, they were in the next room.

It was full of rows and rows of strange orbs, all resting neatly on wooden shelves, lit by glowing blue-bell flames. This was the place, the very place that the Order had been attempting to guard from Harry for the past year—and now they were here. Hermione listened carefully for a moment even as Harry and the others tore down the direction leading to row ninety-seven, straining for any sound that would indicate someone—anyone—else was there.

They were alone. She heard neither a shriek of pain or whimper of defeat that would have signaled Sirius's presence, nor the Dark Lord's high, cold laughter. Nothing. A wave of relief washed over her. If Sirius was not here, then that certainly meant that Selenius was not, either.

But she followed nevertheless, feeling more and more as though this were nothing more than a waste of time at best, and a trap at worst. The Dark Lord was not here, but he had sent Harry a vision that was clearly meant to lure him here. Scraps of memories collected together to form a coherent understanding of the situation. Only the ones that a prophecy referred to could touch it, Voldemort
had already attempted to have others steal it and failed, and he was too vain to do it himself—

He had sent Harry here to do it.

But how on earth was he planning on stealing it from Harry?

If they got the prophecy now, they could steal it away from Voldemort's reach or perhaps destroy it. These orbs looked fragile; all it would take would be for Hermione to grab it, chuck it at the ground, and then they could leave—

But she still had a role to play.

"Ninety-seven!" Hermione whispered.

"He's right down at the end," Harry said. He looked uncertain, and his voice came out slightly shaky. "You can't see properly from here…"

They edged forward, wands out and at the ready, but they inevitably came to the empty aisle.

"He should be near here…"

"Harry?" Hermione said.

"Somewhere… about… here…" Harry said, his voice fading as he began to register that there was no one else there.

"Harry…"

"He might be…" Harry whispered hoarsely, peering down the alley next door. "Or maybe…"

"Harry," Hermione repeated.

"What?" he snarled, rounding on her.

With some measure of palpable relief, Hermione said, "I… I don't think Sirius is here."

Nobody else spoke aloud. Harry stared at the ground, and Hermione could sense the turmoil radiating off of him. She wanted to touch his shoulder, to comfort him, but knew that it would not be welcomed right now. Harry was beginning to realize that he had been manipulated.

"Harry?" Ron suddenly called.

"What?"

"Have you seen this?"

Hermione sucked in a breath as she watched Harry eagerly stride over to where Ron was, no doubt expecting to hear that Ron had found something, a kind of clue to indicate that Sirius had been there —

"What?" he repeated glumly, when all he saw were still more rows of glass balls.

"It's—it's got your name on," Ron said.

Hermione carefully leaned against one of the shelves, checked that it held her weight, and then peered down at the Portkey on her wrist. If she grabbed them all now, she could port them out, and
they would make it back to Hogwarts in no trouble at all and with the prize firmly in hand. It would give away one of her secrets, but Hermione did not want them to simply walk out of the room where they would be vulnerable to attack. As soon as Harry got the orb, they would go.

Hermione suddenly sensed another presence in the room—it was a watchful one, hungrily waiting like a sentinel, and as Harry's hand stretched closer to the glass ball, she felt a spike of magical signature twinge along her senses.

"Harry, don't touch it," Hermione said sharply.

"It's got my name on," Harry said, face set.

His fingers closed around the dusty glass ball.

Hermione felt the magic spike again, tingling along her spine in warning the way a hunted animal felt the presence of a hunter with a loaded gun aiming for their backside, and moved in closer to Harry even as the others gathered around for a look at it.

And then, from right behind her, she heard Lucius Malfoy's familiar voice drawl, "Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me."

Hermione spun around in time to see several black shapes appearing out of thin air, blocking their way left and right; they were wearing their Death Eater masks, wand-tips lit and pointed directly at their hearts of those they had encircled. Ginny let out a gasp of horror, and Hermione quickly moved to cover her.

"To me, Potter," Malfoy drawled, holding out his gloved hand, palm up. His eyes glittered maliciously behind the peepholes in his mask.

"Where's Sirius?" Harry demanded.

Several of the Death Eaters laughed. A harsh, female voice that Hermione remembered all too well cackled and then said triumphantly, "The Dark Lord always knows!"

"Always," Malfoy echoed softly. "Now, give me the Prophecy, Potter."

"I want to know where Sirius is!"

"I want to know where Sirius is!" Bellatrix Lestrange mimicked.

Hermione felt a wave of cold, raw anger course through her at this. The realization settled in that not only had Harry been tricked, not only had the rest of them been tricked, she had been tricked as well.

Of course the Dark Lord would not have given them time to even attempt to leave the room full of prophecies, not even through ways other than the door. She had been a fool.

"You've got him," Harry said desperately. "He's here—I know he's here…"

"Harry," Hermione hissed.

"The little baby woke up frightened fort what it dweamed was twoo," Bellatrix said, in her horrible, mock-baby voice.

"Don't do anything," Harry muttered. "Not yet—"

"Harry, listen to me—"
"You hear him? You hear him? Giving instructions to the other children as though he thinks of
fighting us!"

"Hermione—"

"Harry, shut up."

Harry did not take his eyes off the Death Eaters to look at her, but Hermione knew the expression of
surprise and shock on his face was for her. She hissed into his ear, quietly enough for only Harry to
hear, "Let me handle them. You tell the others when to strike."

"When to—oh." Harry quickly backed away, causing the Death Eaters to hiss and shift angrily and
uneasily at this, as Hermione stepped to the fore, shielding Harry with her body. She had her wand
pointed straight at Bellatrix.

"Look at her," Bellatrix cackled. "Now she's the one giving orders!"

"Oh, you don't know either of them as well as I do, Bellatrix," Malfoy said softly. "Potter has a great
weakness for heroics, and Granger has a habit of being very impudent, though no less self-
sacrificing... but they both understand the situation at hand; just as the Dark Lord understands
Potter. Now give me the prophecy."

"No," Hermione said coldly.

"I know Sirius is here," Harry said desperately. "I know you've got him!"

More of the Death Eaters laughed.

"It's time you learned the difference between life and dreams, Potter," Malfoy drawled. "Now give
me the prophecy, or we start using wands."

Before Harry could reply, Hermione interjected, "You're bluffing."

They all turned to gaze at her; she felt her friends' eyes locked on her in amazement, and the Death
Eater's in cold fury. She continued, "That dusty ball of spun glass Harry is holding—that's the only
thing stopping you from hexing us, because if Harry happens to drop it—" She gave Bellatrix an icy,
cruelly amused smile that she only reserved especially for the Dark Lord and his followers. An
expression that held nothing but contempt and disdain, and told them just how above them she was.
"—I'm quite sure the Dark Lord will be terribly unhappy. If we hand it over, there's nothing to stop
you from turning your wands on us."

Bellatrix let out a hiss of fury. "Accio Proph—"

Harry was ready for it and quickly uttered, "Protego!"

"Oh, he knows how to play, itty bitty baby Potter," Bellatrix said, her eyes staring through the slits in
her hood and filled with madness and malice. "Very well, then—"

"I TOLD YOU, NO!" Malfoy roared, rounding on Bellatrix. "If you smash it—!"

Bellatrix let out a sound like an angry cat, stepped forward, and yanked off her mask.

"You need more persuasion?" she told Harry. Hermione stared at her face, which had hollowed and
sunken in much the same as Sirius's had, and the family resemblance was still there, but there was no
denying her identity. Definitely the Slytherin girl with whom Hermione had clashed with before,
when they were students. "Very well—take the smallest one," she ordered the Death Eater beside her. "Let him watch while we torture the little girl. I'll do it."

Hermione felt the others close in protectively around Ginny, and pressed back as well, baring her teeth threateningly at the Death Eaters as they advanced.

Her lips curled into a snarl. "I'm warning you— one more step, and I'll tell Harry to drop it—"

"You'll have to smash this if you want to attack any of us," Harry called over Hermione's shoulder. "I don't think your boss will be too pleased if you come back without it, will he?"

Bellatrix licked her lips, moistening them, but said nothing. Her eyes glittered with rage, flickering between Harry and Hermione, as though unsure of which one to deal with first.

"So," Harry continued, stalling for time, "what kind of Prophecy are we talking about anyway?"

*Good job, Harry.* He had clearly cottoned on to the situation at last, realizing that Sirius was not there, and that they would need to use every ounce of cunning and blackmailing and procrastinating and bargaining in order to get out of here alive. The Death Eaters were focused solely on the prophecy. That meant Hermione could no longer smash it until the others gto away, but it also meant that they would not be handing it over until they had a secure means to escape. She heard the others whispering quietly, passing along the message to attack at Harry's signal, and smiled faintly at this. They had a chance yet.

The posturing continued for several minutes longer, dragging on. Hermione kept her mouth shut and wand trained on the Death Eaters as Harry taunted them, testing the waters by throwing out Tom Riddle's name. Two prophecies were smashed to the ground as Bellatrix attempted to stun them, causing Malfoy and Bellatrix to round on each other and quarrel in fury, before turning their attention back to Harry and the rest of their group. In that time, Hermione had come up with a tentative plan in addition to Harry's signal, and the message had been passed through the group.

Malfoy was telling Harry and awful lot of stuff that Hermione wished he had not, for it included things that the Order had been reluctant to reveal to Harry, but at this point, her biggest concern was that they get out of here alive. But now everyone else was in on the plan, they all hand their wands at the ready, and then—

"Now!" Harry yelled.

Four different voices behind Hermione screamed, "*Reducto!*" The shelves around them smashed, glass balls flew everywhere, smoke unfurling from them as they hit the ground, wooden splinters raining down upon them—

"RUN!" Harry yelled, and Hermione aimed her wand at the Death Eaters still struggling to get through as the heard her friends follow Harry's directive and flee for the other side of the aisle.

"*Stupefy!*" She snapped, moving back quickly to tail them. "*Cordis Impedimentum!*"

She heard the struck Death Eater let out a gurgling, choking whimper at the last one, heard Malfoy's yells as he tried to revive his two cohorts, and turned around and fled. The last spell was designed for Mediwizard use, to stop a patient's heart, but Hermione had long since discovered just how many spells intended to help people could also be used to hurt them. You didn't need the *Avada Kedavra* if you knew how to expel someone's entrails, or *Crucio* if you could scour the inside of their ear canal or rewire their nervous system.

It was astonishing how many dark, destructive spells had originally been designed for medical use.
She caught up with Harry just before he slammed the door of the bell-jar room shut, and she snapped her wand at it—"Colloportus!"—to seal it shut with a squelching sound before turning to look at Harry.

"Where are the others?" she demanded.

"They must have gone the wrong way," Harry said, looking panicked.

"Listen," whispered Neville.

Footstep and shouts echoed from behind the door, and Hermione heard Lucius Malfoy roar, "Leave Nott, leave him, I say, the Dark Lord will not care for Nott's injuries as much as losing that prophecy—Jugson, come back here, we need to organize! We'll split into pairs and search, and don't forget, be gentle with Potter until we've got the Prophecy, you can kill the others if necessary—"

"What do we do?" Hermione whispered, and for the first time, she was trembling. She was not worried about herself, so much as she was worried about the fact that they were now split up—Ginny—Ron—Luna…

"Well, we don't stand here waiting for them to find us, for a start," Harry said determinedly. "Let's get away from the door…"

They headed back for the circular room, and were almost there when Hermione heard a rough voice order, "Stand aside! Alohomora!"

Harry, Ron, and Neville all dived under a desk, hiding quickly as the door was forcefully opened. Hermione heard two pairs of feet, exchanged a glance with Harry and Neville, and readied her wand.

"They might've run straight through to the hall—" the one who had opened the door ordered.

"Check under the desks," the other ordered.

Hermione saw the knees of one of the Death Eaters bend, and jabbed her wand at the man closest to her, who she recognized immediately as Dolohov, but had to quickly come out from under the desk when the man dodged Harry's hastily thrown Disarming Spell. It was she who his wand turned on, though.

"Avada—"

Harry launched himself at the man, throwing his arms around his knees and dragging him down. There was a loud crack as another spell hit the wall of hourglasses, breaking them, and he quickly scrambled away as Dolohov crashed to the ground, the contents of the hourglasses pouring over him. Dolohov yanked off his mask so that he could see, and pointed his wand at Harry. "STUP—"

Hermione acted first, shouting "STUPEFY!": the man went limp, sinking backwards, his head hitting the bell-jar.

No, not hitting. It went through the bell jar as though it were not glass but a soap-bubble, and Hermione watched in amazement as his head began to shrink…

Oh my god…

She quickly handed Harry's wand back to him, urging the other two to come with her as they made it into the circular, door-filled room again. The Death Eater, whose head was shrinking and then
expanding with age, crashed behind them, and Hermione was forced to Stun him again. They flailed into the next room, searching for the other half of their group, but were followed and before Hermione could seal the door behind them, it was forced open.

With a cry of triumph, the two Death Eaters who had found them yelled, "IMPEDIMENTA!"

Neville was thrown backwards over a desk. Hermione was smashed into a bookcase, covering her head with her hands as heavy tomes toppled off their shelves, knocking into her painfully; Harry was slammed into the stone wall behind him, and as Hermione pushed the books off of her, it occurred to her for a moment that he actually looked too dizzy to do much—

"WE'VE GOT HIM!" Hermione recognized Rudolphus Lestrange, and struggled to get to her feet, wand raised. "IN AN OFFICE OF—"

"Silencio!" Hermione cried, and Lestrange fell silent. He rounded on her—Dolohov again, he had managed to pull his head free of the bell jar—and silently slashed his wand in her direction just as his companion fell to the ground at Harry's feet, stiff as a board. Purple flames flew from his wand, and before Hermione could raise her own in defense, it had struck her right through the chest. She staggered weakly to her feet, with a little cry of 'Oh!' in surprise, and then crumpled to the floor.

The pain was compressing her chest, making her heart feel as though it were about to burst. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head as she struggled to remain conscious, lifting her wand despite the fact that her heart felt as though someone had wrapped a thick, fiery coil of rope around it and was tightening it mercilessly—

The sound of someone casting a *Petrificuls Totalus* resounded through her ears, and then Hermione felt Harry and Neville on either side of her, grasping her hands, which she was trying to move to use her wand.

"She's alive—she's moving—"

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, black spots appearing behind her closed eyelids, as she hoarsely gasped out the counterspell to the one Dolohov had just used on her. The feeling of her chest being constricted and of burned alive vanished, although the pain was still there, and she let out a weak moan before rolling over onto her belly and trying to haul herself up. She heard her heart sounding a frantic, jarred beat of *lub-dub* as she pushed herself to her knees, and Harry and Neville helped her sit up.

"Hermione, are you okay? Hermione? Speak to me!"

Hermione let out a whimper, and a painful gasp for air, and closed her eyes again.

She had almost been killed because she was trying to keep her role firmly covered while fighting. But they were battling Death Eaters who would not play nice—they were in a life and death situation—she had to drop it now. She ground her teeth against the pain, and forced her eyes open.

"Help me up," she gritted.

Harry and Neville, both looking extremely relieved, pulled her to her feet. She staggered for a moment, and then forcing herself to ignore the pain, adjusted her grip on her wand and forced herself to walk toward the door. Her chest beat with vestigial pain at every moment, but it was no worse than the times she had been forced to train against Moody and Kingsley under the Cruciatius Curse, no different at all… she knew how to ignore pain…

But a moment later, she crumpled to the floor again. Harry and Neville let out exclamations of alarm
and tried to help her up again, but Hermione shook them off.

"Leave me here," she snapped, though her voice came out as a croak. "I'll be fine. Go find the others!"

"We're not leaving you here—"

Hermione's eyes glinted dangerously. "Did you hear what I said, Harry James Potter? I told you to go look for the other three people you dragged along on this suicide mission, and find them. You know where I am. I need a moment to recover."

A sudden scream permeated the room, and Hermione winced.

"The others… look like they need your help…"

She saw uncertainty war across Harry's otherwise anguished face, and for a moment, her vision blurred enough that she thought—just for a second—that he was James. He looked exactly like James. James would never have left her behind, and it looked like Harry wouldn't either. But he had to. He needed to get to the others…

"Neville—" he began.

"Neville, go with Harry," Hermione panted out. "You need friends at your back, Harry, and you can't drag me along with you. I'll still be here. Hurry."

That did it. Neville grabbed Harry's shoulder, pulled him to his feet, and the two left the room.

Hermione lay there for several minutes, wincing at the screams and shouts she heard from outside, and then forced herself on weak feet to stagger toward the desk. She crouched down, leaning against the side, wand at the ready, and closed her eyes. She tried to recall all the spells she knew that might help. She had halted Dolohov's curse, but had done nothing to diminish the effect it already had, and the residual pain she was feeling was a warning that if she pushed herself any farther, she might actually kill herself. Damage to the circulatory system was no laughing matter.

She tapped her chest with her wand, and felt her heart jump irregularly for a moment before resuming a soothing, rhythmic lub-dub like it should. Her heart was beating correctly, and she next tried a spell to soothe the pain. That worked, too. It wouldn't mitigate the actual damage done, but now she could function, at least if she didn't push herself too hard. She tried a spell to repair some of the damage, a weak healing spell, but had no idea how effective it would be. This kind of curse surely ran deeper than any healing spells she knew could fix.

She rested there for several minutes more, breathing in and out carefully, and then when she felt that she could stand without falling over or without feeling that her chest was going to burst at the slightest exertion, she forced herself to her feet again.

The fighting seemed to be in the room with archway; the door was still ajar. Hermione pushed through, leaning against the doorway for support, and slashed her wand at the nearest Death Eater, Jugson. He let out a howl of pain, and the Death Eaters' attention was momentarily diverted from Harry and Neville, who were battling side-by-side together, the prophecy clutched in Harry's sweaty palm as they held off their attackers.

And then Hermione felt someone grab her from behind, and whipped around with a whimper of pain in time to see Remus. He took one look at her, quickly pulled her aside, and burst into the room with Tonks and Kingsley at his heels. Hermione's eyes widened as she saw Sirius and Moody appear through another door in the room with the archway, and gathering up what energy and determination
she had left, she followed them in.

"Hermione—no—stay back—"

"I have a job to do, Remus," she snarled, but there was an edge of pain to her tone.

Jets of light avoided them narrowly, and there was no time to argue as the fighting intensified, streams of multicolored light being thrown around the room, bouncing off various things and striking other objects in their path—

Hermione saw a Death Eater pick Harry up, grabbing him by the neck and crushing him in a chokehold, and aimed her wand. She was too tired to think creatively; she just needed to free Harry—

"Spinaliquis!"

The Death Eater dropped Harry and dropped to his knees, legs and arms twitching wildly, painfully, before he collapsed to the floor, his whole body jerking—

Hermione advanced, wand raised in one hand, the other pressed to her chest, and then threw herself to the ground with a grunt of pain in order to duck as Bellatrix diverted her attention from Sirius, who she was now dueling, to aim a jet of green light at her. Hermione rolled away, and bumped into a pair of high-heeled boots—

She looked up, wand lifted above her head in defense, but then lowered it in shock as she saw who it was.

"Dumbledore," she whimpered. Not in fear, but in pain. Her heart was thudding dangerously again, but despite that, a sense of relief washed over her. They were saved. She tried to get to her feet again, but a sudden sharp, explosive jerk of pain expanding outward from her heart threw her back to the ground, her cheek pressed against the hard stone floor. The curse. She had done too much already. Dumbledore quickly moved past her; Hermione saw that much as her world began to blur and swim in front of her. She twisted her head to the side weakly to see the battle, to see him raising his wand, in time to see Sirius dueling Bellatrix.

The last thing she saw was her son's adoptive uncle, almost a godfather to him in his own right, a brother to her in all but blood, dueling Bellatrix Lestrange.

She saw him duck one Stunner.

He did not duck the other.

As if in slow motion, his footing gave out from under him, and he slumped sideways… and fell through the veil.

The last thing she heard, as she closed her eyes and succumbed to the hellish nightmare her mind sought sanctuary from, was Harry crying out, "Sirius!"

~o~O~o~

Hermione slowly opened her eyes and was mildly confused to find herself on a small four-poster bed in the living room of Grimmauld Place. The fire crackled merrily behind the grate, dancing and flickering before her eyes, and she closed them again. A cool hand pressed against her forehead, and then her wrist, and then Hermione heard Poppy's voice.
"She's awake, but extremely weak... she'll be alright..."

She heard someone exhale in relief, and realized it was Remus. When he spoke, however, his voice was tired and hoarse. "Thank goodness. I'll let Severus know."

"He left an hour ago to answer a summons... he hasn't been back yet..."

"Is Selenius still upstairs?"

"Yes. I haven't told him what happened yet... he wants to know where Sirius is, and to see his mother..."

"Does he know?"

"No, not yet..."

Hermione let out a muffled whimper, and then opened her eyes.

"Poppy?" she whispered. Her voice was barely audible, cracked and hoarse.

"I'm right here," the mediwitch assured her, "although I have to return to Hogwarts in ten minutes to check on my... other patients..." she trailed off.

"How long have I been asleep?" she rasped.

"Three days. I don't know what you were thinking, fighting in that condition—the damage you've done to yourself—"

Hermione closed her eyes again.

"I want to see Selenius," she croaked.

She heard Remus get up, and then saw him walk around until he was standing in front of the fire. He came to kneel slowly next to her, and placed a hand over hers.

"Hermione, we haven't told Selenius what happened yet..."

"I want to see him," she repeated. She tried not to look at Remus as she spoke, because it might just be the fire making her eyes itch and water, but her vision was blurred and wet. "That's—that's the only reason I—I went with them. T-to make sure Selenius was okay. Oth-otherwise, I w-wouldn't have let them..."

Remus chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, and then looked up at Poppy. The two stared silently at each other, and as though by some unspoken unanimous agreement, he straightened up.

"I'll be right back."

Poppy made a clucking noise with her tongue as she gathered up her things, and then the fireplace turned emerald green. She was gone a moment later, and Hermione was alone, save for the sound of footsteps descending the stairs—and the sound of more footsteps entering the room. She craned her head to the side slightly in time to see Molly Weasley enter the room, carrying a tray upon which balanced a bowl of soup—delicious, if the smell was anything to go by—and ten different glasses, all filled with potions of different colors, organized neatly on the side. She set it down.

"How are you feeling, dear?" she asked gently.
Hermione swallowed. "I'm sorry, Molly."

"You went to protect your son," Molly said calmly, smoothing out her apron. "And from the sound of things, you didn't have much choice in stopping Ron and Ginny from coming along—or the rest of them, for that matter," she added briskly. "Ron said that Harry told him that—well—you spent more time worrying and trying to protect the others than yourself."

Hermione nodded weakly. A lump rose in her throat. Molly placed a soothing hand on her shoulder in understanding, and Hermione closed her eyes, struggling to take this all in. Footsteps could be heard making their way down the stairs, and her eyes flew open again as she heard Selenius and Remus come in.

"Mum?" he whispered. He stood at the doorway, in the woolen snitch socks the Headmaster had given him, still in his pajamas. He was looking at her with an expression that Hermione could not quite interpret, but it seemed to be mostly made up of fear, relief, and confusion. "They wouldn't let me come in earlier…" he stopped, seeing the condition she was in. "Mum?"

Hermione pulled a hand free of the blankets to reach out for him, and he quickly crossed the room and took it, before throwing his arms around her.

"Careful!" Remus said, as he came to stand beside him. "She's still not well—be gentle with her."

Selenius pulled away a moment later, and looked up at Remus.

"What happened? Why won't anyone tell me what happened?"

Hermione swallowed, and tried to sit up. Molly immediately moved to help her, fluffing up a pillow behind her for support, and Hermione turned to look at Selenius.

"I—I got in trouble," she said weakly, by way of explanation.

"I can see that." If Hermione had not been so tired, if she had not been so bone-weary and miserable with pain and guilt, she might have laughed. His pedantic tone was so very much like his father's. "But that doesn't tell me what happened."

It was Remus who answered for her. "She was one of several who went to help fight You-Know-Who's Death Eaters."

"Like Sirius?"

There was a long, pained pause.

"Where is Sirius?"

Hermione swallowed again, and then looked at Remus for confirmation, before she croaked, "He's dead."

For a moment, Selenius' face looked exactly as Sirius's had, when Bellatrix's spell had struck him. Shock and disbelief froze his expression into place; and then he shook his head slowly, still absorbing it, and said, "No."

"Selenius," Remus began.

"No…" Selenius whimpered. "No… that's… that's not possible…"

Hermione closed her eyes, and felt something wet roll down her cheek.
"He said he would be right back… that he just had to go somewhere for a bit… he promised he would be back soon…"

"I'm so sorry," Hermione choked. She looked up, and grasped Selenius's hand, pulling him close to her. The minute she wrapped her arms around him, hugging him against her, he made a sound like a wounded animal and began to cry. He buried his face in her shoulder, shaking with sobs, and Hermione held him tightly. Remus's hands came to rest comfortingly on Selenius's, and they stayed like that for several long, teary and painful minutes, before Selenius pulled away. He wiped messily at his face with his sleeve, and turned to leave, hiccupping.

Remus followed him, and Hermione was grateful for that. She was also grateful that Selenius had not pulled away immediately; she was not sure she could have handled that. Because at that moment, everything had become clear, and the painful resolution of the battle at the Department of Mysteries settled itself in her mind.

Sirius was dead.

She would never get to talk to him again. See him laugh. Watch him play with Selenius. A hole had been ripped in her heart where Dolohov's spell had failed to reach, with the realization that a man who had been her loyal and unflinching friend for over twenty years had been cruelly torn away from her. And, possibly even more cruelly, had been taken away from her son. And Harry.

Molly placed a hand over hers, and then gestured at the bowl of soup on the tray, which was still warm.

"You should eat and take your potions," she said.

Hermione nodded, sniffling as she took the bowl of soup and began to eat.

~o~O~o~

Selenius came down the next morning, his eyes red and face blotchy from crying, but Remus had managed to convince him to do at least that. Hermione was not yet well enough to leave the bed, and her friends at Hogwarts reportedly thought that she had been sent to St. Mungo's, and was grateful and relieved that her son came to see her first thing. He pulled up a chair next to her, his legs swinging a few inches off the floor, waiting until Molly had finished giving her the ten different potions she had to take, and then spoke.

"How are you feeling, Mum?"

"A bit better," Hermione admitted quietly. "What about you?"

"It still hurts." He swallowed. "That he's not—that he's not coming back."

Hermione looked at her son with sad eyes, and then said gently, "The ones we love never truly leave us. It can—it can help to try and remember the good things about a person, the memories of them that make us happy, even—even if it makes us cry to do so."

Selenius sniffled, and Hermione saw him avert his eyes, though it didn't hide the tears that had begun to roll down his cheeks. "I—we were playing chess when he left. He was winning. He—he was being really ridiculous about it as usual…"

Hermione gave him a watery smile. "I remember when we were students, we used to spend time with our other friends—James and Remus—before school started, and we would buy our supplies together. Sirius was a very good sport about the fact that I couldn't afford much, and he was very—"
just very nice, very much the goofball when I thanked him for buying me new robes."

Selenius had heard this story before, in full, and he wiped his nose with his pajama sleeve before adding, "He said that you were always running out of quills, those days."

Even through her misery and faint, sad smile, Hermione could not help but let out a weak snort of amusement at this. "He was right."

"He taught me all about Quidditch," Selenius added, wiping his face with his other sleeve now. "He—he told me all about Hogwarts. Taught me what's most important."

"What did he say?" Hermione asked gently, but she was genuinely curious.

"T-that your friends come first, broomsticks second, and homework third," Selenius said with a watery smile. "He said your friends are the m-most important thing in the world, and that you need to… to choose them carefully, because they're the people you'll have to s-stick by and expect to do the same for you."

Hermione shook her head, but now she was smiling despite herself. "That's j-just like him," she sniffed, rubbing at her eyes. "That's exactly him…"

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Thirty-Four

Big thanks goes out to my amazing beta, the magical SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review!

Severus did not return from being summoned for several days. In that time, Hermione had to return to Hogwarts, where she stayed in the Hospital Wing with Ron so that Poppy could keep an eye on them both until they were cleared to leave. The *Daily Prophet* used up a good amount of page space to give Harry its accolades, although it failed to give any mention of the fact that it had been among the many publications that had sold copies by telling the world that Harry was unstable and a liar.

"He's 'the Boy Who Lived' again, now, though, isn't he?" Ron said darkly, when Hermione read them the latest set of articles from the *Sunday Prophet*. "Not such a show-off maniac anymore, eh?"

Hermione was discharged the next day purely on the understanding that her husband would be ensuring she got care and bed rest in their quarters down in the dungeons. The story was, of course, that Hermione had gone back to St. Mungo's so that the healers there could check up on her condition, which, Poppy told them exasperatedly, was what any sane person would have done.

However, Hermione was quite glad to be back at home in their quarters, where she and Severus had a chance to talk properly for the first time in weeks. He had gotten the full report of what she had done—both from the Order and the Death Eaters who had escaped—and was well aware of what she had done. He was also understandably furious that she had pushed herself after being hexed by Dolohov.

"By all rights, that spell should have knocked you unconscious!" he told her angrily, arms folded across his chest and one leg crossed over the other as he sat on the bed next to her while she had some shepherd's pie. "But naturally, you got right back up again."

"I had a job to do," Hermione said tiredly. She was still heartsore, not just from Dolohov's curse, but from missing Sirius. "I had to protect them. Of course, we shouldn't have gone in the first place…"

"I don't blame you for going," Severus said quietly. "I would have done the same, given—given we both feared that Selenius might have been involved."

"But he wasn't. It was all a trick."

"Yes."

"What does my interference mean?" Hermione asked, setting her plate aside. "Surely the Dark Lord isn't about to let this slip past unpunished. How has this affected your position?"

There was a moment of silence, and then Severus responded, "I have told the Dark Lord that ever since you returned to your place in this timeline—after assuring him, of course, that I had no idea how you had de-aged yourself—that I was losing control over you. The fact that you managed to apparently sneak off and find a way to become seventeen again without my knowledge means that my methods of coercion were not effective enough. He believes that I kept you under an Imperius curse and that you fought it—and now that we are distanced from each other by duty, that it has broken.
"Of course, he was not pleased about this, but he was more upset about Lucius's failure to obtain the prophecy than he was with you. Despite the damage you did to his Death Eaters, he considers you to be no more than a thorn in his side, even perhaps still useful. Due to Lucius's blunder, and the fact that he has been placed in Azkaban, my position has not suffered as it might otherwise have—in fact," he continued smoothly, "given the fact that he just lost several high-ranking members, he has seen fit to promote me. He expects me to continue trying to retain what control I have over you through psychological and physical coercion, but he is more concerned about my usefulness as a spy, which has been more beneficial and successful to his cause than anything else in the past year."

"So you weren't punished? No standing was lost?" Hermione pressed.

"No."

"Then why are you upset?"

Severus's expression froze for a moment, and then he cleared it into a smooth, blank mask—which Hermione promptly wiped away with a raised eyebrow and a derisive look that clearly said, "Don't even try that on me."

He paused, and then said curtly, "The Malfoys are likely to face further punishment for Lucius's failure."

He waited for the other shoe to drop, but when Hermione gave no indication of understanding, he added quietly, "Draco."

Hermione's eyes lit up in understanding.

"Oh god."

"Yes."

"The Dark Lord will kill him."

"He will be set up for it, yes."

"And you want to help him. Protect him," Hermione clarified, as Severus averted his gaze.

"He happens to be my godson."

Hermione nodded slowly.

Even if Severus had not been directly punished, the fate of the Malfoy boy was most definitely a painful consideration for him. Hermione placed her hand on his crossed arms, and he unfolded them, to take her hand and wrap it between his fingers. He looked at her.

"I'll help you," she said honestly, her eyes soft but tone sincere. "I'll help you help him."

He gazed at her for a full minute, searching her face for something, and then bent down and kissed her.

"Thank you," he whispered.

~o~O~o~

Hermione did not return to King's Cross with everyone else. She remained at Hogwarts, still recovering under her husband's watchful eye; Harry and Ron were summarily informed that she had
been sent home early for her health, but had been otherwise assured that she was fine and would be right as rain soon enough. The Snapes spent their Anniversary curled up in front of the fire on the sheepskin rug, pressed against each other for comfort, and each with a book. They had not had the opportunity to do something like this since Hermione had returned to being a student again, and it was simply a relief to them both to feel the other's solid presence at their side again. Hermione's recovery commenced quickly, but Poppy had strongly advised against strenuous activities, and both Professors intended to follow the matron's recommendation.

On their anniversary, however, that did not stop Severus from pinning her to the sheepskin rug, albeit a bit more gently than he might have otherwise done, and slowly and sensuously tracing patterns across her body with his tongue, scraping sensitive skin with his teeth and lips. And when he released her wrists so that his hands caressed her, covering every inch as though trying to memorize her curves by feel alone, Hermione woove her fingers through his hair, tightened her grip, and then pulled his mouth towards hers so that their tongues mated in a slow, sensuous, fiery mix of passion. Despite the noticeable lack of intercourse, it could not be described as anything other than making love.

Hermione was able to be up and about without worrying about being struck by a sharp pain in her chest about a week after the students had returned home, and was fully cleared as being in good health three days after that. The first thing she did was visit her parents, Flooing to the Leaky Cauldron and then Apparating home.

This was something Hermione had both been looking forward to and dreading. She loved her parents, and had missed them dearly, almost painfully, over the last twenty years. But she had changed so drastically since she had last seen them, and it was simply impossible to try and explain to them exactly what had happened to her. Therefore, she greeted them with tight hugs and plenty of love, and then sat them down to have a talk.

She was used to simply pulling out her wand to get her way with her Muggle relatives, but she had too much respect for her parents to do that. It was too easy, too lazy, too… dictatorial. It was self-admittedly hypocritical on her part, but she operated thus nonetheless. She simply could not bring herself to do that right-off without at least talking things over. She had seriously considered telling them the truth about her situation, but there were too many things that they would have to go over, too many ways the discussion could go wrong. It was not that her parents didn't deserve an honest explanation, but rather that an honest explanation was simply not feasible at that point.

How does one explain to their very non-Magical parents, who only had a vague and incomplete understanding of the Wizarding world, that their daughter had been thrown back twenty years in time, had lived twenty years, married (her Potions Professor, no less) and had a child, fought in a war, and had been de-aged to resume where her timeline had left off, and was now a drastically different person than the one her parents remembered seeing over the Christmas holidays? How could she fit twenty years of her life into the time span of what amounted to a mere six months' absence from her parents' lives?

Until such a time as Voldemort was dead and she and her parents presumably had all the time in the world to sit down and discuss everything for as long as needed, Hermione simply could not tell them. Not to mention that the more people who knew about the reality of her situation, the more dangerous it would became. This was for her parents' safety as much as her own.

Therefore, she lied.

She told them that she would like to remain at the Burrow for the entirety of the summer, and though her parents were not happy at the prospect—they only got to see her sparingly to begin with—
Hermione was eventually able to reason it out with them. It helped that they understood that she had incurred a few health problems near the end of the year (their understanding, anyway) and that being with a Wizarding family would be safest for her if she needed a prompt visit to see a Healer. Thus, she returned and left her parents' house in the space of a day, and then paid Grimmauld Place a visit.

Severus would be returning to Spinners' End in about a week, and Selenius could not stay with him. The Dark Lord indicated he wished to have Wormtail there, although who was keeping an eye on who in that situation was anyone's guess. Nevertheless, this presented a problem, because Hermione had no intention of returning Selenius to his aunt and uncle's. He was still grieving over Sirius's death, and Hermione wanted him to be in the company of people who understood his situation, cared for him, and knew him as a person. People who had also known Sirius so that if Selenius needed an ear, he had one.

Remus offered to extend his stay at Grimmauld Place for two weeks in order to look after Selenius, which Hermione appreciated gratefully—until an Order meeting confirmed that Headquarters would have to be temporarily moved to the Burrow due to the complications concerning Sirius's will in regards to the house. It was then Dumbledore who came to the rescue, suggesting that Selenius stay at Hogwarts until the issue of Headquarters had been sorted out. The Burrow was simply not large enough for Selenius to remain hidden from the Order members who came in and out without him going stir-crazy.

Minerva offered to take personal responsibility for him, and Hermione actually thought that this would be a good arrangement for them both. Her Head of House was still a bit weak from the four stunners she had received, and a bit of help from Selenius would be nice—as well as the fact that she was quite understanding and sympathetic to how Selenius was feeling at the moment, and would be a willing ear for the boy. Not to mention that Filius and Pomona were also remaining behind for the summer, each for their own reasons (some that had to do with the Order) and each both more than happy to help look after their colleague's son. Hagrid, too, would be staying, which was a nice addition.

Hermione therefore brought Selenius back to Hogwarts with her. They arranged for him to sleep in the first-year boys' dormitory up in Gryffindor Tower. Though it was clear to Hermione that Selenius was still broken up inside without Sirius, being given free range of the castle and the grounds perked him up noticeably. He spent the first two days wandering through every classroom, every corridor, and weaving through the bookcases in the library, clearly amazed at the sheer size and space available in the place.

He would be turning eleven come August 31st, but Hermione had arranged with Dumbledore to hold him back from being admitted, at least for another year. On a mere technicality, since he would not be turning eleven until after the letters of acceptance had been sent out, Dumbledore could place him down to attend until he was officially eleven as of when he received his letter. It did not stop Hermione from disguising herself and taking Selenius to the London Underground to visit Ollivander's. Even if he would not be attending school, he would technically be eleven, and she could homeschool him until term began, and then make other arrangements for his education.

Her intention in keeping Selenius from Hogwarts for another year was to keep him safe from appearing on the Dark Lord's radar; she had no intention of keeping Selenius ignorant. That the reason they found themselves in the narrow and shabby-looking shop that announced itself with peeling gold letters that read: Ollivanders: Makers of Fine Wands since 382 B.C. They pushed open the door, their arrival announced by the tinkling of a bell somewhere in the shop, though Hermione now suspected it was a Bell Charm, which was a milder and much more pleasant version of the Caterwauling Charm.
"Good morning," said a soft voice.

Selenius, who had been eagerly looking around him at the thousands of tiny, narrow boxes stacked up to the ceiling, wheeled around. Hermione placed a hand on his shoulder, squeezing it in a silent plea for him to behave and be polite, and then turned to face the wandmaker.

"Good morning," she agreed.

But Ollivander did not seem to pay her much mind. His wide eyes were on Selenius, thoughtful and reminiscent.

"And who would you be?" he asked, his voice still soft and gentle with curiosity.

Selenius turned to look up at his mother.


"I see," Ollivander said, unblinkingly. "I don't suppose you would happen to be related to Hermione Granger?"

"She's—er—my cousin," Selenius replied, without turning to look at his mother.

"Vinewood and dragon heartstring, ten and three-quarter inches," Ollivander said, pulling out an odd, silver-marked tape measure from his pocket. "Nice and flexible, if I recall. Well now, Mr. Granger, let me see… which is your wand arm?"

"Erm—I'm right-handed," Selenius said.

"Hold you your arm. That's it," Ollivander said, and the tape measure immediately got to work. Hermione could not help but smile at the bewildered look on Selenius's face as the tape measure began moving rapidly from measuring his arm to the distance between each nostril. As he measured, Ollivander explained to Selenius the basic knowledge of wandlore, explaining that no two were the same, that each wand was composed of a powerful core inside a carved stick of wood, and that you would never get as good results with another wizard's wand.

Ollivander left for a moment while the tape measurer was still working, and came back holding a single box. Hermione could not help but sigh inwardly at this; it was inevitable that the wandmaker would have to go through several boxes, but it would then be considered reasonable to bring several boxes with him to begin with. She kept quiet, however, as Ollivander pulled out a wand and handed it to Selenius—and pulled it away before he had even finished telling Selenius what it was made of. Hermione helped herself to a seat in a spindly nearby chair as Selenius went through several wands.

Several wands quickly became a dozen. A dozen became a dozen more. It was not difficult to see that Selenius was rapidly running out of patience. He had never been allowed to touch his parents'—or anyone else's wand, for that matter—and Ollivander hardly even let him lay a finger on the wands he was supposed to be trying out. But the old wandmaker was completely unfazed, as pulled down yet another box and opened it.

"Yes, I think this one might do... yes..." He held the wand out to Selenius. "Ebony and dragon heartstring, twelve inches, unyielding. Go on, go on, give it a try..."

Selenius took it, and for a moment he looked as though he half expected Ollivander to snatch it back; but then the next moment passed, and a look came over his face that gave Hermione the impression that if the wandmaker tried to take it back, Selenius might actually protest. He gave it a sharp jab.
A stream of water emitted from the wand, striking a nearby windowpane, and Selenius quickly snapped his arm back in surprise—and then his pale face lit up with a kind of radiance that Hermione had not seen on him since his and Sirius's broomstick expeditions at Tine Cottage had been cut short. The flow quickly stopped, and dusty water dribbled down the window, soaking some parchment on the desk beneath it, but Ollivander didn't seem worried in the least.

"Excellent! Excellent, indeed! Well, that will be all, I think…"

They paid seven Galleons for the wand, and left the shop with an air of relief.

As soon as they made it back to Hogwarts, Hermione laid some very clear ground rules about the use of Selenius's wand. While at Hogwarts, he was free to practice magic at will, and she knew that Minerva and Filius would be more than happy to give him some lessons. He was also allowed to use it while at Grimmauld Place, Spinner's End, and Tine Cottage, as Hermione's authority as his mother designated those places as sanctioned home-schooling grounds. The Ministry of Magic did not know about Selenius, but the Trace recognized the authority of a parent intent on home-schooling their child. But outside of those places, he was not allowed to do magic unless it was a life-threatening situation.

Then she laid out some ground rules that he was to adhere to during his stay at Hogwarts. He was perfectly within his rights to go to the Quidditch pitch and fly, but only if there was an adult present. This was not because Hermione was afraid that he would fall and break his neck, although that was always a worry for her; it was because if Hogwarts got any unexpected visitors, she wanted an adult nearby who was capable of concealing Selenius. And though Hermione fully expected him to become as adept with a wand as she and Severus were, it was beyond absurd to try and teach a first year, with no prior practical experience with a wand, to cast a Disillusionment Charm.

As soon as she was confident that he understood that, she took him to the Charms classroom and poked her head in to see if Filius was available. Upon seeing that the diminutive Charms Professor was there, organizing his desk files, she asked if he had a bit of time to spare to teach Selenius a few basic charms, which Filius was only too delighted to do. He got Selenius started on the Levitation Spell, *Wingardium Leviosa*, and then stood back with Hermione to watch him make his first attempt on a feather.

"I expect he'll be just as talented as you were," Filius noted. "His father was too, at that age. I haven't seen the boy for nearly five years, and I must say that he looks almost exactly as Severus did when he first walked into my classroom twenty-six years ago." The tiny Charms teacher chuckled at this. "Minus the scowl, of course."

Hermione left Selenius there, confident that he would be kept busy for quite some time, and returned to the dungeons.

"Well?" Severus asked curtly, when Hermione stepped into his office. "How did it go?"

"Ebony and dragon heartstring, twelve inches, and unyielding," Hermione recited, snapping the door shut behind her.

Severus's expression froze for a moment, his gaze unblinking. "Ebony and dragon heartstring," he repeated quietly.

"That's your wand, too, isn't it?"

"Yes."
Hermione took a seat next to him, pulling the other chair in the room closer to do so, and then said quietly, "He's with Filius right now. The other teachers haven't seen him for years, and the first thing they seem to notice is how very much alike the two of you look."

"I'm not surprised."

Something was bothering him. Hermione stared at him for a moment, and then decided to throw caution into the wind and ask him outright. "What's wrong?"

Severus set his quill down, and then leaned back in his chair with bitter, sour look. "I've missed you, and despite the short time we have together right now, we are both extremely busy—too busy to spend time together. My concerns about Selenius being discovered have hardly been assuaged, and furthermore, the boy is mourning the loss of a man who made my life a living hell while we were in school, but who was more of a father to him than I ever was. And to top it off," he added nastily, shoving the parchment he had been scribbling on toward Hermione, "I have to write up a brand new curriculum this year rather than fall back on the one I usually use, because Albus has finally decided to give me the Defense Against the Dark Arts job."

Hermione gaped at him for a moment, unsure of what to address first, and then snapped her jaw shut. And then said, "You got the job?"

"Yes," Severus snarled.

Hermione licked her lips for a moment, and then pushed the papers aside and said, "You're leaving for Spinner's End in a week. Save the planning for while you're there."

She was not surprised by the disgruntled look on Severus's face. When she had been a teacher, the two of them had been rather prompt in designing their curriculum for the year, and to break this pattern now was an uncomfortable change, to say the least. But he did not protest.

"Secondly… Severus, you've been holding a full-time job here at Hogwarts, interspersed with spying duties, and Selenius has spent most of his time in Grimmauld Place. Sirius was like an uncle to him, and he looked after Selenius when neither of us could." Hermione placed her hand on Severus's arm, and squeezed it comfortingly. "It's natural that Selenius is close to Sirius and Remus—but you've cared for Selenius as much as you could, the same as I have. That doesn't mean he thinks of Remus as his mother in my stead."

Severus actually snorted in derision at this, but his lips quirked up in the vestige of a smile.

"Sirius never took your place as Selenius's father, Severus. He never spoke badly about you to Selenius's face, either—Selenius is our son," Hermione said firmly, "and he loves us both. He understands that there are extenuating circumstances that mean our family is sometimes broken apart for a bit, but that doesn't change the fact that he still loves, admires, and respects his father."

"Furthermore," Hermione said, when Severus opened his mouth to speak, "given that we have a week until we have to part ways again, why don't you spend it with Selenius? I know you're busy, and that you could be called away at any moment, but it doesn't mean you can't go with Selenius to the Quidditch pitch, or teach him how to brew some first-year potions, or even just play chess with him."

Severus gave her a bitter look. "Selenius will hardly prefer family time to learning how to use his wand."

"It's true that he's with Filius right now, but tomorrow, once he's eaten breakfast, you can collect him
from Gryffindor tower,” Hermione suggested, gentling her tone. "He has all summer to learn from the teachers here, but only a week to be with you. I think I know how he'd rather spend that week, if you'll only give him a chance."

Severus sat there for a long moment, quietly brooding, and then he said quietly, "And you?"

Carefully, mindful of the open bottle of ink on Severus's desk and its proximity to his curriculum plans, Hermione stood up and swung her leg over him so that she straddled his lap. He looked surprised, but the moment she kissed him, his hands moved, one to her waist, the other to cup her cheek, and he returned the kiss hungrily until she pulled away.

"There's nothing stopping us," Hermione told him softly, leaning in until their noses touched. Their eyes met, and she added, "Not even right now."

They gazed at each other for a full minute, searchingly, and then leaned in.

The clothes came off.

~o~O~o~

The next day, Hermione watched with a smile as Selenius followed his father outside, a chessboard tucked underneath one arm, and a broomstick held firmly in the other hand. Severus had abandoned his teaching robes for the day, which made him look less intimidating, more approachable, and it was difficult not to see how ecstatic Selenius was. The boy was practically skipping.

She would have gone to join them, but refrained. Right now, this was Severus and Selenius's time together. She would see if there was room for her later, but right now, she wanted to give the two of them a chance to reconnect alone. It had been a difficult year for them all, and the two of them hardly had any time to be together. This was their sole opportunity. Hermione got to see Selenius far more often than his father did.

Hermione was surprised when she saw them stop by Hagrid's cabin on the way, but smiled when Hagrid opened the door, waved cheerfully at them, and then let Fang slip out before shutting it. The large boarhound joined the two of them, tail wagging uncontrollably as they made their way down to the Quidditch pitch. Hermione spent the day inside, going through her old schoolbooks and writing out a list of spells and notes that she intended for Selenius to be well-practiced in by the time term began, followed by a list of spells that she wanted him to learn while she was completing her sixth year. She would have included potions, but given the volatile nature of the subject, she would rather Severus taught Selenius one-on-one when the opportunity presented itself.

Meanwhile, she was making other arrangements for her son when she and Severus would be unable to look after him due to their respective duties. Remus would be working underground as a spy in the werewolves' camp, and was thus ill-suited to look after Selenius. He would have to give up his position to do that, which would do more harm than good for the Order at large, and Hermione was not willing to compromise that. The Burrow would be an excellent place for him to stay, but she would have to arrange that in person with Molly and Arthur. The two were proficient with magic, had survived seven children, and their home was secure. But even if the Weasleys allowed Selenius to stay, he could not remain during the holidays, when their own children (and Harry and Hermione) would also be expected to return.

In which case, Remus could possibly look after Selenius during Christmas, if Hermione was unable to weasel her way out of visiting the Burrow at that time. He would be their back-up plan, if Severus and Hermione were unable to spend the holiday with their son while his primary foster caretakers were swamped with their other charges.
The next few days fell into a comfortable, pleasant routine. Selenius would spend the morning and a good portion of the afternoon with his father, usually with a game of chess, a mutual challenge of riddles (Selenius was crafty enough to write his own now), or down in the Potions classroom. Selenius was delighted at the prospect of potions-brewing, and though Hermione was not present for those lessons, she had it on Severus's good word that Selenius was a natural.

No, not just a natural. Potions genuinely interested him. He had already proven himself prodigious with a wand, according to Filius's recount of his first-day lesson, but there was something about brewing that was fascinating and deep, something that stirred his mind and interest the same way the puzzles and riddles did. Something that required a good deal more than the application of energy and concentration to a simple swish and flick. He saw something in brewing the same way an artist saw something more to a painting. It was difficult to describe, but it was plain to see that Selenius had the same natural love and talent for Potions as Severus.

Just like his father, Hermione thought fondly. Severus had grown more relaxed, more secure, and more confident in his relationship with his son over the last few days, and given Selenius's immediate fixation with potion-making, the connection between them was undeniable. It was therefore a miserable thing to acknowledge that Selenius's education in Potions would be severely restricted until such a time as Severus could teach him personally, or until he attended Hogwarts. The fact that Selenius had a natural hand for potions did not necessarily mean it was safe for him to brew alone, or supervised by someone who was not capable of recognizing when to step in to prevent a fatal mistake from being made.

It was at this point that Hermione tried to compare her son to his father, when she and Severus had both been students. She had not known him before his sixth year, but the surly, skinny, lanky-haired teenager who had radiated an aura bloated with obsession for the Dark Arts was almost nothing like Selenius. Severus had been ill-cared for, bitter, and for the most part, alone. His son had received as much affection as the people around him could give, even when situations meant that his parents could not always be there for him in person; additionally, his son had a much more laid-back, better-tempered personality. It was plain to see that the son had received everything that the father had not, and it made Hermione seriously wonder what Severus would have been like had his parents been less abusive and negligent, and had he not immediately been targeted and set upon by the Marauders.

Sometimes, she wondered if Dumbledore was right in saying that he thought that they sorted too soon. But this went a bit deeper than that; it was a case of the hat taking the personality at face value and not looking at the potential underneath.

It also made her wonder if Selenius would be sorted into Slytherin. It was a bit naïve to suggest that he would be put into Ravenclaw as a compromise. He was intelligent, quite brilliant for his age and naturally curious, with an eagerness to learn that was comparable to Hermione's, but there was more substance to him than that. He was sneaky. She knew her son could be clever and cunning like his father, and furthermore, was not afraid to be so. It would also be poor manners to forget the fact that his mother was a Gryffindor, and that both men he considered to be uncles were as well.

And there were times when he was brave. When he showed courageousness, or at least a stoutness of heart that prevailed despite the situation at hand. When he had to move from home to home, whether it be his Muggle relatives', Tine Cottage, Spinner's End, Grimmauld Place, or Hogwarts, he took it in stride. It did not mean he was happy about it, but he saddled up and dealt with it. His never neglected his sense of adventure; Hogwarts was a castle that needed exploring, and gravity was something that needed to be defied with a broomstick.

And when Sirius had been killed, he took the blow, and while he was still reeling from it, he prevailed.
No, Hermione's son was not a Ravenclaw. The question was whether the Sorting Hat would choose his craftiness or adventurousness as the main factor in its decision.

That was when Hermione set the whole thought aside. That time would be a full year from now. She had a year before she needed to worry about Selenius and Hogwarts and Houses being in the same paragraph.

When Selenius went to bed each evening up in Gryffindor Tower, Hermione and Severus would retreat to their quarters. The day was reserved for their son and other duties; the nights were reserved for themselves. And they made good use of it. Hermione had brought up the very valid point that since it was a war, linking their wedding rings so that they could send signals through it would be a good idea, and they spent a good portion of each evening making the appropriate changes with a Protean Charm, along with a useful little spell that would allow them to lock onto the other's location and promptly Apparate to them, provided there were no wards in place to stop them from doing so. They were well prepared this time.

After that, they made love to each other furiously. They would likely not have another chance, and that chance was a slim one depending on how things turned out, to have this kind of opportunity for intimacy for a long time. Their separation during the last few months of this year had been a painful lesson in look-but-don't-touch. Neither of them had any intention of dropping their teacher-student roles during term so that they could have sex. They were adults with two distinctive but very important, very difficult jobs and roles to maintain. Their marriage was secure. They had each other. But while they played their roles, they couldn't have each other.

It was a painful thing to accept, but they had come to terms with it during the time that they had been abruptly cut off from each other. They therefore took advantage of what time they did have together to make the most of it.

It was with great sadness that they spent their last night together before Hermione would have to return to the Burrow, and Severus would retreat to Spinner's End. Severus had already returned briefly several times over the last few days, largely to handle Wormtail, who had already made himself at home there, to Severus's disgust. Narcissa Malfoy and Bellatrix had paid him a visit one evening, and Severus's report had nearly made Hermione lose her temper. 'Nearly' was not the correct word. Hermione had lost her temper.

"You did what?"

Severus gave her a wary, but stony look as he uttered, "I made an Unbreakable Vow."

"To Narcissa Malfoy? That you would help kill the Headmaster? Are you out of your mind, Severus?" Hermione looked ready to throttle him. "Do you know what you've done?"

Severus glared at her. "I know perfectly well what I've done."

"If Draco fails…"

"I know what will happen if Draco fails, and what will be required of me."

"The Headmaster—"

"The Headmaster knows, of course."

Hermione let out a scream of frustration and yanked on her hair, trying to pull herself back under control, and without success. Hermione had stormed up to the Headmaster's office, and then back to
their quarters, and then returned to Dumbledore’s office again, and then left for the library, slamming the door shut behind her as she went to look up precisely what an Unbreakable Vow entailed. It was not until quite some time later that she calmed down, although it was a stretch to say that she was at peace with the situation at hand. Dumbledore clearly had something up his sleeve, though what it was, she could not guess.

Selenius would be taking lessons from Filius, Minerva, and even Pomona starting tomorrow. Though they would not be official lessons, they would be just as strict and informative, though given the fact that the teachers would only have one student to pay attention to, it would mean that they could tailor their lessons so that Selenius could get more out of it. It was, as Severus put it snarkily, the effects of removing the lowest common denominator.

The teachers all had their own side-projects to do over the summer, but they were all more than happy to set aside an hour or two each day to devote to extra lessons. They were easily recompensed, however, by the fact that Selenius was more than capable of assisting Filius in organizing his files, fetching things for Minerva that she simply did not have the energy to summon with her wand or stand up to retrieve herself, and was a good enough listener that he could help Pomona do simple repotting that was more time consuming than it was dangerous.

Hermione sighed and leaned back onto the rug, massaging the soft sheepskin with her fingers and reveling in the feel. She sighed again, and then relaxed her shoulders, allowing herself to sink into it with a moan of pleasure.

"I can't even begin to tell you how grateful I am that we got this rug."

"Over twenty years ago," Severus agreed quietly, as he began unbuttoning his shirt, before kneeling down next to his wife to work on her own. "I won't be bringing it back to Spinner's End with me. Wormtail will be there. But it will be here, when I return."

Hermione smiled, and pulled him down by the front of his shirt so that she could kiss him, before releasing her grip on him to run her fingers down the expanse of his chest that was visible. "It's hard to believe it's lasted this long."

"I would say we've taken very good care of it."

Hermione laughed, pleased, and then reached up to kiss his sternum. "I agree."

He bent over her, and was about to place his lips on the sensitive juncture of her neck when there was a burst of flame over them, startling them both. Severus reacted quickly, wheeling around, wand raised, but halted when he saw that it was merely Fawkes. The phoenix, with its beautiful scarlet plumage, spread its wings, stretched out its neck toward them, and let out a soft musical trill.

"Fawkes?" Hermione said, bewildered. "What is Fawkes doing here?"

"It's a message," Severus said abruptly, getting to his feet and quickly buttoning his shirt up again. "I need to see the Headmaster."

"I'll come along too," Hermione said, sitting up quickly and retrieving her wand. "Accio Notebook! There—let's go."

Twenty minutes later found them both in the Headmaster's office, pale and shaken. Dumbledore was slumped in his chair, having barely managed to give a short and undoubtedly incomplete explanation of what he had done, and Hermione immediately approached to help move him into a more comfortable position while Severus pulled out his wand and examined Dumbledore's proffered hand,
which lay blackened and limp on the surface of his desk.

"Ah—thank you, Hermione..." he said, as he sagged sideways in his chair, leaning heavily against the armrest. His eyelids closed, and Hermione frantically looked from him to Severus, who had his wand out and was muttering incantations too quickly for Hermione to even decipher. He paused long enough to tell her what to do.

"Go—my stores—you know where..."

Hermione left through the Floo, and returned several minutes later with a goblet of thick, golden potion. She set it down carefully on the desk, and then came around the other side of the desk to help the weakened wizard sit up long enough for Severus to pour it down his throat. Her eyes fell upon the ring lying on the desk, the Sword of Gryffindor next to it, and cautiously, she moved to prod the ring with her wand.

"Don't touch it!" Severus said sharply, turning to look at her once before returning his attention back to the blackened hand before him.

"It's quite all right, Severus," Dumbledore murmured, his eyes fluttering open slowly.

"Why," Severus said without preamble, anger and disbelief lacing his voice, "did you put on that ring? It carries a powerful curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

Dumbledore grimaced.

"I... was a fool... sorely tempted..."

Hermione had never seen the Headmaster in this state. So vulnerable, so open, so—weak. Frail.

"Tempted by what?" Severus demanded.

Dumbledore did not answer. Perhaps, Hermione thought, he had not heard; he was no doubt still in a great deal of pain. Yet, something told her that he had deliberately ignored the question, and to her great surprise, it only brought back memories of the few conversations she had with Bathilda Bagshot all those years ago...

Her memories on the matter were a bit fuzzy, but old Bathilda had known quite a lot about Dumbledore, and on those occasions where she and the Potters had tea together that Hermione had been present, she had told Hermione quite a bit. Hermione wracked her brain, trying to uncover decades-old information that she had not given much consideration to.

"It is a miracle you managed to return here!" Severus sounded furious, and—to Hermione—just a bit frightened. "That ring carried a curse of extraordinary power, to contain it is all we can hope for; I have trapped the curse in one hand for the time being—"

Dumbledore raised his blackened, withered hand and examined it with an expression that quite reminded Hermione of someone being shown an interesting museum piece.

"You have done very well, Severus. How long do you think I have?"

Hermione bit her lip with anger and worry. Dumbledore's tone was conversational, as though she were asking for a weather forecast rather than how much longer he was expected to live. Severus hesitated for a moment, exchanged an uncertain glance with Hermione, and then said, "I cannot tell."

Hermione leaned over and gently took the Headmaster's hand in her own, turning it over in her
fingers to examine it as Severus continued, "Maybe a year. There is no halting such a spell forever. It will spread eventually, it is the sort of curse that strengthens over time."

"You'll probably lose all feeling in it by the end of the year," she told him softly. "It will probably complete its course by this time, next summer, if not sooner."

Dumbledore smiled. The news that he had less than a year to live seemed a matter of little or no concern to him.

"I am fortunate, extremely fortunate, that I have you, Severus and Hermione."

"If you had only summoned me a little earlier, I might have been able to do more, buy you more time!" Severus said furiously. He looked down at the broken ring and the sword. "Did you think that breaking the ring would break the curse?"

"Something like that… I was delirious, no doubt…" Dumbledore said. With an effort and some help from Hermione, he straightened himself in his chair. "Well, really, this makes matters much more straightforward."

Severus looked utterly perplexed. Hermione understood immediately. Dumbledore smiled.

"I refer to the plan Lord Voldemort is revolving around me. His plan to have the poor Malfoy boy murder me."

Severus sat down in the chair across the desk from Dumbledore. He opened his mouth to say more on the subject of Dumbledore's cursed hand, but the Headmaster held it up in polite refusal to discuss the matter further. Hermione took a seat on the armrest of the chair, placing her hand on Severus's shoulder in silent warning for him to acquiesce. Arguing with Dumbledore at this point would be useless, and berating him for his foolishness would do no good. Scowling, Severus said, "The Dark Lord does not expect Draco to succeed. This is merely punishment for Lucius's recent failures. Slow torture for Draco's parents, while they watch him fail and pay the price."

"In short, the boy has had a death sentence pronounced upon him as surely as I have," Dumbledore said calmly. "Now, I should have thought the natural successor to the job, once Draco fails, is yourself?"

There was a short pause.

"That, I think, is the Dark Lord's plan," Severus admitted quietly.

"Lord Voldemort foresees a moment in the near future when he will not need a spy at Hogwarts?" Dumbledore asked, as though clarifying a simple matter.

Severus's jaw set. "He believes the school will soon be in his grasp, yes."

Whatever color that remained in Hermione's face drained at this moment. She knew this already. She was well aware of what the Dark Lord was up to, what he thought, what he had planned now. But to have Dumbledore confirm it so casually as something that was not just the Dark Lord's fantasy, but something real and probable, made it difficult for her to breathe. She couldn't think Voldemort to have control over the school—it was incomprehensible.

"And if it does fall into his grasp," said Dumbledore, almost, it seemed, as an aside, "I have your word that you will do all in your power to protect the students at Hogwarts?"

Severus gave a stiff nod.
"Good. Now then. Your first priority will be to discover what Draco is up to. A frightened teenage boy is a danger to others as well as to himself. You too, Hermione; you will be able to keep an eye on him from a student's perspective, watch what he's in the classes you share... Offer him help and guidance, Severus, he ought to accept, he likes you—"

"—much less since his father has lost favor. Draco blames me, he thinks I have usurped Lucius's position."

"All the same, try. I am concerned less for myself than for accidental victims of whatever schemes might occur to the boy. Ultimately, of course, there is only one thing to be done if we are to save him from Lord Voldemort's wrath."

Severus raised his eyebrows and his tone was sardonic as he asked, "Are you intending to let him kill you?"

"Certainly not. You must kill me."

There was a long silence, broken only by an odd clicking noise. Fawkes was gnawing a bit of cuttlebone.

"Would you like me to do it now?" Severus asked, his voice heavy with irony. "Or would you like a few moments to compose an epitaph?"

"Oh, not quite yet," said Dumbledore, smiling. "I daresay the moment will present itself in due course. Given what has happened tonight," he indicated his withered hand, "we can be sure that it will happen within a year."

"If you don't mind dying," said Severus roughly, "why not let Draco do it?"

Hermione's lips thinned into a white line at this. Severus must have kept something from her, because he had agreed to the Unbreakable Vow before this, yet it had been a promise of such magnitude that Dumbledore must have already known something of that ilk would be coming and prepared Severus for it. Yet, she had been left out of the loop on this. Why? And what was so important about forcing Severus, an unwilling man, to take the place of a boy who was more than willing to do the deed?

"That boy's soul is not yet so damaged," said Dumbledore. "I would not have it ripped apart on my account."

Hermione let out a derisive snort.

"And my soul, Dumbledore? Mine?"

Hermione's grip on her husband's shoulder tightened painfully, so that her nails were digging into his skin. She glared at the Headmaster with the baleful look of someone who wished to make an offender eat their words, but refrained. She was shaking, though whether it was more with anger or fear, she herself did not know. Right now, her nerves were shot.

"You alone know whether it will harm your soul to help an old man avoid pain and humiliation," Dumbledore said gently. "I ask this one great favor of you, Severus—and Hermione, if it falls onto you to do it for whatever reason—for death is coming for me as surely as the Chudley Cannons will finish bottom of this year's league. I confess I should prefer a quick, painless exit to the protracted and messy affair it will be if, for instance, Greyback is involved—I hear Voldemort has recruited him? Or dear Bellatrix, who likes to play with her food before she eats it."

His tone was light, but his blue eyes pierced them both, placing them both under the x-ray of his
gaze, as though the souls they discussed were visible to him. At last Severus gave another curt nod.

Dumbledore turned to Hermione.

"Hermione?"

Hermione shook her head weakly.

"No, Headmaster," she said quietly. "I can't—I couldn't—"

"If Severus is unable to do the deed, I require that you step in his place for this," Dumbledore said. "You are no stranger to death, Hermione, and you also know the reasons for which you would end my life. To spare me further pain."

Hermione swallowed. Her eyes lingered on the blackened, useless hand still resting on the surface of the desk, limp and lifeless. Imbued with a curse that would undoubtedly spread up Dumbledore's arm, painfully infest his heart or his lungs—whichever came first—and kill him slowly…

Dumbledore was asking this of her so that if Severus was unable to do the deed, she could do it and Severus could take the credit, furthering his position in the Dark Lord's ranks. She would be doing it in his stead as his handler, working to ensure the continuity of her spy and partner's usefulness. She was not murdering an old, helpless man. She was ending his life on his terms to set the stage for the Dark Lord's downfall.

"If it comes to that—and I sincerely hope it won't—then I will," she said softly.

Dumbledore seemed satisfied.

"Thank you, Severus… Hermione…"

With great effort, he pushed himself to his feet.

"You may go now," he said.

"Sir, if you need any help—"

"I will be fine, Hermione."

Seeing that they had both been dismissed, the two of them stood up and left Dumbledore's office. They walked slowly back to the dungeons, neither saying a word to the other. Hermione's mind was in too much turmoil for that.

Severus had made an Unbreakable Vow to take up the task kill the Headmaster if Draco failed.

Draco would fail.

Dumbledore was slated to die by Severus's hand—or hers, should extenuating circumstances prevent him from carrying out the task. Hermione did not want to consider what circumstances that might entail. If Severus were prevented from carrying out the task, it would fall on her to do it—which would release Severus from the Vow, but place the burden of the deed on her. It was not every day that you planned someone's homicide in the company of the soon to be victim, and Hermione could not help but be utterly disturbed both by the conversation that had entailed, what they had been asked to do, and furthermore, what they had committed themselves to doing.

The minute they made it back to their rooms, Severus grasped her arm and pulled her to him, catching her off guard as he wrapped his arms around her, clasping her arms to her sides. She
struggled for a minute, and then desisted, pressing her cheek against his chest as his rested his cheek against her head. They stood there quietly, and then by mutual agreement, pulled away to get undressed. They climbed into bed a quarter of an hour later; silently, without a word said between them, they pulled the other close, pressed as tightly as they could against each other, and closed their eyes. She breathed in his scent, comforted by his nearness, and snuggled in deeper against his chest.

In the morning, when Hermione awoke, he was gone.

~o~O~o~

Hermione gazed out the sun-lit window of the Burrow, sitting at the table while Molly cooked breakfast. None of the others were up yet, meaning that the kitchen was peacefully quiet, save for the occasional yet soothing sounds of a mother at work in a kitchen.

"Selenius can't stay at Grimmauld Place when term resumes," Hermione said quietly.

"Where is he now?" Molly asked briskly, lifting up the lid on one of her pots to give it a small stir.

"Hogwarts." Hermione sighed, and folded her arms on the table, leaning forward. "I would ask Remus to take care of him, perhaps at—at our old headquarters—" she had almost said the words Time Cottage "but Remus has his work to do with the Order… and looking after an eleven-year-old is a full-time job…"

"He's eleven?" Molly said with alarm, turning to look at Hermione. "Why isn't he going to Hogwarts?"

"Technically, he won't be eleven when the acceptance letters come out, so we were able to delay his admittance for a year," Hermione confessed. "But I went to Ollivanders and got him a wand."

"A wand!" Molly repeated, aghast. "Gracious—a wand—not even in school—"

"My purpose in keeping him from attending Hogwarts for another year is to protect him, Molly, not keep him ignorant," Hermione said, echoing the very sentiments that had made her decision to have Selenius schooled privately. "He's getting a bit of a jump-start on his education while he's at Hogwarts this summer, but I've written out a curriculum for him to follow once term resumes. We want to keep him under the Dark Lord's radar for as long as possible—I might even quit seventh year in order to homeschool him myself."

Molly gaped at her in disbelief. "Q-quit school?"

"I graduated Hogwarts over twenty years ago, Molly," Hermione reminded her tiredly. "If I can't find someone to teach him privately for me, I'll have to do it myself. I'd much rather my son got a Hogwarts education, but if that's not possible, I intend to give him the best education I can."

There was a pause, and then Molly checked her pot one more time before she came to sit next to Hermione.

"Why don't you send him to a foreign school?" she suggested, placing her hand over Hermione's and giving it a friendly squeeze. "The name Snape and Granger are lesser-known outside Britain, you could easily send him off to France."

Hermione had not considered that, but she immediately dismissed it. "The only two schools I can think of that would give him an education as good as Hogwarts are Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, and they're both too far away. Besides, Durmstrang places too much emphasis on the Dark Arts, and Beauxbatons doesn't give enough in the way of practical application of self-defense."
The two women sat there quietly, deep in thought for a moment, and then Hermione said, "Would you be willing to let Selenius stay here during term, Molly? I know he wouldn't be able to stay during the holidays, too many people and no way to explain his presence, but..." she gave the other woman a sideways glance. "You could homeschool him."

Molly gave her a thoughtful look. Hermione continued, "You're good with a wand, and with seven children, you know how to handle a boy his age. I'd trust you to do it, if you're willing."

Molly tapped the table with her wand, her expression one of great consideration, though Hermione got the sense that she was both slightly flattered and flustered at the suggestion. "I would be more than happy to do it, but I would have to talk it over with Arthur, of course. Taking on another child is a big responsibility, and looking after Selenius would be a full-time job."

Hermione smiled. If the only thing stopping Molly from saying 'yes' immediately was talking it over with her husband, Hermione was practically assured of Selenius's future. "Thank you, Molly."

At the very least, his future for the next year was secure. After that, Hermione would have to put him into hiding. She was certain that next year, without Dumbledore, Hogwarts would be under the Dark Lord's control, which meant that there was neither no point in sending Selenius this year, nor any reason to contemplate sending him next year. Furthermore, Hermione was certain that Molly would not look kindly upon Selenius after Dumbledore was dead, whether it was by Severus's hand or her own. It hurt her to abuse the other woman's trust, but this was one case where Hermione's duties as a handler and a mother overrode any sense of requisite honesty she might have.

Selenius's care and Severus's position as a spy came first and foremost on her list of priorities.

She guiltily turned her mind to thoughts of Harry. As his godmother, she felt she ought to hold a little more care for him, but it was difficult to place him as a priority over her family. Harry was her friend; in some ways, he was like a brother to her, so she knew him well enough to know that he could take care of himself, and that he did not need to be coddled. She cared for and protected him to the best of her ability, but she was also intent on making him walk on his own two feet, though she would gladly stand beside him in whatever he faced. He just didn't feel like a son, or figure like one in her mind anymore. He hadn't really, since she had de-aged and he had grown up.

But now she wondered how he was doing. How was he handling Sirius's death? The publicity he was receiving? It all had to be a lot for him to take in.

Not to mention that Sirius's death would be followed by the reading of his will. Undoubtedly, Harry had inherited everything from him, as his godson. That would surely include Grimmauld Place.

And Kreacher.

Kreacher knew too much about the Order to be set free. It also meant that Harry would surely need to be more explicit and careful with whatever orders or information he gave the disgruntled elf. Furthermore, Kreacher knew a great deal about Hermione and Selenius; Hermione was worried that now that the elf had switched ownership, if Harry thought to ask him about his godmother, Kreacher might very well be able to tell him.

Hermione buried her face in her hands, rubbing her temples in consternation. How had things gotten so complicated so quickly?

~o~O~o~

Harry arrived at the Burrow soon enough, though Hermione and Ron did not get to see him until the
following morning.

"Oh," Ron said, looking disappointed when Harry told him that he had only been with Dumbledore to help him persuade an old colleague to return to teaching. "We thought—"

Hermione shot Ron a warning glance, and the redhead switched tracks at top-speed.

"—we thought it'd be something like that."

"You did?" Harry said, sounding amused.

"Yeah… yeah, now Umbridge has left, obviously we need a new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, don't we? So, er, what's he like?"

"He looks a bit like a walrus, and he used to be the Head of Slytherin," Harry said.

Hermione couldn't help it. Her mouth twisted into an odd half-smile, half-grimace at Harry's description. Her expression must have looked a bit too strange even for Harry, because he asked, "Something wrong, Hermione?"

She hastily rearranged her features into an unconvincing smile.

"No, of course not! So, um," Hermione said, casting about weakly for a new topic, "did Slughorn seem like he'll be a good teacher?"

"Dunno," Harry said. "He can't be worse than Umbridge, can he?"

"I doubt it," Hermione said, biting her lower lip and trying not to smile.

"I know someone who's worse than Umbridge," Ginny's voice said, and Hermione turned around in time to see the youngest Weasley as she slouched into the room, looking irritated. "Hi, Harry."

"What's up with you?" Ron asked.

"It's her," Ginny said, sitting down at the foot of Harry's bed. "She's driving me mad."

"What's she done now?" Hermione asked sympathetically. Fleur had been staying at the Burrow, because Bill wanted her to have the chance to get to know his family, but there had understandably been a clash of wills over the matter. Hermione found she didn't like the other woman all that much, she was more irritating than anything else though, which was hardly a change of the opinion she'd held of her during the Triwizard Tournament. In Hermione's opinion, Fleur thought too much of herself, and from what Hermione had seen of her fellow Beauxbaton representatives, so did a great deal of her classmates.

No, definitely not the kind of school she wanted to send her son to.

"It's the way she talks to me—you'd think I was about three!"

Hermione grimaced. "It does get aggravating, doesn't it?"

Harry looked bewildered by this comment, and even more so when Ron said, "Can't you two lay off her for five seconds?"

"Oh, that's right, defend her," Ginny snapped. "We all know you can't get enough of her!"

"Who are you—?"
The bedroom door suddenly flew open again, and Hermione found herself tumbling to the floor with Ginny as Harry yanked the bedcovers up to his chin. Scowling, the two of them got to their feet, throwing Harry equally dirty looks before turning their attention to the vision of perfection currently standing in the doorway with a laden breakfast tray.

"'Arry," she said in a throaty voice. "Eet 'as been too long!"

Molly appeared in the doorway a moment later, looking rather cross.

"There was no need to bring up the tray, I was just about to do it myself!"

War of the in-laws, Hermione thought dully, as she dusted off her sleeve, and avoided meeting Molly and Ginny's gaze as Fleur descended upon Harry with the news that she and Ron's older brother were engaged. Thank goodness I haven't had to deal with that... yet...

"Well—enjoy your breakfast, 'Arry!"

Fleur turned around gracefully and seemed to float as she left the room, closing the door quietly behind her. Molly made a sound of discontent in the back of her throat.

"Mum hates her," Ginny said quietly.

Hermione pursed her lips together. As much as she disliked Fleur, she thought this was something of rather poor taste to say.

"I do not hate her!" Molly said in a cross whisper. "I just think they've hurried into this engagement, that's all!"

"They've known each other," Ron said, who looked oddly dazed and was staring at where Fleur had been standing just moments ago. Hermione elbowed him.

"Well, that's not very long! I know why it's happened, of course. It's all this uncertainty with You-Know-Who coming back..."

Severus and I got married as soon as we knew the Dark Lord was gone, Hermione thought idly, recalling the pleasant ceremony and honeymoon they'd had. More than pleasant, actually. The memory made her tingle, and she quickly pulled away from it, chastising herself for having such thoughts in the wrong place at the wrong time. But still, she missed her husband already, and she missed the marriage they'd had before Harry, Ron, and her younger self had arrived at Hogwarts. It had been in a much more peaceful time, and Hermione desperately missed their visits to Fortescue's.

"—people eloping left, right, and center—"

"Including you and Dad," Ginny said slyly.

"Yes, well, your father and I were made for each other, what was the point in waiting?" Molly said impatiently, shooting Hermione a glance before continued, "Whereas Bill and Fleur... well... what have they really got in common? He's a hard-working, down-to-earth sort of person, whereas she's —"

"A cow," Ginny said, nodding. "But Bill's not that down-to-earth. He's a Curse-Breaker, isn't he, he likes a bit of adventure, a bit of glamour... I expect that's why he's gone for Phlegm."

"Stop calling her that, Ginny," Molly said sharply, even as Harry laughed, and Hermione joined in despite herself. "Well, I'd better get on... Eat your eggs while they're warm, Harry."
She left the room looking a bit careworn. Ron still seemed somewhat out of it, a tad punch-drunk; he was shaking his head experimentally, like a dog trying to rid its ears of water.

"Don't you get used to her if she's staying in the same house?"

"Well, you do, but if she jumps out at you unexpectedly like that…"

"It's pathetic," Hermione said furiously. She knew very well what the two of them were talking about; Fleur's charm as a part-Veela. She had cranked it up while she was in the room with Harry and Ron, which explained Ron's slightly drugged reaction. Ron had gotten used to Fleur, but when she came at them unexpectedly, it was understandably hard *not* to be affected. Hermione rather suspected the other woman enjoyed the witless attention she received.

She gave Ron an affronted look and strode away from him, turning around as soon as she was at the opposite wall.

The conversation eventually turned to Tonks, which Hermione found her stomach churning over with guilt even as she lied about the real reason why the Auror seemed to be a bit more like Moaning Myrtle these days rather than her usual, cheery self. Molly was not asking the younger woman around in the hopes that Bill might fall for her instead, as the others surmised, but so that she could be a sympathetic ear. Hermione did not know Tonks all that well, so she tried not to interfere, but she did know Remus.

Hermione was planning on having a talk with Remus next time she saw him. He had not had a proper relationship in years, a social hazard of being a werewolf, and like the time Hermione had taken him along to the Slug Club to teach him to dance, she was going to have to figure out exactly what the problem was this time and see if she might have some advice or perspective that he might find helpful.

She remembered the Valentine's Day card he had gotten last year, and could not help but grin to herself even as she straightened up and lied about the real reason Tonks was having difficulty with her Metamorphosing. Sirius. It was easy to blame it on Sirius's death; it might also give her an opening to talk to Harry about his godfather, because though he had not said a word about him yet, Hermione knew that Sirius had to be on his mind…

The moment Ginny had been called down to help Molly with lunch, Hermione struck the iron while it was hot. "How have you been since the Department of Mysteries?"

"Fine, I s'pose," Ron said, pulling back his sleeve so that Hermione could see the imprints from where the brains had wrapped around him. They hadn't quite faded.

"That's good," Hermione said in an odd sort of voice, glancing at the marks for a moment before turning back to Harry, gentling her tone as she continued, "But Harry—since Sirius died…"

Hermione saw a guilty look flash across Harry's face, as he muttered, "I dunno. I mean—it hurts, knowing I won't ever get another letter from him, but he wouldn't want me to shut myself away with grief…"

Hermione bit her lower lip. "I'm sorry, Harry."

"What for?" Ron interjected. "We were all there. None of it was your fault."

"No," Harry said quietly. "It was mine. I should have listened to Hermione, when she told me to practice my Occlumency, when she told me it was probably a trap…"
"Yes, you should have," Hermione said, just a bit coolly. "Sirius's death was an expensive lesson for us all."

"I know!" Harry said loudly, and then he sighed, dropping his voice. "I know. I'm just saying… don't start blaming yourself for it, either."

"Well…" Hermione said slowly.

"Come off it," said Ron. "You were passed out like the rest of us, weren't you?"

"Well, yes, yes, I suppose," Hermione said, thinking about how she ought to have tried to delay them harder. "But still…"

"I don't know why you're so bothered by it," Harry said, fiddling with his fork, refusing to meet her eyes. "I mean, you never really liked Sirius all that much…"

"That's not true!" Hermione said indignantly, hurt. "I liked Sirius very much!"

"I don't see it," Ron said, shaking his head. "I mean, you were always going off about how irresponsible and lonely Sirius was…"

Hermione glared at him. "Just because I thought he was a bit stir-crazy from being cooped up for too long doesn't mean I didn't like him! Sirius was a good man, a reliable man—he didn't deserve what he got. And he really cared about you, Harry," she added, turning to look at her bespectacled godson and best friend. "You meant the world to him. He would have done anything for you. He just—" her voice caught, and she stopped talking, unable to get the words out.

Ron hesitated, and then crossed the room to cautiously pat her on the shoulder. "I—I think we get it," he said sheepishly.

For a moment, Harry said nothing. Then he said, "Thank you, Hermione."

Silence followed after that, save for the clinking of Harry's spoon as he ate, before he set it down.

"Sirius told me something about my godmother when he died," Harry said suddenly. "I mean, it was written in his will—a letter—Dumbledore told me what it said."

Hermione turned to look at him sharply. "What did it say?"

"That he wasn't in Azkaban for twelve years," Harry said. "My godmother—The Professor—broke him out of Azkaban and hid him. He said she was the only one who ever believed he was innocent."

Hermione tried to look surprised, which was not very hard given that she had not been expecting Sirius to let Harry in on this secret. Ron's jaw dropped.

"You're kidding!" he said.

Harry shook his head. "He told me a bit about it before now, but the letter in his will said he only spent four years in Azkaban. She took care of him all that time afterwards. He said—he said she was like a little sister to him and my dad." His voice choked with emotion, and he looked down at his breakfast. "It's just—I wonder why she hasn't come out yet. I saw her in my first year—Ron, we saw her in our second, when we were hiding in that wardrobe in the Staff Room—"

"You what?" Hermione said.

"We saw her," Ron said, a bit defensively.
"Harry," Hermione said, a bit shakily, "if your godmother hasn't revealed herself to you yet, there's probably a very good reason for it—"

"And," Harry said, ignoring her, "Sirius told me that she and Snape were pretty close in school. She was friends with him." He looked ready to smack himself on the forehead. "Why didn't I ever ask him about her?"

"Because you're not suicidal, mate," Ron said. "If Sirius was reluctant to tell you anything, imagine what Snape would have done."

"Yeah," Harry agreed.

"But wait," Ron said slowly. "I mean, we've already established that Snape knew your godmother, right? And you saw her with that toddler, back in first year…"

Hermione's face burned red. How careless had they been? How much had Harry seen?

"Sirius never said it outright," Harry said quietly. "He couldn't, could he? My godmother was supposed to be a complete secret. But from the sound of things, she was really close to the Marauders, and to Snape. Odd, isn't it?"

"No, it's not," Hermione interrupted. "Harry, what else did Sirius say about your godmother?"

"That she was a bit of an odd duck, but crazy smart," Harry said. "But you're right—that does fit, doesn't it? Snape isn't stupid, either."

That was as close to a compliment as Hermione had ever heard Harry give Severus. She resisted the urge to raise an eyebrow at him, and instead merely said, "So what's the point, Harry? Why is this bothering you?"

"I know she cares about me," Harry said. "Sirius knew her—that's what he told me, anyway. He said she'd be able to reveal herself eventually, and it's just… I thought that with Sirius dead, that might be now."

Hermione had an inkling of what Harry was trying to say. "Sirius was your family outside Hogwarts," she said gently. "He was the person you could always count on, like a—like a father."

"And now he's gone," Harry said bitterly.

Ron shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, and then he said, "Well, maybe you could still ask Snape—you said you'd broken into his mind before, right? Maybe—"

Hermione rounded on him. "Are—you—insane?" she hissed.

Harry shook his head. "I don't have Occlumency lessons with him anymore."

"That's good, isn't it?" Ron said. "Not having the Greasy Git poking around your mind. That means you'll have more time for Quidditch practice."

"Might not," Harry said conversationally. "Dumbledore said he's going to be giving me private lessons this year."

Ron, who had nicked a bite of Harry's toast, choked on it.

"You kept that quiet!" he spluttered, dropping crumbs everywhere.
"I only just remembered," Harry said.

And just like that, the conversation returned from the taboo topic of Harry's godmother to the interesting speculation of precisely what Harry might be learning from Dumbledore. Eventually, though, the topic turned to Percy Weasley—who still lacked the humility to admit that he had been wrong, and to make amends with his family—and while Hermione was peering into one of Fred and George's boxes, which were still stacked around the room, eventually re-emerging with an odd sort of telescope, the discussion turned to the Hall of Prophecy and what the *Daily Prophet* had to say about it.

"Nobody knows what the Prophecy said, though," Hermione said quickly. "It got smashed."

"Although the *Prophet* says—" Ron began, but Hermione quickly shushed him.

"The *Prophet* got it right," Harry said, looking up at them both. "That glass ball that smashed wasn't the only record of the prophecy. I heard the whole thing in Dumbledore's office, he was the one the prophecy was made to, so he was able to tell me. From what it said," Harry continued, taking a deep breath, "it looks like I'm the one who's got to finish of Voldemort… At least, it said that neither of us could live while the other survives."

Hermione and Ron stared at Harry in stunned silence, and then Hermione suddenly let out a shriek as the telescope she'd been holding suddenly smacked her, letting out a cloud of black smoke as it did so.

"Hermione!"

Hermione swept the smoke away with her hand, coughing and still clutching the telescope.

"I squeezed it and it—it punched me!" she gasped, holding up the telescope. And sure enough, a tiny fist on a long spring could be seen dangling from one end of the telescope.

"Don't worry," Ron said, plainly trying not to laugh for some reason. "Mum'll fix that, she's good at healing minor injuries—"

"Oh well, nevermind that now!" Hermione said hastily. "Harry, oh, Harry…"

But it was not until she went downstairs, after being summarily informed that their OWL results were due to arrive later that day, and saw her reflection in the mirror, that she realized that she had been given a great, purple black eye that gave her the appearance of resembling half a panda. Molly immediately set to work trying to fix it, but by the time Harry and Ron made their way downstairs, it became clear that Molly's usual spells were not quite enough to make it budge.

"It'll be Fred and George's idea of a funny joke, making sure it can't come off," Ginny said.

"But it's got to come off!" Hermione snapped. "I can't go around looking like this forever!"

"You won't, dear, we'll find an antidote, don't worry…"

They waited rather restlessly, to say the least, for the owls that were supposed to arrive with their exam results. Hermione was not all that fussed about them, given that she already had her OWL and NEWT scores on record, but it was necessary that she be agitated.

And truth to be told, she *was* agitated. She knew she was going to fail Astronomy, given what had occurred, but since Dumbledore was going to send her the results that she had achieved twenty years ago rather than the ones she had gotten now…
"At Beauxbatons," Fleur said complacently, "we 'ad a different way of doing things. I think eet was better. We sat our examinations after six years of study, not five, and then—"

"Look!" Hermione said, not at all fussed with interrupting Fleur. She got to her feet, pointing at the windows where three black specks were clearly visible in the distance.

"They're definitely owls," Ron said hoarsely, getting to his feet to join her at the window.

"And there are three of them," Harry said unnecessarily, hastening to Hermione's other side.

"One for each of us," Hermione said, almost with a tone of surprise.

Molly squeezed past them to open the window, since the boys didn't dare move to do it themselves, given the fact that Hermione was holding their elbows in a painfully tight grip. The owls soared through, and landed on the kitchen table in a neat line. Hermione immediately dove for the first owl, found that it was addressed to her, and fumbled to untie the letter. Harry made an idle remark about how his aunt and uncle would have had a fit if the owls landed on their kitchen table, which Hermione ignored as she slit open the envelope and pulled out the parchment inside.

Hermione scanned hers silently. It was the same as before.

"Hermione?" Ginny asked tentatively. "How did you do?"

Hermione took a moment to collect herself.

"I—not bad," she said in a small voice.

"Oh, come off it," Ron said, striding over and whipping her results out of her hand. "Yep—ten 'Outstandings' and one 'Exceeds Expectations at Defense Against the Dark Arts." He looked down at her, half-amused, half exasperated. "You're actually disappointed, aren't you?"

Hermione suddenly remembered a very similar conversation.

Merlin, you actually sound disappointed, Severus's voice drawled in her mind.

She shook her head, but Harry laughed, clearly finding the whole thing funny. But Hermione was suddenly very pensive, as she set her grades on the table and helped herself to some sausages.

"You know, it's funny that you only got an 'Exceeds Expectations' in Defense Against the Dark Arts," Ron said through a mouthful of sausage. He took a moment to swallow, and then continued, "I mean, we were separated for most of the time in the Department of Mysteries, but we saw those spells you cast after we blasted apart the shelves. And," he said, pointing his fork at her, "this was right after we'd taken our examinations, right? Harry described you as being a bloody maniac with your wand."

Hermione threw Harry a sharp look, as she responded, "The stuff I used wasn't the same as the stuff that we were tested on, obviously."

"Yeah, but still…"

"Drop it, Ron. I'm still smarting," Hermione said, trying to sound more hurt than annoyed by the fact that she had not gotten all 'O's on her examinations.

"Right."

The next few weeks at the Burrow were uneventful, save for the grisly tidings plastered in
the Prophet concerning attacks, disappearances, and murders. Harry's birthday celebration was interrupted with the news that there had been several more dementor attacks, Igor Karkaroff's body had been found (Hermione stabbed moodily at her plate at this, and wondered if Severus knew about this already), and the even more startling news that Florean Fortescue had gone missing.

"What?" Hermione said, slamming her fork down on her plate with such force that she almost cracked it. "What happened to him?"

"Dragged off, by the look of his place."

"But—but—why?"

"Who knows? He must've upset them somehow," Bill said. "He was a good man, Florean."

Hermione felt her stomach churn, and stood up to excuse herself, taking her plates to the sink. But she couldn't escape fast enough to hear the next bit of disturbing news.

"Talking of Diagon Alley," Arthur said, "looks like Ollivander's gone, too"

"The wandmaker?" Ginny said, looking horrified.

"That's the one. Shop's empty. No sign of a struggle. No one knows whether he left voluntarily or was kidnapped."

"But wands—what'll people do for wands?"

"They'll make do with other makers," Remus assured her, "but Ollivander was the best, and if the other side have got him it's not so good for us."

As Hermione made her way up the stairs, she found herself searching for the only silver lining in the whole situation: that she had, at least, taken Selenius for his wand before Ollivander had been dragged off. Her jaw set as she made her way back to her shared room with Ginny; it was now more important than ever to her that Selenius learn quickly, because even if it was impossible for a first-year to be expected of dueling, she had every intention of teaching him as many means of self-defense as possible. Her son would not be helpless. She would ensure that.

The following day, their letters and booklists arrived. Hermione stared at her prefects badge, turning it over listlessly in her hand; she had not made Head Girl the first time around, as the position had gone to Lily, but it also looked like she would not be made Head Girl when next year rolled around. It was nothing, really, but she had set her sights on being Head Girl a long time ago, and it was a bit of a disappointment to know that even with her hard work, mostly clean record, and consistently high academic achievements, she was not going to get what she deserved.

But again, very few people were likely to get things they had rightfully earned and deserved, given the current climate. Many would suffer things that they most certainly did not deserve. She tossed the badge onto the bed, and began scanning her booklist while absentmindedly scratching Crookshanks behind the ears.

Harry had been made the Gryffindor Quidditch Captain, which Hermione heartily congratulated him on. Molly finally relented, and began making plans to visit Diagon Alley for their school things, having conceded that it could not be put off any longer. A tactless joke from Ron almost made her change her mind entirely, however, and Hermione was not surprised; she and Molly both had too much experience in the past where Voldemort was concerned, and the fact that Ron did not seem to be taking him entirely seriously was worrisome.
But Ron kept quiet about the Dark Lord over the next few days, at least where his mother was concerned, and the weekend dawned without any more outbursts, though Hermione and Molly were both very tense at breakfast. Harry, Ron, and even Ginny seemed to be under the impression that Voldemort would not attack a crowded place in broad daylight; Hermione knew better, and tried to disabuse them of this false sense of security. She was partially successful.

"Voldemort isn't just some creature you might run into in a dark alley," Hermione scolded them one evening. "He's malevolent and cunning, and he wants Harry dead. Do you really think the fact that Diagon Alley is crowded full of wizards, most of whom would probably run away screaming rather than attempt to fight, would stop him?"

Ron scowled. "Right little ray of sunshine, aren't you? So what d'you suggest we do—stay home and hide under our beds?"

"Of course not!" Hermione cried. "Of course we're going! But you have to be aware, Ron! You need to be on your guard, be careful, constant vigilance—"

"Now you sound like Mad-Eye Moody," Ron said, eyeing her warily.

"Constant vigilance!" Hermione snarled. Ginny, who had been sitting at the foot of Harry's bed, jumped in surprise and half-tumbled to the floor. "It's bloody well good advice, if you ask me!"

"Look—"

"I think Hermione's got a point," Harry said quietly. "I mean, he's already abducted some of the shopkeepers from Diagon Alley, hasn't he? Besides," he added, "it's not so different from the advice Dumbledore gave me, when he dropped me off here. He said to be on my guard."

"Well," Ginny said, righting herself. "I don't intend to go around hexing the first thing that moves, but I guess it's not a bad idea to just—you know—be aware. Like Hermione said."

"Like we haven't already been doing that," Ron said heatedly. "I'm tired of us being treated like children—" he mimicked his mother "—Fortescue and Ollivander went on holiday, did they? Then you just buck up your ideas, young man, before I decide you're too immature to come with us!" Barking mad, I tell you."

"If you want to be treated like an adult, then act like one!" Hermione snapped.

Needless to say, when they climbed into the special Ministry of Magic cars that Arthur had managed to borrow for extra security, Hermione and Ron were not quite on speaking terms.

They both forgot their squabble almost immediately, however, the minute they saw who was waiting for them. Hagrid, wearing his large beaverskin coat, waved cheerfully at them as they got out, and proceeded to swept Harry into what appeared to be a bone-crushing bear hug.

"Harry!" he boomed, oblivious to the startled stares of passing Muggles. "Buckbeak—Witherwings, I mean—yeh should see him, Harry, he's so happy ter be back in the open air—"

"Glad he's pleased," Harry said, grinning as he massaged his ribs. "We didn't know 'security' meant you!"

"I know, jus' like old times, innit? See, the Ministry wanted ter send a bunch o' Aurors, but Dumbledore said I'd do," Hagrid said proudly. "Let's get goin', then—after yeh, Molly, Arthur—"

Hermione grinned, and followed the rest of them as they made their way into the Leaky Cauldron.
Truth to be told, she was glad that they would not be doing their shopping accompanied by a battalion of Aurors; she didn't much fancy running into the ones that she had personally hexed that night at the Astronomy tower.

The minute they stepped into Diagon Alley, Hermione saw that it had not changed at all from when she had last seen it to get Selenius's wand—but at that time, it had clearly changed quite a bit from what she usually expected to see. The colorful, glittering window displays were covered up by large Ministry of Magic posters. Most of the posters contained the security advice that the Ministry had handed out as pamphlets earlier, advice which Hermione thought was singularly unhelpful, but some contained wanted posters of various Death Eaters. Oddly enough, none of the wanted posters contained pictures or descriptions of Voldemort himself.

It was difficult to ignore the number of shady stalls that had sprung up over the last weeks, all of which advertised various amulets and objects meant to defend against dark creatures and Death Eaters, but were clearly worse than ineffectual.

"One for your little girl, madam?" he called to them, as they passed by, leering at Ginny. "Protect her pretty neck?"

"If I were on duty…" Arthur said, glaring at the seller.

"Yes, but don't go arresting anyone now, dear, we're in a hurry…" Molly said, sounding harried as she consulted her list.

Hermione, however, stopped by the stall.

"One for you, miss?" the seedy-looking wizard said, grinning unpleasantly.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "I'll buy them all."

"Hermione!" Arthur said, aghast.

The wizard's eyes widened with delight. "That will be—" he began.

"For you to wear," Hermione interrupted. "If I buy them all, I want them hanging around your neck. To see just how effective they are."

The Weasleys and Harry watched her, dumbstruck, as the seller spluttered in protest.

"Surely not—not for me—I couldn't—"

"Too afraid to try on your own amulets?" Hermione asked smoothly, prodding one of the silver-marked necklaces with her wand, and then lifting it up by the chain with the tip so that it dangled in mid-air. "I thought so."

"I—I—they're limited use," the wizard said falteringly.

"I doubt that," Hermione said pleasantly. With a flick of her wand, the amulet vanished, reappearing around the seller's neck. He quickly dropped the tray he had been rattling to yank it off, but not before an audible sizzling sound could be heard. He let out a squeal of alarm as his face erupted in painful, bright-orange, tentacle-like warts.

"That's what you get for trying to take advantage of people," Hermione told him fiercely, as she turned to leave. "I hope you know how to get rid of those."
"Gutsy," Ron said approvingly, once they were out of earshot of his parents and following Hagrid to Madam Malkin's. "A taste of his own medicine, ha ha…"

"It's a rotten thing, what those sellers are doin' to other folks," Hagrid said with a nod of approval. "An' there jus' aren't enough people on duty ter round 'em up… here we are," he said, as they stopped outside Madam Malkin's. "Migh' be a bit of a squeeze in there with all of us. I'll stand guard outside, all right?"

So the three of them walked in, and at first, the shop appeared to be empty; but as soon as the door had swung shut, it became apparent that it was not. Of all the luck and timing, they had walked in for robes at the same time as Draco Malfoy. They might have been able to resist starting a confrontation—Harry and Ron, at least, because Hermione had no intention of doing so in the first place—had Draco not called attention to himself with a less than complimentary remark.

"If you're wondering what the smell is, Mother, a Mudblood just walked in."

"No, don't, honestly, it's not worth it…" Hermione whispered, holding her arms out in front of her two friends, feeling a disturbing sense of déjà vu; she had been forced to stop James and Sirius from starting up a fight with Lucius Malfoy and Severus Snape in this very same shop just before her sixth year over twenty years ago.

It was ridiculous.

"Yeah, like you'd dare do magic out of school," Draco sneered. Hermione did not bother to correct him on the fact that she was already of-age. Hence the reason she had been able to get away with charming the seller's amulet onto his own skinny neck—in addition to the understandably lesser-known fact that the Trace had been taken off when she turned seventeen some twenty years ago, and had not returned since being de-aged. "Who blacked your eye, Granger? I want to send them flowers."

It was not until ten minutes later that they had the shop to themselves, Malfoy having strode out with his mother without paying; while Hermione tried on a new set of school robes and had them fitted, she could not help but ask why, why boys were so ready to fight, and why they were absurdly predictable in doing so. It was maddening.

It took her another two minutes to realize that she was wearing wizard's dress robes, and an awkward moment of pointing out the mistake, before they got that straightened out. When they finally left, it was with a mutual air of contentment at being out of the shop. They met Hagrid outside, as he had promised they would, met up with the Weasleys, and then eagerly made their way to Fred and George's shop.

They all stopped dead when the monotonous row of dusty, dull shops was suddenly broken rather colorfully by a large sign pasted on the window of Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, loudly advertising U-No-Poo as a more immediate worry than You-Know-Who. She had to admit that the whole set-up was quite amazing; the twins had turned Harry's investment into a brilliant jokeshop, and judging by the products available and the crowdedness of the store, it was making big returns. Hermione was almost tempted to ask them if they were selling shares to prospective investors.

She managed to squeeze through the kerfuffle, stopping at a large display near the counter next to Harry, and picked up a box labeled Patented Daydream Charms, reading the label out loud, more for Harry's benefit than hers.

"Not for sale to under-sixteens," she finished, glancing up at Harry. "You know, that really is extraordinary magic!"
"For that, Hermione," said a voice behind them, "You can have that one for free."

Hermione turned around in time to see a beaming Fred standing before them, wearing a set of magenta robes that clashed magnificently with his already red hair. It was quite a sight. They were almost impossible to miss, even in the colorful crowd of students trying to squeeze in ways to purchase extra means of skipping lessons or entertaining themselves through it.

"How are you, Harry?" They shook hands, grinning almost conspiratorially, before Fred turned to get a better look at Hermione. "And what's happened to your eye, Hermione?"

"Your punching telescope," she said ruefully.

"Oh blimey, I forgot about those," he said, digging into his pocket. "Here—"

He handed her a small tube, which she unscrewed before she gingerly sniffed at the thick, yellow paste.

"Just dab it on, that bruise'll be gone within the hour," Fred told her.

Hermione gave him a nervous look, recalling just how effective their other products had been. "It's safe, isn't it?"

"'Course it is," Fred said bracingly. "Come on, Harry, I'll give you a tour…"

The two disappeared, and Hermione began dabbing the paste onto the purplish bruise still circling her eye as she examined the other boxes and packages and other wacky, shocking, and oftentimes just plain odd things that were being sold at the counter. Everywhere she looked, something shrieked, banged, or advertised itself loudly in bright colors. It was like a candy store; Hermione found herself wondering if it would be possible to bring Selenius by for his birthday. This would most definitely be a real treat for him…

Needless to say, despite the fact that Hermione thoroughly disapproved of the products being sold—or at least the reason for which most of them were being bought—she could not help but enjoy herself. There was simply so much stuff. It was unique, a curiosity to poke through. Fred returned a few minutes later to show them their WonderWitch section, and Hermione found herself next looking at a rather wide array of products meant to help witches entice a lover.

"There you go," Fred said proudly. "Best range of love potions you'll find anywhere."

Ginny raised a skeptical eyebrow. "Do they work?"

"Certainly they work, for up to twenty-four hours at a time depending on the weight of the boy in question—"

"—and the attractiveness of the girl," George said, appearing quite suddenly on Ginny's other side. "But we're not selling them to our sister," he added sternly. "Not when she's already got about five boys on the go from what we've—"

"Whatever you've heard from Ron is a bag fat lie," Ginny said calmly, plucking a small pink pot off the shelf. "What's this?"

While Fred was kept occupied with his sister, George came around to Hermione's other side to talk discretely in her ear.

"See something you like?"
Hermione felt a flush suffuse her face at this, and turned to glare at George. "I don't know what you mean."

"Come on," George said, "Fred and I haven't properly paid you back for the help you gave us last year. Surely there's something here that catches your fancy?" He gave her a conspiratorial wink. "For a bloke you like?"

Hermione pursed her lips, and looked at the products lined up in front of her.

"I don't suppose you'd have anything for… you know… just stuff that falls under Defense Against the Dark Arts…"

"Blimey, we've got a whole line of those!" George said enthusiastically. "Why didn't you say so earlier?"

Hermione looked startled. "A whole line? You're joking."

"Nope. 'Come round this way,'" he said, and led her away from the group and toward the back of the shop, where there was a darker, less crowded room behind the Muggle Magic tricks. Hermione's eyes grew wider with each step as she took in the tubs full of interesting but clearly not joke-oriented objects. "Like we told Harry earlier, we've developed a more serious line."

Hermione picked up a Shield Hat, turning it over in her hands, as George continued, "The Ministry bought five hundred of those for its support staff—they won't do anything against Unforgivables, of course, but for your basic hexes and jinxes… you'd be amazed by how many people can't cast a decent shield charm. Anyway, we've got some interesting stuff for you to look at—Peruvian Darkness Powder, Decoy Detonators…"

Hermione had only brought enough money to pay for her school things, but now she wished she had thought to bring more. George gladly tossed her a box of Darkness Powder, and let her pocket a handful of Decoy Detonators before they headed back out to where Molly was now threatening to hex Ron's fingers together. There were several packages on the floor, and as Ron stooped down to grouchily pick them up, George remarked, "After this, though, you'll have to pay like everyone else. But you never did get your special discount for using our products to help rid Hogwarts of Umbridge. 'Course, I also heard that you tricked her into going into the forest, and had a bit of a run in with a herd of centaurs, so…"

"Mum, can I have a Pygmy Puff?" Ginny said suddenly.

"A what?" Molly said, with what Hermione thought was rather appropriate wariness, given the shop they were in.

"Look, they're so sweet…"

Hermione, who had gone to join Harry and Ron again, momentarily had a clear view of the window. The three of them watched in mutual surprise and suspicion as Draco Malfoy hurried up the street—most startlingly, he was alone. He had been with his mother earlier, and Hermione was quite aware of Narcissa's protectiveness of her son, particularly in these times; she had not forgotten their earlier encounters, nor what Hermione remembered of the woman during her stint at Malfoy Manor.

Her jaw set. Draco must have gone to lengths to escape his mother. She did not protest, therefore, when Harry pulled his Invisibility Cloak seemingly out of nowhere and ushered Ron and herself underneath it along with him. They slipped out of the shop unnoticed, past Hagrid who was humming at the door, and made their way down the street, though Malfoy was long gone by then.
But it didn't take a genius to realize where he had gone.

They followed him down Knockturn Alley, stopping as they drew level with the shop Draco was in: Borgin and Burkes, which Hermione was rather familiar with, given its history in selling magical, oftentimes dark objects. He was talking to the proprietor and gesturing with his hands, which Hermione took to mean that he was talking animatedly—if somewhat aggravatedly—with Borgin.

"If only we could hear what they're saying!" she whispered.

"We can!" Ron said excitedly, fumbling with the boxes he was still carrying until he had pulled out the largest, ripping it open and pulling out a pair of familiar-looking, flesh-colored strings.

"Extendable Ears, look!"

"Brilliant!" Hermione said, pulling the end lose as Ron unraveled the red of it and began to slip them toward the bottom of the door. "Oh, I hope the door isn't Imperturbable—"

But as it turned out, it wasn't. Hermione listened, her eyes gradually widening with surprise, and then narrowing in consternation, as she and her two best friends took in every word that was said. When the name Fenrir Greyback was thrown out, Hermione found herself chewing on the inside of her cheek while considering what that might mean. Draco's father was a Death Eater, and Draco had been tasked with killing the Headmaster, but she had not realized that he had been granted the authority to use the Dark Lord's other followers at his disposal—although there was the possibility that it was an empty threat...

"Could you see what he pointed at when he said 'that one'?"

"No, he was behind that cabinet—"

"You two stay here," she said quietly.

"What are you—?"

But Hermione had already slipped out from under the Cloak. She checked her hair in the reflection in the glass, then marched into the shop. A bell tinkled from somewhere inside. Without saying a word to Borgin, Hermione stoically strode toward the counter and began peering down at the objects on display. Borgin glared at her with a look of sullen resentment, his lips curling upward in a slight snarl, though he said nothing.

Hermione slowly looked at the jumble of artifacts on display, stopping at an opal necklace inside one of the glass-fronted cases.

"Is this necklace for sale?"

"If you've got one and a half thousand Galleons," Borgin said coldly.

Hermione sniffed. "Affordable," she said, with the merest trace of a sneer. Borgin raised an eyebrow at this, and she responded coldly, "I do have means. What does it do?"

Borgin eyed her suspiciously, but answered, "It's cursed. I wouldn't advise wearing it." He squinted at her, and then added as an afterthought, "I wouldn't advise touching it, either."

"I gathered as much. You rarely spend so much on a pretty piece of jewelry for yourself," Hermione said indifferently, moving onto another object. "Not if you're buying it from this shop, at any rate. What about this skull?"
"Sixteen Galleons."

Somehow, Hermione doubted that the skull was what Draco was after. No, he would definitely be looking at something more subtle. Less suspicious. And quite likely, more expensive. The necklace was a good guess so far; if it was cursed, he might very well buy it with the intent of delivering it to Dumbledore in the hopes that he might be foolish enough to try it on. But no… Borgin had advised against touching it in the first place—perhaps all that he needed to do was trick Dumbledore into just touching it for the curse to take effect. That seemed far more likely.

Something else caught her eye, and Hermione moved forward to peer more closely at it. It appeared to be a shriveled hand, resting on a cushion in one of the display cases, with a space in it enough to place a candle. She stared at it with avid interest, and Borgin, sensing that she was perhaps a buyer of genuine interest by her attitude, pre-empted her question. But not in the way she expected. "Hand of Glory. Not for sale, although I could probably put you in touch with the person who has it on hold if you're… if you're interested in making other arrangements with him."

"Who's the buyer?" Hermione asked, looking up.

Borgin licked his lips. "Mr. Malfoy."

Hermione pursed her lips. "In that case, I'd rather not. Is there anything else in this shop that he's already got reserved, so that I might not waste my time?"

Borgin squinted at her suspiciously, and Hermione saw his eyes flicker behind her at the case holding the opal necklace, and then said flatly, "No."

"Good," Hermione said haughtily. "I was afraid he might have bought up everything of value." She pointed at the cabinet by the window. "And what, precisely, is that?"

Borgin paused. Hermione saw his temple twitch. "A Vanishing Cabinet. Very rare, very valuable, but already spoken for."

"I see." Hermione didn't press the matter any further. She could tell that she was already treading on the other man's patience; it was clear that he was still visibly shaken from his earlier encounter with Draco. She was tempted to try Legilimency, but knew better; the man had been selling dark artifacts for years. He was no stranger to underhanded tactics. "Well then," she said loftily, "I'd better be off. Thank you for your time."

She left, the bell tinkling behind her as the door closed. As soon as she was out of sight, she slipped back underneath the cloak with Harry and Ron in time to see Borgin hesitate, and then walk over to the door and put up a sign reading Closed.

"You could have tried harder!" Ron hissed at her as Harry twitched the cloak more securely over their feet. "You hardly got anything out of him! You should have pressed him more, asked him for a list of what Malfoy—"

"He would have thrown me out of his shop if I had tried that!" Hermione sniped back, as they made their way back up the street toward Diagon Alley. "Some things require subtlety, Ron! I got far more out of him than simply going in and demanding an answer would have gotten!"

"I'm not saying to demand an answer!" Ron protested. "You could have just asked—you know, for a list of what was reserved in the shop, told him that you were looking to see what was really available—"

"Rubbish," Hermione snapped coldly. "He would have seen right through me!"
"It would have been worth a try—"

"Well, next time you can show me how it's done, Master of Mystery!"

The two of them bickered all the way back to Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, where they were forced to duck around a very anxious-looking Hagrid and Arthur, who had clearly noticed their absence. Hermione sighed as they pulled off the cloak and went to join the rest of the group, determinedly making their excuse that they had been in the back room all along.

The gimlet look in Molly's eyes told Hermione that she would be demanding the real answer from her later. She resigned herself to that fact as she packed away her purchases and left with the others to meet the Ministry car still waiting for them outside the Leaky Cauldron.

One thing was for certain, however. Malfoy had bought the Hand of Glory. He was interested in fixing something. He had Fenrir Greyback—or at least was willing to make the threat—at his command. And if Hermione had judged Borgin right, by the flicker of his eyes, Malfoy had also bought the opal necklace.

These were the things she later recounted in her notebook, before snapping it shut with a sigh and approaching an irate and hassled-looking Molly with the simple request of needing to leave the Burrow and pay Hogwarts an unexpected visit.

The woman gave her a look that suggested Hermione might as well have asked to meet with the Dark Lord for tea, but nevertheless went off to make a Floo call to the Headmaster.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Thirty-Five

Enormous thanks goes out to my wonderful beta.

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review.

Hermione left the Burrow at roughly one o'clock in the morning the next day, arriving at the Headmaster's Office in order to give Dumbledore her report. He sat pensively at his desk, his withered hand resting lightly on top of the other, and listened in silence as she recounted her trip to Borgin and Burkes. When she had finished, she stood up and gathered up her notebook.

"I don't know how Draco is planning on sneaking the necklace in, but given the tightened security measures, I have no doubt that it will fail," she told him briskly. "He asked Borgin for instructions on how to repair something that apparently has to remain put, which leads me to believe that it is at Hogwarts—but what that may be, I haven't the foggiest."

Dumbledore nodded slowly, thoughtfully.

"Thank you, Hermione. I appreciate the risk you took in bringing me this information," he said gravely.

"Yes, sir."

Intuiting that she was dismissed, she stuffed her notebook into her book bag and left. Selenius was waiting for her outside, crouching down by the door with his nose buried in a book. He looked up immediately when Hermione stepped past the gargoyle, and quickly got to his feet.

"Can we go now?" he asked hopefully.

"Just a moment," Hermione said, taking a moment to check her reflection in one of the windows. A flick of her wand, a crackle of magic, and her hair turned jet black. But it was clear to her that this alone would not be enough to fool Fred and George—if they looked past the hair, she would still be eminently recognizable. She frowned for a moment, and then pulled her hair back into a chignon, rather than leaving it down the way she normally did around her friends. She looked very different, more adult, and after she took a moment to adjust the color of her eyebrows, she turned around to face her son, who raised a very Severus-like brow at her in surprise.

"You look different," he remarked.

"That's rather the point," Hermione said with a grin as she checked her clothes one last time. She was wearing what she usually wore under her teaching robes—white button-up blouse, simple black slacks, and a pair of boots. Cover that with the ordinary work robes she was wearing, and though she would quite likely stand out just a bit, she would appear no stranger than a young intern looking to find a joke cauldron to mischievously use on their boss. It would work just fine.

"Alright," she said, kissing her son atop the head before leading the way down the corridor. "Happy Birthday, one week early. Let's go, shall we?"

They Flooed to Diagon Alley through Minerva's office, and then—with Selenius's right hand firmly grasped in hers—she led the both of them down the street toward Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. She
could not help but be pleased at the fact that there seemed to be fewer sellers down the street today, at least down the alley leading from the Leaky Cauldron. Selenius seemed a bit sullen at the fact that he was being forced to walk down the street holding hands with his mother, but once Hermione pointed out that everyone else in Diagon Alley was clustered together in tight packs, most of them holding onto each other in some manner, it became less of a concern to him. She probably looked more like an older sister escorting her brother to any passerby, but Selenius understandably did not see it that way.

Instead, the moment they went inside Weasleys Wizard Wheezes, all that mattered was getting a chance to look at and possible try at least one of everything. Hermione had to squeeze through the crowd to keep up with him, standing back to smile as he immediately made for the flying toy rugs advertised to the leftmost shelf from the counter. Everything in the shop was just as wondrous, if not more so, to Selenius as it had been for his mother the first time she had stepped in, and it seemed that he couldn't stand on one spot for more than a minute before something else would catch his eye.

Hermione ended up backing away and guarding the shelves near the door, because there were simply too many people in there for her to keep up with her son. She was able to follow him with her eyes as he bent over the Patented Daydream Charms, his hair obscuring his face as he read it, before jerking up when Fred came over to remind him that it was not for anyone under sixteen. Selenius scowled slightly at this, putting the box back on the shelf, but immediately cheered up when the red-haired proprietor led him toward the other side of the shop, where there was an entire range of joke sweets to be had.

When Selenius sought her out, arms laden with boxes and packages, Hermione checked her watch briefly to find that they had been in the store for over three hours. Slightly shocked at this revelation, Hermione nevertheless took it in stride with some amusement. They went to the counter, where she sat everything down and took a moment to check it over, and then ordered Selenius to wait where he was while she headed over to the Muggle Magic tricks. She returned moments later carrying a bag of Decoy Detonators and several boxes of Peruvian Darkness Powder, set them down next to Selenius's purchases, and politely requested that George ring them up.

"Right-o," he said, counting up the load of things stacked so high on the counter that they threatened to topple off. "Ten galleons, six sickles."

Hermione's eyes widened. That was almost an entire week's worth of pay, when she had been working at the Three Broomsticks for a summer job! Of course, that was almost nothing to her now, given her success with the stock market and in managing her family's finances. However, for someone who had previously been without many means, it struck her for a moment just how much she was paying. But the moment inevitably passed, and she dug into her purse for the necessary coins.

Selenius was rocking back and forth on the balls of his feet, looking indescribably happy as his mother paid for their things. Hermione shrank everything down and placed it in her purse, before thanking George and heading for the door. A twist and yank on the dial of her watch, and the both of them were immediately yanked back to Hogwarts.

~o~O~o~

Hermione sat in the Staff Room, sipping from a cup of strong tea that the house elves had thankfully delivered while Selenius tore into his gifts. Packets of Ton-Tongue Toffee rolled out onto the floor in colorful wrappers, along with two boxes of Portable Swamps that Hermione had bought against her better judgment, a pair of Extendable Ears, not one but two Punching Telescopes, a variety of trick wands, and a disturbing collection of Weasleys' Wildfire Whiz-bangs. She was not precisely sure
what her son planned to do with all of it, but she was hopeful that it could at least be handled.

He was prodding at his Reusable Hangman, and constructing a small fort around the galley with several Skiving Snackboxes of the Fainting Fancy variety when the door suddenly opened.

"Ah-hah!" Filch cried, and Hermione glanced up sharply at him. "I knew it! More of those damnable Weasley products—hand them over!"

Selenius merely raised an eyebrow at the caretaker in consternation as Hermione got to her feet. "That's enough, Filch. Term hasn't started yet."

"Those things are banned!" Filch wheezed, pointing a gnarled finger at the Reusable Hangman, who had unhooked the noose from his stick-figure frame and was marching his way over toward Mrs. Norris, who was winding her way around Filch's legs and eyeing the approaching toy with baleful eyes. She let out a low hiss as it approached, and Selenius reached over to pluck it off the ground. "I don't care what reason you have for bringing them into the castle—points and detentions for this!"

"They're not banned," Hermione responded calmly.

"They ought to be!" Filch said nastily.

"Then take it up with the headmaster," Hermione said.

Before Filch could reply, there was a sudden familiar voice from behind the door. "What is this all about?" Severus Snape drawled, pushing the door open fully so that he could see what was going on in the Staff Room that had the old caretaker so riled up.

"Fireworks!" Filch cried, pointing an accusing finger first as Selenius, then at each item in turn as he rattled off, "Portable Swamps, Extendable Ears, Skiving—"

"That's enough," Severus responded, uninterested. He sneered down at the reusable hangman struggling in Selenius's hand as fought to reach Mrs. Norris. "You can leave now."

"But—"

"Go away, Filch," Severus snapped. "I've got this well in hand." The caretaker hesitated, and he added sharply, "Leave."

Filch obviously did not dare disobey the Potions Master, who was normally on his side in these sort of matters, and shuffled away muttering furiously under his breath to Mrs. Norris, in a manner that reminded Hermione remarkably of Kreacher. As soon as he was gone, Severus slipped inside and shut the door behind him, albeit with a bit more force than necessary.

"And what, precisely, is this?" He asked, gesturing at the mess strewn across the floor.

Hermione merely raised an eyebrow at him. "Selenius's birthday gifts, one week early." She added with a bright smile, "I didn't know you were going to be here, or I would have told you."

Severus watched with disgruntled interest as Selenius placed the hangman back on his staircase, and started the game over. As soon as everything was in place, he looked up at his father.

"Hi, Dad."

Severus sneered at him and turned to leave. At that moment, it became abundantly clear to Hermione that something was not right—not that anything was, at this point, but something was obviously
more wrong than it should already be—and darted forward to grab his sleeve. He wheeled around to look at her, but Hermione stood her ground.

"What happened?" she asked fiercely.

He bared his teeth. "This was not a sight I expected to find—furthermore, why are you not at the Weasleys?"

"Because I had a report to deliver to Dumbledore, and decided to take advantage of the opportunity to take our son out for an early birthday celebration," Hermione said, loosening her grip and smoothing down his arm before resting her hand on his shoulder.

"What report?"

"Draco made a few select purchases at Borgin and Burkes," Hermione said carefully. She tugged on his sleeve, indicating that they ought to step outside, and he backed away to allow her through. She shut the door behind them, and mindful of the newly-purchased Extendable Ears lying on the floor, she quickly cast an Imperturbable Charm on the door. Satisfied, she continued, "We're also having some inter-organizational personality conflicts."

Severus sneered at this. "The two lovers, I take it?"

Hermione gave him a surprised look. "Tonks and Remus?"

"Quite."

"Well yes," Hermione agreed. "Tonks isn't doing too well—I'm waiting for Remus to drop 'round so that I can talk some sense into him."

Severus's face contorted into a look of deepest loathing, and at once, Hermione suspected she understood at least some of where his consternation was coming from.

"You don't have to like Remus, but he's my friend, and he deserves happiness too," she said, but there was a biting edge to her tone. "I don't see why this should be such an issue for you. You could simply ignore it."

Severus's scowl deepened. "Lupin is an unemployed werewolf, and even he has better romantic prospects than I do!"

Hermione's eyes narrowed. "You're married, Severus."

"To an eighteen-year-old woman with whom I cannot have a proper relationship," Severus responded snidely.

He was lashing out at her. She could sense there was an underlying issue to all of this—Draco was probably at the center of it—and he was taking it out on her. Or rather, he was taking it out on the fact that he did not have his wife to support him at a time when he felt he needed it most. Hermione closed her eyes. *Merlin, grant me patience.* Dealing with him when he was hurting was like a bowtruckle trying to help a dragon pull a splinter from its claw. When she opened her eyes, she said quietly, "Do you want me to stay here until term starts?"

He gave her an odd look. "No—that's not possible, is it?"

"I could certainly arrange it. It would mean I won't be able to keep an eye on Harry for that week, but if my husband *needs* me here," she stressed, "then of course, I will stay."
There was a long silence, and Hermione could see the emotions warring across her husband's face in an unusual display of openness, before he bowed his head.

"I cannot ask you to…"

"But if you did, I would," she told him softly, placing a hand on his cheek.

He accepted the touch, closing his eyes for a moment, and then leaned in to her, brushing his lips against her ear. Hermione thought he was about to try and nibble on her earlobe, to cajole her into reciprocating, but he instead murmured just loudly enough so only she could possibly hear, "I don't know how I'm supposed to handle having you in my class, like this."

"I'll just be my usual annoying, know-it-all self," Hermione whispered, smiling slightly. "I'll raise my hand for everything, have my book out in class before you tell us to, and be the first to succeed in whatever practical application we're doing…"

"Undoubtedly," Severus breathed, and for the first time, he was smiling, if somewhat darkly with reminiscence. "I haven't forgotten what you were like, when we were students together… insufferable…"

"I'll just have to be that way as a student here, too," Hermione said, bringing up a hand to stroke his hair. "But I'll still be me, you realize. You'll still be yourself, handing in your reports when you return my homework. And when we can, when we don't have classes to worry about—we can drop our roles."

"Not until breaks in-between term," Severus said bitterly.

"What about the weekends?" Hermione pointed out. "It would be easy to sneak out, take my homework with me, and find our quarters. Not too often, of course—not enough to raise suspicion. But on occasion… when I need to get away… or when you need me…"

He was tempted. She felt like Eve, offering the forbidden fruit to her Adam. She could see it in his eyes. The way they flickered uncertainly, and then back and forth across her face, as he told himself that it was a bad idea—and yet that it was eminently possible. That it was doable. That it was a partial solution to keeping their partnership—and their marriage—intact despite the immense stress and pressure they were both placed under.

His resolve cracked. "Yes. I—yes."

Hermione leaned her head forward, shifting it slightly to the side so that it was pressed against his. Their noses touched, their connection unspeakably intimate. She added softly, "I am your wife, Severus. As much as I am my own person—as much as I have my own duties to keep, my responsibilities to uphold, my burdens to bear—I love you. I place you and our family—our family—as the center of my universe. Where you go, where you ask me to come… I will follow."

His responding words were too private, too full of sincere promise, to ever be repeated casually. But when they broke apart, they both felt slightly lighter and far more reassured than they had ever dared hope given the difficulties of the upcoming year. They reluctantly pulled away, sliding back into the protective shell of their roles, and Hermione glanced back at the door.

"I ought to check on him… to make sure he hasn't turned the staff room into a swamp…"

Severus smirked, but turned away to leave nonetheless. "Undoubtedly, Filch will have the Weasleys' products on the banned list before the week is out."
Hermione laughed. "As if that will stop any of the students from buying them in the first place."

When she slipped back inside, it was to find that room still in relatively good order, although the flying toy rug had gotten a bit out of control. Hermione did not bother attempting to Stun it, recalling what had happened when Umbridge had tried to do so to the fireworks, but merely took a seat in one of the armchairs, retrieved her tea, and watched Selenius's reusable hangman hang.

~o~O~o~

"Yes, I've already agreed it was fishy, Harry," Hermione said a little impatiently, looking up from Advanced Rune Translation reluctantly to turn to Harry. She was sitting on the windowsill of Fred and George's room, doing a bit of re-reading on the material she would be covering in the following year, and was getting somewhat fed up with Harry's refusal to let the matter of Malfoy drop. "But haven't we agreed there could be a lot of explanations?"

"Maybe he's broken his Hand of Glory," Ron said vaguely, bending over his broomstick with his servicing kit and attempting to straighten the tail twigs. "Remember that shriveled-up arm Malfoy was looking at?"

"He was looking at it," Hermione said crossly. "He never bought it, Ron."

"But what about when he said, 'Don't forget to keep that one safe'?' Harry asked for the umpteenth time. "That sounded to me like Borgin's got another one of the broken objects, and Malfoy wants both."

"Look, this conversation is useless!" Hermione cried, throwing her book down on her lap. To her, it seemed the only way to get anything through to the boys was to be emotional—it was the only thing that got their attention and made them look and listen. It gave them the impression of appearing to be startled rabbits, but it seemed to work, just a bit. She had to be a little less subtle around them. "It's just about as informative as the one we had last year, when we were all together the night you arrived at Grimmauld Place to try and guess the 'weapon' the Order was hiding—and look at where that got us! There's no point to this, Harry!"

"I know what we saw," Harry said stubbornly. "Malfoy's planning something. His father's in Azkaban. Don't you think Malfoy'd like revenge?"

Ron looked up from his broomstick, blinking.

"Malfoy, revenge? What can he do about it?"

"That's my point, I don't know!" Harry said, sounding frustrated. "But he's up to something and I think we should take it seriously—"

Hermione closed her eyes, breathing in deeply. Harry was ignoring her input on this one, which was not only annoying, but disrespectful. Once again he was way-off in his assumptions. Draco Malfoy was not looking for revenge. He was working for his own survival and his family's, since the Dark Lord was putting him through the gauntlet. Revenge was not in the younger Malfoy's top list of priorities, although that would not preclude him from grasping an opportunity if it presented itself.

If he grasped an opportunity that presented itself in the form of Harry Potter running headfirst into the middle of a mess he was only vaguely aware existed. Hermione loved Harry as a godson and best friend, but there were moments like these when she wanted nothing better than to knock some sense into him.

Harry had suddenly stopped talking, and Hermione opened her eyes to find he was staring at the
"Harry?" she said anxiously. "What's wrong?"

"Your scar's not hurting again, is it?" Ron asked nervously.

"He's a Death Eater," Harry responded slowly. "He's replaced his father as a Death Eater."

There was a moment of silence. Hermione mentally counted from ten to zero in Latin. And then Ron broke out laughing. "Malfoy? He's sixteen, Harry! You think You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join?"

"It seems very unlikely, Harry," Hermione said, in a repressive sort of voice, hoping to quash this line of conversation and get it out of Harry's head as quickly as possible. And then almost despite herself, she asked, "What makes you think—?"

"In Madam Malkin's. She didn't touch him, but he yelled and jerked his arm away from her when she went to roll up the sleeve. It was his left arm. He's been branded with the Dark Mark."

Hermione and Ron exchanged looks, even as Hermione made the mental note to inform Severus that he needed to tell Draco to be more circumspect with his behavior; he was clearly being too obvious, if anyone who knew what to look for bothered to do so.

"I think he just wanted to get out of there, Harry," Hermione said, with a glance at Ron, who looked thoroughly unconvinced. At this moment, she was once again grateful for the occasions that Ron showed a level, even thoughtful head. He was not immediately jumping on the wagon of suspicion like Harry, which meant that there was a better possibility of talking Harry out of this seemingly mad idea.

"He showed Borgin something we couldn't see," Harry pressed on stubbornly. "Something that seriously scared Borgin. It was the Mark, I know it—he was showing Borgin who he was dealing with, you saw how seriously Borgin took him!"

Hermione exchanged another look with Ron, praying that this would not be enough to convince him, too.

"I'm not sure, Harry..." she began.

"Yeah, I still don't reckon You-Know-Who would let Malfoy join..."

Looking thoroughly annoyed and fed up with the both of them, Harry snatched up a pile of dirty Quidditch robes and left the room. Hermione waited for the door to close, and then turned to Ron.

"You don't seriously believe..."

"Nah," Ron said. "Malfoy's only sixteen. What would You-Know-Who want with a sixteen-year-old? Not even fully qualified. Plus, it'd be risky, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah, that's right," Hermione said, relieved. "But still... Harry..."

"Maybe Harry's right about the revenge," Ron proposed vaguely. "Something like that. Or maybe he's his father's errand boy while Lucius Malfoy's in Azkaban. But it doesn't make sense for him to let Malfoy join..."

"Yes, that seems much more likely," Hermione said, looking at Ron bemusedly.
"Anyway," Ron said, returning his attention to his broomstick, "what could we do about it? Once we're back at school, I doubt Malfoy'll be able to do anything. Didn't Dad say something about Hogwarts increasing security this year? It won't be a problem."

Later, Hermione slipped away from the confines of the Burrow to Floo to the Staff Room at Hogwarts. She had worked out an excuse with Molly to explain away her periodic absences from the Burrow, the majority of which went unnoticed by Harry and Ron to begin with—they were spending a great deal of time practicing Quidditch, of which Hermione was rarely a participant in the first place—and was choosing to spend her time with her husband and attending duties as a member of the Order.

Despite her de-aging, she had gone to Dumbledore and demanded that he put her back on active duty. She had functioned to what amounted as an inactive sleeper agent toward the end of last year, where she blended in and laid down low, and had no intention of doing so this year. No matter how difficult switching between her camouflage as a student and her duty to the Order would be, she was determined to take it on. Now was not the time to reveal her position to all and sundry: while there were several participants on both sides of the war who knew the secret of her past, the Ministry was blissfully ignorant of it, and Hermione wanted it to stay that way. The last thing she needed was an investigation and their interference in her life, which would be opened formally if she made the knowledge public.

And she could not tell Harry, either; he needed to remain focused on whatever Dumbledore had planned for him. He could not afford to be distracted by the cascade of distraught emotions and questions that would surely follow by the simple revelation of her trip back in time.

But she could put herself back on active duty. And that was precisely what she did.

"So," Hermione said one evening, wordlessly sending her boots and traveling cloak sailing obediently over by her chair to lay themselves down neatly, "how did things go?"

Severus lifted his head up, pulling back the curtain of his hair so that he could see her. Selenius sat across him, and between the two of them was a rather methodically-deployed chess match. Severus's appearance over the past week and a half was sporadic at best; oftentimes, he only stayed long enough to meet with Albus or prepare his classroom before returning to Spinner's End. This evening, however, he had found an opportunity to remain late enough to spend time with his son.

"Passable," he said neutrally, as Selenius directed his bishop to take out a pawn.

Neither of them could talk freely while Selenius was present, but Hermione was not inclined to send her son away. Any chance they had to spend together, Hermione was willing to push aside the compilation of a report just a little longer. Satisfied, she noncommittally summoned herself a cup of tea and came to sit by the fireplace, cross-legged and silently observing their game.

She had spent the early morning and latter half of the day on patrol through the London Underground, keeping an eye on Borgin and Burkes in case Malfoy presented a return and generally observing the going-ons around the local shops. The Death Eaters often staked out their targets for raids, and if she could spot them watching a particular target, she could investigate without placing Severus's position at stake. It was best now that they operated half-blind; if Severus did not tell her who the Death Eaters were planning to attack—information of which was limited to him begin with —then he would have less to hide when trying to cover up his tracks under Voldemort's Legilimency. Half-truths were easier to manipulate than outright falsehoods about what he had and had not disseminated to the Order.

Later, once Selenius had begun yawning and was summarily sent up to bed, Hermione and Severus
had a chance to reconvene with her notebook.

"I'll be closing up Spinner's end this Saturday," Severus said, cleaning up their chess game with a flick of his wand. The pieces popped back into its box and slid back underneath the armchair it was normally stored under with an obedient snap. "Term resumes in a week—close enough for me to make my excuses to the Dark Lord why I'm kicking Wormtail out of my home."

Hermione made a face, wrinkling her nose just a bit. The fact that Pettigrew was living with Severus, however temporarily, made her skin crawl. She did not want the odious little worm to be going through her house—*their* house. "Good."

"What did you find today?"

Hermione set her teacup down on the floor. "Only one person visited Borgin and Burke's today, and it wasn't Malfoy. Madam Rosmerta went there for a shrunken head—not surprising, since one of hers got nicked down at the Three Broomsticks when I paid a visit a couple weeks ago—"

"Keep it concise," Severus said tersely, but there was a quirk of amusement to his thin lips. "No need to get as long-winded as your essays. Skip to the important parts."

"Right." Hermione ran a hand through her tangle of hair with a huff of exasperation. "I saw no one—not in their day clothes, and no one familiar or otherwise standing suspiciously in one place for a long time to watch a particular person or establishment. I don't think anyone was there today. Not even Fenrir Greyback, and I was so hoping to see if Malfoy would really carry through with his threat…"

She trailed off, and then sighed.

"In short, I found nothing. I recorded it in my notebook anyway, though what good that'll do, I haven't the faintest clue." There was a sudden, plaintive *mew* from underneath the armchair, and Crookshanks slinked out. He arched his back in a feline stretch, and then padded forward into Hermione's lap, where she immediately began acquiescing to his wish for attention with a scratch behind his ear. "On the other hand, Harry is still firmly convinced Malfoy's a Death Eater, and Ron's the only one stopping him from going off the deep end with his conspiracy theories—not that Harry's wrong, for once he's actually right."

"Unfortunately." Severus took her teacup and lifted it to his lips, finishing it before Crookshank's twitching tail could spill it over. "Weasley has shown improvement, however."

"Yes, I suppose," Hermione said, scratching a purring Crookshanks underneath his chin now. "He's much more level-headed now. I suppose the Department of Mysteries has taught him something."

Severus reached over for her notebook, which lay open on the rug between them, and shut it with a resounding clap. Quicker than she would have believed, he lifted Crookshanks out of her lap, ignoring the half-kneazle's undignified mew of surprise, and set him off the rug before turning his attention back to her. The cat fluffed up with indignation, vaguely resembling an experimental stick of orange cotton candy gone wrong, but had the good sense to scoot off as Severus leaned forward and captured his wife's lips with his.

The fluffy, squash-faced ginger turned around once more in time to see his mistress tumble backwards onto the rug before stalking off.

Hermione laughed as Severus pinned her down, the noise muffled by their kiss before they broke apart. "That's it?" she teased. "We're done with work, and now we're squeezing in what time we
have left?"

He nuzzled her cheek—something he did out of habitual affection—and then lower his head to nib at her collarbone. "You did offer to stay," he said silkily. "Surely you knew what that would entail."

Hermione ran her fingers through his hair, registering the greasy feel to it and not minding in the least as she pulled his head up again to kiss the tip of his nose. "Of course. And I don't mind in the least."

He paused for a moment to caress her cheek, savoring the soft skin, and then began to work his way down. He hid his eagerness with the self-discipline he had built up over the years, appearing calm, perhaps even merely contemplative as he tweaked a nipple or laved at her belly with his tongue, but Hermione was not fooled for a minute. She allowed him to take his time, exploring her body as though for the first time, though with knowledge and an expert touch that revealed otherwise—but when he finally moved to position himself between her legs, hooking them up over his elbows to expose her fully to him, it was abundantly clear that he was not in the mood to wait.

Normally, he took things aggravatingly slow. The build-up was that much more intense, when he made her wait for it and teased her mercilessly along the way—but tonight was not one of those nights. But it was not until they removed an irate Crookshanks from the room, after he had started yowling at the door to be let out, that they finally made it to their bed.

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The day the train was due to arrive, Hermione spent the early morning wandering along the road of Hogsmeade. Severus had been called away after delivering Selenius to the Burrow, and Tonks was at her post near the gates of the school. It would be an inconvenience for someone else to be called away to patrol the seemingly quiet village, and so Hermione had readily volunteered for the task. She stopped by the Three Broomsticks for a takeaway mug of steaming warm Butterbeer, and was surprised by the brisk reception she received from Madam Rosmerta.

"Business has been slow," the proprietress had said, her tone snappish, as she turned around to make Hermione's order. "The Death Eaters have been all around Diagon Alley, it's no wonder people are worried they'll show up here, too."

Still, her tone was rather unlike the Rosmerta that Hermione knew, and she left feeling slightly disconcerted. Her old employer was someone Hermione considered to be an old friend of sorts, though not in the same league as Mad-Eye or Remus by any means—and the fact that Rosmerta appeared worried did nothing to allay Hermione's concern that there must be suspicious activity happening around Hogsmeade. Something more suspicious than a lack of customers.

She left her shift around noon when the streets began filling up a bit more, and wandered around to the end of the street, where she and Harry and Ron had gone in their fourth year to meet Sirius and get help for the Triwizard tournament. It had been a bit foggy earlier, but it had mostly cleared up by now, though there were still wisps of it curling along the ground like a misty rug.

For a moment, staring off into the highlands in the distance, Hermione almost felt as though she were waiting to see Sirius again. To see a big, shaggy black dog—or perhaps white with his fur shaved down in an amateurish sort of way—come trotting out to greet her like nothing had happened. But no such thing happened, and Hermione was left standing there, quite alone.

When she finally trudged back up to the castle to get into her school clothes and wander down into the Entrance Hall, arriving just in time for the throng of returning students to begin milling their way into the Great Hall, she followed them, once more blending in among the crowd. She took her seat, and waited. Ron arrived a few minutes later, slumping into the seat next to her and poking at his fork
with his wand, looking irritated about something. She saw Ginny and Luna appear moments later, taking seats elsewhere, and Neville arrived almost last, looking quite flustered for some reason.

But as soon as they all made it to the Great Hall, and the Sorting Hat's song had begun, it dawned on her that Harry was not there. Upon glancing up at the dais, she was distraught to find that Severus was not there either—yet his absence was easy to explain away. The Dark Lord must have kept him long, though this was unusual because he did not like risking Severus's cover. But Harry… where was Harry? Why had he not come up with the others?

She nudged Ron as soon as the Sorting had finished, elbowing him as he was half-way through a slice of shepherd's pie.

"Where's Harry?" she hissed.

Ron gave a non-committal shrug, swallowed his enormous mouthful, and downed a glass of pumpkin juice before responding. "I dunno."

"Didn't he go up with you?"

"No," Ron said, his brow creasing into a frown as his own seedling of worry began to set in. "He wasn't with me when we arrived, I reckoned he had already gone up… but he hasn't, has he?"

Hermione shook her head.

"Well, he must be all right," Ron said bracingly, helping himself to another mouthful. "Maybe he's gone to investigate something before coming up, you know how Filch was jabbing us with all those Secrecy Sensors—maybe wanted to stash his Cloak before Filch could nab it…"

Hermione had not actually been through those devices which Filch had taken to with an unseeming level of glee, but she did not correct him on this matter. Ron assumed she had been patrolling another carriage on the Hogwarts Express; none of them seemed to realize she had never actually boarded the train.

Her panic began to rise the longer the meal went on, as she wondered if she might perhaps find a way to sneak out of the Great Hall to find Harry, when the doors finally opened.

"Where've you—blimey, what've you done to your face?" Ron asked, goggling at Harry as he walked into the Great Hall half-way through dinner. His nose and mouth were caked with bits of blood, and there were flecks of it on his glasses. He took a seat between Hermione and Ron, and reached for a spoon, looking thoroughly disgruntled.

Hermione stared at him.

"Why, what's wrong with it?" Harry asked.

"You're covered in blood!" Hermione exclaimed, reaching for her wand. "Honestly, I can't believe—come here—Tergeo!"

"Thanks," Harry said, feeling his face as her spell siphoned it clean. "How's my nose looking?"

"Normal," Hermione said anxiously. What had Harry gotten himself into this time? They hadn't even started dessert yet! "Why shouldn't it? Harry, what happened? We've been terrified!"

"I'll tell you later," Harry said shortly.
"But—"

"Not now, Hermione," he said in a darkly significant voice that was supposed to clearly convey some deeper meaning that. Hermione was unimpressed, but bit her lower lip in a mixture of anxiety and anger, and quieted nonetheless; Harry reached across Ron for a couple of chicken legs and chips, but they vanished just before he could take them, they were replaced with bowls of pudding.

Hermione saw Harry's expression sour as he leaned back in his seat, oblivious to Ron's exclamation of delight as he reached for a chocolate gateau.

"Hat say anything interesting?" Harry asked sullenly, staring at the chocolate treats piled before him.

"More of the same, really…" Hermione said carefully.

"Dumbledore mention Voldemort at all?"

"Not yet, but he always saves his proper speech for after the feast, doesn't he?" Ron said, through a mouthful of chocolate. "It can't be long now. Anyway, glad you finally made it."

"Snape said Hagrid was late for the feast—"

"You've seen Snape?" Ron asked, between frenzied stuffings of gateau. "How come?"

"Bumped into him," Harry said evasively.

"Hagrid was only a few minutes late," Hermione said, eyeing Harry with what she hoped was concern, but was really suspicion. Harry was being ridiculously secretive about what had happened to make him late to the feast, not to mention the reasons for which he had bumped into Severus in the first place. She was concerned; discreetly, deciding now was a good opportunity to test the new enchantments they had placed on their rings in the field, she pulled out her wand and tapped her wedding ring, pretending to instead be resizing her fork.

She needn't have bothered; Harry and Ron were muttering conspicuously to each other, their talk now interrupted by Nearly-Headless Nick, who had dropped in on the pretense of attempting to eavesdrop before he had instead jumped right into their conversation. The smooth silver surface of her wedding band was replaced with Hermione's small, tight scrawl, which formed the words, *What happened?*

The ring burned white for a moment, and then faded. Severus, who had returned to his seat at the staff table shortly after Harry had walked in, suddenly set down his fork to glare at his hand. He pulled it away, shaking the sleeve of his robe over it; but nevertheless, a moment later, Hermione felt her ring heat up in response.

In tiny, spiky scrawl that Hermione had to squint at in order to decipher, Severus's answer came through. *Tonks found Potter on the train. Sent Patronus. Brought Potter back up to the school.* The handwriting faded away a moment later, to be quickly replaced with a single word: *dunderhead.*

Hermione tried not to smile at the epithet. She looked up at the staff table, and saw Severus glaring in her direction. Or possibly Harry's. Hermione locked eyes with him, and forced their connection open, pulling his mind toward hers. A moment later, he responded by pouring in the necessary focus to uphold his half of their connection, and Hermione immediately dove into the matter at hand.

*What did Harry do?*

*My understanding is that he tried to listen in on what appears to have otherwise been a private*
conversation between several of my Slytherins.

Hermione could easily guess which Slytherins those were.

Malfoy figured out he was there?

Apparently. According to Tonks, she found Potter Petrified and on his back in a most undignified manner. There was no hiding the sardonic amusement in his tone. He came away with a broken nose, but she fixed it. Your precious Potter is otherwise unharmed. 

Damn you, Harry… receiving the mental equivalent of a raised eyebrow, she clarified, One of these days, he's going to get into another bind like that, and his attacker won't be so forgiving. He's lucky to be back in one piece. I'm surprised Malfoy didn't hex him into little slimy pieces.

Draco knows he has bigger fish to fry. The larger picture to look at, so to speak. Seriously injuring Potter would merely interfere with his mission, and place his family in further jeopardy. I don't doubt he was tempted, however.

At that moment, Dumbledore got to his feet, silencing all conversation. The talk and laughter echoing throughout the hall died down almost immediately, and Hermione and Severus broke eye contact to give him their fullest attention.

"The very best of evenings to you!" Dumbledore said, smiling broadly, his arms opened wide in a gesture of embracement.

"His hand…" Hermione whispered. She remembered what his hand had looked like weeks ago; only the fingers and the adjacent half of his hand had been fully blackened, although most of his palm and wrist had clearly started to wither and darken. Now, however, his entire right hand was completely dead.

She was not the only one who took a moment to peer at the injury; murmurs struck up in the hall, as students turned to their neighbors to point it out. Dumbledore merely smiled and shook his purple-and-gold sleeve over his hand, correctly interpreting the reason for the students' reaction.

"Nothing to worry about," he said airily. Hermione almost snorted at this. "Now… to our new students, welcome, to our old students, welcome back! Another year full of magical education awaits you…"

"His hand was like that when I saw him over the summer," Harry told them in an undertone. "I thought he'd have cured it by now, though… or Madam Pomfrey would've done."

"Not everything can be cured, Harry," Hermione said quietly. "There are some injuries you can't cure… old curses… and there are poisons without antidotes… and his hand looks as though it's died, I doubt it has any feeling left to it at all…"

Ron swayed for a moment at this, looking distinctly ill at the prospect.

"...and Mr. Filch, our caretaker, has asked me to say that there is a blanket ban on any joke items bought at the shop called Weasley's Wizard Wheezes."

Despite herself, Hermione snorted with amusement. Harry and Ron gave her odd looks, but immediately turned their attention back to Dumbledore, who, after making a quick mention about the Quidditch teams, was now moving onto the announcements concerning staff appointments.

"We are pleased to welcome a new member of staff this year. Professor Slughorn—" Slughorn stood
up, looking quite pleased and entirely in his element "—is a former colleague of mine who has agreed to resume his old post of Potions Master."

Hermione smiled thinly as the word 'Potions' erupted throughout the Great Hall. Students were repeating it as though to confirm that they had heard right.

"Potions?" Ron exclaimed, turning to Harry. "But you said—"

"Professor Snape, meanwhile," Dumbledore continued, raising his voice so that it could be heard over the steadily rising murmur echoing through the great hall, "will be taking over the position of Defense Against the Dark Arts."

"No!" Harry said loudly.

"I thought you said Slughorn would be teaching Defense Against the Dark Arts," Ron shouted, struggling to be heard as the hall erupted into loud exclamations from all sides of the room.

"I thought he was!"

Hermione turned her attention to Severus, who was seated at Dumbledore's immediate right—a change from his usual spot at the far end of the table, which he had occupied for almost as long as Hermione could remember—and raised a hand in lazy acknowledgement as his Slytherins applauded and cheered. For all the stress that he was under, for all the complications concerning his position at the school and in the Dark Lord's camp, for all the trouble it had caused him to write up a new curriculum in under ten weeks, it was clear that he was truly pleased with this assignment. Triumphant, even.

In a way, it was like a parting gift from Dumbledore. To finally give Severus a chance to direct the class that he had been itching to teach for almost as long as Hermione had been retired from teaching it. To bring it back up to higher standards that none of its past teachers, save perhaps Remus, had ever been able to achieve. To allow himself a chance to do what he had always wanted to before everything went to hell in a hand-basket.

*Congratulations, love.*

"Well, there's one good thing," Harry said savagely, interrupting her thoughts. "Snape'll be gone by the end of the year."

Hermione stiffened, as Ron asked, "What do you mean?"

"That job's jinxed. No one's lasted more than a year… Quirrell actually died doing it… Personally, I'm going to keep my fingers crossed for another death…"

Hermione slammed her fork down on the table, knuckles white. "*Harry!*"

"He might just go back to teaching Potions at the end of the year," Ron said reasonably. "That Slughorn bloke might not want to stay long-term…"

Ron's words faded away from Hermione's mind as she focused on Harry. She knew Harry hated Severus; understood it, even, given the way Severus had treated him the moment her scar-headed friend had stepped foot in his classroom. Furthermore, Harry had no idea that anyone at Gryffindor table might find his words offensive, nor did he seem to acknowledge that there might be a different side to Professor Snape that none of them saw. Naturally, none of this occurred to him.

Yet, the fact that Harry hated Severus with such a burning, blinding passion was disturbing.
Frightening, even. Hermione set her jaw and filed the information away, stoutly trying to keep everything in perspective, yet wanting nothing more than to yank Harry around to face her so that she could berate him into applying common sense and human decency to his words.

Dumbledore cleared his throat at that moment, recapturing the attention of the hall, and then started on the heart of his speech, what they had all been waiting for. The one that told everyone, in no uncertain terms, that the Dark Lord was back, and that there were increased security measures that needed to be observed.

He trusted them to conduct themselves with regard for their own safety and for that of others. His eyes swept over the entire hall as he spoke, but Hermione had a feeling that some of those words were strictly for Malfoy's benefit; Dumbledore did not care if he died, but he could not allow a frightened and desperate teenage boy to endanger others in a bid to assassinate him. Despite the fact that Malfoy was hovering a fork in midair with his wand, sending the signal that he thought the Headmaster’s words unworthy of his attention, it was clear that this was a plea by Dumbledore on behalf of the other students in his care.

They were then dismissed. Amid the usual deafening scrape of benches being pushed back, Hermione stood up to do her job of herding the first years to Gryffindor tower, ensuring they all got there in one piece.

That night, just before she went to bed, she paused to look down at her ring.

And then, as she climbed into bed, she grabbed her wand, and tapped it. Writing scrawled itself across the smooth surface, forming five simple words: *I love you. Good night.*

They faded away, and for a moment, the ring was blank; as soon as Severus had presumably registered the surprise of receiving such a message, his spiky handwriting appeared across the band.

*Sleep well, love.*

~o~O~o~

The next day was not uneventful, by any means.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was the first class of the day, and at this point, anything involving Harry and Severus was guaranteed to be interesting, if nothing else. It became clear to Hermione that Severus had imposed the darker side of his personality on the classroom, placing pictures on the walls which were carefully framed, for all to see, which Hermione would not have wanted her son to set eyes on—a son who had thankfully made a safe trip to the Burrow, and was undoubtedly, settling in there. But she mentally digressed from the topic, returning to the fact that no, Defense Against the Dark Arts was not uneventful.

Far from it. In the space of forty-five minutes, he had knocked Severus off his feet and into a desk, earned himself a detention, and painted a target on himself for more of her husband's ire.

The time spent in the classroom had not been a total loss, however; Hermione had captured Severus's attention through eye contact, and managed to get away with a full five minutes of quick conversation, where she duly relayed to him that he needed to teach Draco the meaning of subtlety; his behavior on the train as relayed by Harry, at Madam Malkin's, and at Borgin and Burkes was placing him at risk of easily being discovered. He needed to learn to move around without requiring someone to step in for damage control.

Severus took this in, setting the information aside to be dealt with later, and then proceeded to ignore
the fact that she had just managed to repel Neville's muttered Jelly-Legs Jinx silently—a feat which
would have earned twenty points from any reasonable teacher. He merely sneered contemptuously in
her direction, and strode past.

"You really shouldn't have done it," Hermione said later, once they were safely out of the classroom,
referring to Harry's earlier cheek regarding the use of 'sir', which had been a large determining factor
in earning him his detention. "What made you do it?"

"He tried to jinx me, in case you didn't notice!" Harry fumed. "I had enough of that during those
Occlumency lessons! Why doesn't he use another guinea pig for a change? What's Dumbledore
playing at, anyway, letting him teach Defense?" Without waiting for a response, he plowed on
angrily, "Did you hear him talking about the Dark Arts? He loves them! All that unfixed,
indestructible stuff—"

"Well," Hermione said quietly, "I thought he sounded a bit like you."

"Like me?" Harry squawked.

"Yes, when you were telling us what it's like to face the Dark Lord," Hermione said calmly. "You
said it wasn't just memorizing a bunch of spells, you said it was just you and your brains and your
guts—well, wasn't that what Snape was saying? That it really comes down to being brave and quick-
thinking?"

Harry seemed so disarmed by her words that he did not protest further.

They made their way back to Gryffindor tower during break in silence, save for the interruption of
Jack Sloper stopping by to deliver a message from Dumbledore concerning Harry's first private
lesson. She would not admit this to either of her friends in this lifetime, but listening to Severus
murmur in that devastatingly soft, unmistakable baritone about the Dark Arts—because Harry had hit
upon a truth in his anger, which was to say that Severus did indeed love them in his fascination—
was deeply sensual. He had spoken about the Dark Arts with an almost loving caress in his voice—a
tone that reminded Hermione very much of other times he had used it.

Like when she was pregnant, and he was leaning over her body and fucking her while whispering
dirty things into her ear… there were other very memorable instances, but that was one that stuck out
in the forefront of her mind, that made her tremble with pleasure at the very memory…

"Hermione? It's after break—don't you have Arithmancy—Hermione?"

Hermione had started and quickly rushed to gather her things and get to her next class after that
point.

Arithmancy, of all things. The irony was heavy.

Directly afterward, however, she had to help Harry and Ron with their Defense homework. Severus
had set it at a ridiculously complex level, something that Hermione could have likely done in her
sleep, but that was likely to stump over half the class. Sadistic git. He was definitely enjoying this a
bit too much, although given the prospects he was facing at the end of the year, she could not blame
him as much as she would have liked.

Potions, however, simply took the cake.

Hermione knew Dumbledore had explained Hermione's situation to Slughorn earlier, which meant
her old teacher was not at all surprised to see her in the classroom again. Unspeakably amused, to be
sure, but not surprised. He took care of Harry and Ron's lack of books and other supplies, and then
Hermione did not remember him doing anything quite like this before, but again, Slughorn had had years of retirement at his disposal to brew them, which was what allowed him to lay them out now for his class. It was actually a bit of a treat. They started with Veritaserum, moved onto recognizing Polyjuice, and then came the third potion.

"It's Amortentia," Hermione said, smiling almost lazily as she breathed in the potion's drugging scent.

"It is, indeed. It seems almost foolish to ask," Slughorn said, looking rather impressed at the fact that Hermione had retained all of this information years after attending school, "but I assume you know what it does?"

"It's the most powerful love potion in the world," Hermione said, inhaling deeply, the potion's fumes filling up her mind like a hazy, wonderful drink. At once, Severus's male, musky scent filled her nose, mixed with old parchment; the smell of a familiar and well-used sheepskin rug, and the faintest hint of roses…

"Quite right! You recognized it, I suppose, by its distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen?"

"And the steam rising in characteristic spirals," Hermione said, perking up with enthusiasm on the subject, despite the sedating, sensual effect the Amortentia was having on her thought process, "and it's supposed to smell differently to each of us, according to what attracts us." She paused to breathe in, and then added, "I can smell roses, parchment, sheepskin, and something m—"

But at that moment, she broke off, her face suffused in an unmistakable flush of embarrassment, and did not finish her sentence. Beside her, she heard Ron sniggering slightly until Harry elbowed him.

"May I ask your name, my dear?" Slughorn asked, ignoring her embarrassment, and looking thoroughly bemused.

Hermione gave it, knowing very well that he already knew. But he was doing a good job of keeping up with appearances for her sake, almost as though the whole thing were a clever, well-rehearsed little one-act. Nevertheless, it was not until Slughorn had begun lecturing them on the specifics of Amortentia that Ron muttered, "So what was that last thing again?"

Hermione made a shushing gesture and refused to answer, still slightly pink in the face.

"—and now," Slughorn said, drawing their attention back to him once more, "it is time for us to start work."

"Sir, you haven't told us what's in this one," Ernie Macmillan said, pointing to a small black cauldron resting on Slughorn's desk. Hermione looked at it interestingly, eyes widening as she recognized what it was. The color of molten gold, with droplets jumping from the surface like leaping goldfish without spilling a drop.

"Oho," Slughorn said dramatically. "Yes. That. Well, that one, ladies and gentlemen, is a most curious potion called Felix Felicis. I take it," he said, turning to Hermione, "that you know what Felix Felicis does, Miss Granger?"

"It's liquid luck," Hermione said eagerly, peering over for a closer look at the potion in question. Calmly, fighting against the urge to burst into uncharacteristic excitement over close proximity to a valuable elixir, she clarified, "It makes you lucky."
Now the whole class seemed to straighten up, giving Slughorn—and indeed, the small cauldronful of potion—their full attention.

"Quite right, take another ten points for Gryffindor. Yes, it's a funny little potion, Felix Felicis…"

"Blimey," she heard Ron whisper. "That stuff must be amazing…"

"It is," Hermione said, leaning in to whisper to him. "Like Slughorn said, very hard to make, but very much worth it… the amount in that cauldron over there would probably be enough for at least half a day's worth…"

"…and that," Slughorn said, grasping their fullest attention again, "is what I shall be offering as a prize in this lesson."

There was silence in which every bubble and gurgle of the potions in the room seemed to magnify; the tension in the room was so thick that Hermione thought it could be cut with a knife. Everyone in that room wanted to come away with that tiny cauldronful of guaranteed luck.

"One tiny bottle of Felix Felicis," Slughorn said, taking a miniscule glass bottle with a cork stoppered in it out of his pocket and showing it to them. "Enough for twelve hours' luck. From dawn till dusk, you will be lucky in everything you attempt. Now," he added sternly, "I must give you warning that Felix Felicis is a banned substance in organized competitions… sporting events, for instance, examinations, or elections. So the winner is to use it on an ordinary day only… and watch how that ordinary day becomes extraordinary!"

"So," Slughorn said, suddenly brisk, "how are you to win my fabulous prize? Well, by turning to page ten of Advanced Potion-Making. We have a little over an hour left to us, which should be time for you to make a decent attempt at the Draught of Living Death. I know it is more complex than anything you have attempted before, and I do not expect a perfect potion from anybody. The person who does best, however, will win little Felix here. Off you go!"

There was a shuffling and scraping sound as everyone hurried to set up their cauldrons and flip their books open. Hermione immediately got to work. She had brewed the Draught of Living Death Before, not only having been taught by Slughorn once before, but living with Severus meant that it was a matter of course; she had worked alongside him on his projects on rare occasions, and taking over some of the potions he brewed to sell to the local apothecary so that he could give his attention to something else was a given.

The hour progressed steadily. Ron ended up with a potion that looked like someone had melted a vat of black licorice in his cauldron and mixed it with a quart of tar for good measure. Harry was doing astonishingly well, and occasionally borrowed one of her tools to do the job. Where he had gotten the notion to crush the sopophorus bean with the flat side of the knife was beyond her at the moment; she was more focused on her cauldron than anything else, and idly suspected that he had simply copied her, given that doing so had turned her potion a light shade of lilac, just as it was described in the book.

She began stirring her cauldron, and vaguely heard Ron muttering to Harry from across the table, "How did you do that?"

"Add a clockwise stir to every seventh counter-clockwise stir… and crush your sopophorus bean with the flat side of your knife, although I think it's a bit far gone by now…"

Hermione startled at this recitation, though she did not stop attending to her own potion.
"Yeah, looks like it…" Ron sounded dejected. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him poke his potion with his wand, and come off with an unappetizing black slime dripping from the tip.

Hermione glanced over at Harry, eyes narrowing in suspicion. How did he know this? Libatius Borage's book had not been updated in years; the instructions Harry was giving were ones only Severus had taught her—

Her eyes fell upon the black scribble that filled up the margins of Harry's borrowed book, and she almost stopped stirring. She recognized that scrawl—no, scratch that. The book was unmistakable. She had first laid eyes on it during a very memorable detention with her husband almost twenty years ago…

No...

"And time's… up!" Slughorn called. "Stop stirring, please!"

Hermione stared helplessly down at the book Harry was using, fingers itching to snatch it away from him so that she could leaf through it to check—just to check—if there was something on the back cover, something that might possibly identify the owner. Just in case her mind was playing tricks on her; she missed Severus badly despite the times they got to see each other, and her role as a student was playing bloody hell on her senses in the form of déjà vu; it was possible she was mistaken, at this point she wanted to be mistaken, because if Harry had Severus's old copy of Advanced Potions-Making…

Slughorn had made it around the room to their table now, and was giving Ron's thick, black potion a rueful smile before passing over Ernie's navy concoction—and then stopping at hers, with the expression of being dumbstruck on his face. But he said nothing, not until he laid his eyes on Harry's cauldron as well.

"Oho!" he exclaimed, eyes widening, instantly the picture of pure delight. "Oho! Good lord, we have two winners here—two identically superb potions! Excellent, you two, excellent! Of course, this means we'll have to split the prize between you, but no matter, no matter… here you go!"

Hermione and Harry exchanged astonished looks with each other, albeit for different reasons, as Slughorn pulled out another tiny bottle, filled it up half-way with the Felix Felicis, and then squinted at them to ensure they were exactly even before handing them both a bottle. Hermione cradled the bottle of liquid luck in her hands before tucking it into her pocket, feeling both satisfied and disappointed as she glanced at her bespectacled friend beside her. Quite suddenly, she felt a rush of something akin to anger course through her; in a way, it felt like Harry had cheated. Hermione had a good idea of what she wanted to use the potion for, and felt that Harry had taken some of it when he should not have been able to, by all rights.

But she did not protest as they left the dungeons. She still had six hours' worth of liquid luck resting safely in her pocket. That was something, at least.

But she had no intention of using it on herself.

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It soon became very clear to Hermione that Harry had no intention of willingly relinquishing the book, which had revealed itself to be the property of the Half-Blood Prince following their first Potions lesson. Hermione was tempted to steal it out of his dormitory, but had to admit to herself that this course of action was just a bit too obvious: Harry would look at the three most immediate suspects for its theft, since only three people were aware of the book's true value: Hermione, Ron,
and Ginny (who had overheard the short argument that had ensued following the lesson.)

She would have to speak to Severus about the book. There had to be a way for him to confiscate it. He was a teacher, after all; furthermore, it was his book, and he had every right to take it back. But things were not so simple. If Hermione didn't know better, she would almost suspect that Harry was having a one-sided love affair with Severus's dog-eared textbook. It was both absurd and laughable, yet disturbingly true. While Severus had great difficulty in getting Harry to take anything away from his lessons over the past five years, his book was having a good deal more success.

It was difficult to get Harry to shut up about the book. The Prince said this... The Prince wrote that... there, in the margins—he suggested that... it was almost, but not quite, as bad as Percy Weasley and his report on the thickness of cauldron bottoms. And yet, in some ways, it was infinitely worse. If there was one comfort Hermione had been counting on to help her get through the year, it would be her superior skills in every class. She felt it was well deserved; she did, after all, work hard for those grades, and the acknowledgement she received.

But by the end of the week, Slughorn was raving about Harry's abilities, saying he had rarely taught anyone so talented. He acknowledged Hermione's equally good work, but since it was Harry who was apparently the young prodigy while Hermione was merely the older mind— not to mention Harry's fame as the 'Chosen One'— he often passed over her in favor of praising Harry. Something very much like jealousy began to take shape in Hermione at being pushed aside.

Hermione was almost tempted to subtly set the book on fire one Potions class and get it out of the way for good, but the fact that it belonged to Severus stayed her hand. It was her husband's hard work that was written in there, and if they could get it back intact, that would be much more preferable than losing it all in a fit of temper.

In Harry's favor, he had offered to share the book with her as well as Ron, but Hermione saw no point in it; she had read that book front to back several times before, and knew all of Severus's tips and tricks by heart.

But when Harry confronted her about why she was being so bad-tempered, Hermione did lash out at him.

"Why do you think?" she snapped. "You cheated, Harry! You shouldn't have known half those tips that got you through the first lesson, where I had to actually take the time to learn them... so why do you think?" she continued, her voice chilly. "You got six hours' worth of Felix Felicis for almost no real work on your part. Don't you think I feel robbed?"

A look of genuine guilt flashed across his face, but Ron jumped in to defend him. "He only followed different instructions to ours," Ron pointed out. "Could've been a catastrophe, couldn't it? But he took a risk and it paid off—even if it wasn't much of a risk, given you already knew most of the tips he was using..." he heaved a sigh. "Slughorn could've handed me that book, but no, I get the one no one's ever written on. Puked on, by the look of page fifty-two, and I think someone might have actually eaten the dedication page, but—"

"But it still doesn't change the fact that Harry didn't have to put in any effort," Hermione said, gritting her teeth.

"Well, what d'you expect him to do?" Ron retorted. "Go back to Slughorn and say, 'sorry Professor, I was using someone else's book and it had all these really great tips'—or what, give you the Felix Felicis he got?"

Hermione stared stonily at her friend, refusing to respond, but that was exactly what she wished
would happen. The minute Slughorn had shown them the potion, Hermione had been planning on nicking or asking Slughorn for some of it, given she was a member of the Order and had a perfectly legitimate reason to requisition it. Furthermore, when Slughorn had given her the perfect option to win it, she had already had her mind set that she would have it. After all, she was the best in class. Whatever Harry or Ron said to the contrary, Harry had won it unfairly.

And there were two very important people to her who could use it. Six hours' worth of luck, used at the right time, could save Selenius's life if he was attacked. Six hours' worth of luck, used carefully, could help Severus navigate through the Dark Lord's graces when he was being particularly treacherous about it. She had been planning on splitting it evenly between them, although Selenius would require a stern lecture on what the potion was supposed to be used for…

"No," Hermione said finally, lying through her teeth. "But he should give that graffitied copy back."

"Come off it," Ron said. "You're just jealous."

Hermione gave him an affronted look, for lack of being able to express what she really thought, and twitched her essay on The Principals of Rematerialization away from him, preventing him from reading it upside-down. Ron looked about to protest, and Hermione was ready to continue lambasting them both, when Harry suddenly stood up and began packing his things. "It's five to eight, I'd better go, I'll be late for Dumbledore."

"Good luck," Hermione said, her ire not forgotten, but relenting slightly in the face of Harry's upcoming—and undoubtedly informative—lesson. "We'll wait up—we want to hear what he teaches you."

"Hope it goes okay," Ron said, glancing back at Hermione's essay.

Harry left, and then Hermione got up as well.

"Come on, let me have a look, Hermione—" Ron weeded.

"No," Hermione said sourly, putting her essay away. "You can learn what it's like to have to use your own work to get things done. I'm going for a walk."

"A walk?" Ron said, bewildered. "You're mad—curfew's in an hour—"

"That's right," Hermione said pleasantly, shouldering her bag. "Have fun."

She left Ron still gazing at her in disbelief, and as soon as she had made it down the first staircase, she tapped her ring with her wand.

I'm coming. Are you free?

The words faded a few seconds later, and Hermione had descended another staircase before the reply came. Yes.

Hermione Disillusioned herself before making her way down to the dungeons, where she found the door to their quarters and slipped inside without incident. The rooms were empty, but Hermione set her bag down, pulled out her essay, and got to work finishing it up before Severus arrived.

He appeared fifteen minutes later, shutting the door behind him with more force than necessary. When he saw her sitting in her favorite armchair, paper and quill out and working, his expression changed from one of frustration to merely tired resignation. He joined her a moment later after kicking off his boots, removing his robes, and rolling up the sleeves of his shirt.

"How was your week?" he asked wearily, sitting in the other armchair.
"Frustrating, to say the least," Hermione began, and then proceeded to tell him everything—from the competition over the Felix Felicis in Slughorn's first Potions class to the fact that Harry now had Severus's old Potions book, and the ensuing issues that followed Harry taking possession of the Half-Blood Prince's book.

Severus let out a vehement exclamation of fury when he learned that 'Harry bloody Potter' now had his old copy of *Advanced Potion-Making*, and his contemptuous sneer deepened into a scowl of utmost loathing when he learned that the book had helped him unfairly win six hours' worth of liquid luck.

"Blasted Potter, just like his father—"

"James would have used the book, yes, but James had a better sense of fairness," Hermione said, jumping to her friend's defense.

"I suppose you consider it *fair*, then, to dangle me helplessly in the air without my wand with my own spell?"

"No," Hermione conceded unhappily, "but the James I grew up with was a lot kinder than that. He was more… sensitive, by then. But either way, this is Harry we're talking about, not James."

Severus turned his ire to the fire instead, flicking his wand to forcefully shove another log into it, causing sparks and ashes to fly. He took a moment to breathe in deeply, and then said, "I will have Slughorn give him a different book, and then confiscate that one from the classroom. Permanently."

"Good idea," Hermione said, feeling relieved. "That's one problem taken care of. As for the Felix Felicis—"

"Give it all to Selenius," Severus said quietly. "I can take care of myself. But if the Burrow were attacked, or if something were to happen to him, being able to drink some liquid luck might save his life."

Hermione bit her lower lip, but the decision was made. The potion would go to Selenius.

"As for Malfoy—the issue you brought up with me at the beginning of the week," Severus murmured, calmer now that they were not discussing Harry. "I have tried to speak to him, but he has been avoiding me."

Hermione grimaced. "Nothing seems to be going our way, does it?"

"There is one thing," Severus said grimly. "The Dark Lord does not plan to summon me often during term. He intends for me to keep my cover as much as possible, up until the moment I must break it."

Hermione shook her head, with something akin to a resigned sigh. "I don't know whether that's good news or bad news," she said heavily.

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Classes resumed on Monday as expected, but not before Harry's new copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* had arrived. Hedwig delivered it in the middle of breakfast that morning, carrying a large square package; Pigwidgeon appeared a moment later carrying an identical package, although he crash-landed at the table, twittering feebly as the wrapped book nearly crushed him. Ron hurried to help his owl while Harry tore open his parcel with an exclamation of delight.

"Oh good," Hermione said, delighted. "Now you can give that graffitied copy back."
"Are you mad?" Harry said. "I'm keeping it! Look, I've thought it out—"

He pulled out Severus's copy of Advanced Potion-Making out of his bag, and tapped the cover with his wand with a muttered, "Diffindo!" He did the exact same to the new copy, ignoring Hermione's scandalized look, and then swapped the covers, tapping both, and saying, "Reparo!"

Hermione stared at Severus's copy, now disguised as a new book, while the one from Flourish and Blott's sat there looking thoroughly secondhand.

"I'll give Slughorn back the new one, he can't complain, it cost nine Galleons."

Hermione pressed her lips into a thin, angry line, and got up to leave, silently rethinking how they were going to get that book back. Ron reached across her seat to grab her copy of the Prophet, opening it up to read between mouthfuls of toast, apparently unconcerned.

Defense Against the Dark Arts took place before Potions on a Monday, as usual, and Hermione managed to convey what new curveball Harry had thrown them while in class. Through eye contact, Hermione could hear Severus practically spitting with rage, and it was no surprise to her when he docked Harry twenty points for incompetency when he failed to block a hex nonverbally. Harry did not defend himself out loud, but was the one slammed into the desk this time around, looking just as furious and sullen as the Potions Master undoubtedly felt. He also assigned anyone who had not succeeded in casting nonverbally additional homework, which spared Hermione, but deluged the entire class.

"Come off it!" Ron groaned as they left. "We've got loads as it is! And Quidditch tryouts this weekend!"

"Why doesn't he pick someone else?" Harry demanded angrily, rubbing his shoulder from where it had knocked into the desk. "I still don't know what Dumbledore thinks he's playing at, letting Snape teach Defense… the greasy git's just getting off on pushing us around."

"You wouldn't get pushed around if you learned to do what he's trying to teach you," Hermione said, at little too smugly. "You can't do everything by using other peoples' work, you know."

"Hermione, are you ever going to let that drop?" Harry said irritably.

"No," Hermione said sourly. "Not until you return that book."

Ron gave Harry an uneasy look. "Well…" he said uncomfortably. "I mean, maybe you should—it's not worth keeping it at this point, is it?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asked roughly.

Ron gestured at Hermione, who looked surprised to finally be given some support on the matter. "I mean, come on, mate. If it bothers her this much, shouldn't you just—I mean, she's got a good reason for not liking it, doesn't she? Anyway, when has our experience with mysterious books and instructions ever ended well?" Ron mused. "Remember our second year? I told you not to pick it up."

Harry glared at Hermione, and then turned to Ron. "So I should just give up the book because she's being a bad sport about it, is that it? Or because it's got some good tips, that somehow makes it dangerous?"

"Well—"

At that point, they had reached the Potions classroom, and their conversation was cut short.
Hermione threw Ron an appreciative look, and took a seat on his other side in class to avoid having to sit next to Harry, who merely looked disgruntled. Slughorn did indeed ask Harry for his book at the start of the lesson, and Hermione merely bit the inside of her cheek as he took the wrong book and put it away.

But Ron's support was not forgotten later at the end of the week during Quidditch tryouts. She sat in the stands with everyone else, if only to support him, which he seemed to appreciate. She was there for Ginny, too. Unfortunately, she was sitting rather close to where the Keepers were waiting to try out, which meant that she had to listen to Cormac McLaggen's every swaggering word.

"Weasley's too weedy to make it as Keeper," McLaggen drawled. "I'm surprised his sister made it on the team, but when you're friends with the Boy-Who-Lived… perhaps she is quick, but she's got poor broom control… but I suppose being pretty has its compensations…"

Hermione felt very satisfied with herself when they left the Quidditch Pitch that evening to go down to Hagrid's, not feeling the least bit guilty about Confunding McLaggen during his own tryout. Ron stumbled upon the truth unknowingly, however, and when they left Hagrid's several hours later, Harry stopped her to confront her about it.

"What?" Hermione said defensively.

"If you ask me," Harry said quietly, "McLaggen looks like he was Confunded this morning. And he was standing right in front of where you were sitting."

Hermione's face turned red. She had been caught. To be fair, she had been a bit obvious about it, but…

"Oh, all right then, I did it," she whispered. "But you should have heard the way he was talking about Ron and Ginny! Anyway," she added, "he's got a nasty temper, you saw how he reacted when he didn't get in—you wouldn't have wanted someone like that on the team."

"No," Harry said. "No, I suppose that's true. But wasn't that dishonest, Hermione? I mean, you're a prefect, aren't you?"

"Oh, be quiet," she snapped, and he smirked.

They hurried up to the castle at Ron's impatient glance, and despite the fact that Hermione was still angry with Harry about the Potions book, she was starting to let it go, just a bit. She would certainly do her best to get it out of his grasp, but at this point, there was no reason to continuing to be completely sour about it. It wasn't going to make Harry change his mind. They would have to get the book away from him some other way.

Once they were inside, however, their path to the Great Hall was impeded by Slughorn's arrival.

"Harry, Harry, just the man I was hoping to see!" he boomed genially, twiddling the end of his enormous mustache and puffing out his enormous belly. Resemblance to a walrus or not, he was effectively blocking their path. "I was hoping to catch you before dinner! What do you say to a spot of supper tonight in my rooms instead? We're having a little party, just a few rising stars, I've got McLaggen coming and Zabini, the charming Melinda Bobbin—I don't know whether you know her? Her family owns a large chain of apothecaries—and, of course, I hope very much that Miss Granger will favor me by coming too."

Slughorn made Hermione a little bow as she finished speaking, and she was actually a bit flattered. She was fully familiar with the way he operated, and it was clear that he had his eyes set on
ensnaring Harry, but she was glad that she was not being completely overlooked. Oddly enough, it made her feel slightly better, until it became obvious to her that he was ignoring Ron.

Well, she thought, looking at Slughorn consideringly, *we can't have that.*

"I can't come, Professor," Harry said at once, before Hermione could reply. "I've got a detention with Professor Snape."

"Oh dear!" Slughorn said dramatically, his face falling. "Dear, dear. I was counting on you, Harry! Well, I'll just have a word with Severus and explain the situation. I'm sure I'll be able to persuade him to postpone your detention. Yes, I'll see you both later!

"Wait, Professor," Hermione said, stopping him.

"Yes, m'dear?"

"I doubt Harry will be able to come—you know Professor Snape is ever so strict—but I'd like to bring Ron along."

Slughorn eyed Ron apprehensively, but it was only for a split second. He smiled genially at her. "Of course, Miss Granger, of course. The more the merrier! I still hope Severus will change his mind, but in that case, I'll see the three of you later!"

"Thank you, sir."

Ron, who had looked sullen and not at all pleased at being ignored, looked Hermione in amazement.

"Blimey… thanks," he said, looking awkward.

"Just because you're not good at Potions is no reason for him to ignore you," Hermione responded coolly. "He just doesn't know what you're capable of. I'm sure if you showed him a chess game or your Keeping skills, he'd be impressed."

"It's not like I care about what he thinks of me," Ron said, trying to act unconcerned.

"It's good to have someone well-connected interested in you," Hermione told him firmly. "It gets you places. It'll give you a chance to let others see your talents when they might otherwise be overlooked—even if you don't like him very much, he's useful."

Ron goggled at her. Harry shook his head, smirking but clearly impressed.

"I…" Ron said, but Hermione cut it off.

"Ron, do you remember something you told me once about your dad? That he could get a promotion anytime he wanted—that he just likes being where he is?"

"Of course!" Ron said, a bit too defensively.

"Well," Hermione said, "that's all very well for your dad, but I know there's a lot you want to do with your life. You know that as well as I do—" Ron was nodding eagerly at this "—but it helps if you start planning how you're going to go out there beforehand."

Ron was eyeing her appreciatively now. "Thanks, Hermione."

After dinner, they made their way back up to Gryffindor Tower. They found a spot in the crowded common room, and Ron, who was in a bit of a better mood now, passed Hermione a copy of
Ron was at first alarmed—but once appeased, merely surprised—to find mention of his father in the paper, although when Harry confessed that the confidential tip-off Arthur had been working off of was him, Hermione took issue with it.

"Yeah, mine!" Harry said. "I told him at King's Cross about Malfoy and that thing he was trying to get Borgin to fix! Well, if it's not at their house, he must have brought whatever it is to Hogwarts with him—"

"But how can he have done, Harry?" Hermione asked sternly. "We were all searched when we arrived, weren't we?"

"Were you?" Harry said, taken aback. "I wasn't!"

Hermione had nearly forgotten that; since Harry was late, naturally, Filch had not had a chance to jab him with Secrecy Sensors, and she told him so. For a moment, Harry looked stymied, before he suggested, "Someone's sent it to him by owl, then. His mother or someone."

"All the owls are being checked too," Hermione said.

Harry finally looked stumped, and at last, turned to Ron.

"Can you think of any way Malfoy—"

"Just drop it, Harry," Ron said, with a meaningful glance at Hermione. "If there were a way for Malfoy to sneak something into the school, Hermione would have thought of it."

"But—"

Harry was interrupted by the arrival of Demelza Robins, who Hermione recognized as one of the Gryffindor Quidditch team's new chasers, with a message.

"From Professor Slughorn?" Harry asked hopefully.

"No… from Professor Snape," Demelza said. "He says you're to come to his office at half past eight tonight to do your detention—er—no matter how many party invitations you've received." She paused, and then said, "He wanted you to know you'll be sorting out rotten flobberworms from good ones, to use in Potions and—and he says there's no need to bring protective gloves."

"Right," Harry said grimly. "Thanks, Demelza."

Hermione was the only one who understood precisely where Severus's particularly vindictive streak was coming from, and said nothing as she and Ron got up to leave for Slughorn's after-dinner supper. Ron had clearly not forgiven Slughorn for snubbing him earlier, but he was willing to put on a good face to try and prove to him that his first assessment of him as inconsequential was wrong.

"Miss Granger!" Slughorn greeted, when she arrived. He nodded to Ron, and welcomed them both inside. He was using the same room had had used to host his parties as last time, all cozy tables and stuffed armchairs with a roaring fire. As promised, McLaggen was there, and Hermione immediately dragged Ron over to the armchairs, finding them a good seat before they could be filled up.

"Wait here," she told him quietly, and then got up to find a way to talk to Slughorn privately.

She did. Taking him aside as the last guest entered, and talking in a low voice, she asked him if he had checked the book he had taken from Harry.
"Harry gave the book back, no trouble, no trouble at all!" Slughorn said, twirling his great walrus mustache.

Hermione shook her head. "Did Severus come to collect it?" she hissed quietly.

"Why, yes—he came to take a look, to check it—but he seems to think I got the wrong one—"

"You did. Harry gave you the one he got from Flourish and Blott's."

"Well, I can't complain, then," Slughorn said genially. "Severus shouldn't, either. A brand new one, he should be happy—"

"He's not," Hermione said sourly.

"Well, that's Severus for you."

Hermione didn't think it was safe to comment farther on this line of questioning. Instead, she backtracked slightly on it. "You know how possessive Severus is about his things. It shouldn't surprise you that he wants his copy back, not the new one from Flourish and Blott's."

"Well," Slughorn said, looking slightly taken aback. "Well, yes, I suppose I'll see what I can do then…"

"Thank you."

"Now I have a question for you, Hermione," Slughorn said, addressing her by her name, as his colleague. "Why did you bring Mr. Weasley with you?"

"You shouldn't underestimate Ron," Hermione said quietly. "He's useless at Potions, but he's got good talents elsewhere."

"I see, I see…" Slughorn looked thoughtful, glancing back at the group of students now chattering amiably together. "Well, I suppose I will see, won't I?"

Hermione gave him a tight little smile, and the two of them returned to the fire, where Slughorn's collection was waiting for him.

~o~O~o~

The weeks passed by agonizingly. By October, the weather had turned wet and cold, and when Hogsmeade weekend finally came, it was not a peaceful day. Hermione was regaled at the breakfast table with the tale of what had happened that morning—namely, Harry had accidentally hexed Ron into being levitated by his ankle—and neither of them seemed to see the seriousness of the situation.

A few days after her talk with Slughorn, however, Harry had slumped down in the seat next to her at dinner, looking thoroughly unsettled.

"Slughorn held me back after class to ask if I'd made a mistake and returned the wrong book," he muttered, just loudly enough for Hermione and Ron to hear. "D'you think he suspects something?"

"What did you say?" Hermione asked, buttering a roll for herself.

Harry looked uncomfortable at this, and did not respond immediately, which Hermione took as a bad sign.

"I told him I hadn't," he said at last, somewhat evasively.
Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, but wisely said nothing. At least, not yet.

And then there was the trip to Hogsmeade itself, which was an exercise in masochism and determination. As soon as the students got there, however, it became clear to them that Hogsmeade was no longer destined to be fun when the boarded up windows of Zonko’s hailed their arrival. The Three Broomsticks was open, thankfully, which allowed them to pull off a few of their layers and dry off in the warmth of the establishment after a cursory visit to Honeydukes. Hermione and Ron were both invited to another supper party of Slughorn’s while the man was visiting Honeydukes to stock up on boxes of crystalized pineapple, but Harry hastily made an excuse not to go—one that included Ron, much to Hermione’s exasperation, since Quidditch practice included him.

Which meant Hermione would be expected to go alone.

"Bugger," she muttered as they made their way to the Three Broomsticks.

They were passing the Hog's Head when they caught sight of Mundungus fumbling with something in his arms. The squat, bandy-legged man jumped and dropped an ancient, tattered-looking suitcase at the sight of them, and it burst open. He hurried to gather his things up, carrying the air of a man who was eager to be gone, and it was not until Ron bent down to retrieve a silver goblet that Hermione understood why.

"You took that from Sirius's house!" Harry bellowed, struggling to he heard over the howling of the wind around them as he pinned Mundungus to the wall. "That had the Black family crest on it!"

Mundungus spluttered in protest, turning slowly purple as Harry laid on the accusations; but he had not survived as a thief for long without learning how to extricate himself from such situations, because a loud bang later, he had freed himself from Harry's grasp, grabbed his suitcase, and Disapparated with an audible crack.

Harry swore at the top of his lungs, spinning around on the spot as though hoping to find Mundungus.

"COME BACK, YOU THIEVING—!

"There's no point, Harry."

Hermione whirled around in time to seek Tonks standing there, her mousy brown hair wet with sleet. She looked, if possible, even more tired and careworn than when Hermione had last seen her.

"Mundungus will probably be in London by now. There's no point yelling."

"He's nicked Sirius's stuff!" Harry protested angrily. "Nicked it!"

"Yes, but still," Tonks said, looking perfectly untroubled and merely weary at this piece of information, "you should get out of the cold."

She watched them leave, and when Hermione turned around, she was still standing there, looking rather forlorn. She cursed silently to herself at this, and vowed that she was going to find a way to talk to Remus at the soonest opportunity.

But it was their return to Hogwarts that was the most eventful and troubling, resulting in Katie Bell being carried up to the castle by Hagrid after the rather disturbing, eerie sight of her being lifted up into the air, screaming all the while. Harry, thankfully, demonstrated some common sense when he took off his scarf to wrap up the necklace and package that Katie had dropped rather than picking it up by hand, and the three of them returned to the castle with it.
It was one of those days that was unable to stop worsening on its own.

"Good lord," Minerva said upon their arrival, as she took the necklace from Harry. She quickly dissuaded Filch from interfering by sending him off to deliver the necklace to Severus, before taking them to her office, where they proceeded to explain to her what had happened, as they witnessed it. Katie Bell's friend, who had witnessed the whole thing and been a part of the ensuing argument that had ended in Katie ripping the package, was eventually sent to the Hospital Wing for shock; this left Hermione, Ron, and Harry in the office.

Harry continued to explain what they had seen, and then made the request to see Professor Dumbledore.

"The headmaster is away until Monday, Potter," Minerva told him, looking rather surprised.

"Away?" Harry repeated angrily.

"Yes, Potter, away!" Minerva said tartly, "but anything you have to say about this horrible business can be said to me, I'm sure!"

Harry hesitated, clearly thinking it over, and then said, "I think Draco Malfoy gave Katie that necklace, Professor."

There was a moment of stunned silence, broken only by Ron rubbing his nose in apparent embarrassment, and Hermione shuffling her feet as though to put a bit of distance between herself and Harry. She closed her eyes in exasperation.

Because it was true.

There was no one else who could have given that necklace to Katie.

The question, however, was how?

And furthermore, Malfoy was being so ridiculously sloppy that even Harry was able to figure it out. Draco was starting to put not just himself, but other students, at risk.

"—you saw Malfoy leaving the shop with a similar package?" Minerva asked, looking frankly surprised.

"No, Professor, he told Borgin to keep it in the shop for him—"

"But Harry," Hermione interrupted, "Borgin asked him if he wanted to take it with him, and Malfoy said no—"

"Because he didn't want to touch it, obviously!"

"What he actually said was, 'How would I look carrying that down the street'?" Hermione said quietly.

"Well, he would look a bit of a prat carrying a necklace," Ron interjected.

"Oh, Ron," Hermione said exasperatedly, "it would be all wrapped up, so he wouldn't have to touch it, and quite easy to hide inside a cloak, so nobody would see it. I think whatever he reserved at Borgin and Burkes was noisy or bulky, something he knew would draw attention to him if he carried it down the street—and in any case," she pressed on loudly, before Harry could interrupt, "I asked Borgin about the necklace, don't you remember? When I went in to try and find out what Malfoy had
asked him to keep, I saw it there. And Borgen only told me the price, in addition to the fact that it was
cursed, he didn't say it was already sold—"

"Because you didn't ask!" Harry said heatedly. "You only asked him the price and what it did—"

Hermione placed her hand on her hips. "Oh, yes, I should have strode in and pretended to be
interested in the weather before asking him if anyone had already bought it—"

"That's enough!" Minerva said, silencing their argument. "Potter, I appreciate you telling me this, but
we cannot point the finger of blame at Mr. Malfoy purely because he visited the shop where this
necklace might have been purchased. The same is probably true of hundreds of people—"

"That's what I said," Ron muttered.

"—and in any case, we have put stringent security measures in place this year. I do not believe this
necklace can possibly have entered this school without our knowledge—"

"But—" Harry tried.

"—and what is more," Minerva said, with an air of awful finality, "Mr. Malfoy was not in
Hogsmeade today."

Harry gaped at her, deflating at once.

"How do you know, Professor?"

"Because he was doing detention with me. He has now failed to complete his Transfiguration
homework twice in a row. So, thank you for telling me your suspicions, Potter," she said, marching
past them, "but I need to go up to the hospital wing now to check on Katie Bell. Good day to you
all."

She held open the office door, and they had no choice but to file past her without another word.
Hermione exchanged glances with her colleague as she left last, and Minerva gave her the subtest of
nods before closing the door behind her.

Hermione followed Harry and Ron back to Gryffindor Tower, speculating who the necklace was for
(and Hermione had a very shrewd idea who) and siding with Ron when Harry continued to insist
that it must have been Malfoy. She ensured the two of them made it back to Gryffindor without
further incident, and then quietly left.

When she arrived at the hospital wing, it was to find Minerva, Severus, and Poppy standing around
one of the beds closest to the end of the ward. Hermione strode in, closing the door behind her, and
—shedding her student role—walked confidently over toward them, her back stiff with anger—
though it was directed not at them, but at Harry and Malfoy both.

"Well, Minerva," Hermione said conversationally, "Mr. Malfoy may not have been in Hogsmeade
today, but Harry still thinks he's the culprit, and frankly, I think he's right."

"I don't see how," Minerva murmured, as Severus pressed the tip of his wand against Katie's hand—
the hand that she had brushed the necklace with—and began muttering incantations, much like he
had with Dumbledore's curse. Katie, who had been twitching on the bed, jerking occasionally, grew
utterly quiescent, almost peaceful. "He was in detention with me all afternoon… and he could not
have brought it into the school—"

"Firstly, Minerva, Malfoy has other people at his disposal," Hermione said, striding to one side of the
bed to look down at Katie. She did not know what to do the same way Severus did; she could have, if she had to, but she preferred to let Severus do his work unimpeded. "He need not be in Hogsmeade in order for his work to be done. Secondly, the point of this was to bring the necklace into the castle, from Hogsmeade to Hogwarts— Katie was not his target. She was just a means to an end. I have to say, though, that this was poorly planned."

"If you are so certain that Mr. Malfoy is responsible, we ought to hold him—"

"No, Minerva," Severus said quietly, looking up at last.

Minerva pressed her lips into a thin line. "If Mr. Malfoy is, indeed, the culprit as Hermione suggests—"

"—then we will leave it up to Professor Dumbledore to handle, when he gets back," Hermione said firmly. "He knows best what to do. Malfoy needs to be handled delicately, Minerva. This is more than just an issue of school discipline. Dumbledore—Dumbledore knows what's going on." She looked down at Katie. "He only wished that other students might not get caught in the crossfire."

Minerva gave Hermione a frank, bewildered look, and looked ready to ask, but Hermione shook her head.

"You know how the headmaster is," she said finally. "He only tells us so much."

Poppy, who had remained silent during this exchange, looked up.

"How many more students do you expect to get caught in the crossfire?" Her tone was calm, but there was a note of concern to it.

Hermione bit her lower lip.

"We're dealing with a frightened and desperate sixteen-year-old boy," she said carefully. "He's not exactly predictable, is he?"

She gestured at the opal necklace, which lay on a levitated cushion ten feet away. "This was no doubt expensive, and clearly planned in advance since he looked into it before term started, but this wasn't his first plan. It's—I don't know," she said, glancing at Severus. "It seems to me like he's trying to repair something here, at Hogwarts, that has a fully functional twin elsewhere—at Borgin and Burkes, perhaps—and when it seems like that might not work, he tries something else in the interim, a shot in the dark. That's my guess, anyway."

There was a moment of silence, and then Severus straightened.

"I've done what I can for her, Poppy, although I still recommend you send her to St. Mungo's—"

"The curse?" Poppy asked sharply. "Is it gone?"

"I've stopped it from spreading, and done what I can to cancel it," Severus said curtly. "I presume it to be gone, but that does not reverse the damage already done."

"Well then," Minerva said, straightening. "I shall go contact St. Mungo's. In the meantime, how are we to handle Mr. Malfoy?"

"Severus should be the one to do any questioning, as his Head of House," Hermione said at once. "He's Draco's godfather, to boot—he knows how to handle the boy. In the meantime," she added, "he mustn't suspect that we know it was him. He should be on his guard knowing that he was
careless," Hermione continued, with a meaningful nod at Severus, "but in every day interaction… we must act as though everything is normal, as though he’s just another student…"

"And Professor Dumbledore…"

"When the Headmaster returns, we'll tell him of course."

Minerva narrowed her eyes at Hermione, giving her the impression that the older woman was assessing both her and her words; a moment later, however, the Transfiguration professor seemed to accept this, for she left without another word or indication to the contrary.

Hermione glanced back at the opal necklace, her expression thoughtful; then she pulled out her wand and summoned a small matchbox. Lifting the necklace carefully with the tip of her wand, and under Severus's watchful eye, slid it inside and shut it. She tapped the box once, and it turned into slate-gray stone, sealing the necklace inside it. She cast another spell, to render it shatterproof, and then a third to ensure that none other than herself could open it. Finally, she pocketed it.

"I'll have this with me, next time I visit Borgin and Burkes," she said quietly. "I may get some answers then."

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Thirty-Six

Enormous thanks to my super-awesome beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review!

The following Tuesday found Hermione, Harry, and Ron together in Herbology, with Harry recounting his latest lesson with Dumbledore. He described the memory they had gone into the previous night in vivid detail, and Hermione pressed him for specific descriptions of what Tom Riddle had been like as a child, thinking that this might prove to be helpful in understanding his adult self. The information she got did and didn't come as expected; on one hand, Harry's words made it clear that the Dark Lord had magpie-like tendencies, which Hermione filed away as useful information for later.

On the other hand, she could not help but be reminded of Selenius. The way Harry described it, Voldemort had grown up in an orphanage. His mother, Merope, had died shortly after giving him his name. He was a frighteningly precocious but malignant user of magic even before he acquired a wand, and furthermore, he was alone and friendless.

None of that described Selenius, of course; Selenius was good-natured and friendly. He excelled at magic, but had learned to use it responsibly. He enjoyed intellectual challenges, and had mastered the art of making his expression smooth and blank when necessary, mimicking his father most notably in that regard. Most importantly of all, her son was loved. Hermione had made sure of that.

But Hermione could still not help but wonder how her son would have turned out in a place like the orphanage Riddle had grown up in. She remembered what Severus had been like as a teenager, and it was not a far cry to guess what kind of child he had been. It was difficult to convince herself that if for whatever reason, she had been in Merope's position, that her son would turn out half as good a person as he was today. Upbringing counted for a lot, and as a mother, it was difficult for Hermione to not feel pity for Riddle's child-self, and fear that things could have turned out very differently for her own son had the circumstances been different.

They were the kind of fretful worries and fears that never amounted to anything. Hermione had done her utmost to ensure that her son would grow up with as much love and affection as possible, and it showed in his cheerful, vivacious countenance. The fact that Riddle had not was, in Hermione's opinion, only a contributing factor to his personality and egotistical issues.

"Wow, scary thought, the boy You-Know-Who," Ron said quietly, interrupting Hermione's thoughts as they gathered around the Snargaluff stump that they would be working with that day. "But I still don't get why Dumbledore's showing you this. I mean, it's really interesting and everything, but what's the point?"

"Dunno," Harry said, inserting his gum shield, "but he says it's all important and it'll help me survive."

"I think he's right," Hermione said thoughtfully. "It makes absolute sense to know as much about the Dark Lord as possible. How else will you find out his weaknesses? Or his tendencies, come to that, underlying patterns of behavior—"
"So how was Slughorn's latest party?" Harry asked her thickly through his gum shield.

"Oh—well, it was quite fun, really," Hermione said, thrown off by the sudden change of subject. She began pulling her protective goggles on. "I mean, he drones on about famous ex-pupils a bit, and he absolutely fawns on McLaggen because he's so well-connected, but he gave us some really nice food and he introduced us to Gwenog Jones."

"Gwenog Jones?" Ron said, eyes widening under his own goggles. "The Gwenog Jones? Captain of the Holyhead Harpies? Why wasn't I here for this one?"

"Quidditch practice," Hermione said, with a nod at Harry. Harry had been scheduling practice sessions whenever Slughorn invited him, and as a member of the team, Ron was required to participate—which essentially meant that though Ron was eager to attend the parties, and Slughorn had begun sending him invitations, he was rarely able to attend unless Harry came up with a more original excuse than Quidditch. Interestingly, Harry had been forced to serve two more detentions under Severus's authority, which had allowed Ron to attend the parties scheduled on those weekends. But still, Hermione was finding herself annoyed with Harry's inconsideration on the matter—although truth to be told, she could understand it. Harry had enough on his plate without dealing with Slughorn's attempts to add him to his jeweled collection of famous pupils.

"Bugger," Ron said, crestfallen.

"Quite enough chat over here!" Pomona called to them sternly. "You're lagging behind, everybody else has started!"

"Okay, Professor, we're starting now!" Ron said, and then added quietly, "Should've used Muffliato, Harry."

"No, we shouldn't," Hermione said crossly, as she always did whenever Harry and Ron attempted to use any of the spells from the Half-Blood Prince's book. Of course, she knew the spell herself, but on principal, she was trying to discourage Harry's—and Ron's—attachment to the book. "Well, come on… we'd better get going…"

The three of them exchanged apprehensive looks, and then dove for the gnarled stump that had otherwise been sitting innocently between them. It sprang to life at once, shooting long, prickly, bramble-like vines out at them and through Hermione's hair, attempting to strangle anyone else close enough for it to get a grip on. Five minutes later, cut and scratched and looking as though they had just gotten into a fight with a Devil's Snare, the three of them backed away, a single pulsating green pod the size of a grapefruit held between them. Hermione took a moment to painfully yank a vine out of her hair with a wince, and it snapped back, flying quickly back into the stump. The snargaluff shuddered for a moment, and then grew still.

"You know, I don't think I'll be having any of these in my garden when I've got my own place," Ron said, pushing his goggles up his forehead and wiping his face.

"Pass me a bowl," Hermione said at once, holding the snargaluff pod at arm's length. Harry pushed one over, and she dropped it in before passing it to Ron, who began attempting to burst the pod by placing both hands over it and pressing down with a grimace of disgust.

"Don't be squeamish, squeeze it out, they're best when they're fresh!" Pomona called.

"Anyway," Hermione said, continuing their conversation as though a lump of wood had not just attempted to strangle them. "Slughorn's going to have a Christmas party, Harry, and there's no way you'll be able to wriggle out of this one because he actually asked me to check your free evenings, so
he could be sure to have it on a night you can come."

Harry groaned. Ron looked up at Hermione, still attempting to squeeze the pod to its bursting point, and frowned. "Why wasn't I told about this?"

"You haven't exactly been showing up much," Hermione said, pursing her lips and turning to look at Harry. "Not your fault, really, because of Quidditch practice, but—"

"I don't suppose I'm invited, then," Ron said glumly.

"Don't be ridiculous, of course you're invited," Hermione said. "At the very least, all you have to do is let Slughorn know you're free. He knows you're on the Quidditch team, and that you've been practicing like Harry—"

The pod suddenly flew out from under Ron's fingers, bounced off the greenhouse glass, and rebounded onto the back of Pomona's head. Her patched hat was knocked off and so Harry went to retrieve it. Hermione continued, "You're fine, Ron. Anyway," she added brightly, "we're allowed to bring guests."

Ron's expression suddenly went slack. "That's it, isn't it?"

"What?" Hermione asked, perplexed.

"You've—Slughorn hasn't been inviting me, he's been inviting you, and you've always been asking me to come along—"

"I asked you along the first time," Hermione said, bewildered, "but he's been asking you separately every other time. Why? What's the problem?"

Ron turned red. "Nothing. It's just—if we're allowed to bring guests—but you're already going…"

Harry reappeared at that moment, dropping the pod back into the bowl. He began trying to open it rather noisily, banging it against the table, as though trying not to listen in on their conversation. Hermione stared uncomprehendingly at Ron for a moment, not quite understanding what he was getting at.

Ron opened his mouth to say something, but at the last moment, shook his head. "Never mind," he snapped, suddenly irritated, although it seemed to be more at himself than Hermione. A bit bitterly, he said, "Maybe you should just hook up with McLaggen—"

"Actually," Hermione said, a bit stiffly, her face scarlet, "I was going to ask you if you wanted to go with me. As friends."

"You were going to ask me?" Ron said, in a completely different voice.

"Yes," Hermione said, still red-faced, "but if you'd rather I hooked up with McLaggen…"

Harry had started clanging the bowl noisily, and now reached for a trowel, and had begun banging the pod with it, in obvious effort to drown out their conversation.

"No, I wouldn't," Ron said quietly.

Hermione stared at him, and suddenly, she understood. All those things that had seemed petty over the years to her—especially in the days surrounding the Yule Ball in fourth year, and their conversations about Harry's relationship with Cho—now made startling clear sense to her.
She glanced down at her ring, which none of them could see, but which glinted brightly at her in the misty morning sunlight. *Oh, merlin's sweet teapot. No.*

Harry missed the pod, ended up smacking the bowl with the trowel, and shattered it. Hermione and Ron jumped, and he hastily repaired the bowl with a wave of his wand, but just like that, the discussion was over. Hermione was flustered for a moment, and then fumbled around for her book on *Flesh-Eating Trees of the World*. Ron looked sheepish yet somewhat pleased with himself as he went to retrieve his goggles.

Harry was giving her a look that plainly said, *I don't believe this.*

Hermione glared at him. While Ron's back was to them, she hissed at him, "It is *not* happening."

"Good," Harry shot back quietly, passing the bowl to her before going to retrieve his goggles. He adjusted his gum shield once, and then he and Ron dived back down again at the stump to retrieve another pod.

The rest of the lesson passed without further mention of Slughorn's party, or anything else of a sensitive nature having to do with emotions, hooking up, or invites. Hermione continued to firmly avoid such discussions over the next few days. In a way, she felt like an idiot for not having seen it earlier; but Ron was like a brother to her at best, a trusted friend's youngest son at least, and she just could not see him that way even if she were not already married. But the signs had been obvious, if a bit blurred after a twenty-year's distance between them, and now she wondered how she was going to dissuade Ron. She wished she had not made that comment about McLaggen, even in jest.

Fortunately, in some ways, he was like Remus; a bit too shy to come out into the spotlight to say what he really thought, which might potentially prevent any actual declarations of interest. If she just pretended she didn't see the signs, acted as though he were a friend and nothing more, it would pass. She was sure of it.

Thankfully, the next few days seemed to prove her right, and Hermione put the incident out of her mind. She had more pressing issues to concern herself with, anyway; she had not seen Severus outside of class since last Hogsmeade weekend and the issue with Katie Bell, and though he was handing in his reports with her homework, and they often had a total of five minutes during class to make eye contact, Hermione was concerned about the Dark Lord's movements. He was not summoning Severus often—on the contrary, he did not seem to be summoning Severus at all. And the problem was neither of them seemed to be able to tell whether this was because of the Dark Lord's confidence in him or lack of it.

It also meant they did not have a good idea of the Dark Lord's movements. Lessened contact meant Severus was safer, in a way, but his job as a spy was not to be safe; and as of right now, it was providing their side with very little. To top it off, Dumbledore was either so busy or too often absent that they never had a chance to arrange a time to meet with him so that both Hermione and Severus could be present to discuss the situation.

Hermione had a good idea of Severus's value to the Dark Lord. Severus had come to him as an angry teenager, easily manipulated by his affection for Lily and his bitterness and paranoia toward the world at large. He was intelligent and cunning, and had proven useful in keeping the Dark Lord abreast of Dumbledore's movements. And yet, he was not the most trusted of the Dark Lord's followers, if 'trust' was a good word to apply to Voldemort's view of his followers. He had been brought into the fold as a spiteful, angry adolescent; he was not a cold, ruthless Muggle-hater like his fellows. He had talents that Tom Riddle thought useful, which were likely what kept him alive.

But his position among the Death Eaters was precarious. It could be cemented, and was almost
guaranteed to be by the end of the year, but until then, Severus had to play a game of careful balance. As his handler, Hermione had to watch and manipulate the game from above and behind. It was not a pleasant arrangement—but then, war never was. But the wrong impression could get Severus killed in an instant, which was what had Hermione fretting so much.

And yet, the fact that the Dark Lord was, perhaps, indicating to Severus that he trusted him enough to leave him to his own devices could be a good sign, if that were indeed the message Tom Riddle were sending him.

An incident at the breakfast table before a Quidditch match involving the fake use of Felix Felicis was hardly something to be concerned about, but it did cause whatever amiable relationship Hermione had had with Ron to suddenly fall apart. She frankly had more important things to worry about, but in regards to handling Harry, Ron had been her reliable ally. Now the two of them were barely on speaking terms with her. The underlying issue between them had nothing to do with Quidditch, yet that was what it had broken down over. Hermione was weary and exasperated with it all.

But what quite possibly made the entire situation worse was that she considered Ron a friend. A friend she had personal issues with, but a friend all the same. And yet, right after the match, he had immediately started snogging Lavender Brown at the party following Gryffindor's defeat of Slytherin… thrown the other girl in her face, really… it was clear to Hermione that this was more a form of revenge for Ron over their earlier argument in the greenhouse rather than any actual attraction to Lavender. Hermione did not care about his romantic interest, but it was the way that they had gotten together that irked her—she did not like to see Ron using Lavender to get to her. Lavender didn't deserve to be dragged into their petty fight.

It was just hurtful. She was still feuding with Harry over the damn book, and now with Ron over the fact that she wasn't snogging him instead. She left the party early, wanting nothing more than to find an empty classroom and have a good cry, if to at least relieve the tension piling up on her from all sides. Even she had her breaking point, when she needed to stop bottling it up and let it all out, and yet—and yet—she simply could not right now. Stuck in the body and life of a nineteen-year-old was playing ruddy hell with her sense of emotional equilibrium.

It actually made her consider whether it might be worth letting the issue of Severus's book go, at least for now, if it meant having a friend she could laugh and talk to again.

Hermione's schedule meant she was so busy during the week that, in the days leading up to Slughorn's Christmas party, she could only talk with Harry properly in the evenings. She refused to stay in the common room while Ron and Lavender were sucking each other's faces off, and therefore spent most of her time in the library—which was, incidentally, where Harry found her one evening.

"He's at perfect liberty to kiss whoever he likes," Hermione told Harry one evening, when he had raised the issue of Lavender and Ron with her again. "I really couldn't care less. I just don't like the fact that he's using her to try and get to me."

And this was the truth. She didn't like Ron that way. But she was quite fed up with him throwing Lavender in her face, and that he was leading Lavender on with the misimpression that he liked her more than he actually did. It was dishonest and juvenile. But Harry seemed to think it was an issue of unrequited love on both sides, and had not yet let the matter drop.

"And incidentally," Hermione said, changing the subject, "you need to be careful."

"For the last time," Harry said, lowering his voice because Madam Pince was now prowling the shelves behind them, looking for an excuse to throw them out, "I am not giving back this book, I've
learned more from the Half-Blood Prince than Snape or Slughorn have taught me in—"

"I'm not talking about that!" Hermione said, giving Harry a deservedly sour look. "At this point, I don't care anymore. I really don't. You can keep your stupid book. But I'm talking about earlier, when I went into the girls' bathroom just before coming here, and there were about a dozen girls in there—Romilda Vane included—who were all deciding on how they were going to get you to take one of them to Slughorn's party. It seems they've all bought Fred and George's love potions, which I'm afraid to say probably work—"

"Why didn't you confiscate them then?" Harry demanded, looking horrified at this seeming lapse of duty.

"They didn't have the potions with them in the bathroom," Hermione said scornfully. "They were just discussing tactics. As I doubt whether even the *Half-Blood Prince* could dream up an antidote for a dozen different love potions at once, I'd just invite someone to go with you, that'll stop all the others thinking they've still got a chance. It's tomorrow night," she reminded him. "They're getting desperate."

"There isn't anyone I want to invite," Harry mumbled.

Hermione raised an eyebrow at him; it was quite obvious that he was lying. "Well, just be careful what you drink, because Romilda Vane looked like she meant business."

She packed up her bag and made to leave, when Harry stopped her.

"Hang on a moment," he said slowly. "I thought Filch had banned anything bought at Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes?"

Hermione closed her eyes in consternation, and then proceeded to explain it to Harry.

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Hermione ended up going to Slughorn's party alone.

Cormac McLaggen had asked her to go with him, but Hermione had flatly turned him down. She did not know whether Ron and Lavender would be there, but if they were, she did not intend to stay for long. Harry had asked Luna to go with him, which Hermione thought was a good choice all things considered, and when she arrived at Slughorn's party on the night, she was the only one who did not seem to be going around with a smile on their face. She had almost considered not going at all, but thought it would be rude to simply not show up at the last minute—and in truth, though she did need the night off, she still needed to keep an eye on the going-ons at the school.

But when she got to the party, she found that the evening was destined to be interesting, if nothing else. The first person she ran into was Eldred Worple who was accompanied by another very familiar face. Tall, emaciated-looking, and with dark shadows under his eyes, Sanguini did not fail to give her what passed for a bright smile on a dead-looking face.

Hermione stared at him wordlessly for a moment, and then held out her hand. "I'm glad to see you made it out alive," she said quietly.

Worple stared at her in astonishment for a moment, and then looked at Sanguini. The vampire shook her hand slowly, and then turned to look at his human companion.

"She looks just as I remember."
"Twenty years ago—!" Worple exclaimed, looking back at her.

"Not aged a day," Sanguini agreed solemnly.

Hermione leaned in so that only they could hear her next words. "I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention that to anyone else here," she murmured.

"Of course, of course," Worple said. He was a small, stout, bespectacled man whose geniality and enthusiasm somehow reminded Hermione of Slughorn still. "But I never got around to thanking you for what you did… hiding him, you know, how much I appreciate that…"

"My pleasure," Hermione said with a smile. "Although I have to ask—what are you doing here? I'm just surprised that you'd come back here, especially in the current political climate…"

"Ah," Worple said, his manner suddenly businesslike. "Yes, indeed. Professor Dumbledore asked if we might pay him a visit, and so—here we are."

"I… see."

"He expects us up in his office later," Worple continued, peering up at her shortsightedly. "You are Hermione Granger, aren't you?"

Hermione stared at him. "Yes."

"He wants you up there, too. Along with your… husband, I think it was?"

Hermione's head snapped to both sides quickly, checking for eavesdroppers, but she need not have; the party was so crowded, so loud, so busy, that no one was paying them any attention at all. "Yes, although I'd advise you to keep quiet about that, too."

Worple and Sanguini both nodded. Sanguini was eyeing her through narrowed eyes, his gaze considering. Hermione had the impression that he was assessing her, his curiosity piqued by the reality behind the girl who had saved him then, and the girl who should have been much older, but was still, according to all appearances, just a girl now. Undoubtedly, he was baffled, but interested.

There was a sudden commotion, and Hermione turned around in time to see Slughorn standing next to Harry and the Divination teacher and, with a slight hiccup, said, "—instinctive, you know—like his mother! I've only ever taught a few with this kind of ability, I can tell you that, Sybill—why even Severus—"

And to Hermione's ensuing horror, he seemed to throw an arm out and grab hold of Severus's shoulders out of nowhere, pulling him into the conversation.

"Stop skulking and come join us, Severus!" Slughorn hiccuped happily, ignoring the black look on his fellow Potion Master's face. "I was just talking about Harry's exceptional potion-making! Some credit must go to you, of course, you taught him for five years!"

Trapped, with Slughorn's arm around his shoulders, Severus looked down his hooked nose at Harry, his black eyes narrowed rather like Sanguini's.

"Funny," he said softly, "I never had the impression that I managed to teach Potter anything at all."

"Well, then, its natural ability!" Slughorn shouted. Hermione grimaced, glancing at Sanguini, who seemed highly amused more than anything else. "You should have seen what he gave me, first lesson, Draught of Living Death—never had a student produce a finer first attempt—except for Miss
Granger, of course," he said with another hiccup. "I don't think even you, Severus—"

"Really?" Hermione's husband said quietly, looking at Harry with an expression that told Hermione he knew exactly where Harry was tapping his genius from.

Hermione turned to look at Sanguini and Worple. "I'll see you later, I suppose."

Sanguini gave her a solemn half-bow. Worple was too busy waving an elf for a pastry to notice. Without another word, Hermione slipped away into the crowd, edging closer, hoping to break up the disaster waiting to happen.

"All the subjects required, in short, for an Auror," Hermione heard Severus say, and there was the faintest trace of a sneer to his words.

"Yeah, well, that's what I'd like to do," Harry said defiantly, no doubt bolstered in confidence by the fact that they were at a party, and not in the classroom.

"And a great one you'll make, too!" Slughorn boomed.

"I don't think you should be an Auror, Harry," Luna said unexpectedly.

Hermione sidled up between Harry and Severus, effectively blocking them from being forced to stand beside each other, in time to hear Luna continue, "The Aurors are a part of the Rotfang Conspiracy, I thought everyone knew that. They're working to bring down the Ministry of Magic from within using a combination of Dark Magic and gum disease."

Harry inhaled half his mead up his nose as he started laughing, choking on his drink and slopping it on himself. Severus's face twitched at this. Hermione could not quite stop herself from laughing as well, grinning with a mixture of relief and disbelief at Luna. This drew the attention of the two males standing on either side of her, but before anything could be said regarding her sudden appearance, a distraction arrived in the form of Argus Filch dragging Draco Malfoy by the ear toward them.

She stopped laughing immediately. Harry was grinning. Severus looked as though he had whipped his head to the side to look too quickly, and was wearing a most ugly expression indeed.

"Professor Slughorn," Filch wheezed. The expression on his face could have matched Harry's; both of them looked as though Christmas had come early. "I discovered this boy lurking in an upstairs corridor. He claims to have been invited to your party and late in setting out. Did you issue him with an invitation?"

Malfoy yanked himself free from Filch's grip, looking furious.

"All right, I wasn't invited!" he said angrily. "I was trying to gatecrash, happy?"

"No, I'm not!" Filch said, looking, if at possible, even more delighted. "You're in trouble, you are! Didn't the headmaster say that nighttime prowling's out, unless you've got permission, didn't he, eh?"

"That's alright, Argus, that's all right," Slughorn said, with a slight hiccup, waving a hand. "It's Christmas, it's not a crime to want to come to a party. Just this once, we'll forget any punishment; you may stay, Draco."

Filch's expression of outraged disappointment was one that would have been more appropriate on a cat that had just had its mouse plucked away to safety by a disapproving owner. He turned around to leave, cursing furiously under his breath, and throwing Malfoy a dirty look as the thanked Slughorn piously for allowing him to stay.
Yet, there was no mistaking the look of disappointment on his pale blond face. He had been up to something. Not gatecrashing, certainly. He had been going somewhere inside the castle—to work on repairing whatever it was that had a twin at Borgin and Burkes?—and no doubt considered this a night wasted. Hermione looked up at the man next to her, and shot a warning look at him; the anger and fear on his face was too visible. A glance in her direction, a register of her meaning, and his face became inscrutable once more.

"I'd like a word with you, Draco," he said suddenly.

"Oh, now, Severus," Slughorn said, hiccupping again, "it's Christmas, don't be too hard—"

"I'm his Head of House, and I shall decide how hard, or otherwise, to be," Severus said curtly. "Follow me, Draco."

They left, Severus leading the way, and Malfoy looking resentful. Hermione turned to her other side, trying to figure out where Harry was, but it seemed that she had only turned away from him a moment ago, and now he had disappeared.

Hermione turned to Luna. "Have you seen Harry?"

"He's gone to the bathroom," Luna said cheerfully, and then with a note of serenity, added, "I hope he doesn't take too long, wrackspurts tend to gather around people when they're using the toilet…"

"Thanks," Hermione said grimly, making her way for the door.

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Hermione waited outside the door leading to Slughorn's office, Disillusioned and perfectly still. Malfoy reappeared almost ten minutes after he had left, and a moment later, Severus did as well. His expression was smooth, unfathomable, and when Hermione reached out a hand to touch his shoulder just before he opened the door, he reacted sharply by grasping her hand in a painfully tight grip.

"It's me," Hermione whispered.

His hold loosened immediately. Without another word, he opened the door, and disappeared, only to reappear moments later. A short nod in her direction, and the two of them strode off in the direction of the headmaster's office. As soon as they were out of the dungeons, and effectively out of earshot of the party, Hermione felt it was safe to talk.

"What happened with Malfoy?" she asked quietly.

Severus pressed his lips into a tight line, and refused to respond. Hermione resigned herself to waiting, and they made their way up to Dumbledore's office in silence. They arrived at the gargoyle, to which Severus muttered "Blood-flavored lollipops" just loud enough to be audible, and they knocked once on the door before entering.

Dumbledore sat at his desk, looking unusually tired. He looked up at them when they entered, and gestured for them to have a seat.

"I take it, then, that this evening was not the enjoyable party that everyone was looking forward to?"

Severus gave Dumbledore a very sour look. Hermione merely removed her Disillusionment Charm, and said, "To be honest, I'm not quite sure what happened. I'm sure Severus knows more—"

"I don't," Severus said flatly.
"Well then, I can only give you my best guess, which is to say that Mr. Malfoy was planning on spending the evening working on his plan to assassinate you, and was otherwise detained by Mr. Filch. He ended up gatecrashing Slughorn's party instead."

"I see," Dumbledore said, peering at them over his half-moon spectacles. "Please continue."

"Well…" Hermione said, looking at Severus.

"Draco has avoided meeting with me despite the fact that I have continuously requested that he do so," Severus said, his expression unreadable, but there was a trace of anger in the hardened look around his eyes. "I used the opportunity to force him to do so now, when he could not openly refuse to do so. The discussion did not go well."

"No, I wouldn't expect it to," Dumbledore said with a heavy sigh. "What was the content of this discussion?"

"Draco's clumsiness. The extent of the risks he's taking, which, if he pushes much further, could result in him being expelled for the other students' safety." Severus scowled, as he continued, "He has been learning Occlumency—from his aunt Bellatrix, no doubt. He believes I have no intention of helping him, but am rather trying to figure out his plan so that I can steal his glory. I admitted to him that I made an Unbreakable Vow to his mother to help him, but that has not softened his attitude toward me." He paused, and then said quietly, "He believes this to all be an act, and I am not certain whether I have impressed upon him how important it is that one be able to act."

Hermione bit her lip, thinking.

The office was silent, save for the whirring of an odd, spindly silver instrument on Dumbledore's desk. Fawke's let out a small, musical note.

Then Dumbledore sighed again. Heavily, it seemed. But before he could speak, Hermione got there first.

"There's no way to prove to him that you're not trying to steal his glory, nothing you could say that would help?" she asked.

Severus shook his head. His ire with the situation at hand was all that prevented him from berating her for posing such an obvious—and likely, equally useless—question.

"I… I hate to ask this, but with the situation being what it is… but we can't afford to let another student run afoul, because next time, they might not be as lucky as Katie Bell…"

"Spit it out, Hermione."

"You might ask the Dark Lord if he will assign you to help Draco," Hermione said quietly. "He's already got Fenrir working for him, right? Draco can use Fenrir, and he still gets the credit for the deed, like he's hoping for. You could do the same."

Severus opened his mouth to speak, but Dumbledore got there first. "It's worth a try, Severus."

Hermione saw Severus's hands fist together, and a temple pulse slightly, but otherwise, he did not react.

"Draco will see any attempt to help him as interference," he said through clenched teeth. "Going to the Dark Lord will most likely only worsen matters, particularly because this is Draco's job and not mine."
"Severus—" Dumbledore began.

"I have another idea," Hermione interjected at once. "Actions speak louder than words, don't they? If Malfoy sees you helping him, deliberately, without knowing precisely what he's up to, he might take you seriously." Dumbledore was looking at her interestedly now, with an expression of mild curiosity, as though he were waiting for her to show him an interesting curio. Severus looked suspicious. She continued, "Prefects have to patrol the corridors at night, but once curfew hits for us, we have to go back to our common rooms, too. Hence the reason Draco was almost put in detention tonight. My suggestion," she plowed on, "is for me to do my duties, patrolling—by late curfew, he'll likely head off to wherever he's going to do his project, which will put him at risk of being caught by Filch. I can delay him, and you can come in and—and send me off, take points away, and then tell him to move along to finish whatever he was doing. He'll see the favoritism as support."

The two men were staring at her with identical expressions of amazement. Hermione shrugged.

"If you do that—you're not pressuring him for information, but you're helping him move around the castle even if he doesn't think you know where or why—"

"That seems like a sound idea," Dumbledore said approvingly.

"One flaw," Severus drawled. He had relaxed slightly at the suggestion, which told Hermione that he was considering it. "He clearly doesn't go every night. It's quite possible he doesn't even do it on a routine basis. It may be difficult to catch him at the right moment, and the right place."

"Filch said he was lurking in an upstairs corridor," Hermione said stubbornly. "You can ask him for specifics, but if he doesn't have any, I'll pick a random floor every night once Christmas break is over, you'll know where in advance. If we're lucky, we'll get him."

Severus gazed at her silently for a moment, and then turned to the headmaster.

"Very well," he said.

There was a sudden knock on the door, causing Hermione and Severus both to jump in surprise. Yet, they need not have worried, for a moment later revealed that it was merely Sanguini and Eldred Worple, at the Headmaster's office just as they had said they would be. Sanguini greeted Severus with a toothy, emaciated smile, while Worple eagerly came forward to shake Dumbledore's hand. Hermione noticed the Headmaster deliberately kept his injured right on his side and offered his left in its stead, subtly keeping it from being noticed.

Introductions were made. This time, Hermione was grateful to find herself being introduced as Hermione Snape; lately, if it were not for the ring on her finger, she might almost forget that she was a married woman. Severus's eyes narrowed and his brows furrowed in consternation as he took in the new arrivals, silently asking for an explanation.

He got one. "When I was working at The Three Broomsticks just before my sixth year—well, you'll remember that I tricked Rowle into going off on a wild goose chase," Hermione said, gesturing at the vampire. "Sanguini here is the reason for it. I hid him in the back room."

Severus's lip curled. "I see."

"Sanguini and Worple are here to help us," Dumbledore said amicably. "This time around, Tom has managed to successfully contact and court the vampire community at large. They are responding agreeably to his advances, though no commitment has been made yet—and will likely be with him, not unlike the giants and werewolves. However," he said, peering at them with a look of aged
sternness in his eyes, "Sanguini has agreed to rejoin the vampire community and report on their activities to us, not unlike one of our other agents."

Remus, Hermione thought at once. She was then mentally reminded of the fact that she had not seen the werewolf in several months, and that she needed to speak with him.

"Normally, vampires keep to themselves," Severus said softly, "unless, of course, they are part of a coven. Why should this one help us?"

Sanguini bared his teeth. Hermione saw a pair of sharp, pointed canines poking out from underneath his upper lip, and then he spoke. "Your wife paid me a great kindness in helping me avoid capture. I promised her that I would return the favor one day—and I keep my word, beyond the obvious contingencies of a Life Debt." He let out a raspy chortle as he added, "Though since I am not alive, it hardly applies to me, does it?"

A pulse twitched under Severus's neck. "So why are we here, then? Surely our presence isn't required for this."

Sanguini merely shrugged.

"I wish for your wife to know that I am here to repay her favor," he said, flashing his pointed teeth at Severus once more. It was a dangerous gesture, yet Hermione had the sense that Sanguini himself was not threatening at all, but rather that showing his teeth was a mere force of habit. He turned his tired, emaciated eyes on her.

"And that should she ever be in need as I once was," he continued, "I would be willing to help."

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Hermione was grateful when Harry and Ron were gone the next day, off to the Burrow, along with so many other students who had families desperate to see them. Selenius arrived roughly ten minutes before Harry and Ron were scheduled to leave, and Hermione quickly brought him from Minerva's office and down to the dungeons, dropping him off at Severus's office before quickly heading back to say good-bye to Harry and Ron.

Harry received a hug and a heartfelt "Happy Christmas", which she received in return, as well as the intriguing news that Harry had something important to tell her once they got back from the holidays. Ron might have received more than an affronted look if he had not been snogging Lavender just moments before she came to say goodbye, and had only looked up (making a sound like a wet plunger as he did so) in order to hear her out. When they left, Hermione walked right past Lavender without another word, and made her way down to the dungeons.

As soon as she made it to their quarters, she tore off her student robes and tossed them onto the dresser before pulling out the clothes she had worn as an adult. She yanked off her Gryffindor tie, and was in the process of pulling on the Muggle clothes she wore on underneath, rolling up the cuffs, when Severus arrived.

He took one look at her, and gave her a thin-lipped smile that might have been one of amusement.

"I take it you're glad to be back."

"Quite," Hermione said briskly, glancing behind him. "Where's Selenius?"

"He said he wanted to visit the library for a bit."
"But—"

"None of the students will notice, Hermione," Severus interrupted. "It's the holiday. Few of them are wearing their school uniform, and even fewer will care to take a second look at a first-year."

"That's true…" Hermione said, still looking apprehensive, but otherwise appeased. "I mean, I don't know how many students are staying in the first place—the school seems almost empty…"

"Six," Severus said, smiling. "Total. None of them Gryffindors."

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this. "I take it Selenius will be staying in Gryffindor Tower, then?"

"Indeed."

"He'll like that, I'm sure," Hermione said, but now she was smiling, and for the first time in weeks, she looked more relaxed. "So what are we going to do for Christmas, this year? I was thinking we might take a trip to Diagon Alley for a couple hours tomorrow. Just to get out for a bit."

"How crowded do you expect it to be?" Severus asked, sitting down in one of the chairs and leaning back, looking completely at ease.

"Well, it's rather cold, and aside from last-minute holiday shopping and the fact that everyone's afraid of Death Eater attacks—not very." She shrugged. "I thought we might stop by Flourish and Blot's for a bit. You know—family time together. While we still can."

Severus held out a hand to her, and Hermione took it, pulling herself to him and arranging her legs so that she was sitting half on the chair and half in his lap. She leaned against him, pressing her face to his neck; closing her eyes, and continued, "I need to pay Borgin and Burkes a visit, and… even if it's not on your birthday… it would be nice, I think, if we could go to Flourish and Blot's as a family… even if Forstecue is gone, and owls are locked up again."

Severus's arms came to wrap around her torso, and she felt them tighten. "I'll be the one to pay Borgin a visit."

Hermione deliberated this for a moment. "I don't think you should be seen interfering with Draco Malfoy, especially in connection to the necklace. It would be better if I'm posing as a teacher, and even if Borgin recognizes me, he'll only remember me as the woman who came in as a potential buyer. I'll play my cards carefully."

She felt Severus sigh beneath her, his whole body heaving with tiredness, exasperation, and just a bit of anxiety. "No. If I'm to make Draco think I'm trying to help him, I would go in as though I'm trying to assist him. Sexist though it is, Hermione… he will be far more intimidated and convinced by my presence than yours."

Hermione considered carefully, and then said, "We'll both go."

"What?" Severus asked sharply.

"The Dark Lord knows that you're struggling to retain control over me. If you can prove you're making progress on that by bringing me along to assist you, then if the Dark Lord finds out about your interference, you'll have something good to stay his anger with. Point out that you're attempting to help Malfoy kill Dumbledore, and manipulate me in the process." She smiled faintly against his chest. "Two birds, one stone."

"I… damn," he muttered, his voice muffled by the fact that he had his face buried in her hair. "I'd
"We'll leave Selenius at Flourish and Blotts," Hermione said. "I don't know the exact incantation, but I can look up how to make a word-activated Portkey, as opposed to a time-locked one. If something happens while we're gone, he can Portkey straight back to Hogwarts." She stroked Severus's cheek with the lightest caress of her knuckles, and continued, "Aside from giving him the Felix Felicis, it might not be a bad idea to give him some Portkeys to carry on hand as a general rule. If something were to happen at the Burrow... I want Selenius to be as safe as possible. I want us to do whatever we can to ensure that if something happens, he has a way out. Even if it's not necessarily orthodox."

She felt Severus smirk as he pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Such as illegal Portkeys?"

"I don't care if it's illegal," Hermione said, with a trace of grumpiness in her voice. "Portkeys are only regulated because they can get through Anti-Apparition wards and allow people to go trans-continental in an instant—and because there's the liability of people using them to prank Muggles. They're regulated to prevent abuse, but we're not misusing them, and furthermore we've got a bloody good reason for needing some."

"I agree," Severus said quietly, pulling her up against him just a bit further so that he could slide his hands down her spine, resting them on her lower back. His fingers began massaging, and Hermione let out a helpless moan of mixed amusement and divine relief as he pressed in small, soothing circles. "We'll get everything together, and then sit Selenius down to discuss his safety and the measures we're taking to ensure it. He's not ignorant, you realize," he added smoothly, when Hermione lifted her head to say something. "He does read the Prophet. Molly's taken one out for the Burrow."

Seeing the look of bewilderment on her face at how he knew Selenius's reading habits, he added, "He writes to me once a week. It would be difficult to explain away your correspondence with him, but no one notices mine."

Hermione smiled. She felt a slight twinge of jealousy that her husband got to talk to their son more often than she did, but it was gone almost in an instant, and was instead replaced by relief and some measure of happiness that Severus and Selenius had this opportunity to remain connected. Severus had been uncertain and distant when he had first had an opportunity to spend time with his son, and now that they were once again separated, Hermione thought it was good that they were not completely cut off from each other.

After that, they spent a good half-hour in near-silence. It felt good to simply have the other with them again, and there would be time for sex, love-making, and perhaps even a kinky reprieve from the real world later. But for the first time in weeks, the world around them was quiet, save for the crackling of the hearth, and they were both content to sit pressed against another warm, familiarly comfortable and equally comforting body.

Eventually, they got up. Hermione reluctantly Transfigured her shirt into a jumper, returning to their room to root through the wardrobe for the cozy red-and-gold hand-knitted sweater that Molly had given her last year. She pulled it on, again Transfigured her trousers into something warmer, and was then ready to leave with Severus to retrieve Selenius from the library.

Outside of their rooms, they walked apart from each other, clearly aware that the other was there, but acting as though they had nothing to do with them. Their quarters were the only sacrosanct place in which they could drop their roles; even now, in the nearly abandoned, empty corridors, there was the possibility of another student coming through. It was not until they got to the library that they realized this was a good idea, for while Severus went to search for a book on Portkeys, Hermione looked around for Selenius.

But when she found him, he was not alone.
He was sitting at one of the desks, a game of Wizard Chess in front of him, and three books stacked neatly to his right. And across from him, in the opposite chair, sat Draco Malfoy; leaning forward in his seat, brow pinched in contemplation. Hermione nearly gasped out loud in surprise when she saw this, but quickly stepped back behind another bookcase, leaning against it for a moment to gather her wits.

"Knight to C-4." That was Draco's command.

"Bugger—" there was a small squealing sound as Selenius's bishop was forcefully dragged off the board by Malfoy's knight, but a moment later, he uttered, "Queen to F-6."

How the hell had Selenius gotten into a bloody game of chess with Malfoy? How the hell had he convinced Malfoy to even _play_?

"Damn it," she heard Draco mutter, "you're good. What did you say your name was?"

"Sirrah."

"Well, Sirrah," the older boy drawled, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to slaughter your other bishop. Knight to D-3."

She heard Selenius swear using a set of words Hermione had not quite realized he had known yet. "You're just about the only other person I've met who pulls off that maneuver on me, other than my dad. Where did you learn that?"

"My godfather," Draco said, sounding bored yet smug. "He used to come over for Christmas, and we'd play."

"Bloody hell. He must have been good."

"Who are your parents, anyway?" There was a note of censure in Draco's voice. "You never gave me a last name."

"I don't know their names," Selenius said off-handedly.

"You're joking."

"Well, I only know them as Mum and Dad, don't I?"

"And they don't use each other's names around you?" Draco sounded thoroughly disbelieving.

Hermione turned around, now able to stand on her own two feet, and peered through the books on the shelf in time to see Selenius shrug. "Not really. I don't see my parents, much."

To Hermione's surprise, something about that seemed to hit Draco hard; for a moment, his face twitched, as though to get rid of an irksome fly, and then he said sullenly, "I suppose not."

Hermione saw Selenius examining Draco's face carefully for a moment, and then said, "You don't see much of your parents either, do you?"

"What, do you read minds now?" Malfoy asked with a snort of derision, but there was an underlying layer of resentment to his tone.

"No, you're just terribly obvious."

Malfoy frowned at this, tried to smooth his expression, and then looked back down at the board. "It's
"Your turn."

"Right. Knight to D-3." There was a moment of almost respectful, speculative silence as Draco's own knight was dragged off the board, kicking and struggling, and then Selenius said, "You haven't played chess in a long time, either."

"Bloody hell—what now? What gave it away this time?" Draco sounded irritated.

"Because you forgot how to Castle."

Draco's expression turned sour at this, but then it turned interested, even contemplative. Then he said, "You're right. I haven't played chess in years." He gave Selenius a thoughtful look. "It is a good way to relax without letting your brain rot. I just haven't had the time to do it—or anyone to play with, for that matter."

"If I'm having trouble with my puzzles, sometimes I'll take a break and ask my uncle to play, or play against myself," Selenius said.

"You like puzzles?"

Selenius nodded.

"Problem-solving?"

Selenius nodded again.

Cautiously, Draco asked, "Odd artifacts?"

Another nod of affirmation.

Draco gave him a sharp look, and Hermione could see the gears practically turning in his head. And then, as though to stop himself from reconsidering, he blurted out, "What do you know about Vanishing Cabinets?"

Hermione saw Selenius's eyebrows rise in surprise at this, and then his expression furrowed with mental effort as he turned the topic over in his head. "Vanishing Cabinets… I've read about them. Really rare, really valuable. You put something in one of them, and it reappears in the other. It was used a lot in medieval times, usually to avoid getting caught in the crossfire between warring Wizarding families." He thought this over for another moment, and then added, "I think Hogwarts used to have one, until it was no longer needed due to the arrival of the Hogwarts Express." Another thoughtful look, and he added, "It's written about in Muggle literature, too. In the Chronicles of Narnia—"

Hermione saw Malfoy's eyes light up almost greedily at this, but he held up a hand to silence Selenius.

"I'm not interested in that. Did you ever read how to make them? Or… fix them?"

Selenius shrugged. "There was a list of enchantments, but it wasn't really a step-by-step manual on how to make them. It was one of my Dad's books on artifacts and old objects. The Vanishing Cabinet is tame, compared to some of the other stuff I found in there."

"Could I borrow that book?" Malfoy asked eagerly. "You know—ask your father if you can lend it for a bit, so I can take a look at it?"
Hermione held her breath, heart pounding so loudly she was surprised that the two boys sitting just feet away from her couldn't hear it.

"Sure," Selenius said. "Dad let me borrow it already. It's in my trunk."

"Excellent—"

"But under one condition," Selenius said, and here, Hermione could see he was grinning. "You have to play chess with me every afternoon until term starts."

Malfoy's eyes glittered at this, but to Hermione's surprise, there was not a trace of malice in them. "Deal."

"And I get it back before term starts, too."

Hermione could see Malfoy thinking this over quickly, even as his lips formed the words, "Done."

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The only coherent words Hermione could think of were jumbled curses, swearwords, and hexes as she paced in front of the fire. Severus was sitting quietly in his chair, thinking over the scene Hermione had relayed to him not more than an hour ago after they had left the library. They had left without Selenius, neither of them stepping in to break up his chess game with Draco.

It was Severus who spoke first, pulling Hermione out of her panicked and worried thoughts. "This may turn out to be a rather… fortuitous turn of events, if we do this right."

"I don't see how," Hermione snapped. "The more time Selenius spends with Draco Malfoy, the larger the likelihood that Malfoy will find out who he is—and furthermore, Draco Malfoy is the last person on earth I want my son to be around!"

"Set your emotions aside for a moment and think carefully, Hermione," Severus said smoothly. "Selenius has been consistent in keeping up with his disguise, and it is useless to try and forbid a child to do something—that will just make him more likely to go against it. I will certainly speak to him about Draco, but I have no intention of forbidding him from playing chess with my godson. Furthermore," he added quietly, "this could be used to our advantage. Draco seems to like Selenius, and may confide in him things that he would not tell anyone else. We know now that he is interested in Vanishing Cabinets, which is an enormous step forward from where we were just hours ago."

Hermione bit her lip. "Malfoy is a bad influence on him. He already suggested asking if he could borrow the book without telling you why—"

"As I said," Severus interrupted, "I will speak with Selenius. Besides," he added, getting to his feet, "children lie to their parents, Hermione. That is a fact. We've all lied to our parents about one thing or another—the trick to having a child who prefers not to lie is to ensure that he doesn't have an ingrained reason to. Selenius trusts us both, and we have never punished him for his honesty."

Hermione found herself deflating slightly at this, no longer pacing in a frenzied sort of way. Severus added smoothly:

"I expect that we can find a compromise with him that allows him to spend Christmas in the company of another boy who is close to his age without compromising his safety." Hermione watched him bring a finger to his lips, tracing them as he always did when deep in thought, before he continued, "Selenius respects the boundaries we have set for him—and we have restricted him greatly. He's not even allowed to go outside without an adult, which means he cannot simply get up
and go see Hagrid or walk by the lake on a whim, and he has no friends because we've chosen to homescool him rather than keep him at your aunt and uncle's."

"I—we—"

Severus put up a hand, silently asking her to listen and let him finish. With a sigh of frustration, she capitulated.

"I don't regret the choices we've made for him," Severus said softly. "Because of them, we have a son who loves us both, is remarkably bright, well-cared for, and has grown up knowing a great deal about the Wizarding World. Even hidden, we have ensured that he will get as full and thorough an education as we can arrange. Furthermore, he is happy, which is a far cry from the miserable state he was in when he lived with your relatives." He stopped tracing his lip, and his hand dropped to his side. "I only regret the unintended consequences—that is to say, that he has never had much opportunity to interact with other children."

He watched Hermione gather herself up, as though ready to counter him, but then she capitulated yet again, looking rather helpless and tired.

"All right," she said. "I mean—yes, you're right of course, but I still don't like it, but… I will trust your judgment on this one."

She closed her eyes, and then opened them.

"Besides," she added, "it's only until term resumes."

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That evening, the three of them sat around at the table situated in the corner behind the armchairs. Hermione had left their quarters while Severus had a private discussion with their son, and when she came back an hour later, it was to find that they both looked relatively satisfied with themselves. There was not a trace of resentment or fear on Selenius's face; whatever Severus had said to him, it had not put him on the defensive. When Hermione entered and shut the door behind her, she pulled out the tiny bottle of Felix Felicis and the small woven bracelet of unicorn hair that Hagrid had given her several years ago.

She set them both down on the table, and took a seat at the end. Severus was sitting perpendicularly to her right; Selenius to her left. She looked at Severus to confirm that he was ready to do this, and then turned to Selenius, who was eyeing the molten gold-like potion with avid interest.

"Your father tells me you've been reading the paper," Hermione began. "Is that right?"

Selenius nodded.

"Then that means you understand the climate that we're dealing with," Hermione continued. Seeing the look of confusion on her son's face, she clarified, "the political climate. That is to say, the attacks by Death Eaters, and the Ministry's attempt to apprehend them."

Selenius's eyes flickered down at the table, and he muttered, "There's a death in there almost every day."

Hermione stared at him for a moment, struck by his words. Merlin. She glanced at Severus for reassurance, and when the inscrutable expression on his face did not change, she decided to tread cautiously. "Yes. I—yes. They're killing people." She twisted her watch around on her wrist, fighting nervousness, and then said, "And you understand the position that you're in—that your
existence has to remain a secret, that your father and I cannot always be there for you, and that your safety is our biggest concern."

Selenius nodded. Hermione stiffened her proverbial backbone, and sat up a bit straighter.

"The Burrow is well protected," she continued, "as is Grimmauld Place and Tine Cottage. But there is always the threat that a Death Eater could come to call, especially," she stressed, "since the Weasleys are involved in this war. Grimmauld Place is also a target—you already know this, because it's the Headquarters to the Order of the Phoenix."

Selenius didn't say a word, but his eyes were locked onto his mother's face; it was clear that he was listening intently.

"In the case that you are ever attacked—at the Burrow or somewhere else," Hermione said, now tapping the miniscule bottle of Felix Felicis with one finger, "your father and I have come up with two things that are intended to help you. This bottle here—I don't know if you recognize what's in it?"

Selenius shook his head, but it was clear that he was dying to know.

"It's called Felix Felicis," Hermione lectured, "also known as liquid luck. There is four hours' worth of luck in this tiny bottle—" she lifted it up and shook it slightly "—which is only to be used in the case of an emergency. That is to say, a life-threatening situation. Furthermore," she continued, as another thought struck her, "you are not to tell anyone that you have it. No matter how much you trust or like them, this is something that is supposed to be kept secret. This is what you pull out when you're in danger of being killed."

She and Severus had reconsidered giving Selenius the entire six-hours' worth, and had each taken a sixth of the potion to store in a miniscule phial on their person. It had been Hermione's insistence that they have that tiny last resort up their sleeve, and Severus had eventually agreed. Slughorn's decision to give herself and Harry six hours' worth each had been done in the spirit of recreational use, or to simply have a good day, and not an emergency. It had been a last-minute alteration to their plan, but they were satisfied with it. Four hours' worth for Selenius should be enough.

"What your mother has neglected to tell you," Severus said, his voice low, "is that this is only to be used after you have tried to Portkey, and failed." He tapped the bracelet of unicorn hair with his wand, which had originally belonged to Hermione as a gift from Hagrid, and Selenius picked it up, examining it for a moment before slipping it on his wrist. "This is a Portkey that activates by use of a word that has been keyed to it." Hermione pulled out a slip of paper from her pocket and pushed it toward Selenius, as Severus continued, "The word is written on there—no, don't say it now!" he snapped, as Selenius opened his mouth. "Portkeys are one-use only, and if you spend it now, you will have wasted it. Memorize the word written on that parchment, but do not say it out loud."

Selenius nodded quickly, took a moment to read the parchment, and then set it back down on the table. Visible in the firelight, in black ink, the word Padfoot was written clearly. Hermione thought she saw Selenius swallow, as though he were having difficulty opening his mouth to speak, but then apparently decided that silence was best. He looked back up at his father, whose attention was now back on the Felix Felicis.

"If you are attacked, you are to attempt to Portkey away first. It will take you to the outskirts of Tinworth, though not directly to Tine Cottage. If you are unable to do so for some reason, you are then to take a mouthful of Felix Felicis and find an alternative to Portkeying." He nodded at the potion, and Selenius reached out and carefully pocketed it. "Do not drink the whole bottle at once."
"Why not?" asked Selenius. Hermione had a feeling that Selenius knew, or at least was able to guess a few of the reasons why, but wanted clarification anyway.

"Because Felix Felicis takes six months to brew and is disastrously difficult to make," Severus responded sharply. "Furthermore, it is highly toxic if taken in large quantities, and overuse can drive the drinker to reckless behavior. It is a potion meant to be taken sparingly. I trust I have made myself clear?"

Selenius shook his head vigorously to show that he understood. His lips were pressed together; it was clear to Hermione that underneath his silence, he was thinking rapidly.

"And now, to address a significantly more pleasant topic," Severus said, leaning back in his seat, "your mother and I will be taking you to Diagon Alley tomorrow. At some point, we will stop by Flourish and Blott's, and you will be left there—alone—for several minutes." Selenius perked up with interest at this, and Severus raised an eyebrow at him—and for a moment, Hermione nearly snorted with laughter as Selenius raised the same brow in response—before he added, with a slight note of censure in his tone, "Is it necessary for me to tell you that we expect you to still be there when we get back, or can you infer that for yourself?"

Selenius smiled, although it was really more of a smirk in Hermione's opinion. "Don't worry, Dad."

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As Hermione had predicted, Diagon Alley was sparsely populated. There were a few people straggling about, trying to get Christmas shopping done with two days to go, but the threat of Death Eaters combined with the unappealing cold no doubt kept most people at home today. Hermione, in her black-haired disguise, took Selenius to Madam Malkins for a new set of robes; his last pair had been bought over a year ago, and he had grown at least another two inches by Hermione's reckoning. Furthermore, he needed a winter cloak. She wore her hair up in a chignon, charmed black, her eyes equally different so that none of the shopkeepers they came across recognized her. The quest for new robes was uneventful, compared to the one that had almost disintegrated into a fight in the middle of the shop last August.

Severus wore a hooded cloak that obscured his features, but nothing more. It caused Madam Malkin to twitter nervously as she helped outfit Selenius, clearly at ill-ease with having a disguised stranger in her shop, but nothing came of it. No one would be able to associate him with the woman and the boy he accompanied. The cover was enough.

They went straight to Flourish and Blott's, passing the boarded up building that had previously been Florean Fortescue's. Hermione saw Severus cast an almost longing glance in its direction—and she, too, looked at it with wistful reminiscence—before they moved on, pushing into the bookstore. A flurry of snow followed them in, and they wiped off their boots before they each went to find the section that held their interest.

There were few people inside the shop, too. A careworn-looking woman was on the second floor, sitting by the railing with a book in her hand. A man stood near the back, wearing a leather duster-jacket and darned gloves without finger-sleeves. A stout, older woman had a basket in one hand and was clearly buying all of her grandchildrens' gifts in the form of storybooks. There were a few other people dotted here and there around the room, all minding their own business, with an air of alert tension, as though they were ready to scurry away at a moment's notice.

Selenius ignored the depressing atmosphere and was immediately drawn to a bookcase just three shelves down from the entrance, and when Hermione followed him to see what he was looking at, she was rather amused to watch him pull several books off and balance them in his arms. He hefted
them into a cobbled pile in the crook of one elbow before continuing to browse the titles. *Hairy Snout, Human Heart* was at the top of the stack. *The Rise and Fall of the Dart Arts* soon followed it, and Hermione eventually went to retrieve a basket for him, because soon he had so many books that he could barely see over them. *A Guide To Medieval Sorcery* made it into the basket, along with the last copy of *Confronting the Faceless*, and most interestingly, a thick volume titled *The Compleat Collection of Grimm's Fairytales*. Selenius turned around in time to see his mother raising an eyebrow as the stack of books reached well over a dozen, and sighed.

"Do you really need all of these?" Hermione asked, picking up *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* and turning it over to the back.

"Yes," Selenius deadpanned. Seeing the unconvinced look on his mother's face, he added, "It's Christmas, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I'm sure Hogwarts has most of these already…"

"But I don't get to use the library very often," Selenius pointed out.

Severus came up behind her at that moment, and placed a hand on her shoulder, signaling that he was ready to leave. Hermione pursed her lips.

"I'm giving you a budget of twenty Galleons," she said, folding her arms across her chest. "You pick whatever books you want, but it has to meet that limit. And whatever change you have left from that, you can keep as pocket money."

Selenius gaped at her for a moment, and then a broad grin slowly spread across his face. An exclamation of "Yes!" followed by Hermione nearly having the life squeezed out of her in a hug, and then Selenius wheeled around and began going through the shelves in earnest. Severus squeezed her shoulder, and when Hermione turned around, there was no denying the amusement lingering in his expression.

"You've just made his Christmas," Severus muttered into her ear. "Shall we go now?"

They left Selenius to his books, and made their way down the street, turning into Knockturn Alley. They pushed the door open to Borgin and Burkes, startling the man behind the counter with their abrupt arrival, and causing him to quickly set something wooden and silvery back behind the counter. Borgin eyed them silently as they approached the counter, and then his eyes widened perceptibly in surprise as Hermione pulled out the stony matchbox. A tap of her wand caused the box to crumple to ash, leaving the opal necklace gleaming in the dim light of the shop.

For a moment, Borgin didn't move a muscle. He held himself very still, and Hermione had the sense that he was doing some very quick thinking. Then his eyes began to flicker visibly over the necklace, and he pulled out his wand. He tapped it once, twice, and then lifted it up very carefully with the tip, holding it up closer to the light, keeping it at arm's length. Then he finally set it down, very slowly, back on the counter and turned to look at the two customers standing silently before him.

"I know who I sold this necklace to," Borgin uttered, and there was a trace of fear in his words. "I was not under the impression that he intended to… resell it."

"He did a bit of gifting," Hermione said, her voice chilly as she recalled Katie Bell's shrieks as she was subjected to the curse. "He tried to have someone else do the delivery, but I'm afraid it went downhill from there."

"I see." Borgin was all business now, though there was a definite air of wariness about him. "And
"No," Severus said quietly from beneath the hood of his cloak. "We're here to ask what else was bought here—by the same person who purchased this necklace, of course."

Borgin licked his lips. "I can't tell you."

Severus let out an impatient hiss of disbelief, and without even exchanging glances with Hermione—neither of their harsh, inscrutable expressions altered one jot—he stepped forward and yanked back the sleeve of his left arm. The grotesque shape of the Dark Mark was clearly burned into his skin, unmistakably genuine, and Borgin did a double-take, glancing back up at Severus and then Hermione with an expression of deferential fear.

"We have the same goals, Malfoy and I," Severus said silkily, pulling the sleeve back down. "Unfortunately, he insists on working alone, and his incompetence may cost me." Seeing that he now had Borgin's full and undivided attention, he continued smoothly, "You will supply me with a list of what he has purchased since last summer, and any details you have concerning what he intends to use them for." Borgin hesitated, and he snarled, "Now."

Deciding that he feared this grown man and his stiff-backed, dark-eyed, curly-haired accomplice far more than a lone sixteen-year-old boy with the same credentials, Borgin immediately bent down behind the counter. There was the rustling of paper, and then Borgin reappeared with parchment in hand. He smoothed it out on the counter, skimmed down the list, and then turned it around and pointed to a number of purchases under the same name somewhere near the bottom.

"Draco Malfoy purchased a Hand of Glory, and this very same cursed opal necklace, early last August," Borgin said. "He also paid for a Vanishing Cabinet, but demanded I keep it here. The very same one," Borgin continued, pointing a quavering finger at a spot behind Severus and Hermione, "standing right behind you. His only orders on the matter were for me not to sell it."

"Is that all?" Hermione prompted, restoring the matchbox with a flick of her wand and then carefully lifting the necklace back into it, before sealing and placing the box back into her pocket again.

Borgin looked worried; he was wringing his hands now, and then he said, "He promised retribution if I told anyone. In for a Knut, in for a Galleon, I suppose, so I have no qualms with telling you that he claimed Fenrir Greyback to be an acquaintance of his—that he would be checking in on my… progress."

"Progress?" Severus repeated, his tone silky and unmistakably dangerous. "On what, exactly?"

"He… has the other Vanishing Cabinet," Borgin said uneasily. "According to him, it's broken. A quick Reparo isn't really sufficient to make objects formed by complex layers of enchantments fully functional again. His description of the object was that it was smashed by a Poltergeist, but still appears to be partially, if dubiously, working. He has placed a great demand on my time and energy in instructing him on how to repair it by description alone, in single steps. It is…" Borgin searched around for an appropriate word. "Difficult."

Now Hermione and Severus exchanged identical, stony looks, but there was no mistaking the meaning behind it. Right now, Draco was undoubtedly stumped on some step that the repairing process required, and was looking at another source of inspiration to get past it.

Borgin continued, an underlying layer of desperation to his voice. "I would appreciate it if you told no one where you got this information. Or—or if you do, that you put in a good word for me. I don't need—I don't need another visit from Greyback, to be frank."
Severus waved a hand in callous dismissal. "If he asks, deny it. If worst comes to worst, tell him to talk to me first. After all," he continued silkily, "you will continue to help him—in which case, he has no reason to bring retribution down on your head, if you are not impeding him."

"Yes—I—yes, of course—"

They both turned to leave, but Borgin called after them, halting them both in their tracks.

"Will he—the Malfoy boy—will you tell him?"

Severus took his time in turning around, his head rotating a fraction to the left to look at Borgin. Hermione, her hand still on the door, didn't move a muscle as he spoke.

"Unlikely."

And with that, Hermione yanked the door open, causing the bell in the shop to chime as they left. As soon as they had gone several feet down the alley, Hermione turned around for one last look at Borgin.

The man was standing behind the counter, a look of abject fear and misery on his face; if he had merely looked worried after Malfoy had left all those weeks ago back in August, now he looked terrified. Hermione did feel somewhat bad about it, but in the next moment, as they turned down the street, she had let it go; they had gotten important information, information that explained a great deal.

Information that might, in the long run, save lives.

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"Malfoy purchased the necklace, and used the first available Hogsmeade weekend to try and sneak it into the castle," Hermione said, while jotting down her words in the notebook. The unassuming pages of bound parchment were filled with cramped handwriting, impeccable in their record keeping. Compressed though it was, Hermione quickly found a blank page among the hundreds that were neatly dated and filled to the brim. "He was at Hogwarts at the time, which means he used an accomplice to do it."

"Crabbe and Goyle were also in detention that day," Severus said, tossing the Evening Prophet aside, where it slipped off the coffee table and landed in the hearth. The flames quickly devoured it; Severus glared sourly at the now ruined paper, but did not otherwise seem much bothered by its untimely demise, as he continued, "which wipes them off the list of suspects."

"That means he was using someone else," Hermione said, chewing on the tip of her quill. "My guess would be he placed them under the Imperius. Who the victim is, I cannot say. Katie Bell was Imperiused into taking the package up to the castle, but she wasn't enchanted until after she left the Three Broomsticks. In any case, that means Malfoy either has another accomplice, one who either left the castle with the other students…"

"…or one who was stationed in Hogsmeade to begin with," Severus finished, getting to his feet abruptly. "I find this to be the most likely case; whoever Imperiused Miss Bell was probably also in possession of the necklace to begin with, which would have meant that Draco had it dropped it off at Hogsmeade before term began. The accomplice, willing or otherwise, holds onto the package until the students come to Hogsmeade; he then Imperiuses one of them into taking the package back up to the castle."

"Or she," Hermione added absently, still chewing on her quill. "But that doesn't make sense. It's the
sort of plan that's doomed to fail immediately, given the security we've got this year. That necklace wouldn't have made it into the castle."

"Perhaps Draco was operating under the off-chance that Filch would summon the headmaster, or that Filch might take the necklace up to him personally after confiscating it," Severus said, folding his arms across his chest and leaning against the mantle. "There would always be the possibility that Albus would touch the package with his hands—and given the way it was wrapped, it was clearly very easy to tear, and nearly impossible to open without its contents spilling out."

"So it was a sloppy attempt, but with a chance of success all the same," Hermione murmured. "In fact…"

"If Draco's accomplice had chosen a different victim, the necklace might have made it to the castle," Severus finished darkly. "It was only by chance that Miss Bell had a friend who bothered to be concerned about the wisdom of bringing an unknown package up to the school."

"This was a desperate, stab-in-the-dark attempt," Hermione said slowly, thoughtfully. "But it's not his main plan. His main plan clearly involves a Vanishing Cabinet…" she sat up straighter. "Severus, remember that night two years ago? When you discovered that someone had been searching your office, and ended you up having that argument on the staircase with Filch and Crouch—don't you remember? Filch mentioned a Vanishing cabinet…"

Severus's brow pinched as she spoke. "Yes—Potter's Map, and his golden egg…"

"Didn't—Severus, didn't one of your Slytherins get shoved into a Vanishing Cabinet last year…?"

Severus paused. His eyes flickered over her face, and Hermione could see he was doing some rapid thinking and recollection. "Yes."

"But it's broken," Hermione said carefully. "Peeves smashed it the year before, didn't he? Smashed it up, and left it on the first floor…"

"But it's not on the first floor anymore," Severus pointed out quietly.

"That means Malfoy's hidden it," Hermione said, quick on the uptake. She stood up at once. "Harry's told me that he's been disappearing off the Map at times—I thought he was just not noticing him among the other names, but Malfoy knows about the Room of Requirement, and I've never seen it on the Map…"

"You think he's taken the Vanishing Cabinet to the seventh floor?" Severus asked, in a tone that could easily be mistaken for skepticism, but was simply sharp. Dangerously sharp. A pause, and he suddenly switched track. "The Map—Potter's Map—how is he not seeing you on there?"

"I honestly don't know," Hermione said, "he may be oblivious, or perhaps it's because I'm still being called by my maiden name…"

"Very well—but the Vanishing Cabinet?"

"Yes, yes," Hermione said, now pacing in front of the fireplace. "He's taken it there to hide it, so that he can repair it in secret. That's where he's been going—that's why Filch found him the night of Slughorn's Christmas party, he was setting out for it when he thought the halls would be deserted." Her eyes narrowed, and she wheeled around the face her husband. "Of course, the only way we'll know for sure, for us to prove that, is for me to start patrolling the Seventh Floor in the hopes of catching him… that's when you'll step in and send me away, of course, and let him get back to whatever it is that he's doing."
"We can reasonably assume that you're correct regarding where and what Draco is up to," Severus said coolly. "But it doesn't tell us why he's trying to repair it—unless…"

Hermione locked eyes with him. "He told Borgin to reserve the one in the shop, didn't he?"

"Indeed."

"He's trying to make a link between Borgin and Burkes and Hogwarts," Hermione said determinedly. "Maybe he's trying to sneak something in—something dark and dangerous—something that wouldn't get past Filch's Secrecy Sensors and Dark Detectors…"

Severus stood there silently for several long moments, moments that stretched as his expression furrowed into one of intense brooding and concentration. The firelight flickered ominously across his face, and Hermione caught a glimpse of the man Borgin had seen in the shop, underneath the roles they were playing. The part of Severus that was every bit as deadly and dark as he gave the impression of being. The part of him that was cunningly unraveling every inch of Draco Malfoy's plan…

"No," he murmured at last, mostly to himself. "No, he's not trying to slip an object or artifact past Filch. It's more than that."

He straightened, and at Hermione's querying look, continued, "When I confronted him, that night Filch caught him, he told me something interesting that I had, until now, dismissed almost entirely. When I pointed out how foolish he had been, sneaking out without backup, and relying on dunderheads like Crabbe and Goyle for assistance… he told me, and I quote, 'They're not the only ones, I've got other people on my side, better people'. But as I told you, I had dismissed it as insignificant…"

Hermione stared at him, eyes widening in horror. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, quite," Severus said. "He already threatened Borgin with Fenrir, and as you've heard, it was not an empty threat." He tilted his head toward the flames, and for the first time that night, Hermione saw Severus's expression morph into one of cold fury. "He's planning on smuggling people into the castle."

"Death Eaters," Hermione clarified.

"Yes."

Hermione shook her head, her expression caught between anger and misery. "If we're right, then I've underestimated him," she said bitterly. "This plan is disgustingly clever… he brings Death Eaters into the castle, puts the other students at risk—next, he'll probably try to corner the headmaster…"

"And then kill him."

Hermione nodded.

"Well," Severus said, his tone dangerously soft, "we'll have to see if we're right, once the holidays are over." He paused to let this sink in, firelight dancing ominously across his face, as he continued, "If we're right, I'll have to find a way to help him in a manner that he'll accept, and see if we can possibly spare any students from crossing his path."

"The students are the most important, at this point," Hermione said staunchly. "They're the ones that need protection. The headmaster—the headmaster has resigned himself to his fate. He's going to die either way, preferably by your hand, but this plan places everyone else in the castle at risk."
"There's only one question left to answer," Severus said, crossing over to her. He placed on hand on her shoulder, his grip stiff and tight. "Do we tell Albus?"

Hermione stood there for a moment in deliberation, and then shook her head.

"No," she said quietly. "We don't know for certain if we're right, and until we do, we'll keep this quiet. The headmaster is waiting for us to get results on intercepting Malfoy and tricking him into thinking you're on his side, first."

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Christmas morning was spent in their quarters. Severus had snarkily ordered his son the evening before not to disturb them before noon, which Selenius easily agreed to, likely because he had no intention of leaving Gryffindor Tower before then in the first place. The common room was literally piled with books, and he had made himself quite at home curled up and reading.

Neither of them had bought a particularly notable gift for the other. They had neither had the time to go out and spend hours looking for a book the other did not have yet, or something entirely new and unique to present them with. Hermione had, however, bought Severus a new winter cloak while at Madam Malkins, and she received a pair of fuzzy warm, black gloves in return that kept her fingers decidedly cozy.

Their real gift, however, was a whole uninterrupted morning, free of worldly concerns, to spend together.

Hermione was jerked awake that morning, out of a confusing swirl of dreams, with a mixture of surprise and keening pleasure as Severus's lips and fingers ambushed her, nibbling on her neck and massaging the bundle of nerves between her legs. For a split-second, she was confused and a bit dazed about what was happening, but as soon as she squirmed around to look at the warm presence pressed against the curve of her back, she understood immediately, and retaliated by catching hold of his ear and suckling on it.

He jerked away, instead snaking around to capture one of her nipples in his mouth, still working his fingers between her folds and causing her to gyrate against them in earnest. Her nimble fingers quickly reached under his chest to tweak his sensitive, coin-sized areolas in retaliation, and he sat up quickly, tossing aside the bedcover so that he could move unimpeded, and then pulled out his wand.

"Don't make me tie you up, Mrs. Snape," he drawled.

Hermione stared at him, shuddering as his fingers continued to work their own brand of magic on her, helplessly aroused and even further turned on by his threat. She opened her mouth to answer, but merely bit her lip as Severus withdrew his fingers; a moment later, he slid two of them inside her, and was now using his thumb to continue pleasuring her. He was succeeding, if the goal was to turn her brain to mush. In the overly-hormonal body of a nineteen-year-old witch, it was ridiculously easy to turn on the sexual overdrive in her brain.

If only it were that easy to satisfy it.

She threw her head back, and let out moan of pleasure before turning her head to the side to look at him. She locked her gaze on his face, her expression deeply wanton.

She did end up tied to the bed that morning, wrists bound flat against the mattress. It was then that her husband proceeded to slowly torment her, taking his time in exploring her body and reacquainting himself with what, precisely, made her tick. Or scream. Or beg, demand, and moan, as
she was wont to do. He tortured her, bringing her pleasure without satisfaction, ignoring his raging
erection in favor of experimenting in the ways to drive his lovely, normally loquacious and eloquent
wife to mutter incoherently.

Eventually, he pressed against her, nudging at her opening. To her surprise, he bent down to whisper
into her ear, surprisingly making his own sensitive ear vulnerable to her teeth in doing so. She did not
take the bait, however, as he spoke.

"Do you remember that day at Spinner's End when I finally had you?" he murmured, sinking into
her slowly, stopping when he was only a few centimeters in before withdrawing. "When I pulled
you down to the floor, and took you there for the first time…" he sank back into her, as he
emphasized, "and then again…"

Hermione closed her eyes, absorbing his words and the deep, caressing baritone that accompanied
them. "Gods…" she murmured out loud.

"I didn't pay enough attention, that first time," Severus murmured quietly in response, slowly pushing
into her. She was so wet by now that there was absolutely no resistance; if anything, it felt as though
her body, slick as it was, was desperately trying to pull him in. "It was too fast, too quick. But
now…"

Hermione's head thumped back against the mattress as his fingers snuck between their joined bodies
and he began thumbing her again. Her legs came to wrap around his hips, trying to pull him in
deeper, to convince him to move…

"Now," he whispered, nuzzling the sensitive spot just behind her cheek, "I can take my time to truly
appreciate, discipline myself to ignore the urge to simply fuck in favor of bringing you to the peak of
arousal…" a shift of his hips preceded his next words "before I do this."

And then the glorious, naked bastard thrust hard into her, causing her to gasp and let out an
unintelligible stream of moans and encouragement as he took her roughly now, not without
tenderness, but with libidinous enthusiasm that threatened to knock Hermione's head into the
headboard—or would, if she were not pinned in place by her wrists. Nevertheless, after the slow
sexual torment he had put her through, this was entirely welcome.

He thrust into her hard, whilst reminding her in panting breaths of all the memorable occasions they'd
had together. Recounted the times they had used to patrol the halls together as fellow teachers, and
he would ambush her and take her in some shadowed niche by surprise, or in his classroom, the
library… and finally ended with a recall of the instance where he had used Legilimency on her,
breaking her Occlumency barriers through sexual torment, and proceeded to do exactly that once
again.

There were no secrets between them at this moment. This time, she willingly opened her mind to his,
and he relaxed his barriers enough for her to slip through in turn. Memories swayed into view, a bit
hazy at first, but clearer as Severus dragged up his favorite encounters for her to experience from his
perspective, and began pushing through her head for some of her own. Hermione didn't realize she
had reached completion until Severus finally broke the connection, his hips jerking and losing their
rhythm and breaking their joint concentration.

Light exploded behind her eyes, tremors wracked her body, all intensified by the enforced celibacy
they had been through for the last four months. At some point, the magic pinning her wrists
dissolved, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, clinging to him tightly as she rode out her
climax, shuddering with bone-deep pleasure. When he pulled away, moving so that he could half-
prop himself on his side with his elbow, Hermione snuggled next to him, pressing her face into his
neck and breathing in the smell of sweat, sex, and satiation that lingered in the air, contentedly recovering. The musky, male scent that she had recognized that first day in Potions class was there too, and she savored it with slow, deep breaths.

They lay there in post-coital bliss—for how long, Hermione did not know—but she eventually sat up again. Severus had closed his eyes by now, thoroughly relaxed as he was, and only let out a muttered word of a protest as her warmth left his arms. His eyes flew open when he felt her lips wrap around him without warning, and he jerked upright, one hand reaching for her head. His fingers wrapped in her curls, and for a moment, he seemed undecided on whether to pull her away or encourage her; but then he fell back onto the bed, his expression contorted in a grimace of pleasure, and any considerations to stopping her were done away with. He let out a hissed exclamation as she took his hardening shaft deeper into her mouth, sucking, licking, occasionally pulling back to nibble before taking him in again…

Needless to say, they spent the entire morning in mutual, shuddering enjoyment. They eventually migrated from the bed, to the table for breakfast, and finally ending up in front of the fire, on the luxuriously soft sheepskin rug. Nothing deterred them from making full use of the time they had allotted to spend undisturbed together.

When noon arrived, Hermione had difficulty forcing herself to get up and get dressed, and while Severus reluctantly left to collect Selenius from Gryffindor Tower, Hermione tried to figure out how she was going to make it to the Great Hall for lunch without making it plainly obvious that she had just been well and thoroughly shagged. As far as Harry and Ron knew, she had returned to her parents' for Christmas. As far as the rest of the school knew, or so the official story went, she was holed up in Gryffindor Tower getting ahead on her reading.

Severus, however, returned to their quarters before she made it out the door, looking thoroughly irritated. Selenius was not in Gryffindor Tower, and after stalking over to the library, he had come back to inform her that Selenius was playing chess. With who, exactly, it was easy to guess, to say the least. He did not seem to be the least bit concerned about the fact that his parents were not there. They therefore elected to summon lunch to their quarters, and spent the rest of the afternoon continuing what they had started that morning.

When Hermione saw Selenius later that evening, back at Gryffindor Tower, he seemed pensive. When he was younger, he had always been the quiet, contemplative sort; it was not until he had turned eight that he began to open up, to become more outgoing and talkative. Since Sirius's death, he had become sadder, noticeably more depressed with the loss of his uncle, but he had not retreated into himself. Now, however, when Hermione saw him, it seemed his mind was miles away; he was locked inside his head, kilometers deep in his brain, with a sign on his forehead that said, 'Do Not Disturb.'

He looked just like Severus did when he was privately thinking about how to fix a step or alter an ingredient in a potion, for a private project. Pensive. Contemplative. Brooding. And when asked, he would respond that there was absolutely nothing on his mind.

Which was why Hermione found herself gazing into Selenius's eyes, silently entering his mind to find out what he was up to. What swam into view was starkly revealing; Draco had been distracted all through their chess game as he looked through the book Selenius had lent him. Draco had also asked him about his parentage, and when Selenius had sullenly refused to answer, Draco had laughed in his face and told him that if he wasn't telling, he must be a half-blood—and had leaned back in his chair and drawled about how his father's best friend had been a half-blood, too, with a Muggle for a father. He had spoken disparagingly about that, and there was a trace of bitterness in his tone, but it was clear to Hermione that Draco still respected his godfather. That was important to
It was clear to Hermione that Draco's attitude about heritage bothered Selenius. The fact that he thought himself so superior irked her son, and it seemed that he was privately warring with himself over what he had been taught—to reject the pureblood dogma—and wanting to have a friend, a companion closer to his age. This was what her son was so quiet about: the fact that Draco was someone who insulted his parentage, but was also his one social link outside of his immediate family.

"Don't worry about it," Draco had said dismissively, once his mantra about inferior parentage had been finished. "You're alright, even if you're just a lowly half-blood."

All of this now registered itself before Hermione's eyes, without a single blink from Selenius to indicate that he realized what his mother was doing. He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, the way Hermione had always seen Harry behave even before he knew about Occlumency, and suspected that he must feel as though she were x-raying him. Harry had once told her that he sometimes felt Dumbledore was seeing into his soul, long before the topic of Legilimency had ever crossed his consciousness. Perhaps Selenius was feeling the same way, too. Nevertheless, Hermione got up and left.

The Fat Lady had a bit of trouble letting her out; the portrait's occupant was heavily drunk, swaying alarmingly in her frame. Beside her, her portrait friend Violet took a swig of dark red wine, and proceeded to giggle. What looked like a vat of wine had been added to her portrait, and Hermione watched as the Fat Lady leaned forward to help herself to another glass, tittering before she downed it.

Hermione shook her head, and then made her way to her quarters, and Severus.

Though Selenius spent a portion of each day with his parents, he continued to play chess with Draco well into his last day. Hermione would scan his mind when he returned, gleaning oddly important tidbits from him, though there were days when Severus took it upon himself to do it in her stead. Neither of them felt remorse; they were allowing their son an opportunity to meet someone closer to his own age, but that someone was also not the safest or most trustworthy person to be around, and they were monitoring him for his own safety if nothing else.

The day he was set to return to the Burrow, Hermione watched Severus take their son aside to talk to him. They spoke in low voices, which Hermione could not possibly make head or tails of, but when they straightened and then made their way to his office to use the Floo, Selenius seemed even more quiet than before. Hermione caught up with them then, having given them the space they needed for a private chat, and made Selenius check his person for all of the gifts his parents had given him. He patted his left pocket for the bottle of Felix Felicis and showed his mother his wrist for the unicorn hair bracelet.

Satisfied, Hermione kissed her son good-bye, tucked his ever-growing bangs behind his ear, made him promise her that he wouldn't make too much trouble for Molly and Arthur, and then proceeded to let him go. He stepped into the emerald green flames, and was gone.

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Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon down at Hagrid's, stroking Buckbeak's feathery neck while Hagrid warmed squirrels over a fire for him and then tossed them to the waiting hippogriff. Hermione was bundled up against the cold, once again back in her school clothes and wearing her Gryffindor scarf. She had dropped by Dumbledore's office earlier to check in with the headmaster, and carried a scroll in her pocket for Harry, to inform him of when his next private lesson would be.
Dumbledore had been surprisingly forthcoming about where he had been over Christmas break, giving her the details while she examined his blackened hand. Severus could not do much more to stop the spread of the curse, so it was her job to look at it and make sure that it was progressing as estimated.

"I paid Azkaban a visit," Dumbledore said quite conversationally as Hermione ran her wand over his deadened fingers. "Visitors are allowed, of course, but with increased security these days, I'm afraid it gave me a bit of trouble… and I must confess, I was not all that inclined to let the Ministry in on what I was there for."

"Understandable," Hermione said. She paused, and then asked, "Whose memories did you take, Albus?"

"If I am right in assuming that Harry has told you about the previous memories I have shown him, you will surely recognize the name Morfin Gaunt," Dumbledore said. "I do not believe you would recognize the second—a house-elf named Hokey, although I think I shall save that one for another time." He sat up a bit straighter in his chair now, and added, "I did, however, acquire a third memory."

"Not from Azkaban, sir?"

"No," Dumbledore agreed, leaning back in his chair now with a heavy sigh. "I finally managed to persuade Horace to part with an important memory—or rather, I thought I had." He tapped a vial of memory sitting on his desk, and Hermione saw that it seemed a bit sludgy compared to the other two memories resting on the table, as though it had congealed. "It took quite a bit of coaxing to convince him to give it to me, but as you can see, he has clearly tampered with the memory first."

"Memories can be tampered with?" Hermione asked, momentarily distracted as she bent down to look at the contents of the slightly sluggish, misty-greyed memories with a mixture of awe and curiosity. "After they've been extracted, I mean?"

"Certainly," Dumbledore said, pulling his injured hand away to place it back in his lap. "But that is, I am afraid, the problem. Horace has altered the memory he gave me, eliminating the vital, necessary part that I sought in the first place."

"Then what is the point of showing this memory to Harry?"

Dumbledore smiled at her.

"It will be Harry's job to persuade Slughorn to give me the real memory," he told her. "Naturally, he needs to know what he is asking for before he can do so."

Hermione had hesitated for a moment, and then asked, "And—sir… what is the point—why are you showing Harry all of this?" Dumbledore had raised a single, silvery-white eyebrow at her, and she amended, "It's all very interesting, and it makes sense to know as much about the Dark Lord as possible, but if I know you headmaster—and forgive my impertinence," she added carefully, "I think I know you fairly well, to some degree, and—well, you always have a point to these sort of things. A crux to the matter. What is the end revelation for this?"

The headmaster had gazed at her for a moment, his expression wizened and contemplative, as though he was quietly debating whether or not to tell her.

At last, he said, "Horcruxes, Hermione."

At Hermione's frank, bewildered look, he peered down at her through his half-moon spectacles.
"I trust, given your expression, that you do not know what that is?"

Now, Hermione thought back to her earlier conversation while stroking Buckbeak's withers, in a way that caused the hippogriff to lower his neck and close his eyes in relaxed enjoyment. He occasionally made a lazy snap at the squirrel bones littering the ground around his feet, but otherwise, the hippogriff was content, and silent. Hagrid, however, was talking.

"Aragog's gettin' worse, an' I don' think he's goin' ter get better," he told Hermione gruffly, but it was easy to see that the half-giant was struggling to hold back the urge to cry. "Don' know how much longer he's got ter live… anyway," he added, as Buckbeak caught a freshly-cooked squirrel in the air and snapped it between his beak, "I'd ask yeh ter take a look at him, mebbe give me an' estimate… have yeh check 'im out, since yer good at tha' kind o' thing… but I'm not sure it'd be safe, mind."

"It's not like I'm an expert on Acromantulas, Hagrid," Hermione reminded him. Hagrid gave her a pointed, slightly amused look with his beetle-black eyes, and she amended, "I've read about them, but I've got no practical experience, no experience at all. You know I took a look at Professor Dumbledore's hand, but that doesn't exactly preclude me to playing doctor for Aaragog."

"Ar, well," Hagrid said, leaning back with a sigh. "It can't be helped, then…"

He abruptly changed the subject, and asked, "How's yer son, Hermione?"

"Good," Hermione said, brightening. "He's doing fine. We had him here over Christmas, but since he's still pretty restricted, he couldn't come down to see you…"

Hagrid waved a hand. "Ah, don' worry about it. I was pretty busy looking after Aragog meself." He peered down at her. "I still remember what he was like as a baby—always sittin' on the floor and pettin' Fang until he knocked all me pots and pans off their hooks…"

It took Hermione a moment to realize he was referring to Selenius and not Aaragog, and then laughed. "It seems like it was only yesterday, doesn't it?"

Hagrid chuckled, but then his expression became serious. "For us. But I don' think Harry was the only one torn up an' lost when Sirius died."

Hermione winced. "You know how close Selenius and Sirius were… practically inseparable…"

"Whenever I visited Headquarters, I'd always find 'em playing chess or summat," Hagrid explained. "The way Sirius was always goin' on about Selenius, it was like he had his bes' friend back. I think it was good for 'em both, ter be honest."

Hermione swallowed, and tried to fight back the watering in her eyes. She knew Hagrid was right. "Sirius was lonely without James, even with me and Remus. Sometimes, I think he used to get Harry and James mixed up, too. But Selenius… I think Selenius was just as lonely, and the two of them had a lot in common…" she sniffled, despite herself, blaming the way her nose stuffed up on the cold, before she added, "Sirius doted on Harry, and loved him like a son, but he didn't get to see Harry all that often… so he and Selenius grew close. Really close."

Hagrid nodded. "People don' get over tha' kind o' stuff quickly, like," he said wisely. "It was like that with me dad… he was always there fer me, an' then one day, he jus' wasn'. People move on with their lives, but stuff like that stays with 'em still."

Hermione could only nod.

"Still, it was interestin'," Hagrid said thoughtfully, as Buckbeak crunched the last squirrel in his sharp
mouth. "Snape an' Sirius were like two dogs, always goin' at each other. Sirius hated Snape, but he loved Snape's son. Funny how tha' happens, eh?"

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Thirty-Seven

On another note, if any of you have been following the SSHG_Exchange on Livejournal, the big reveal is up. Which means the amazing person who did my gift, Cabepfir, is up there for you to see... and you can also have a good chuckle at my experiments with photoshop. Next year, I am totally drawing nudes. By hand. On old-fashioned paper instead.

Big thanks to my amazing beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review!

Harry approached Hermione after their Herbology class, the night after his session with Dumbledore, to confide in her what he had learned and to ask her about what Horcruxes were. Hermione's eyebrows had shot up at this, but she quickly feigned ignorance. The headmaster had enlightened her on this subject, but had requested that she not share the same information with Harry, and in truth, Hermione was inclined to agree. Harry didn't need to know what kind of Dark Magic that was in order to retrieve the memory from Slughorn, and she trusted Dumbledore's judgment on the matter.

But still, she needed to give Harry a faint inkling of what the word might entail. "They must be really advanced Dark Magic, or why would Voldemort want to know about them?" she asked rhetorically, adjusting her grip on her book bag. Her tone became warningly serious, however, when she added, "I think it's going to be difficult to get the information, Harry, you'll have to be very careful about how you approach Slughorn, think out a strategy... after all," she reminded him pointedly, when he opened his mouth to speak, "Dumbledore had a lot of trouble getting it out of him the first time. He'll be on his guard, won't he?" she pressed on, and added, "You'll have to be charming and coaxing, Harry. Be persuasive. Say the right thing, be convincing... he'll be wary about approaching the subject at all..."

"Ron reckons I should just hang back after Potions this afternoon..."

Hermione felt her temper flare up at this, but beat it into submission. Right now, she needed to guide Harry into the right direction on how to get that memory from Slughorn.

Still, she couldn't keep her ire from surfacing. "Well," she snapped, "do you really expect you'll just be able to walk up to Slughorn and off-handedly ask if he wouldn't mind giving you that memory? Just hang back after class, and casually wonder if he'd be willing? He altered the one he gave to Dumbledore, Harry! He's not a man prepared to give it up without a fight!"

Harry looked uneasy. "I don't want to fight Slughorn, Hermione—"

"I'm not telling you to whip out your wand and hex him," she said, tactfully leaving off the implied, appended *you dunderhead*. "I'm telling you to treat him like a skittish animal. I already told you—be charming, be coaxing. Watch his body language, try to soothe him, convince him that what he's doing is right..."

"How can he believe that it's not right?" Harry demanded. "I'm trying to kill Voldemort!"
"Look, Harry," Hermione said, setting her bookbag aside and grasping his shoulders, forcing him to face her squarely. "Slughorn isn't a brave man. He returned to Hogwarts for protection and comfort. He's terrified of Voldemort, and frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if he's ashamed of the fact that the Dark Lord used to be a favorite of his. He's a man who wants nothing more than to drown out the voices in his head that are constantly reminding him of his wrongdoings by pretending it never happened, by pushing it aside and ignoring it. Whatever he did, whatever he really said in that memory Dumbledore showed you, it must surely haunt him." Seeing that she had Harry's full attention, she pressed on. "Why else would he tamper with it?"

Harry looked disturbed at this, and Hermione continued, "Slughorn isn't a bad man either, Harry. Don't get me wrong. By all accounts, he's a good person, skilled at what he teaches, and gives people leg-ups in life—even if he reaps a little reward in return. But he's just not a daring or courageous man, Harry. It's not his first inclination. That's why you have to coax him, tug on his heartstrings, and be firm but gentle with him." Seeing the doubtful look on her friend's face, Hermione added determinedly, "You'll have to teach him to be brave, Harry. That's what you need to do. Help him learn to be brave so that he can help you by giving you that memory."

Harry looked thoughtful, but also wary and uncertain. "I don't know..." he said. Seeing her flare up at once, he added hastily, "I mean, everything you've said makes sense, but I don't know how I'm supposed to do that."

"Well," Hermione said, turning to trudge through the snow back up to the castle, "that's what you've got to figure out. You'll need to learn to be Slytherin with Slughorn, and Slughorn's going to have to learn to tap into his inner Gryffindor. How you do that is entirely up to you."

~o~O~o~

Potions that afternoon was something of a disastrous irritation.

Hermione quickly moved her cauldron to Ernie's other side so as to avoid sitting next to Ron, earning a mutinous mutter from the red-head. Slughorn immediately got them to work, reviewing Golpalott's Third Law, and Hermione was certain she was the only one who understood. The principal of it was simple to her, really. A poison concocted of two or more other poisons would have an antidote composed of more than just the antidotes for each individual poison combined, which was simply explained by the fact that the components of each poison would react with each other; this was what made a blended poison more difficult to deal with in the first place.

If Hermione had cared to explain it to Harry and Ron, she would have told them that this was the very reason Arthur Weasley had difficulty recovering from Nagini's venom: Nagini was a combination of at least two different kinds of venomous snake, and each snake's respective natural poison had combined within her to make her venom completely unique and more toxic than had been the original snakes', even combined. Harry would have understood that. Ron would have wrapped his head around it. It would have made them understand it better, to have that kind of reference.

But Hermione was still not on speaking terms, and for once, she was gleeful when she saw that there were no tips in the Half-Blood Prince's book on the matter.

"It's a shame that the Prince won't be able to help you much with this, Harry," she said brightly, as she straightened up and poured the contents of a large vial which contained her assigned poisons into her cauldron. "You have to understand the principals involved this time. No shortcuts or cheats!"

Harry gave her an annoyed look, and then got to work, clearly ready to give it a shot in the dark nonetheless.
Pleased, Hermione silently waved her wand over her cauldron, identifying the poisons within before lighting a fire underneath and moving to the store cupboard.

"Just shove a bezoar down their throat."

"That is the singularly most unhelpful thing I’ve ever heard!"

"Really? Even a dunderhead could follow those instructions. Sounds rather helpful to me, if you’ve been poisoned and are trying communicate to the idiot next to you that you need help."

"Yes, but what about when bezoars don’t work?"

"You die."

"Severus!"

"Fine. Sit down and I’ll show you."

Now Hermione retrieved several ingredients, laid them out on the table, and waved a spell over her cauldron to separate the different poisons, decanting them all into ten different phials. There was no wiping the smug expression off her face, not even Harry’s irritated look in her direction, as she got to work on crushing her poppy seeds and mixing them with chopped salamander liver, turning it into a thick, congealed, light red paste. She dropped the sluggish goop into the cauldron, and then got to work on her fern leaves. Those were added, and then she took each phial and emptied it, one by one, into the cauldron.

The potion immediately began to fizzle and hiss, turning a shade of poisonous-looking green. It emitted a few sparks, and Hermione began stirring it until it settled into a light lime color. Powered root of Asphodel was added shortly, turning the concoction bright orange, and gradually, Hermione was able to skillfully detoxify the contents. Daisy roots cut into neat slivers, crushed milkweed, a measure of buggane bile, and then she got to work on turning porcupine quills into a fine powder.

When Slughorn finally called, "Time’s… UP!" Hermione was nearly finished. She managed to cram two final ingredients into her cauldron, turning the potion within it a dull shade of pale yellow, and sat back to examine her work while Slughorn moved around the room. No one else had managed to complete their antidote, yet when Slughorn passed over her potion, he merely gave it a cursory nod. Despite herself, Hermione felt her stomach sink to the floor, along with her spirits. She had succeeded—in something that was difficult even for adults—yet, Slughorn had barely acknowledged it. Why? Was it because she was in the Order? Was it because she had too much of Dumbledore’s ear, that Slughorn was now more wary than ever that the headmaster might employ her to get the full memory? He wasn’t making eye contact with her—he was avoiding her—and as Hermione watched him move to Harry’s cauldron, it finally struck her.

Slughorn was afraid of her.

He was avoiding her because he was just as hunted in Hogwarts as he had been while on the run, and trying to resist giving her an opening to wheedle her way in and charm information out of him. He knew her work in the Order; he also knew Severus, too. He remembered them both from their days as students. And whatever else Slughorn was, he was no fool.

Of course, Hermione had not been charged with any task by Dumbledore whatsoever regarding Slughorn and the memory he had shown Harry, but Slughorn did not necessarily know that.

Still, Hermione could not help but be thoroughly put-out that her effort was entirely ignored.
In favor of Harry, of course. Her jaw nearly dropped when Harry presented a sweaty-palmed hand to Slughorn, and what should he have to show for his efforts but a single bezoar. She watched as Slughorn stared at Harry for a moment, just as taken by surprise as she herself was, and then he started laughing.

"You've got nerve, boy!" he boomed, holding up the bezoar so that the entire class could see it. "Oh, you're like your mother… well, I can't fault you… a bezoar would certainly act as an antidote for all these poisons!"

Hermione was livid. "And you thought of a bezoar all by yourself, did you, Harry?" she gritted out.

"That's the individual spirit a real potion-maker needs!" Slughorn said happily and, Hermione thought, a bit too enthusiastically.

Hermione pursed her lips, too angry to say anything else, and when class ended, she packed up her things and left without another word. Ron followed, but Harry stayed behind, and it was all Hermione could do to privately hope he failed for his sheer audacity in using a bezoar, followed by a silent prayer that he would succeed. Nevertheless, she stomped past Ron, and headed for the library.

She was surprised, however, when someone shoved past her on the way in. She nearly dropped her book bag as Draco Malfoy stormed past her, not caring about the fact that he had knocked into her. He hardly gave her a second glance as he left, and to her surprise, two nervous-looking girls were following him. They cast her odd looks, and then hurried after him.

Hermione stood there, collecting her stuff, and wondering what on earth Draco thought he was doing; those girls didn't look much older than thirteen or fourteen. Why on earth was he taking them with him? She wasn't stupid; older boys typically didn't hang around younger girls unless exploitation was on their mind, and those girls were definitely too young. Setting her jaw, she discreetly Disillusioned herself, and followed.

They made their way up one floor, and then another, and then the next. She heard one of the girls grunt in exasperation when Malfoy sped up, and when they had reached the seventh floor, Malfoy made a dash for the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy.

Right… in front… of…

"Alright," Malfoy snapped, wheeling around on them. "Goyle, if someone approaches, drop that pair of scales you've got—you did bring them, didn't you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes at one of the girls.

Hermione's jaw dropped.

Goyle-as-a-little-girl nodded, and pulled out a pair of brass scales.

"Right. Crabbe, you'll go down toward the other end of the corridor…"

Well, Hermione thought, this certainly saved her the trouble of going after Malfoy for preying on underage girls. She had never really considered Draco the type for that—he was a little gobshite and a bully, but he preferred tormenting people with insults and hexes and abusing his status as a prefect in those manners. And clearly, so far, she had judged him mostly right on that regard.

But she had never really thought he would order Crabbe and Goyle to Polyjuice themselves into girls.

The thought almost made her snicker, but she refrained as the two transformed Slytherins sulkily
went to their posts. Malfoy began pacing in front of the tapestry, and Hermione chose at that moment to remove her Disillusionment and step in. The opportunity was too good to pass up. She had a free period, but thanks to Severus, she knew Malfoy's schedule, and knew that he did not. He was supposed to be in class—as were his two cohorts.

Goyle let out a little shriek, dropping the brass scales unnecessarily. Malfoy jumped and wheeled around, wand raised, but Hermione got there first.

"You should be in class, Malfoy," she said authoritatively, "not skulking up here. Move along now."

Draco's pale, drawn, tired face suddenly hardened. In fact, he looked about ready to crack. "Go away, Mudblood."

"I'll have to report you for skiving class," Hermione riposted loftily. "I'm sure you don't want that."

"I said—" Malfoy's hiss suddenly broke off, and his eyes snapped behind her. Hermione took a step back, craning her head around, and promptly knocked into Professor Snape. She stumbled back, and found herself staring into cold, black, pitiless, and thoroughly unamused eyes.

"Ten points for carelessness, Miss Granger," Severus snapped, sidestepping her and placing himself between Hermione and Draco. "Another ten for not being where you should. Surely you have class to attend."

"I have a free period, sir—"

He cut her off. "—which does not include harassing other students. Twenty points for abusing your status as a prefect," he added silkily. "A further five for contradicting me. My, Gryffindor does seem to be getting a bit low on points, doesn't it?"

Hermione felt her face grow hot, but it was more out of arousal than anger. His voice had a tendency to do that to her—a rich, deep, and damnably silky baritone. And when he put it to good use at moments like these…

"Run along now, Miss Granger," Severus continued smoothly. "I don't think you want to be caught here again."

She locked gazes with him for a moment, silently conveying her thoughts, and then obediently turned to leave. She had been patrolling the upper corridors for the past few nights as planned, but they had not caught Malfoy yet, and it was only now that their suspicions were being proven true. She had not, however, expected it to be verified in the middle of the day. While classes were still in session. Merlin's undershorts, Malfoy needed some serious lessons in subtlety.

She rounded the corner, fully intending to go full-circle and spy on Malfoy's cronies while Disillusioned, and had just reapplied the spell and turning the next corner when a hand clamped itself over her mouth. She opened her mouth to speak, but the prickle of magic sweeping up her spine told her that a Silencing Spell had been applied. She twisted, trying to turn around to see who her attacker was, when she felt a pair of familiar lips descend upon her neck. Hot, warm, familiar breath blew gently over her shoulder. Chameleon-like fingers slid away from her mouth, caressing her cheek for a moment, and then he whirled her around.

Severus had also seen fit to Disillusion himself, for she could only detect slight, shimmery movement from the man next to her. A strong grip encircled her wrist, and a moment later, she was being half-dragged, half-led back the way she had come. Their feet fell silently upon the floor as they walked, and she found herself being directed down to the corridor below, leaving Malfoy and his plans
behind. It was difficult to read Severus's behavior, as he led her away; his demeanor was difficult to define. Was he angry at her interference or jubilant?

And why was he not in class? She wracked her brains for an answer, and the solution came quickly; he had a free period now. Even teachers were granted this much; there were only so many students to take so many classes, which meant he probably had the afternoon off—at least, she was pretty sure he did—

Further consideration on the matter was quickly snuffed out when he pushed her into a shadowy niche along the sixth floor corridor they were in, and promptly snogged her senseless. With such a reaction, it was now abundantly clear to her that he was not angry—in fact, from the murmurs of praise interspersed between the caresses of his lips, he was downright pleased.

"You caught him… at just the right time… mmh…"

"I—I saw him, and knew he was supposed to be in class," Hermione breathed, pulling away long enough to look at his face, trying to read him while she reached for her wand to remove both their Disillusionment Charms. An icy trickle ran up her body as it dissipated, even as color swirled back into view on her husband's face. "I probably wouldn't have bothered, except that he was with those two—he's been polyjuicing Crabbe and Goyle into girls, by the way—"

"So I noticed. I saw you follow them, and ended up following you."

What a sight that must have been. Hermione almost laughed out loud. Severus following her, when she was following two little girls who were really Crabbe and Goyle in disguise, who were tagging after Malfoy…

"By sending you away, and telling him to carry on with whatever it was that he was doing, I created an opening," Severus murmured, nuzzling and licking at her neck hungrily. "I even offered to give him an excuse for missing class. It will take work, but it's exactly what I needed. Good timing, love."

Hermione smiled. "You've made him question whether or not he should keep you out of the loop, if you've proven helpful."

"Precisely." With reluctance, he pulled away. "Although I must ask why you were up there, rather than your common room—that's where you usually are, at this time."

Hermione's lips twitched, but the look she gave him was a level one. "Another bad day at work, love."

"Do tell."

"Dumbledore's charged Harry with the task of retrieving a certain memory from Slughorn, and more likely than not, Harry's going to bungle his first attempt," she said, with a frustrated sigh. "Furthermore… I know it doesn't matter at this point, really, but Slughorn doesn't give my work the acknowledgement it's due, and after an hour of class today, he gave Harry more praise for using a single bezoar than he even looked in my direction for succeeding."

Severus gave her a look of pure contempt. "A bezoar? Potter pulled out a bezoar?"

"That's right."

"But where would he ever get the idea? I never had the impression he ever paid attention to me when I taught it to you lot in your first year—"
Hermione gave him a sour look. "A certain graffitied copy of Advanced Potion-Making gave him the idea, obviously.\" Severus gave her a startled look, and Hermione could tell he was mentally reviewing what he must have written on that particular page, for she enlightened him by adding, "The Half-Blood Prince apparently thought that shoving a bezoar down someone's throat was a more expedient solution to brewing the actual antidote.\"  

Severus smirked at the memory, but then it was quickly replaced with a sneer. "Potter. Always breezing through Potions on my work, getting more credit for half-baked attempts than he rightfully deserves…\"  

"I still haven't found a way to nick the book from him,\" Hermione said miserably. "He keeps it with him at all times. He's obsessed with it—the way he talks about it, you'd think it were his best friend. He's desperate to find out who owned it before, you know,\" she added, her nose twitching with irritation. She began twisting her watch around her wrist, and continued, "He talks about the Half-Blood Prince as though he's the authority on the universe itself—not that he knows it's really you, of course.\"  

Severus gave her a nasty grin, and then drawled. "You must admit that my creations and annotations are rather… useful.\"  

"Oh, yes,\" Hermione snapped. "I can hardly breathe for laughing. I haven't forgotten how you hung me upside-down during my sixth-year exam.\"  

"It was well deserved,\" Severus murmured. "Particularly after you kicked me in the groin. That bit of vengeance was a long time in coming.\"  

"I still won our duel,\" Hermione said smugly.  

He scowled at her. "I haven't forgotten.\"  

Hermione smiled at the memory for a moment, but then her cheer faded. "I know we've been doing duel practice over the years, but you're a good deal better now than I am.\"  

"And what, precisely, is wrong with that?\"  

"It's depressing to know that I can no longer keep my husband in line through fear,\" she joked.  

Severus's expression changed dramatically, but when he spoke, his face was perfectly straight. "You don't have to be a better duelist in order to terrify me, Hermione. You do that well enough just by being my wife.\"  

Hermione laughed. "Flatterer. But I was much better twenty, even fifteen years ago.\" Another thought occurred to her, and for the moment, her bad mood was lifted as she registered the familiar, trouble-making smirk on her husband's face. The very same that had coaxed her into sneaking out to Diagon Alley with him on his birthday. She was transported back to that moment and down memory lane, before her thoughts returned to Harry—promptly vanishing her cheerfulness, again.  

Severus watched the myriad of expressions cross her face, and she murmured in explanation, "Harry. We've created an opening for you to worm your way into Malfoy's trust, but we still have Harry to deal with.\"  

At the mention of her lightning-scarred friend, Severus's face blackened considerably. Hermione sighed, and plowed on before he could start disparaging him again.  

"I love Harry like a brother, Severus, and he is also my godson, but you'll understand me when I say
there are moments when I really hate that he can be an immature prat. Ron, too," she added as an afterthought. "Right now, the both of them are difficult to deal with."

"You have my pity." Severus gave her a contemptuous look. "For suffering the brain damage it must take to think of Potter as a brother."

Hermione smacked him lightly on the shoulder, and then checked her watch. Classes were very nearly over for the day now, which meant that she needed to start heading back to Gryffindor Tower. She bit her lower lip, and then turned to look at Severus.

"I need to see how Harry's attempt with Slughorn went, but I'll try to sneak out and see you tonight," she said softly, pressing a kiss to his cheek. "Our exams are five months away—that's a good enough excuse for Harry and Ron to believe that I'd sleep in the library."

"Five months," Severus said quietly. There was a trace of pain and mournfulness to his expression, and he leaned forward to press his forehead against hers. "Five months until…"

He trailed off. Hermione didn't bother trying to finish the sentence, either. There weren't enough words to convey it all. Five months until everything went to hell in a handbasket, before Dumbledore would be dead, before they would have to part ways, make additional arrangements for Selenius, have to strike out on their quest to destroy the Dark Lord on opposite sides of the war, before they would have neither plausible excuse nor reason to be seen in the other's company by anyone on any side...

It was like being told that they only had five months to live. They might as well. As soon as they left the school, the protections afforded by it would be forfeit.

Hermione closed her eyes.

"Your birthday is in a week," she whispered. "How do we celebrate it?"

Severus's eyes snapped open in surprise, and he stared down at her. "We can't."

"Yes we can," Hermione said determinedly. "I'll argue it with the headmaster if I must, but we're celebrating your birthday this year even if I have to buy a set of Skiving Snackboxes for myself to excuse my absence."

Severus gazed at her blankly for a moment, and then let out a sigh.

"Fortescue's is closed, Hermione. A trip to a bookstore hardly seems worth it, and there is nowhere else—"

"We don't have to leave the castle."

"Besides, it doesn't seem fair, particularly since we didn't celebrate your birthday—"

"Rubbish," Hermione said coolly. "I was dealing with Harry and Ron and a host of other things. I was far too busy for that. But things are a bit calmer just after New Years Eve—if that really bothers you, we can celebrate enough for the both of us."

A pause, and then Severus capitulated, like a man who knew he shouldn't have something, but was far too tempted by the offer of it to resist anymore. "We'll celebrate your birthday, mine, and our anniversary," he whispered. "We won't have a chance to do so in June, and in truth, I consider my birthday to be our real anniversary—after all," he said with dry amusement, "that was the day I first realized I liked you, after you snuck out to London with me."
Hermione nuzzled his cheek, and then kissed him. "Then that's what we'll do."

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When Hermione returned to Gryffindor Tower, it was to find Harry arguing with Ron. Ron was annoyed that Harry had not slipped him a bezoar, and Harry was frustrated at his apparent failure with Slughorn. Hermione dropped her stuff on the armchair, folded her arms across her chest, and directed Harry to tell her exactly what had happened.

When he had finished, she gave him an arch look.

"I suppose it wouldn't do much good to say, 'I told you so', would it?" she said coldly.

"Drop it, Hermione," Harry said angrily.

"No, Harry, I don't think I will," Hermione said stiffly. "I told you to be careful, I told you to be cautious, and you disregarded every piece of advice I gave, and blew it. You're becoming lazy, Harry, and frankly, you're starting to act like Malfoy." This caused Harry and Ron's heads to jerk up in her direction, mouths agape in horror at this proclamation. "Yes, Harry, it's true! Malfoy was always sucking up to Professor Snape, getting by on easy work and favors, and now you're expecting the exact same thing—just from Professor Slughorn."

Harry, who had opened his mouth to protest, snapped it shut without a word.

"I know you're not going to want to hear this, Harry, but getting that memory from Slughorn is going to take more effort and devotion than you've been willing to put forth so far," Hermione said warningly. "You won't be able to get it by offering him crystalized pineapple and attending his parties and being his little Potions prince. I told you that you were going to have to use every ounce of cunning and coaxing skills at your disposal, and by making a half-baked effort, you've effectively ruined your chances of catching him off his guard—which would have made it far easier for you, if you had actually bothered to come up with a plan like I told you to!"

"Come off it, Hermione," Ron said bitterly. "Who could have known that Slughorn would react like that?"

Hermione felt herself inflate with anger, ready to let loose, but she calmed herself. Her hands balled into fists, and she resisted the urge to fiddle with her watch. Instead, she asked tightly, "Have you been listening to a single word I've said, Ron?"

"Of course!" Ron said with a scowl. "You told Harry to be careful—coax—plan—whatever—"

"And dear Ronald, why would I give Harry that advice if I wasn't expecting Slughorn to react badly to such advances without careful preparation?" Hermione asked bitingy.

"You would have said that even if you didn't!" Ron protested hotly.

"Well, Won-Won," Hermione said scathingly, her temper rising, "I would expect any sensible person would recognize that, given what Dumbledore told Harry about how difficult it was to even get the tampered memory to begin with—and also given the fact that Dumbledore already tried and failed, Ron!"

Ron looked momentarily taken aback. "Well..."

"Well nothing!" Hermione snapped. "I gave my advice, Harry chose to ignore it, and now he's paying the consequences. I don't know what else there is to say."
"Wait," Harry said, getting to his feet. "If you've got advice, lay it on me now. I messed up this time, so how do I get it from him now?"

Hermione threw her hands up into the air. "How should I know, Harry?"

"Hello?" Ron said, tapping her book bag with his quill. "Know-it-all."

Hermione's face flushed. "Well," she said icily, "if you want my advice, Harry, my suggestion would be for you to use your Felix Felicis."

At once, both rose up in protest.

"Are you mad?" Harry said. "I'm saving it—there's got to be a better use for it than Slughorn—"

"Like Harry's going to waste something that good!" Ron scoffed. He squinted at her, and said, "Anyway, you're still just mad that you didn't get all of it. If you think it's such a good idea, why don't you share some of yours with Harry, eh?"

Hermione pursed her lips. "I can't."

"Why not?" Ron demanded.

Harry stared at her for a moment, and then it dawned on him. "She can't because she's already used it, Ron."

"So what if I have?" Hermione countered, suddenly very aware of the phial that hung from her neck, attached to the chain that held her locket. She had placed an Unbreakable Charm on it, and given the phial was about the size of her thumb, it was very easy to keep tucked away. "Besides, you have your own perfectly good stock—and furthermore," she said, rounding on Ron, "I may be upset that Harry got his bottle by unfair means, but that doesn't mean I don't care about what I'm asking him to use it for! Harry," she said, turning back to her other friend, "This memory—Dumbledore himself asked you to get it! He's teaching you about Voldemort's past, how to defeat him—it's important, and it's vital that you get it as quickly as possible. Felix Felicis is the best way to do it."

"Like you wouldn't know," Ron said sullenly. "Why didn't you tell us that you'd used yours?"

"Because it was none of your business," Hermione said hotly.

"Why not?" Ron demanded.

Harry stared at her for a moment, and then it dawned on him. "She can't because she's already used it, Ron."

"So what if I have?" Hermione countered, suddenly very aware of the phial that hung from her neck, attached to the chain that held her locket. She had placed an Unbreakable Charm on it, and given the phial was about the size of her thumb, it was very easy to keep tucked away. "Besides, you have your own perfectly good stock—and furthermore," she said, rounding on Ron, "I may be upset that Harry got his bottle by unfair means, but that doesn't mean I don't care about what I'm asking him to use it for! Harry," she said, turning back to her other friend, "This memory—Dumbledore himself asked you to get it! He's teaching you about Voldemort's past, how to defeat him—it's important, and it's vital that you get it as quickly as possible. Felix Felicis is the best way to do it."

"Like you wouldn't know," Ron said sullenly. "Why didn't you tell us that you'd used yours?"

"Because it was none of your business," Hermione said hotly.

"Well, what did you use it for?"

"That's none of your business either." She turned away, snatching up her book bag. "I'm done here. Harry, if you want that memory, you'll use Felix Felicis—but at this point, I don't know why I even bother with either of you," she said, tears pricking at the corner of her eyes. "You're both such immature arseholes. If it's not one conspiracy theory against me, it's another, and I'm sick of it!"

"Hey," Harry said, holding his hands up in a gesture of placation. "I don't have a problem with you on that front—I just wish—" he broke off.

"Yes, Harry," Hermione said with quiet fury in her voice. "You wish you'd listened to me the first time, and now you're ignoring me the second. When will you learn, Harry?"

"Lay off him, Hermione," Ron said. His face had turned an unflattering shade of red, and was competing with his freckles for color. "Besides," he added accusingly, "why won't you tell us what you used yours for? It was a bloke, wasn't it?"
Hermione lost her temper. "Of course it was a bloke!" she snapped. "I took a gulp of Felix, sought him out, seduced him, and then we had wild, rabid, bookworm sex. I now plan to marry him, have a Quidditch team of his children, and you're most certainly not invited to the wedding!" she let out a huff, and shouldered her bag. "Any other questions, Won-Won?"

Ron stared at her, dumbfounded. And then he turned to Harry.

"She's joking, right?"

Hermione gave Ron a look that suggested she was very much tempted to smack him on the side of the head with her book bag, but was refraining for civility's sake. Instead, she merely closed her eyes, mentally rattled off the first few runes from the Futhark alphabet. She willed herself to be calm, took a deep breath, and then opened her eyes. Her lips parted to speak, but Harry got there first.

Surprisingly, his voice, too, was calm.

"I'll think it over, Hermione," he said. "About whether to use a bit of Felix Felicis, I mean."

Hermione breathed in a massive sigh of relief, and then turned to leave.

"That's all I ask, Harry."

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The week breezed by with surprising quickness, but still, Harry made no mention nor gave any indication that he was prepared to use some of his Felix Felicis. Ron spent those days sulking, although he occasionally tried to catch her off guard by ambushing her with the question of what she had used her liquid luck for. By the end of the week, Hermione was so fed up that she again lost her temper.

"Fine!" she cried. "I never drank it. I gave it away!"

Harry and Ron's jaws had dropped.

"Blimey, Hermione, if you didn't want it that much, you could have given it to me!"

"I gave it to my family!" Hermione snapped, only telling the partial truth. "It's the only protection they've got!"

Ron stared at her, his mouth open like a fish for a moment, and then he closed it.

"Oh," he said weakly.

"Yes, 'oh',' Hermione snarled. "Now if you're done interrogating me, I'm going off to bed."

As she left, she heard Ron muttering to Harry, "At least it wasn't for a bloke, then."

Hermione spent the weekend avoiding them both. On Monday, however, Harry cornered her at lunch just before she walked into the Great Hall, carrying two plates laden with food.

"I—d'you want to go for a walk around the lake for a bit?"

Hermione assessed the offer carefully, and then tiredly took her plate and followed Harry. She was disturbingly reminded of the time she had intercepted Harry just before breakfast with a napkin and toast after his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire, and Ron wasn't on speaking terms with him. Now she wasn't on speaking terms with Ron, and barely so with Harry. Yet, she grudgingly
accepted the proffered olive branch, and made her way down to the lake.

"I—Hermione, I'm sorry for my behavior earlier," Harry muttered, taking a bite of shepherd's pie and swallowing. "It's just that there's a lot going on, and sometimes it's hard to tell where you're really coming from…"

"Your best interests have always been my priority, Harry," Hermione said, a bit stiffly. Her breath was coming out in cloudy puffs of air, and the lake was frosted over. She shuffled her feet a bit in the snow still littering the ground.

"Yeah, but sometimes, I forget," Harry admitted. "Especially when—you know, when we're arguing over stuff like the Prince's book."

"I don't trust the book, Harry," Hermione said quietly. "And I think you're being especially unfair to those of us who work hard by using it. But that's beside the point, since I haven't bothered you about the book in ages," she said listlessly. "But that doesn't mean—merlin, I don't even feel like rehashing it out now—it doesn't mean I don't care for your well-being."

"I'm going to try again without Felix Felicis," Harry said determinedly. "I'll plan it out this time, see where it gets me. And if it doesn't work…" he trailed off.

"All right," Hermione said tiredly.

Harry examined her face for a moment, as she took a bite of bacon sandwich, and then added, "Ron likes you."

Bugger. "He has a funny way of showing it."

Harry didn't seem to know what to say to this. Hermione took another bite, chewed, swallowed, and then turned to look at him.

"I don't like Ron like that, Harry."

"I—oh," Harry said, staring at her. "You don't?"

"No," Hermione said shortly. "That's why I don't care who he dates. What bothers me," she continued, taking a stab at the sauce on her plate, "is the fact that he feels the need to throw her in my face, and generally be an arse to me about it. And that he's acting like a cad, using her to try and get to me."

"I see," Harry said. A moment's pause, and then he added cautiously, "and—me?"

"I don't like you like that either, Harry."

"Good," Harry said, sounding relieved. "Because that would be—" he broke off.

"Awkward," Hermione supplied, with a faint smile.

"Well, yeah," he admitted. "Just weird, because I can't really think of you as anything other than a sister." He sighed, and then said, "Ron's going to be really disappointed, though."

"I'm not interested in dating Ron," Hermione said softly. "I just want my friend back. I just—I just want things to go back the way they were before, at the beginning of the year, when we were all getting along just fine."

Harry placed a hand on her shoulder, and gave it a friendly squeeze. "I'll try not to doubt you again."
Hermione nodded. At this moment, she wished for nothing more than to be back in sixth-year with James and Sirius. Those two, for all the trouble they ever gotten into, had never doubted her.

~o~O~o~

Hermione left her last class complaining of a headache, five minutes before it was due to end, and paid a visit to the Infirmary. She signed in, asked Poppy to kindly not let anyone in to see her and to tell any curious busybodies that she was contagiously ill. She wrapped a curtain around one of the beds to make it appear as though it were occupied, and then left to make her way down to their quarters. She slipped inside, and the moment the door clicked shut, she let out an enormous sigh of relief.

And then made her way to the bathroom. She got the hot water running on the tub, stripped off her clothes, and then slowly sat on the edge. The tile was freezing cold, but the minute her legs sank into the water, she felt a dizzying sense of tingling warmth. She slowly eased her way in, the hot water washing away the stress and tension from her body. Eventually, she slipped down entirely, until the water reached up to her chin, and she let out a sigh of pure, unadulterated bliss.

She soaked in the tub for several minutes, her eyes half-closed in lazy contentment, before she pulled a towel into reach to dry her hands off. She picked up her wand, summoned a book, and leaned back to read and relax. The bathroom was quiet, save for the occasional sounds of water sloshing gently against the sides of the tub, and time passed by for Hermione with uncharacteristic indolence.

Eventually, the sound of the bathroom door creaking open and then closing caught Hermione's attention, and she looked up from her book. Craning around to look behind her, she watched Severus take a seat and begin stripping off his robes, kicking off his boots and tugging off the clothes underneath before he set down a bottle of champagne on the side of the tub. A stack of several thick, choice tomes joined it, topped by two empty champagne flutes.

Hermione absorbed the sight of him, pale skinned and dark-haired, as he climbed in next to her and sank into the water. The exhalation of sudden, appreciative relief was not lost on her as he too absorbed the relaxing warmth of the bathwater. They sat there in quiet, languid, and companionable silence for several long moments, and then Hermione set her book aside and leaned into him, resting her cheek on his shoulder. She closed her eyes, breathing in deeply, and felt him lower his lips to the top of her head, resting lightly against her.

"Happy birthday, Severus," she whispered.

"Happy birthday, love," he murmured, nuzzling her. "However belated it may be."

Hermione smiled, and then reached over for the champagne and a glass. She poured, and then handed the glass to Severus before reaching for the other glass for herself. She set the bottle down, and they clinked glasses lightly before taking a sip. The silence stretched, and then the glasses were set down, and Hermione looked down at the books Severus had brought.

"Did you expect us to do much reading tonight?" she asked, amused.

"Yes." He poured champagne in both of their glasses, and then pulled one of the books off the stack and, careful not to get it wet, flipped it open. "Some. A chance to de-stress would not go amiss."

Hermione let out a contented little sigh, and leaned against him, resting her cheek against his shoulder. "I agree."

The better part of their evening together was spent together in the bathtub, each with a book and a
glass of champagne. It was nothing fancy, and frankly, neither of them had the energy to entertain anything more than this. They were both tired, overworked, and—if they were honest with themselves—lonely. Merely spending time with the person they loved and who they knew unequivocally loved and cherished them back was a far more welcome balm to soothe their frazzled nerves than the other alternatives they could dream up.

At one point, Hermione drifted to the other end so that she was facing him, drawing her legs up and bracing her feet against her husband's shins as he rested them on either side of her hips. It was a comfortable position, one that allowed Hermione to brace her book on her knee and lower her other hand into the water to caress the ankle pressed against her. Occasionally, they would look up from their reading to glance at the other, or for another sip of champagne. But eventually, the champagne burned its way through their bodies enough to loosen their tension, and Hermione daringly moved one foot off of her husband's leg and instead slid it down, until it was placed against his groin.

He took his time in looking up at her, giving her an inscrutable look; she smiled, and then lightly pressed the heel of her foot against his flaccid cock. One eyebrow shot up at this, inquiring, but instead of pulling back or pushing her away, he merely leaned back and settled himself more comfortably against the tub. Encouraging her to continue. And she did; returning her gaze back to her book, but not really reading, she slowly massaged him with her foot, pressing and rubbing gently.

His one hand nearly lost its grip on his book—causing it to dangle dangerously from the other—as he thrust the other into the water to grip her foot. Struggling not to drop his reading material into the tub, he set it aside on the edge before turning to give his wife his full attention. Hermione merely smiled at him as his expression morphed from determinedly aloof to irritated as she leaned forward and took his hardening cock into her hands, drawing a reaction out of him that he simply could not conceal. Minutes later, however, his annoyance abated as he conceded defeat; he quite contentedly allowed her to set her own reading aside and drift through the water toward him, draping herself against his chest and kissing him as she continued to fondle and stroke him.

Contrary to popular belief, sex in the water was not easy; nor was it good lubrication for a hand-job. The two of them thus decided, judging by the pruning of their hands, that they had been in the bath long enough and at that point, got up and left. They dried off the Muggle way, with warm fluffy towels that the house elves thoughtfully supplied them with, and without bothering to clean up their books or their champagne, retired not to their bedroom but the living room.

The dungeons were as cold as ever during the winter, but the fire was ablaze, bathing the room in appreciable warmth. From its constant position in front of the hearth, the sheepskin felt like a blanket that had been pulled fresh from the dryer; it was soft and pleasant to the touch, and Hermione quite happily laid back to enjoy it with a taste of hedonism. She closed her eyes, savoring the moment, and then opened them to meet her husband's.

With mixed feelings of lassitude and eagerness, she reached forward and pulled him down to kiss him. It was languid; it tasted of another time when it had felt they had all the time in the world to do this. To be a young couple so very in love and ready to explore. But they were no longer young, their love not new, and their time short.

Yet, the first did not matter; the last could be ignored. But the second was something to be grateful for, Hermione decided, as Severus covered her body with his and began to kiss her with increasing fervor; their love was not the loose, carefree thing it had been before, but was now something strong, dependable, and just as passionate. Something precious and reliable. Whatever else happened, they both knew that as long as the other drew breath, there was someone they could trust with all their heart—someone who kept their secrets, soothed their fears, and made love with them.
As they were doing now; Hermione's head thumped back against the rug as Severus took a nipple into his mouth, biting down lightly at the same moment that he pushed into her. Twenty years. They had been doing this for almost twenty years, and they both loved it still. Found mutual, electric, spine-shocking pleasure as their limbs tangled and twisted against each other, seeking, yearning, searching for the nirvana of completion. This time, however, Severus slowed just as Hermione felt herself nearing climax; her eyes flew open to meet her husband's, and found him bending over her, cupping her face in his hands, and placing a tender kiss on her lips.

Hermione still found it incongruously odd that a man with such a sharp tongue was able to soften his entire demeanor enough to demonstrate his love and passion to her. Even after all these years, the disparities between the two personalities he presented still brought a quirk of wry amusement to her lips. Not that they mattered now; it inconsequential to this moment. Her fingers, which were gripping his shoulders, slid down to his face to cup his face in turn. She caressed his cheek with her thumb, and urged him to pull away just enough for her to be able to see his eyes.

Two deep black eyes surveyed her face; often empty and chasm-like, they were now the most expressive things she had ever seen. Passion. Tenderness. Arousal. Smugness. Lust and love; for the two of them, those came hand in hand. She felt him start to move again, stroking her from the inside and rubbing deliberately against her clitoris, and let out a whimper that fell somewhere between a sigh and a moan. In retaliation, she deliberately squeezed him, causing him to jerk his hips in surprise. After that, there was no more moments set aside for deliberate observation. They moved against each other, desperate yet deliberate, and when they both finally reached completion, they wound up pressed tightly against each other still, winded, sweaty, tired and with the air permeated with the musk of sex—the way they liked it.

They spent the night on that sheepskin rug, making love again and again. With their tongues, their lips, their hands, their bodies. They left every mark on the other that they could in the name of pleasure, whispered every endearment that they wished, and drank each other as though it were for the last time, and shared in their own taste. It was like nothing they had ever done, and yet everything they had.

At one point, late in the night, when they were finally spent and curled up in each other's arms—not even bothering to get up and retreat to their bedroom—Hermione inhaled the scent of the sheepskin underneath them, breathing it in deeply as though it were perfumed by a heady flower. She gave it a moment to wrap around her senses, and then turned tired, thoroughly sated eyes onto her husband, who was watching her with lazy curiosity.

"It smells of you," she said, with the smile of a woman faintly stoned on pleasure.

Severus buried his face in her curls for a moment, and then with a sigh bent low to compare it to the sheepskin. "Indeed—of you. Of course," he added with a drawl, pulling her closer and nuzzling her cheek like a large cat, "this means I'll have to take it with me, when we leave… for the summer…"

Hermione closed her eyes, burying her face in his chest, as though to imprint it in her mind for the umpteenth time, for fear that she might forget it. "Before I leave, I want to cut off a bit of this rug to take with me."

Severus did not respond to this, and Hermione peeked up at him to see his face. It was curtained by his hair, and what she could see of it displayed an expression somewhere between a scowl, and a furrow of confusion and inquiry. She clarified: "When all of this is over, I'll sew it back on. But I want to have a piece of this to carry with me. It's—well, it's been with us for so long, it's just one of those things that always reminds me of us. Of… you."

Severus understood. Shifting so that he could rest his head comfortably on her shoulder, buried in the
tangled mess of her curls, he murmured, "Carry it with you. But we won't sew it back on until after it's all over... and the three of us are together again. As a family."

"A family," Hermione echoed softly, her voice a low sigh. She closed her eyes. "Yes."

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Hermione sprinted up towards the hospital wing, white-faced and panicked, as soon as the trickle of news reached her ears that Ron was in the infirmary. Word spread fast, and even though the day had not quite yet passed morning, half the school already seemed to know that something had happened earlier. She hurtled down the corridor, worst-case scenarios running through her head, and banged her shoulder against the wall as she turned the corner, nearly colliding with Harry. He let out on 'oof!' of surprise as she knocked his glasses askew on his face, and quickly held out a hand to settle her.

The fact that Harry was standing outside the doors, rather than being in the ward with Ron, was enough to override the comforting gesture. "What happened?" she demanded.

Harry told her. He was just finishing up his tale, explaining to Hermione's increasingly horror-stricken face how he had managed to force a bezoar down Ron's throat, when the door creaked open slightly and Minerva stepped out, looking pale and solemn.

Harry jumped up to speak to her. "How is he, Professor?"

"He will be all right, Potter," Minerva said, but the look in her eyes told Hermione that she was just as shaken by this as she was pretending to be calm. She gave them both a stern look. "You two ought to be heading back to your dormitories now. He will not be receiving visitors today."

"We're his friends!" Harry said determinedly. "Why can't we see him?"

"Because Madam Pomfrey is tending to him, Potter," Minerva said sharply. "Mr. Weasley will make a full recovery, I assure you, but while your quick thinking with the bezoar saved his life, he still needs to be administered the antidote—which will take some time to brew. Until then, he is not out of the woods and will not be receiving visitors."

Seeing the distressed looks on both Harry and Hermione's faces at this, she added, her tone softening just a bit, "You may wait here until Madam Pomfrey lets you in."

Grateful that she was not sending them away, Harry and Hermione both waited outside the hospital wing. Time passed mind-numbingly for them; Ginny arrived shortly after, and while she and Harry debated Ron's poisoning, Hermione merely slumped to the ground in relief. Teachers occasionally came in and out; they tried to peer inside on these occasions, but never saw much.

Eventually, the hour grew late, and they were finally allowed inside.

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"...But you said Slughorn had been planning to give that bottle to Dumbledore for Christmas," Ginny said, reiterating what had already been said for the umpteenth time now, "so the poisoner could just as easily have been after Dumbledore."

Hermione, who had sat through the entirety of the discussion on Ron's poisoning without making a single sound other than to sniffle, finally spoke up. Her voice was hoarse, and even to herself, she sounded as though she were a bit ill with a head cold.
"Then the poisoner didn't know Slughorn very well," she said quietly, immediately thinking of Malfoy. "Anyone who knew Slughorn would have known he'd keep something that tasty for himself."

"But then how did Harry and Ron get thrown into the mix?" Ginny argued. "If Slughorn didn't know it was poison, wouldn't he have drunk it before then?"

"Ginny's got a fair point," Fred said, arms folded around the back of his chair as he turned to look at Hermione.

"Slughorn said he meant to give it to Dumbledore," Harry said, as Hermione opened her mouth to speak. "He forgot about it. Sounds an awful lot like an accident, to me." He nodded at Ron. "Sort of like how I forgot about those spiked Chocolate Cauldrons Romilda Vane gave me until today."

"Spiked?" George inquired.

"With your love potions," Ginny said, looking just a bit sour at this.

"Besides, Dumbledore trusts Slughorn," Hermione said stubbornly. As did she. Slughorn simply didn't have the spine to attempt assassination, nor was he so spineless as to turn on his own friends. He was the kind who ran when the going got tough, as evidenced by the fact that he had been in hiding for over a year, not the kind who turned on others when he got desperate.

"Dumbledore trusts Snape, too," Harry reminded her. "And at Slughorn's Christmas Party—"

"Harry, we already agreed that he was just trying to trick Malfoy—"

"Wait, what's this about?" Ginny interrupted.

"But what if he's not?" Harry retorted, ignoring the Weasleys, and the fact that they were all listening in avidly now.

Hermione's temper flared, but almost immediately, it died away. She gave Harry a weary look. She was worn out from her earlier distress, and was not in any shape to get into this argument now. She was angry at Harry's insistence about Severus, but from his perspective, she could understand it.

And given what was to happen at the end of the school year, it was fast becoming perceived reality.

"Whether or not we trust Slughorn or Snape doesn't matter right now," she said tiredly. "We trust Dumbledore, and if… Harry, if we can't trust Dumbledore, we can't trust anybody."

Silence fell over the room, broken moments later by Ron croaking "Er—my—nee," in his sleep.

And then the door burst open, and Hagrid walked in. A trail of muddy footprints resulted, and Poppy rushed out of her office upon his arrival, looking positively alarmed.

"No more than six visitors at a time!"

"Hagrid makes six," George pointed out.

"No, that's okay," Hermione said, getting to her feet before Poppy could register the reason for her confusion; Hagrid took up the space of several men. "I need to go. Now that—now that Ron's all right. I'll see you all later."

She Scourgified the muddy footprints behind her as she left, and closed the door.
As soon as she was clear of the corridor, she whipped out her wand and tapped her ring. The smooth, silvery surface rippled for a moment, and then the words, 'We need to talk' began to scrawl themselves out onto it in her neat handwriting. She hurried down the corridor, not wanting to be caught by Filch, and was on her way up the stairs leading to Gryffindor Tower when it burned in reply.

The response was simple, but ominous: 'I know.'

~o~O~o~

"Malfoy's getting desperate," Hermione said, ducking her head as they veered down a deserted corridor, "and dangerous. That's twice he's tried something else, without concern for who might get caught instead."

"First Bell, now Weasley," Severus sneered, as they ascended the steps to the Astronomy Tower. "Yes, I know."

"What did you get out of him?"

"He was reluctant to confess, but eventually did," Severus conceded, striding to the far parapet before turning to face her. "I've gained enough of his trust that he would admit such a thing to me."

"At least we know it's him," Hermione said in an undertone. "If we didn't, I'd be concerned that we might have another suspect. The uncertainty would be…" she trailed off.

"Unpleasant," Severus responded silkily. "Yes, I can imagine. Nevertheless, Draco has assured me that he will not be making other such attempts. Not that he needs to," he added snidely. "He's almost finished with his… project."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat as she joined him, gazing out across the darkened grounds. In the distance, Hagrid's hut flickered with light. "It's March. Three months until term ends. That's still too much time between now and when—"

"I didn't say he had finished," Severus interrupted. "I said that he's almost finished. Given the rate of progress he has made over the year, I rather wonder whether he will make the deadline at all."

"But it still leaves the school vulnerable," Hermione argued. "We don't know when he might strike."

"As a matter of fact," Severus responded coolly, "we do."

Hermione gave him a sharp, skeptical look, and he explained, "Draco intends to wait until the school is undefended before he puts his plan into place. He wants his accomplices to be in place after Dumbledore leaves the school, and before he returns."

"An ambush," Hermione realized. "Dumbledore's appearances at the Great Hall have been inconsistent, to say the least—it's an easy guess even for Draco that he's not always at the school."

"It's not much comfort, but it does give us some control over the circumstances," Severus muttered.

"Speaking of circumstances," Hermione said, snapping her head up to look at him. "Harry told me about something interesting that Hagrid let slip to him last night. About an argument you and Dumbledore had."

Severus's eyes narrowed at this, and she saw something very much like rage glitter in them. "Hagrid and his overgrown mouth, I take it?"
Hermione winced. "It was just a little mistake—I think he was talking about… well, about the concerns Dumbledore and the Board of Governors were expressing about the school, and your name came up in passing…"

"And Potter, ever so eager to dig up the evidence against me, pursued the line of questioning," Severus interpreted, his lips curling into a sneer. "Naturally."

Hermione bit her lower lip. "Well, that's what I heard at the breakfast table. Harry seemingly couldn't wait to tell me."

"I see," Severus said coldly.

They stood there in silence for a moment, a silence which stretched on for several minutes. A breeze gusted through, brushing past their cloaks, and whistling tunelessly in the night.

"We were discussing Potter," Severus said at last, sounding frustrated. "I asked him what he was doing, those evenings they spend closeted in his office. The headmaster was aggravatingly vague, and then could not have put it any more plainly that he does not trust me."

"Dumbledore trusts you!" Hermione said, stepping up to the old man's defense at once.

Severus sneered. "It's not an issue of trust in regards to loyalty, Hermione. It's an issue of trust regarding my capabilities as a spy—most particularly, in keeping certain things from the Dark Lord."

"Rubbish!" Hermione snapped coldly. "He tells Harry far more important things, and they have a direct connection!"

"The difference, however, is that Dumbledore does not fear that the Dark Lord will try to invade Potter's mind again," Severus said bitingly. "He seems to think that the Dark Lord did not enjoy the experience enough to try it again in the near future."

Hermione peered at him perceptively. "That's not all that's bothering you."

Severus shook his head. "That's all I can tell you."

"What a reversal of roles," Hermione said dryly, "now you're the one keeping secrets from me."

She saw a flicker of something pass over her husband's face. It was an odd, indecipherable expression, but Hermione thought she detected a trace of mixed anger and muted pain before he schooled his face blank once more.

"The headmaster saw fit to give me enough information to provide me with reassurance of his faith in me." The words came out as a quiet, dejected hiss. "I can only confess that I left his office less than pleased. Nothing more."

"He didn't tell you enough," Hermione guessed, with a sigh.

Severus's eyes glittered strangely at this, and then he turned away.

"When I told him that he took too much for granted, and that I had perhaps changed my mind, he reminded me that I had given my word," he said bitterly. "As if that were not enough, he saw fit to point out that should I fail to carry out my task… I have a wife who is more than willing to follow it through."

Hermione grasped his hand in hers, squeezing it tightly when he yanked it back reflexively, and took
a step forward until she was pressed up against him. Not sexually, but comfortably; a solid, familiar presence. He was the one keeping secrets from her now, and she was the one providing what bit of security she could.

"Severus, we're all under stress here," she said quietly. "Even the headmaster, though he's so dotty that we don't always notice it. We're all—we're just waiting for the catalyst." She felt tension drain reluctantly out of her husband's body, and continued gently, "It's true that if you can't carry out your task, that I will step in to do it for you—but we both know that you will do it, because you want to contribute to the Dark Lord's demise just as much as I do... and spare Dumbledore a slow death." She squeezed his hand again, and with a sigh of capitulation, he allowed her to drape his arm around her shoulder. She pressed her cheek against his side. "But whatever I do, Severus, I do it for you."

Severus's thumb absentely stroked the side of her cheek. "I know," he whispered.

Silence followed, no longer tense, but merely tinged with sadness, as they stood there on the Astronomy Tower. Pale light washed over them from the full moon that sailed overhead, the only observer to this moment. And then his hand dipped lower, and retrieved the chain around Hermione's neck, pulling it up so that he could see it.

On the back of the locket, she had attached a bit of sheepskin, which explained the small piece missing from the rug in his rooms; the rug now looked as though it had been attacked by a wool-eating cookie-cutter shark. But the missing piece was neatly attached to the pewter backing of the locket, and when he flicked it open, the age-worn picture's silent occupants greeted him.

"You still wear this?" he asked, his voice thick with emotion.

"Of course," Hermione said. Almost humorously, she added, "I haven't changed the photograph because I can never seem to get the three of us smiling in the same picture. And even here," she said, pointing at Selenius's face, "he's pouting a bit. And here," she said, pointing to another picture, which had been added to the inside of the lid, "I got a picture of Selenius with Sirius, from last year."

Severus snorted, and then clicked the locket shut, tucking it back under the neck of his wife's robes. "I was only smiling under duress."

Hermione laughed softly, adjusting the collar of her robes around her neck before leaning forward to kiss him on the cheek. "That doesn't make it any less precious to me."

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Ron's recovery from his poisoning was now one of speedy assurance, but he was not released before Harry wound up in a bed next to him after being struck in the head by a Bludger, which had been aimed at him—however unintentionally—by none other than McLaggen. Aside from the issues regarding McLaggen's continued membership on the Gryffindor Quidditch Team as well as Harry's health, Hermione and Ron had not spoken to each other since he had awoken. Certainly, she stopped by to say hello, but any conversations they had were short and stilted, and accompanied with determined avoiding of the other's eyes.

Hermione frankly did not want to have a discussion with Ron, given the multitude of more important things on her mind, and was grateful to find that Ron was seemingly too shy and too nervous to even try. It seemed, however, that such a thing would work itself out on its own; at the very least, Ron seemed happy enough knowing that Hermione had been worried when he had been poisoned. She had no idea what he and Harry talked about, all those hours they were cooped up together in the same room with nothing to do, but it seemed that their friendship was beginning to repair itself at least.
On the downside, Lavender Brown took the fact that Ron had not informed her of when he had been released from the Hospital Wing very hard, and seemed to finger Hermione as the culprit. All in all, this was not such a bad trade-off; Hermione had very little to do with Lavender to begin with, and was not the least bit interested in what the other girl thought of her. She was a grown woman with a husband and son; right now, the squabbles of young couples still trying to find their footing in the dating scene seemed distant and inconsequential to her.

Whether Ron would finally get around to admitting to Lavender that he did not want to date her anymore, or got back together with her, was not Hermione's concern in the least—that was, as long as it did not strain their friendship again. She had had quite enough of that.

Still, she found herself in an extraordinarily good mood for the rest of the day when it seemed that the three of them were back to normal again. An episode of poisoning and a bludger to the head seemed to have done wonders.

Harry left that evening for another private lesson with Dumbledore, and returned with renewed determination to finish the task Dumbledore had assigned him, with regards to retrieving the memory from Slughorn. Hermione saw him poring through his illegitimate copy of *Advanced Potion-Making* over the next few days, brow furrowed, clearly searching desperately for the answer to his problem. He did not quite seem to take Hermione's word for it when she told him he wouldn't find what he needed in there. She certainly didn't expect Severus to have scribbled a note out in the margins about how to charm and flatter people.

It was highly disconcerting when Hermione discovered that Slughorn was not the only one on Harry's radar of focus, when Dobby and Kreacher appeared one evening to report the results of their observations. Harry was now several steps closer to cracking the mystery surrounding Draco Malfoy's suspicious behavior, and what was worse—he was now more obsessed with his blond-haired enemy than ever.

Defense Against the Dark Arts classes were not much better. Following Mundungus's attempted stunt impersonating of an Inferius, something that had thrown the whole Order into something of an outrage, Severus seemed to be trying to use Harry as a verbal punching bag as a means of de-stressing. While it seemed to be working brilliantly for him, judging by the look of smug self-satisfaction on his face as they left his classroom, it left both Harry and Ron in a correspondingly cranky and depressed mood.

At the next opportunity to visit Hogsmeade, Harry decided to lag behind in order to try and get into the Room of Requirement to see what Malfoy was up to. Hermione grew cross at this, and followed him as they headed up to Gryffindor Tower so that Harry could retrieve his Invisibility Cloak.

"You should be trying to get that memory from Slughorn, Harry," Hermione told him as Harry walked faster, forcing her to jog in order to catch up. "That should come first to this—this *thing* you've got about Malfoy—"

"I've been trying!" Harry answered hotly. "He doesn't want to talk to me, Hermione! He can tell I've been trying to get him on his own again, and he's not going to let it happen!"

Hermione pursed her lips in an effort to stifle her next response, which would have likely been said more out of pent-up frustration than any desire to convince Harry otherwise, and she turned around and began stalking off in the direction of the dungeons.

"Wait," Harry said, stopping to look over his shoulder at her. "Where—what are you doing?"

"The dungeons," Hermione challenged him, stopping as the staircase she was on began to move. "If
you won't do it, Harry, then I will!"

Harry gaped at her for a moment. The staircase stopped, and Hermione stepped off, striding purposefully down toward the entrance hall. She hoped that her goading would convince him otherwise, but as she stopped at the bottom of the last staircase, she saw that Harry had gone. She frowned. Normally, Harry was one to rise to such bait, but just when she was counting on it most, it seemed that he had chickened out.

Determined to give it a try anyway, Hermione made her way to Slughorn's office.

The corridors were, for the most part, thankfully deserted. Most of the students had gone to Hogsmeade. Hermione had been planning to go, mostly with the intent of finding a chance to talk to Ron in a neutral setting where they could clear some things up between them, but this was more important. She stopped in front of Slughorn's office, and knocked.

There was a pause, and then what sounded like the hasty silencing of a gramophone and papers shuffling. Hermione frowned, and knocked again. No response. She was tempted to pull out her wand and demand Slughorn open the door on pain of having it blasted open, but she was not certain she would be able to get away with it. There was no point in forcing her way in; the point of Dumbledore assigning the task to Harry was to not force Slughorn, but coax him.

She stood there helplessly, not entirely sure what she should do. Now she almost wished that she had gone down to Hogsmeade with Ron. But a moment later, the thought was pushed from her mind. She had no homework and no Order business to attend to. Deciding to take advantage of the freedom of this weekend, she tapped her ring with her wand.

*It's the weekend. I can sneak over. May I?*

The words burned brightly for a moment, and then disappeared. Hermione began to make her way down to their quarters, but it the response she got was a delayed one.

*Yes. And then, as a desperate afterthought, the word* please *appeared after it.*

Hermione's pace quickened. She had not visited Severus often, even though they had agreed that she could sneak over on rare occasions during the weekend. She could count the number of times that year on one hand, and they had usually been planned in advance. Now, however, she had a free moment. A glaring opportunity that she was now grasping to take advantage of.

When she got to their quarters and slipped inside, it was to find Severus in their bedroom, grading; he sat cross-legged on the bed, the essays of various years spread out in neat stacks, and with a bottle of red ink and the flat surface of a cutting board floating helpfully in front of him. It was a slightly bizarre scene, as it was more reminiscent of a fifth year with too much homework than a grown man with work to do. But Hermione brushed that aside as she shrugged off her robes, adjusting the sleeves of her shirt for comfort, before gingerly climbing on top of the covers without disrupting the neat stacks Severus had laid out.

He shifted over to give her more room, and Hermione curled up next to him, resting her head against his shoulder. They stayed like this for several minutes, before Severus stretched and leaned against the headboard, uncrossing his legs without knocking over his essays.

"Work," he said tiredly. There were shadows under his eyes, which suggested a lack of sleep, and he looked more pale and drawn than she had ever seen him.

"I'll help," Hermione offered. Humorously, she added, "I used to teach the class, after all."
"Not to my standards," Severus responded shortly, but there was an edge of grateful amusement to his tone.

Hermione elbowed him. "Close enough. They came away with the important stuff, although I admit that I never reached the same level as Professor Faulkner."

"Ah, yes. Our favorite professor."

Hermione grinned at him. "For different reasons, I'll bet."

This elicited a chuckle from Severus, surprisingly enough.

They spent the morning finishing up Severus's grading, which was a surprisingly pleasant affair when they were in each other's company. The scratching of quills was interspersed with remarks about the essays themselves, which ranged from obviously incorrect information to places where the charm on someone's Spell-Checking Quill had begun to wear out.

They finished by the time lunch rolled around, but Hermione did not leave for the Great Hall, even though she knew Harry and Ron had likely returned by now. They could do without her for a few hours. It was her husband who needed her most right now, and Hermione went about this by insisting he shower first, order a filling meal from the kitchen second, and get some early sleep later. He protested this, digging his heels in at the prospect, but he relented soon enough when it became clear that Hermione was not going to let him weasel his way out.

He became more interested in complying when he realized that she meant to join him. Hermione had him kneel under the spray while she washed his back, and pulled his head out from underneath it long enough to scrub his hair, getting rid of as much oil and grease from it as possible. He grimaced and snarled at her when she used her nails on his scalp, letting out a splutter of surprise when she promptly pushed his head back under the spray to rinse. As soon as she was done, he dragged her down to the floor with him, and promptly reversed the scene, pinning her unnecessarily on her belly while he took the washcloth to her back. There was definitely a bit of hair-pulling while he ran his fingers through, but he gentled it quickly as he lathered it with soap and then worked it in.

In this time, he had been holding her down by straddling her lower back, keeping his weight on his knees and the soles of his feet. Hermione had not held still; she struggled and writhed underneath him, trying to get out from him and recapture the upper hand, just to see if she could. But without a wand, the advantage was clearly with her husband, and he enjoyed his victory by releasing her when he saw fit, and when she tried to get to her feet, promptly grabbing her by the foot and sliding her across the slippery tile toward him.

"Hey!" Hermione cried, as he bent over to kiss her neck, despite the spray. "That's not fair!"

"You married a Slytherin, Hermione," Severus purred, cupping a breast and stroking it. "We're known for being distinctly unfair."

In retaliation, Hermione reached out and grabbed his scrotum. Severus froze at this, not daring to move a muscle as she threw him a mischievous look.

"And you married a Gryffindor," she said evenly. "We're known for grabbing a bull by the balls rather than just the horns." She rolled them gently between her fingers, stroking them, causing his erection to swell even further, and added, "We're a bit reckless that way."

Severus let out a hissed exclamation at this, but did not protest; rather, he grabbed hold of his wife's hair and shifted closer, blocking the shower spray with his body as he urged her to take him in her
mouth. She did not hesitate to do so, wrapping her lips around the head and gradually taking him in deeper as she worked him. He bent over her, pressing her against his groin, panting hard as he thrust and bucked erratically under his wife's ministrations.

Hermione ignored him when he began trying to get her to pull away, latching on more determinedly than before and applying suction and pressure to his most sensitive spots, scraping her teeth lightly in warning when the hair-pulling became more insistent. She even went so far as to slide a hand out from under herself to grab hold of his balls again, squeezing and playing with them, in an effort to make him climax.

It worked. Hermione found herself being forced to take more of him in again as he pressed her closer, hips jerking erratically, and then hastily tried to find her rhythm again even as she swallowed the bitter, milky substance that filled her mouth. He held himself there for several minutes, resting his cock in the warmth of her mouth, and then reluctantly withdrew. Hermione sat up immediately and filled her mouth with some of the shower water, gargling for a moment and then aiming for the drain.

"I haven't taken any sort of contraceptive," she explained, as soon as she looked up. Severus's eyes glittered at this, though he had not moved from where he knelt, still panting from pleasure and exertion. "We couldn't have sex." She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, and then added, "But that doesn't mean we can't still do this."

In response, Severus pulled her closer to him, and began kissing her with renewed fervor.

The shower took much longer to finish than Hermione had originally anticipated. The rest of the time, aside from rinsing off, was spent with gentle caresses and massages, veritable lovemaking by touch alone. But once they were out and dressed, she ordered food from the kitchen. It was still a bit early for dinner, and Hermione knew Harry and Ron would be no doubt wondering what she was doing, and that she would have to come up with a very good lie, but Hermione paid it little mind as she shared a meal of lamb chops and Yorkshire pudding with her husband.

Despite the levity of their shower, the discussion came to a fairly serious turn as they both registered that June was soon bearing down on them. They sat on the couch and put their heads together to consider other options for Selenius other than the Burrow for the following year, but nothing seemed very promising.

"I'm not prepared to leave my son in the care of people who believe me to be their enemy," Severus said, his tone brooking no argument. But Hermione still rose up in Molly's defense.

"Molly and Arthur wouldn't pay attention to that," she argued. "They wouldn't hurt him just because you're his father. Besides—there's me. He's my son, too, and no matter how they feel about you—"

"We don't know what the precise situation will be next year," Severus responded tightly. "We could both very well be on the run, depending on how the headmaster's death goes down. Furthermore, they may be more forgiving than most, but there are other members of the Order who would not be—and if Selenius stays, they will most certainly find out about him."

Hermione's heart sank, knowing Severus was right. While most of the Order were people who would not hold a child's parentage against him, there were a few she could name who would not hesitate to consider trying to use Selenius as leverage if they thought they could get away with it. The world was not divided between good people and Death Eaters; the only thing everyone in the Order had in common was the desire to work toward the downfall of Lord Voldemort. While Molly and Arthur were examples of some of the best, most kind-hearted people in the Order, Mundungus was one person Hermione could name off the top of her head who was less than reliable. Even if the Weasleys were happy to look after Selenius, Hermione could not trust that they would be able to
keep an eye on him every time an Order member visited their home.

Hermione slowly rotated her watch around her wrist thoughtfully, the way she did when she was thinking hard. "We can't send him back to George and Diane. They're Muggles—they've got no protection, and I'm sending my parents to Australia. We need Selenius close, with someone we trust, somewhere safe."

Severus closed his eyes. "As much as I hate to admit it, it is at times like these that I wish Black were still alive."

"Tine Cottage," Hermione suggested.

"Oh, yes," Severus said, sarcasm lacing his every word. "We could leave a twelve-year-old boy to look after himself for a year."

Hermione bit her lower lip. "We could leave a house-elf with him, possibly. There's always Dobby —"

"Tine Cottage is compromised. Anyone in the Order could drop by unannounced."

"What are our other options?" Hermione asked worriedly. "The Dark Lord foresees a time in the near future when he'll have control of the school, which means Hogwarts isn't an option, either—"

"On the contrary," Severus said, sitting up suddenly, "Hogwarts may possibly be an option. The Dark Lord will need someone to run the school."

"Once Dumbledore's dead, he won't need a spy," Hermione agreed, cottoning on at once. "You'll be the perfect man to put in that position—you've been here for over a decade and a half, he believes you're loyal to his cause, you know the students, you know how to maintain discipline… if you played your cards right, he would probably pick you."

"If that's the case, it may be possible to hide Selenius in the castle," Severus allowed, "but that requires further thought, and we would still need a contingency plan should the Dark Lord not assign me."

Hermione sighed and buried her face in his shoulder. "And now we're back to square one."

They cleaned up their plates shortly after, stacking them to the side for the house elves, and Hermione followed her husband to bed. At first, he was reluctant to let her stay, not because he did not want her there, but because he was certain she had no excuse for not making an appearance in Gryffindor Tower. His reticence only lasted for so long, because as far as his wife was concerned, as long as she had confidence that she could come up with a good excuse for her absence, that should be enough for him.

This time, it was. As enjoyable as their celebration had been three months ago, they were both still lonely and stressed, and were a little too willing to risk questions being asked if it meant some relief and connection. If it meant another night spent curled up and spooned against each other, with Severus's arms wrapped possessively around Hermione, and his shoulder being substituted for a pillow. In the morning, they would part ways again, but not tonight—neither of them had what it took to resist what they both badly needed most.

~o~O~o~

"If you ask me," Ron said, helping himself to a Sunday breakfast of eggs and ham, "Tonks is cracking up a bit, after what happened at the Ministry. You said she was looking for Dumbledore?"
"Yeah," Harry said, taking a swig of pumpkin juice. "She said he wasn't here, though. She didn't look all that well."

"It's odd," Hermione said, biting her lower lip in concern as she absorbed Harry's report, "she's supposed to be guarding the school. Why would she suddenly abandon her post?"

Harry and Ron had met her at breakfast this morning, and much to Hermione's relief, were too focused on the mystery surrounding Tonks's odd behavior to question where she had been. As it turned out, while trying to get into the Room of Requirement yesterday, Harry had run into Tonks. According to him, the Auror resembled nothing so much as a watering pot. Reluctant as she was to leave Severus's side, she got up early enough to make it to breakfast on time to catch up with the other students. But now that was one hurdle put aside, Hermione had another object on her plate to deal with. What was Tonks up to? What was wrong with her?

"I had a thought," Harry said quietly. "You don't think she can have been… you know… in love with Sirius?"

Hermione stared at him, not quite expecting this piece of absurdity.

"What on earth makes you say that?"

"I dunno," Harry said, shrugging. He seemed to be hoping for some sort of insight from her. "It's just… she was nearly crying when I mentioned his name, and her patronus changed…"

"I don't think it had anything to do with Sirius," Hermione said slowly, not really wanting to discuss the Auror's private life. It really was not Harry or Ron's business. "Tonks hardly knew him. I think she would have been nearly crying no matter whose name you threw out. Besides," she added briskly, "It's not our job to be figuring out other peoples' business."

"Sirius is my business!" Harry said hotly.

"Honestly, Harry," Hermione said, exasperated, "I don't think Sirius has anything to do with this."

"Then what do you think it is?" Harry challenged.

Hermione hesitated.

"I think she's in love with someone, but he's not returning her affections the way she hoped," she said quietly. "That's a sort of private thing for a person to deal with, Harry."

Ron shifted uncomfortably at this, and at once, Hermione was grateful when he abruptly changed the subject by asking, "So, hey—did I tell you two the joke I told Madam Rosmerta about the hag, the Healer, and the Mimbulus mimbletonia?"

"Did she laugh?" Harry asked, suddenly interested.

Ron scowled. "No."

Classes the next day were a bit of a confusing affair, because so many of the upperclassmen were absent from their afternoon classes in order to take their Apparition tests. Hermione already had her license, which was filed in the Ministry's directory even if no one remembered, but she was going to take the test again regardless so that there would be an updated record that would hopefully help further hide the knowledge of her earlier existence. Thus, she and Ron were among the other seventeen-year-olds slated to take their tests that marched down to Hogsmeade.
The weather was turning surprisingly temperate, the boundaries between April and May becoming blurred, and the day was thus only mildly wet and chilly. A bit of fog had risen up over the village, but it vanished in the weak sunlight by the time they arrived. The students were allowed to linger and mill about in front of the Three Broomsticks while they waited for their name to be called for testing, and Hermione decided to help herself to a butterbeer while she waited for 'Granger, Hermione' to be called.

She had not seen Rosmerta in what seemed like ages. Thus, when she saw her old employer, she was surprised when she got nothing more than a curt, cursory nod from her as she took her order. Hermione was used to getting a friendly greeting, but it was as though Rosmerta hardly knew her. She contemplated the barmaid's odd behavior as she sipped her drink, and found herself idly observing her as she served the other of-age students, all of whom it seemed wanted some bit of liquid courage to help them pass.

When Ron reached to ask for a firewhiskey, Hermione stopped him.

"Don't get anything stronger than a butterbeer," she said, gesturing at her own drink. "You don't want to be too impaired."

"You're not my mother," Ron grumbled, but relented.

No, but I'm old enough to be, Hermione thought with a sigh as Rosmerta passed them by. Her eyes narrowed as they locked onto the other woman. She was acting oddly, which could mean any number of things, and after the incident of Katie Bell being cursed, there were no doubt questions being raised about the security of her establishment—

Acting oddly—

Cursed—

Hermione stared, struck by sudden realization.

Draco Malfoy had an accomplice in Hogsmeade. The necklace had originated in the girls bathroom of the Three Broomsticks. Malfoy had not been in Hogsmeade, which distanced immediate suspicion from himself, but—

"Granger, Hermione!"

—she and Severus had already covered the possibility that he had placed someone under the Imperius Curse—

"Hermione, you're up!" Ron hissed, jabbing her in the side with his elbow.

Hermione startled, thrusting her butterbeer into Ron's hands as she quickly stepped forward to answer the examiner's summons. She quickly smoothed herself down, calming her nerves—not that she was nervous about the test, but that she was now jittery about the sudden realization that had struck her not but a moment ago.

Malfoy had Rosmerta under the Imperius Curse.

"Just remember the three 'D's," Twycross said dispassionately, as Hermione got into position. She steadied herself. "And on the count of three, I want you to Apparate to your assigned destination. One—two—"

On 'three', Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and spun into the ether. The next moment, she
disappeared with a loud crack, and the familiar sensation of being squeezed took over until it finally released her, and she landed gracefully on a patch of grass, just outside of Hogsmeade, where another examiner was waiting for her.

"Excellent, Miss Granger!" the wizened-looking woman who met her there said, stepping forward to check and see if she had left anything behind. "Got all your bits and bobbles?" Hermione nodded, and the woman brushed the hair out of her face to peer closer. "No missing eyebrows, got your teeth and tonsils? Everything? Wonderful!"

Three minutes later, Hermione was cleared to Apparate back. She landed exactly where she has disappeared from five minutes ago, and handed Professor Twycross the slip of parchment informing him that the other examiner had passed her. She hardly registered the delighted look on the wispy man's face as he put her license together with a wave of his wand; now that she had passed, her focus was all on Rosmerta.

"Yes!" Ron crowed, as soon as she was free to join the crowd again. "I knew you'd pass, Hermione! Flying colors!"

"Thanks, Ron," Hermione said distractedly, hoping she passed off as modest rather than aloof as her mind continued to whirl over possibilities. She knew Rosmerta well; there was no way she would ever willingly assist Malfoy. It had to be the Imperius, if she judged her behavior correctly, which common sense and experience told her she had. "You'll be up in a few—I'm sure you'll do well, too —"

As it turned out, Ron did not pass. He passed the first examiner, but when he Apparated back, Twycross noted that in his excitement to return, he had left behind half an eyebrow. The examiner was sympathetic but unwilling to pass him, and the two left Hogsmeade with Ron looking sulky.

When Ron was not looking, however, Hermione lagged back to discreetly tap her ring with her wand.

*I think I found Malfoy's accomplice*, she said.

The words remained etched in place for a moment, and then melted away as Severus's reply came through. *Who?*

*Madam Rosmerta*, Hermione replied. *Imperiused.*

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Enormous thanks goes out to my wonderful beta, who has been instrumental in making this story as polished as possible.

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review.

It was apparent the minute Hermione and Ron saw Harry that evening that he had tried and once again had no luck in cornering Slughorn about the memory. In all honesty, this failure was not a surprise. What did come to as a bit of a shock, however, was when Harry finally said he would try the Felix Felicis, as Hermione had been suggesting for weeks.

"I don't need all of it, not twelve hours' worth," he said, as they walked back to Gryffindor Tower from dinner. "I reckon just a mouthful. Two or three hours—not even. I'll just stop by his office, and with a little luck," Harry continued, as they stepped into the common room and he made his way toward the stairs leading to the boys' dormitory, "I'll persuade him."

As Harry disappeared up the stairs, Hermione looked thoughtfully at Ron, who had his arms crossed.

"Well," he said awkwardly. "It looks like you finally persuaded Harry, at least."

"Well, if the potion does what it's supposed to, it should work," Hermione told him reasonably.

Ron shrugged. "I—well, I guess." He gave her an odd look. "If Harry's not going to be here tonight, could we—y'know—talk?"

Hermione looked at him blankly for a moment. Talk? What did he want to talk about? Surely not…

As though reading her mind, Ron looked over his shoulder quickly for a moment, before muttering, "It's about—well—the past few months, really." He scratched the back of his head, and then sighed. "I mean, we could just do our Prefect rounds together this evening…"

Harry reappeared before Hermione had time to fully process this, but she did not have a quick mind for nothing. She recognized immediately what this was an opportunity for, and if Ron was ready to try and get some things straight between them, Hermione was going to be the mature adult that she was and do it.

"Alright," she said.

~o~O~o~

As soon as Harry had gone, Hermione and Ron slipped out of Gryffindor Tower, although not before Ginny and Dean started to row in the common room. Wanting to ignore the drama, they elected not to remain behind to see it run its course, and instead decided to start from the bottom upwards, making their way toward the seventh floor. It was nearing curfew, which meant that few students were out—few students were even supposed to be out. They ascended the staircases silently, both feeling a sense of extreme awkwardness. Once they rounded the seventh floor corridor, however, Hermione decided to take charge and break the tension first.

"You wanted to talk," she ventured.
"Well," Ron said, "it's about—you know—what happened earlier this year… before Slughorn's Christmas Party, I mean."

Hermione listened.

"Well," Ron repeated awkwardly. "I mean—well. Earlier this year, we got into a fight over something really petty, and it's just—now that we've made up… I mean, we have made up, haven't we? We're still friends…"

"Yes, of course," Hermione said, somewhat amused. "Go on."

"Well, I finally realized that the—well, the only real reason Slughorn was inviting me we because of you," Ron said finally. "I realized he wouldn't have invited me in the first place if you hadn't asked him to or something. I mean, I appreciate it, Hermione, but—but—"

He gave her a helpless look.

"I'm not interested in your pride, Ron," Hermione said, exasperated. "As soon as Slughorn gave you a chance, he was sold. He's a good wizard to make connections with, and I wanted him to pay attention to you because you have the kind of talent he looks for."

Ron's jaw worked a bit, as though he were trying to find the courage to say something. At last, he said, "When you do stuff like that, Hermione, it's like you're treating me like a—well, a kid. I know you don't mean to, but it just makes me feel a little—a little inferior, you know? Like you think you're my mum."

He gave her a pained look.

Hermione bit the inside of her cheek. "I'm your friend, Ron. I was just looking out for you. If you didn't want to go, you didn't have to, but I just wanted you to have the chance if you were interested in it."

Now Ron looked a bit sulky. "I did want the chance. I just didn't want the chance because you arranged it."

Hermione began luring out the real reason. "Why? What difference does it make?"

"Because you're my friend," Ron said, as though it explained everything. Yet, his freckles were now competing for color—his face was that pink.

"Friends help each other out," Hermione said ostensibly.

"Yes, but not—I mean—" Ron stopped, and finally looked as though he had enough of dancing around the real issue that was bothering him. "Not friends who like other friends," he muttered.

Hermione tried to keep the look of pity off her face as she looked him over carefully for a moment, and let the guillotine drop.

"I'm sorry, Ron," she said honestly, "but I'm not interested in you."

To her surprise, Ron merely inhaled deeply. She had been expecting a bit more of a reactionary response, which was also why she was grateful that the corridor was deserted. But it seemed Ron was containing himself rather admirably.

"I—well, I sort of realize that now," he said, expelling the breath he had been holding in. "Harry told
me as much a few weeks ago. Which is why I kind of realize why you were doing what you did, and why you didn't see any problem with it. It's just—it's just that that's why I was acting like a prat then, because I thought you were treating me like—well, like a child, you know? And then when you said that you were going to invite me as a friend, I wasn't really sure what to think of that."

Hermione did not respond. In truth, she had plenty to say, but she wanted Ron to have his fill first. The red-head ruffled his hair with one hand, looking supremely uncomfortable, and then continued. "I know that you don't like me like that, but at the time, I didn't know, and I thought—well, I just thought I'd see if I could make you jealous. But instead, I just ended up making a complete prat of myself, and it's just—I want our friendship back, Hermione. I know—I think—we've got it back now, but I just want it out there in the open so that we both know where we stand."

Hermione folded her arms across her chest. "No more throwing Lav-Lav in my face?" she asked dryly.

Ron's face reddened, if at all possible, even more. "No."

"No more misunderstandings about who likes who?" Hermione asked, her tone light and just on this side of teasing.

Ron's face broke into a smile. "Nope."

"Good," Hermione said, and then her expression softened. "Because I like you, Ron. Just not like that. We've been friends since our first year, and I love you the same way I love Harry—like a brother. And I'd really hate to lose you over something as trivial as this."

Ron threw an arm over her shoulder and grinned, looking immensely relieved. "You got it."

"Friends?" Hermione asked, smiling up at him.

"Absolutely." He pulled her into a bit of a bear hug, and pulled away. "As long as you still help me with my homework, of course."

Hermione whacked him lightly on the side of the head. "Prat. How do you expect to learn if I do your homework for you?"

In truth, Hermione felt enormously guilty about helping them with their homework, because as a teacher herself, she knew that it was not assigned just for kicks and giggles. The homework was meant to solidify the new stuff they had learned in class, and help the teacher judge if they were actually getting the material. The fact that Harry and Ron tried to get around it still irked her.

"I do learn," Ron said, pulling on his most convincing puppy face. "It's just that the teachers are taskmasters, Hermione. Especially Snape. How d'you expect me to do it all done in one night?"

"If you didn't procrastinate," Hermione began.

Ron groaned. "Oh please, not another lecture—'Ronald Weasley, as much as you hate homework, it is more important than Quidditch and you need to do it yourself'—' Honestly, Hermione, I do actually do the work. I just need a couple extra lines, I don't know how they expect anyone but you to turn in two rolls of parchment on Inferi—"

Hermione cuffed him again, this time on the shoulder. "It's called research."

"But five classes!" Ron protested, as they turned down the corridor. "How do they expect us to do
They spend the rest of the evening bickering over the workload, Hermione reminding him that she was managing just fine and that she was taking far more classes than he, and Ron grumbling that not everyone could be a 'bloody genius' like her. They performed their rounds in less than two hours, sending no less than two late Gryffindors and one lost-looking Ravenclaw back to their dormitories, and made it back to the common room in time enough to finish up the homework due the next day.

The news they received from Harry the next day was shocking, to say the least. They found themselves a quiet spot in Charms to practice, and after casting Muffliato, Harry quickly explained to them that not only had he been successful in getting the memory, he had gotten to view it with Dumbledore—and Dumbledore had agreed that Harry could come along the next time he planned to destroy a Horcrux.

"Wow," Ron said, waving his wand vaguely at the ceiling, not really paying attention to what he was doing as he took in all that Harry had just told them. "Wow. You're actually going to go with Dumbledore… And try and destroy… wow."

A few fat, fluffy white flakes suddenly swirled into view, landing on Hermione's nose. She shook them off.

"Ron, you're making it snow," she said patiently, leaning over and redirecting his wand away from the ceiling.

There was an audible sniff from the table next to them, and Hermione had no need to turn around to see that it was Lavender. She and Ron had officially broken up this morning, on their way to breakfast, and she was still teary-eyed over it.

"Oh yeah," Ron said, looking down at his arm. "We look like we've got horrible dandruff now, haha…" he shook it off, and then brushed some of the snow off of Hermione's hair. "Or maybe you're just shedding."

"Very funny, Ron."

As if on cue, Lavender burst into tears. Ron looked somewhat guilty about it, and turned to look helplessly at Harry and Hermione.

"I came clean with Lavender this morning," he admitted. "I don't mind that it's over, but it wasn't much fun when she started yelling. At least it's over." He looked down at the table, keeping his voice low. "There's no way I'm ever going through that again—not that I should have used her like that in the first place…"

"It was a bad night for romance all around, I think," Hermione said, glad that Ron had learned his lesson, and knowing better than to press it. "Ginny and Dean broke up last night just after you went, Harry—they had a row about it right before Ron and I left."

Harry's face stiffened, as though he were trying not to smile. He was doing a good job of it, but from Hermione's vantage point, he looked very much as though he would like to be doing a little celebratory dance. But still, he managed to squeeze out, "How come?"

"Oh, it was something really silly," Hermione said, waving her wand and tapping her glass, turning the vinegar it contained into a deep, red wine. She lifted it to her lips for a tiny sip, and nodded approvingly at it. "She said he was always trying to help her through the portrait hole, like she couldn't climb in herself… But they've been a bit rocky for ages."
Hermione was fairly sure she wasn't mistaking the look of hopefulness in Harry's eyes. In a way, they reminded her very much of Severus's, when they had been young, and he was hoping for a chance to lure her away for a snog or, before they were romantically involved, a walk around the lake. But a quick flicker of those green eyes in Ron's direction, and Hermione could see the reason he had not asked Ginny out in the first place: he was worried about Ron's reaction.

Frankly, at this point, Hermione wasn't that worried about what Ron would think. She was quite sure he would much rather his little sister be with his best mate than with any number of other boys he couldn't keep tabs on. But she decided to leave the whole issue alone; they would work it out in their own good time. Besides, right now, Harry was supposed to be focusing on Voldemort, not Ginny…

She suddenly saw tiny Professor Flitwick bobbing in their direction, and they all immediately stood upright, trying not to look guilty of not doing their classwork.

"Now, now, boys… a little less talk, a little more action…" the tiny Charms teacher squeaked, stopping in front of their table. "Let's see you try."

Harry and Ron exchanged dubious glances, and then in unison, they waved their wands and tapped their glasses, their faces screwed up in concentration. Harry's vinegar turned to ice, cracking the glass warningly as it expanded rapidly. To everyone's surprise, however, Ron's cleared up a bit as the murky brown took on a faint and clearer hue of red. Filius peered up through his glass, and then gave Ron an approving nod.

"A bit more practice, boys, but that was a fine attempt," he squeaked.

As he moved on to the next table, Harry turned to Ron.

"How d'you do that?"

"Lucky," Ron said, waving his wand lazily toward the ceiling. "Practice and hard work, Harry. That's the key. According to Hermione, anyway."

Hermione giggled, as Harry turned to give her an exasperated look.

A few fat, white, powdery-looking things began falling from the ceiling.

"Ron, you're making it snow again."

~o~O~o~

Hermione stared down at the pale face of Draco Malfoy as he lay in bed, sound asleep, unaware of her Disillusioned presence in the Hospital Wing. Severus was sitting on a chair by the bed, applying more dittany to the translucent scar that ran along his chest. Poppy had lit a candle by the bedside to provide light, and had left them alone to do their work a little over a quarter of an hour ago, her face drawn with angry disproval.

She was not certain about the circumstances, but Harry had gotten into a fight with Malfoy in the boy's bathroom—which in itself was unremarkable, except for the fact that had Moaning Myrtle not started screaming bloody murder, Malfoy could very well have died quickly of blood loss. It was lucky that Severus had heard; even luckier that he had been the first in, and had quickly managed to restore most of the blood into the boy's body.

What alarmed and angered Hermione the most, however, was the fact that Harry had used one of the spells from the Half-Blood Prince's book. She had warned him countless times of the dangers involved in invoking an unknown incantation. She shuddered at the thought he could have just as
easily used the spell on Ron, if by pure accident.

"Your godson has detention with me every Saturday until the end of term," Severus said quietly, still working over Malfoy's body, his face stony. "What do you have to say to that?"

"Nothing," Hermione said evenly. "Harry got what he deserved. He's lucky he didn't get far worse. I think the only reason he regrets doing it is because he's got about a dozen detentions for the rest of the year."

Severus let out a hiss, like an angry snake.

Hermione placed one hand on Severus's shoulder. He twitched, but did not shake her off. "The good thing is that Malfoy is still alive, and he'll be up and about by tomorrow. Harry has been sufficiently punished—you saw to that. Not even Minerva contested it."

Severus did not respond, and the two of them lapsed into silence.

Hermione stared down at Malfoy, bitterly thinking about the fight she had just had up in Gryffindor Tower earlier that evening. Word about Harry and Malfoy's bloody scuffle had gotten around quickly, and the first thing Hermione had done was try to get Harry to see reason. But Harry was too defensive; all he did was defend the book, and claim that he had been doing it in self-defense, rounding it off with the angry insistence that he wasn't defending what he had done—but that Hermione's insistence that the Half-Blood Prince's book was a dangerous object was still unjustified.

Hermione was furious. As much as she loved Severus, she was fully aware that he was dangerous—and that the books from his younger days brought that side of him to light. She tried appealing to Harry in every way she knew, to at least try and get him to see the immensity of what he had done, and while Ron mostly kept mum the entire time, Ginny had jumped to Harry's defense.

"By the sound of it, Malfoy was trying to use an Unforgivable Curse, you should be glad Harry had something good up his sleeve!"

"Well, of course I'm glad Harry wasn't cursed!" Hermione said, stung by the accusation. "But you can't call that Sectumsempra spell good, Ginny, look where it's landed him!" Trying to appeal to something the younger girl would understand, she added, "And I'd have thought, seeing what this has done to your chances in the match—"

"Oh, don't start acting as though you understand Quidditch," Ginny snapped, giving Hermione a look of utter contempt. "You'll only embarrass yourself."

Hermione stared at Ginny, a mixture of disbelief and anger on her face, and then quite suddenly, her entire expression closed up. The change was rather alarming, judging by the expressions on Harry and Ron's faces, as well as the one of growing uncertainty on Ginny's. She gazed down at the youngest Weasley with a stony, cold expression, and then promptly turned around to leave.

"Hey, wait," Ron said, getting out of his seat as she stalked past them. "Where are you going?"

"Probably to sulk," Ginny said, though she sounded unnerved.

Hermione did not reply. The Portrait of the Fat Lady closed behind her with an air of ugly finality, and she had been up in the Hospital Wing ever since, resuming her previous role of the invisible observer. Malfoy had been groaning in pain for most of the time, but now he was quiescent, and on the road to recovery. Yet, the repair that had occurred more recently between the Golden Trio had once again been ripped anew, and Hermione was not sure how they were going to stitch their friendship back together again.
She had spent her last two years at Hogwarts pretending to be a student. It had required her to loosen up again, to become a bit silly, a bit less rigid, more emotional and open. Less adult. But now she was coiled back up tightly, and there was no unraveling her right now.

She left shortly after, returning to Gryffindor Tower. She slipped quietly past everyone without being noticed, and went to bed.

She did not attend the Quidditch match the following Saturday, and was absent from Gryffindor Tower while the partying went on. She got the news the following day from the grapevine that Harry and Ginny were finally an item, and upon receiving it, found she could not care less. She had entered one of the phases where she simply turned numb and unresponsive, and dealt with it by immersing herself in her work. But not even school work could distract her for long, and one evening, she set the finished stack of essays aside to ponder what Harry had done with the book.

Last she heard, he had hidden it. Hermione found herself slowly getting up from the table to retrieve her things, as the answer came to her quite easily. There was only one place Harry would think to hide something in an emergency, which was why she shouldered her book bag and began making her way to the Seventh Floor. He had not yet had a chance to retrieve it, mostly because it seemed he was wary of Snape being on the look-out for it, which meant that if Hermione's luck held, it was probably still there.

She fidgeted through her book bag as she came up to the corridor that bore the tapestry of Barnabas the Barmy, and his ill-fated attempt to train trolls for a ballet performance, and pulled out her Notebook. She had been carrying it around with her all year now, and the pages continued to fill up with Severus's reports, as well as her own observations, and she began pacing.

_I need a place to hide my Notebook… someplace where it can't be found… safe and hidden…_

She almost broke into a little jig when, after three turns, the door to the Room of Requirement appeared. While it had staunchly refused to open for Harry, it now made way for her, and she treated herself to a very thin smile as she slipped inside. The minute she entered, however, pocketing her Notebook once more, she found herself stumped.

Harry was obviously not the first student to use the Room of Requirement to hide something. There were perhaps thousands upon thousands of books there, not to mention banned items of the joke shop variety—mostly from Weasleys Wizard Wheezes and Zonkos—forming a new layer of illegal paraphernalia upon what seemed to be centuries of junk piled upon junk. If she were to dig down far enough, she would half expect to find dinosaur bones. As it was, there was a cage poking out of a cupboard that looked like it contained the skeleton of something that appeared to have five legs—someone's misguided attempt to hide a pet Quintaped, she thought with a repressed shudder.

Something caught her attention, as she moved through the mountainous piles of junk, and she realized that it was the glint of something shiny and silvery, tarnished nearly beyond recognition, but for some reason, still captivating. It crowned the top of an ugly, old warlock, and it took all of Hermione's self-control to pull herself away from it. It drew her attention like a magnet, which set off warning bells in her head, and to distract herself, she cautiously pried open the cupboard door for a better look at the skeleton.

To her surprise, there was something familiar stuffed behind it. With a rising feeling of incredulousness, she tugged it free, and a smile began to grow across her face as she examined the cover and then opened it to look inside.

_This book is the property of the Half-Blood Prince._
She could have let out a scream of delight, were it not for the fact that the door had suddenly opened. Hermione quickly pressed the book to her chest and ducked down. She scrambled for her wand and Disillusioned herself, while pressing herself down and against the cupboard. The door clicked shut, and Hermione heard a single pair of footsteps approaching. A moment later, Draco Malfoy came into view, turning a corner around the nearest pile of junk, and making his way down another aisle of it. Hermione watched him stop not fifty feet from her, in front of an antique-looking cabinet—a Vanishing Cabinet.

He appeared pale and drawn, and despite having healed up in the Hospital Wing, he, quite frankly, looked ill. Yet, his expression was pulled into one of fierce concentration as he worked his wand over the Cabinet, before reaching into his robes and pulling out several bottles. He set them down on the ground, uncapped the lid of one, found a conveniently nearby paint brush on the ground, and began applying the contents of one bottle with care to the cracked door of the Vanishing Cabinet.

Hermione sat there, watching him work in silence. He used every bottle and his wand for each repair he was making. Several times, something failed to work the first try, and he would let out a curse. But Hermione now got to observe his resourcefulness first-hand as he worked diligently, putting his effort into the last, final repairs. What seemed like hours passed; finally, the boy stepped back to admire his work, and then with an expression of apprehension, pulled the door to the cabinet open wide, and stepped inside.

Hermione held her breath.

The door shut.

And not five minutes later, it opened again, Malfoy stumbling out, a look of utter delight on his face. He let out a whoop as he shut the cabinet door, pumping his fists in the air, both gleeful and relieved. But just as he seemed about to decide what to do next, the door to the Room of Requirement opened, and Malfoy froze in place. It was too late, though; his voice had carried, and whoever had just entered had no doubt heard him. Hermione prayed it wasn't Harry, and to her surprise, as she found out a moment later, it was not.

"Who's there?" asked the voice of Sybill Trelawney, looking uncertain as she stepped into the room. Malfoy was hidden behind one of the piles of junk, obscured from her view, but Hermione was in the perfect position to see both the Divination teacher and the blond Slytherin—and saw Malfoy quickly reach into his pockets. The room exploded into darkness just as Trelawney took another hesitant step forward.

Hermione suppressed a gasp of surprise as she went blind, but a withered hand appeared scant seconds later, bearing a candle that pushed the darkness away. It rushed past her, and there was a sudden shriek and a bang, before the door to the Room of Requirement flew open, and through the shifting mass of Peruvian Darkness Powder, Hermione could see the light form the corridor appear and disappear, interspersed with a shriek. She saw the Hand of Glory remain in place where it was for a moment or two, and then as though satisfied that the intruder had been taken care of, Malfoy began walking back in the direction of the cabinet.

Her vision slowly clearing further, Hermione was able to make out Malfoy standing self-importantly in front of the Vanishing Cabinet, hands on his hips, looking as though he were praising himself for a job well done. And then he stepped inside the Cabinet again, and disappeared.

Hermione got up quickly and left. This was it. Malfoy had made the deadline. As she shut the door behind her, she saw Harry rushing quickly down the hall, wearing an expression of determination on his face. Hermione pressed herself against the wall as he passed, and then made her way to Dumbledore's office. The ascent up the spiral staircase had never been more nerve-wracking; and
when she knocked on the door, the reply was immediate.

"Enter."

"Sir," Hermione said at once, without preamble, shutting the door quickly behind her. "Sir. Malfoy—he's done it."

"I already know, Hermione," Dumbledore said calmly, gazing out the window as the remains of the sun sparkled ruby-red as the rays shone their last before they sank into the lake. "I was rather hoping I would be able to find you before meeting Harry, but nevertheless, am glad you've come."

"Harry?" Hermione asked, bewildered.

"I have located one of Riddle's horcruxes," Dumbledore told her gently. "I have also promised Harry a chance to help me. But my absence will leave the school vulnerable and open, I'm afraid, and with the news that you were so eager to tell me—I'm afraid that tonight is the night."

Hermione's heart stopped.

"Now," Dumbledore said, turning his gaze on her. "Do you remember when I first entrusted Hogwarts to you four years ago?"

Hermione bowed her head. "And last year. Yes, sir."

"I am entrusting the care and protection of Hogwarts to you again, tonight, Hermione," Dumbledore said quietly. "You know what is to happen, and you alone know what is most important so that everyone may do their part. And then—one I am dead—I release you from this duty."

Hermione stared at him, and it seemed strange to her that as he spoke, a whisper of something very much like magic was tingling and sweeping across her skin, seeping in like a promise. She had not verbally said she would accept, and yet—it seemed that the magic already knew that she could not refuse.

"You are no longer playing your role as a student, Hermione," Dumbledore told her kindly. "While I am gone, I am placing you in charge of ensuring the students' protection."

His eyes flickered over her.

"Do I have your word that you will help Severus in his endeavor to spare young Malfoy's soul?"

Hermione hesitated.

"Yes, sir," she said, straightening.

As though this were what he had been waiting for all along, Dumbledore gave a slight nod, and made to move past her. He placed a wizened hand on her shoulder before he left.

"Thank you, Hermione."

Hermione stood there, reeling with something akin to shock and numbness long after Dumbledore had gone. The portraits in the room all stirred restlessly, not certain what to say. Hermione nevertheless collected herself, and with a final look at the Headmaster's Office, departed. As she left the office, she began Transfiguring her clothes. Her school robes, which she had originally Transfigured from her preferred adult ones, returned to their previous state of comfort. The jeans turned to dark slacks, and the jumper changed to simple white button-up blouse. By the time she had
ascended the stairs, she was pulling her hair back into a chignon to keep it out of her face, and as though the clothes had facilitated such a transformation, Hermione felt every inch of her thirty-something years. It was like having her skin back.

She quickly made her way down to the Entrance Hall and to the grounds, intent on catching hold of Tonks and the other Order members who had come.

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"Where's Hermione?" Harry demanded, as he skidded to a halt in front of Ron and Ginny.

"I dunno, she went off somewhere," Ron said, as Ginny responded, "The library."

Harry expelled a breath of frustration, but nevertheless, he quickly pulled out a pair of rolled-up socks, handing them to Ron. He had not seen much of Hermione lately, as she had been avoiding him—and, he knew, his stomach clenching uncomfortably at the thought, Ginny and Ron. They had not yet made up after their latest argument, but now that he was going with the Headmaster, that mattered little to him. He was sharing his Felix Felicis with his friends, and he wanted Hermione to be among them. But now that was moot.

"Thanks," Ron said, "but—erm—why do I need socks?"

"You need what's wrapped in them," Harry said, "it's Felix Felicis. Share it between yourselves, and Hermione if you see her."

Ron and Ginny both looked alarmed.

"Look, I heard Malfoy celebrating up in the Room of Requirement," Harry said, aware that the longer he remained her, the longer he would leave Dumbledore waiting for him. He shoved the Marauders' Map into Ginny's hands. "You've got to watch for him, and you've got to watch Snape, too. Use anyone else you can rustle up from the DA…"

He took another moment to explain where he was going and why—telling Ron to explain the rest to Ginny, as she had largely been left out of the loop to begin with—as he stuffed his Invisibility Cloak in his pocket, bade them good-bye, and flew out of the common room, through the portrait hole, and down the steps.

~o~O~o~

The quiet that followed that evening perturbed Hermione, who was on the alert for the smallest thing, but found nothing of concern. She stopped by Severus's office later late that night, hoping for one last chance to talk, and was startled to find Luna Lovegood standing outside it, looking quite unconcerned. She turned her eyes onto Hermione as she approached.

"Oh, hello, Hermione," Luna said quite cheerfully, completely unperturbed by her odd appearance. "Did you get the message?"

"I—what?" Hermione asked, bewildered.

"Harry's gone off with Professor Dumbledore—"

"Yes, I know," Hermione said, getting a sinking feeling in her stomach. What was going on?

"—and Ron and Ginny gathered up the rest of us, from the DA," Luna said, as though she had not been interrupted. "They've gone to stand guard at the Room of Requirement, and asked me to find
you to stand guard outside Professor Snape's office. Of course, I couldn't find you, so I thought I'd just wait here. I knew you'd show up sooner or later."

Hermione felt like groaning. Of course Harry had to get everyone else involved. And now that they were, there was no dissuading them.

"I—well, I came here to ask Professor Snape about our last homework assignment," she offered lamely.

"At a quarter to midnight?" Luna asked interestedly.

Hermione folded her arms across her chest.

"The Nargles made me do it," she said firmly.

There was a moment of silence, and then Luna seemed to accept this.

"Of course," she said, smiling. "Determined little buggers, aren't they? Well, if you want to wait with me, I'd very much enjoy that."

Hermione gazed at her mutely for a moment, and then with a sigh, leaned against the wall. For certain, while Luna was there, she would not be speaking to Severus tonight. Silence permeated the corridor, but as though Hermione's arrival had sparked some kind of cue, frantic footsteps suddenly began padding down the dungeon corridor. Seconds later, Filius's tiny form bobbed into view, as he sprinted in their direction.

"Death Eaters!" he cried. "Death Eaters in the castle!"

He almost knocked Luna over in his haste, bursting through the office door, and Hermione and Luna both peered inside as the tiny Charms professor rousted their Potions professor from his grading. Shouting from above suddenly caught their attention, and they only turned to peer back inside in time to see Filius slump to the ground, out cold. Severus was already at the door, and he froze in place upon seeing the both of them there. His eyes locked onto hers, scarcely taking in her appearance, and then he turned to Luna.

"Professor Flitwick collapsed," he said curtly, although there was a certain sense of urgency in his voice. "Take care of him while I go help fight."

Luna nodded and stepped back, letting him through, and then quickly slipped inside his office to see her Head of House. Hermione, however, tore after him, matching his sprint down the corridor.

"Who are you, tonight?" Severus asked, as the stopped at the heavy wooden door that led from the dungeons to the Entrance Hall.

Hermione looked him squarely in the eye. A moment passed between them.

"Your wife," she said shortly.

Severus gave a short nod, and without further preamble, they ascended into the world above, where the fighting now grew louder. Spells were flying every which way, Death Eaters lashing out at anyone without a care as to who got in the way, stone crumbling around them upon impact. She saw bodies slumped on the ground, familiar ones, and without bothering to check to see if they were still alive, she had her wand out and was blasting spells in the direction of the nearest Death Eater.

"Hermione!" Remus cried, ducking a jet of green light as she turned around in time to see it.
"Don't get distracted!" Hermione ordered, aiming her wand at the massive Death Eater standing at the base of the stairs, firing at will. "Stay on the alert! Keep fighting!"

It was confusion, pandemonium. Several Death Eaters were climbing up the staircase, no doubt following Malfoy. Neville managed to push himself off the ground, from where he had fallen, and tried to charge on up after him, but was thrown back. A barrier blocked his way, and as though he had been struck, he flew backwards and hit the ground. Ginny ducked another fatal hex thrown by the enormous Death Eater Hermione could only begin to suspect was Rowle, and out of the corner of her eye, she saw Severus rushing toward the stairs. The barrier let him through; seconds later, Remus, who had tried to follow him, was also thrown back, landing on the ground hard as it threw him back with force.

Severus disappeared from view, and Hermione's heart lurched.

This is it...

The only Death Eater still behind appeared to be the one maintaining the barrier, and Hermione saw his eyes land on her. He turned his attention on her, sending spell after spell in her direction, and it was all Hermione could do to dodge. She returned the attacks with equal fervor, ducking the Unforgivables and blocking the ones she could before sending back spells that missed Rowle not so much by an inch as by a hair.

The dueling grew intense, as Hermione fought to keep Rowle at bay while also trying to get Ginny and Neville out of there.

"No!" Ginny cried, when Hermione ordered her to leave. "I don't care what you say—I'm still fighting—Tonks, look out!" she said, as the Auror wheeled in time to dodge a jet of red light.

Deciding it was best to let them stay than distract them, Hermione threw herself in front of them both, preferring to be a shield if she could. Neither side was gaining ground, but Hermione was ready to step forward with an Unforgivable when the Death Eater gave her an opening, aiming his wand at the ceiling.

Tonks threw up a shield in time to break the fall of a large chunk of stone as what appeared to be half the ceiling caved in; the Death Eater was thrown backwards as Hermione's hex and a piece of rock the size of her head knocked him askew. The barrier disappeared, and for a moment, it seemed as though it was over—and then the dust cleared, and Hermione saw a familiar figure standing at the foot of the ruined steps, Malfoy at his side.

"Stop!" Hermione said, as Ginny, Tonks, and Remus all drew their wands. "It's Professor Snape—don't hex them!"

Their wands lowered, and without so much as a thank-you, Severus grabbed Malfoy's wrist and yanked the startled boy forward. They ran past them, and a moment later, the same entourage of Death Eaters that had gone up earlier was tearing down the stairs, with Fenrir Greyback in the lead. They lunged in the direction of the five of them who had been fighting, and Hermione raised her wand in ready retaliation.

"It's over!" Hermione craned her neck back to see Severus standing at the doorway, addressing the Death Eaters, who had begun fighting anew. It was with visible reluctance that the remaining Death Eaters dispersed, sending off hexes as they went. Fenrir Greyback gave her a last, snarling look and tore away, disappearing into the courtyard beyond. A moment later, and to her horror, a familiar figure barreled past her, hot on the two Slytherins' heels.
"Harry!" Hermione screamed. She tore herself away from the group, where Tonks had taken down another Death Eater, and it looked as though Ginny, Neville, and Remus all had everything in hand — "Harry!"

She sprinted after Harry, struggling to keep her balance as the cobblestones, slick with blood, threatened to send her to her knees. Outside, it was chaos; spells were flying in every which direction, and a moment later, Hagrid's house became illuminated with red just before it exploded in flames. Yet, Hermione's focus was entirely on Harry, as she sprinted after him, trying to stop him from being killed —

"Stupefy!" Harry roared.

The jet of light barely missed its target, who skidded to a halt and turned around long enough to face his pursuer, before shouting, "Run, Draco!" His blond companion stumbled forward the first few feet, and then ran off into the darkness to the looming gates of Hogwarts, where he would be able to Apparate away. Hermione was still yards behind Harry, who she saw raise his wand at the same time as Severus —

Pounding footsteps from behind caused her to turn around in time to see Rowle tearing down the ground behind her, and she whipped around, wand lancing through the air, in time to surprise him. The enormous Death Eater absorbed a jet of blue light, and then was thrown back several feet, skidding to the ground. He did not get up immediately, though he let out a piteous groan.

Hermione spared him no further thought, but ran after Harry, stopping level with him.

"No Unforgivable Curses from you, Potter!" Severus shouted, knocking Harry off balance and sending him sprawling as he attempted to cast the Cruciatus. His expression looked terrible in the dancing firelight, the cruel chaos that was sweeping all of Hogwarts up into its doom, his face merciless and sneering. "You haven't got the nerve or the ability —"

"Incar —"

"Harry, let him go!" Hermione cried, as Severus deflected the spell with a lazy flick of his wand. "We can't beat —"

"Fight back!" Harry screamed, ignoring Hermione. "Fight back, you cowardly —!"

"Coward, did you call me, Potter?" Severus shouted, rage apparent on his face. "Your father would never attack me unless it was four on one, what would you call him, I wonder?"

"Stupe —"

A sudden, searing pain caught Hermione off guard, and she felt the world around her spin. Her knees hit the ground, and the ringing in her ears ceased in time for her to hear Severus call, "Blocked again and again until you learn to keep your mouth shut and your mind closed, Potter!"

"What did you do to her?" Harry's bellow rang through her ears. She weakly pushed herself off the ground, vaguely realizing that it was Severus who had hexed her. A moment later, she realized why, as the enormous Death Eater she had taken down earlier ignored her defeated form in favor of coming up behind Harry, who got the full blow to the face, causing him to hit the ground. She saw the Death Eater point his wand at Harry, his lips forming the words "Cruc —"

"No!" Hermione struggled to get to her knees, as Severus's wand flicked in her direction, and at once, the pain disappeared. It was with alarming alacrity that the cares and concerns of the world melted away, disappearing in a rolling fog of content, and she heard her husband's deep voice
commanding her, with silky, yet soothing authoritativeness, "Stay on the ground, Hermione, stay on the ground—"

She obeyed, dazed.

"—you forgotten our orders?" Severus was addressing Rowle, now, instead of her. "Potter belongs to the Dark Lord—we are to leave him! Go! Go!"

The Imperius kept her glued to the ground, her eyes closed, with all the appearance of being knocked out. She had the vague, instinctive sense to fight it, but the spell's strength and insistence seemed to weaken the will to do so. It wasn't that she was incapable of fighting—after her training with Moody and Kingsley, she was perfectly skilled at it.

It was the fact that it was Severus who had cast the spell on her.

"You dare use my own spells against me, Potter?" Severus's rage permeated the thick fog of the Imperius. "It was I, who invented them— I, the Half-Blood Prince! And you'd turn my inventions on me, like your filthy father, would you?" He was goading Harry—goading him, it seemed, for all he was worth. "I don't think so… No!" There was a bang, and Hermione vaguely realized that he must have hexed Harry, for she heard her godson's yelp of pain.

"Kill me, then," she heard Harry panting in the grass beside her. "Kill me, like you killed him, you coward—"

In the distance, Fang yelped with pain and fear, and Hermione could hear Hagrid tearing through the flaming walls of his cabin, trying to get at his dog.

"DON'T CALL ME COWARD!"

There was the muffled sound of impact, Hermione's eyes suddenly flew open as the spell faltered for a moment, in time to see Harry get thrown backwards, and in time to see something enormous descending upon them, hailed by a rush of angry wings—

"Buckbeak, no!" Hermione screamed hoarsely, as she watched the hippogriff bearing down on Severus, his claws raking the air, and then tearing at him. He came away with nothing more than the black tatters of shredded sleeves, his prey no worse than scratched up. To Hermione's surprise, he swept upward and obeyed, circling overhead and letting out a terrible, screeching cry. This gave Severus the chance he needed to hold the enraged hippogriff at wand length, as he staggered to his feet.

To Hermione's confusion, he did not turn and flee immediately. He crossed the grass, passing just short of Harry, and coming to a stop directly in front of her. With a last, wary glance at the half-bird, half-horse, he knelt down next to her, cupping her cheek, tilting her head up to look directly at him. A spark of connection, and Hermione saw, through his eyes, him looking down at her, and through her eyes, he saw her looking up at him—

Those black, depthless eyes said, I love you.

And she replied, in no uncertain terms, I love you, too.

And then Hermione let out a raspy croak of warning, Severus pulling away quickly as the hippogriff suddenly swooped down at them again. A fired-off hex sent the beast swerving away, and the next moment, Severus was running toward the gates, the angry hippogriff clawing and screeching at his heels. The Imperius curse was back in full force now, pinning her to the ground, and as her eyes closed, she felt a dazed, confused sense of relief. Severus had gotten away.
It was the last thing she remembered, before the silky strings of the Imperius closed her eyes, bidding her to sleep, even as a hand grabbed her shoulder, frantically trying to shake her awake.

"Hermione," she heard Harry say, distantly. "Hermione, wake up! Hermione…"

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Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Thirty-Nine

Enormous thanks goes out to my wonderful beta, SSB. I will try to get the next chapters tweaked and sent to you by the end of this week. Merry Christmas, and as always, I am extremely grateful for all the valuable work you put into helping me make this as polished as possible.

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own. Not even Santa's magic will miraculously make it mine.

Please review!

Hermione buried her face deeper into the pillow, enjoying its softness. She felt safe, warm, comfortable, and as though from a great and unimportant distance, that she could hear people talking. The fog of the Imperius still roiled lazily around her, keeping her in a state of perpetual content and bemused confusion, but she still heard.

"Snape killed Dumbledore," she heard Harry say, and it sounded from his tone as though this were not the first time he had said it.

"Snape," she heard Minerva said weakly. "We all wondered… but he trusted… she trusted… always…"

Hermione heard the scrape of a chair, as the Transfiguration teacher took a seat.

"Snape," she repeated, as though she were trying to understand the very words. "I can't believe it."

"Snape was a highly accomplished Occlumens," Remus said, his voice uncharacteristically harsh to Hermione's ears. "We always knew that…"

Hermione let out a sigh, blocking out the conversation for a bit. For some reason, they seemed unimportant compared to the otherwise soothing command to sleep and, while she could, find some peace and rest… Yet, something in her slowly struggled against this, and the discussion filtered back into her awareness.

"He always hinted that he had an ironclad reason for trusting Snape," Minerva muttered, sounding vaguely tearful. She sniffled. "I mean . . . With Snape's history ... Of course people were bound to wonder… But Dumbledore told me explicitly that Snape's repentance was absolutely genuine—wouldn't hear a word against him! And his wife… we always trusted her, we had no reason not to, and she obviously trusted him… Dumbledore did too, you know…"

"Wait," Harry said at once, his voice breaking through the fog with a loud, almost annoying insistence. Hermione's brow scrunched in irritation; to have him disturb the peacefulness of this… soothing, silky fog… was borderline obnoxious. "Snape was married?"

"Not was," Remus said. "Is."

"My godmother, right?"

"Harry," Hermione heard Ginny say, sounding both disturbed and confused, "what are you talking about?"

It was Remus who answered.
"The Professor… yes."

"Where is she now?" Harry demanded.

Something like a forceful reprimand pulled Hermione away from the conversation. It was the smooth voice in the back of her mind, telling her, "Don’t pay attention… rest, now…"

"…trust me, Harry, she wasn’t helping Snape tonight…"

Ignore them…

"Fine," Harry said, sounding frustrated, "but that still doesn’t explain what he did to Hermione!"

"Wait," Remus said, and there was a definite note of alarm in his voice. "You didn't say he'd done anything to Hermione… you just brought her in, and then told us what Snape had done—"

Ignore them, Severus's voice said, pulling her from the conversation with more insistence.

No, Hermione found herself arguing back. I have to listen.

"He hexed her while we were on the grounds, and just before he left, he lifted up her head and made her look at him," Harry said, sounding stubborn. "I dunno—maybe he performed Legilimency on her or something—"

"Did she react?" Remus asked, intently.

"When Buckbeak tried attacking again—"

You are hurt. Right now, you will rest. There will be plenty of time to ask and listen later.

As though to convince her further, Hermione felt the pangs of soreness on her body, and reluctantly capitulated. Had it been anyone else’s voice, she would have fought hard; but here, tired and dazed as she was, the best thing seemed to be to listen. Her breathing evened out; her body relaxed.

She was asleep again in minutes.

When she awoke, hours later under the darkness of the night, it was to find Remus sleeping in the chair next to her, Tonks’ head resting peacefully on his shoulder. The two were sound asleep. In the next bed, was Bill Weasley, with Fleur at his side, her head tipped forward in sleep. Everyone else had apparently left, but now Hermione was wide awake and fully alert.

Her sudden movements must have made enough noise, because instantly, Remus and Tonks both snapped up, jolting to awareness and staring at her, their eyes concerned but wary. The clouding fog of the Imperius, with sinful, soothing richness like dark chocolate, smoothly ordered her not to move.

"Hermione?" Remus said quietly, sitting up straighter in his chair.

Hermione did not respond. She did startle, however, when Tonk's wand appeared out of nowhere, jolting to awareness and staring at her, their eyes concerned but wary. The clouding fog of the Imperius, with sinful, soothing richness like dark chocolate, smoothly ordered her not to move.

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"Dumbledore," she croaked. "Is Dumbledore dead?"

"Yes," Remus said, summoning a glass of water for her and pressing it to her lips. Hermione took it in gratefully. "Which leaves us in a bit of a bind, Hermione."

She took another gulp of water. "Why?" she rasped.

Remus and Tonks looked at each other, and Tonks shook her head.

"He Imperiused her, Remus," she said, as though that explained it all. "He wouldn't have needed her to help him voluntarily if he hadn't Imperiused her. And she did help us fight."

"But we still don't know where her actions end and Snape's Imperius begins," Remus said calmly, reasonably.

"I don't know," Tonks said honestly, coming around to Hermione other side and peering into her eyes. "I can't make heads or tails of it. She was fighting alongside us, which is what I would expect of her in any case, but then she told us to stop when Snape and Malfy came through—"

"But you would have stopped regardless, Tonks," Remus reminded her. "We thought Snape was an ally then."

"Right, but after that, I don't know where to even begin to guess. She tore after him when Harry went after Snape and Malfy, Harry said there were several times when he could have done it, when they were alone on the grounds—"

"But we don't know for sure," Remus said quietly. Now he turned to Hermione.

"Hermione," he said, his tone gentle but firm. "We need you to tell us what your last memory was concerning the events of last night."

Hermione stared at him blankly, mind whirring. How much to take responsibility for? After a moment, she decided upon honesty—at least, concerning when she had been Imperiused.

"I remember pain," she whispered truthfully. "I—I remember hitting the ground, everything spinning—and then… it just disappeared. That's all." She let out a shaky breath. "I can't believe… I can't believe he did that. That he would Imperius me..."

Remus nodded. And then the tension suddenly broke, and he pulled Hermione into a hug, Tonks joining in, and the three commiserated in comfort for a moment, grateful that they were still on the same side, before they broke apart.

"Once you're feeling better, we'll talk about what happens after," Remus said, flicking his wand, and summoning a waiting tray of food. Hermione's belly rumbled with agreement at this. "Right now, the Order's figuring out what to do."

Hermione swallowed. "We'll need to reconvene, all of us," she said. "Harry's seventeenth birthday is coming up—after Dumbledore's funeral, that should be our foremost concern."

"We should send him directly to the Burrow," Tonks began.

"No," Hermione said at once. "Dumbledore—Dumbledore always said Harry needed to return to his aunt and uncle's, at least once a year, for Lily's protection to work."

"But the magic ends after he turns seventeen," Remus said quietly. "What's two months of protection
worth, if it means we'll have to break him out of there with Death Eaters on our tail?"

"Dumbledore always insisted," Hermione said firmly. "He didn't always tell us the reasons for it, but he was insistent that Harry always return. I don't—I don't know how important it is, but I think we should at least take into consideration that Dumbledore might have known more about this protection than we do."

Remus and Tonks both nodded in understanding.

"Right now, I don't think the Order's prepared to defend against an onslaught of Death Eaters," Hermione added. "If he's got two months of protection left, then let's see if we can't use it to buy the time we need to make wherever we send him next as safe as possible."

She reached for the tray, prepared to take a bite, and then paused, lowering her fork.

"You know, Remus," she said at last, "I was waiting for a chance to talk to you, but it seems like it's not necessary anymore."

Remus looked baffled. "Why?"

"Because it looks like one way or another, you and Tonks have worked things out."

Tonks grinned widely at her, and came back around the bed to wrap her arms around Remus, who seemed to be at loss for words.

"It's that obvious, huh?" she said, her hair turning bubblegum pink.

~o~O~o~

Hermione stared at the inside of the kitchen of the Burrow, leaning against the counter, arms folded across her chest, as she waited. Dumbledore's funeral had ended hours ago, and the last evening rays of light were just beginning to sink past the horizon, washing everything in Gryffindor colors. Selenius was upstairs now, packing the last few things he would need, before his mother took him away once again.

Molly seemed both tearful and relieved. On one hand, she was still mourning Dumbledore's death, and was scared sick to death about what would happen to them all. On the other hand, she was glad, at least, that Hermione had other plans for Selenius, because she was genuinely worried about the boy's safety. In a tiny house like this, there was no place to hide. Everyone would be squeezed together even without him.

She had packed Selenius a plate of home-made fudge to take with him, and was now attempting to assuage Hermione's fears concerning the reaction of the rest of the Order.

"You couldn't have known what he would do," she told Hermione, who had not gone back to wearing school robes, and looked odd—aged beyond her years. "From the sounds of it, you were fighting alongside everyone else. You don't have anything to worry about, dear…"

Hermione swallowed at last.

"But Selenius," she said. "The Order is all very well, Molly. I can handle a few suspicious wizards. But what do I tell Selenius?"

Molly froze, looking uncertain.
"I don't know," she confessed.

Hermione shook her head, in time to hear Selenius's footsteps come pounding down the stairs.

"Neither do I," she said.

Selenius entered the kitchen, knapsack over one shoulder, and wearing a knitted jumper that Molly had made for him, green with a large, golden 'S' on the front. His slacks looked as though they had been subject to one too many Repairing Spells, and Hermione estimated he had grown another two or three inches. Molly had thankfully kept his hair in shape, not allowing it to grow any longer than his shoulders, and it seemed that Selenius had allowed her to fuss over him, because when Molly came to say good-bye, there were no protests or attempts to pull away. In fact, he looked rather disappointed that he was leaving. It was at comforting to Hermione to know that he had been well cared for at the Burrow.

"Take care, now…" Molly said, packing the home-made fudge in his knapsack. "Don't give your mother too much trouble, dear…"

Hermione raised an eyebrow at this. "What kind of trouble did you cause, Selenius?"

Her son did an exceptional job at not looking guilty. "Nothing."

"He hexed all the chickens green, is what he did," Molly said with a huff, but there was no heat behind his words. "But don't worry, I've had worse from Fred and George, trust me."

Hermione laughed weakly at this. "In that case, I don't want to know." She hugged the other woman. "I'll stop by again later, Molly. I know you have to go to pick Ron up from the train, soon, but just let me know when the next Order meeting is…"

"Tomorrow, I think," Molly said, with a sniffle. "You can stay with us for the rest of the summer, when you're ready—no one will find that suspicious."

"Thank you, Molly."

With a final good-bye, Hermione and Selenius walked outside. She grasped her son's hand, and with barely a warning, Disapparated the both of them away. Dobby was waiting for them just outside the door to Tine Cottage, where they reappeared. Hermione took a moment to introduce the both of them, and then laid down the rules.

"You'll be staying here for most of the summer," she told Selenius. "Your father and I won't be around very much, but while we're gone, Dobby is in charge…"

"Mum," Selenius said quietly. "Where's Dad?"

"He's busy," Hermione said evasively.

"I heard Mrs. Weasley talking to Mr. Weasley," Selenius said, looking slightly annoyed that she was brushing his question off. "They were talking about something—something about Dad and Headmaster Dumbledore." He gave his mother a narrow look. "He killed someone, Mum. What happened?"

Dobby's ears flattened at this. Hermione swallowed, and then shook her head.

"I can't tell you about it now," she said, trying to sound regretful.
Selenius looked sullen and displeased as they walked inside. Once he set his knapsack down, he turned to look at his mother.

"Fine," he said shortly. "I just want ask, though, if there's ever going to be a time when I'm not always hiding and moving around. When we can be a normal family."

Hermione sat down in one of the chairs, looking defeated.

"I don't know," she said softly.

Without another word, without even taking his pack up with him, Selenius got up and left. Hermione heard his heavy footfalls on the stairs, Dobby's cringing with every step, and then there was the audible sound of a door opening and shutting. The house elf, still wearing all number of ridiculously mismatched socks, hats, and tea cozy's, looked up at her as though unsure of what to do.

"He's just tired," Hermione told him, rubbing her temple, before resting her head on the kitchen table. "We all are."

~o~O~o~

Hermione appeared in front of Grimmauld Place. No one else had touched it yet. Not even Mad-Eye had come yet, although Hermione knew he most likely planned to. She slipped inside quickly before anyone could notice her, and shut the door behind her. She had come here after Apparating to several places around Muggle London, to ensure that she had not been followed—although given she had come from Tine Cottage, she was fairly certain there had been no one to follow her to begin with.

The house was silent, empty. Even the portrait of Mrs. Black was quiet, although Hermione knew that nothing would shut up the old harridan once she got going, and thus she did her absolute best to be quiet as she crossed the kitchen and climbed the stairs. The floors above her creaked in warning, and Hermione froze—and then, a moment later, her ring burned and Hermione looked down.

I am at Grimmauld Place. Are you?

Yes, she responded, tapping her wand against it. In the room with that horrid tapestry in it.

Duly noted. And then the words vanished.

Footsteps fell heavier now, and Hermione looked up in time to see the familiar face of her husband as he descended the stairs. His face looked drawn and wary, his eyes red from crying. He took in Hermione's appearance, and then came down the last few steps and crossed over to her, pulling her into his arms. They embraced, and then pulled away for a proper look.

Before Hermione could ask, Severus pressed a piece of torn parchment into her hands, and she unfolded it. A moment later, she tucked it into the nearest pocket of her husband's robes and sniffled, burying her face in his chest and gripping the folds of his robes in her hands.

"Even after all these years, I still can't believe they're gone," she said, tears rolling down her cheeks. They soaked into the wool of Severus's robes, staining them, but neither of them seemed to care.

"Here one day, gone the next… with nothing but an imprint of them left behind, after all they've said and done…"

She saw Severus's legs buckle out from underneath them, and then they both slid to the floor, leaning against the wall for support as they cried. It was the first chance they had to completely abandon the trappings of their roles, and fall into each other for comfort, and the first time since Dumbledore had
died that they could finally let go and let the wash of misery that had built up release itself in a kind of catharsis. The pain of losing James and Sirius, and now Dumbledore, wound itself poisonously through Hermione's heart, but having Severus's arms around her were the greatest comfort she knew to alleviate it.

Later, tired and emotionally drained, she lifted her head to look at him.

"What now?" she asked quietly.

Severus swallowed.

"The Dark Lord is planning to attack Potter as soon as he leaves the protection of his relatives' house," he said hoarsely. "He assigned me as Headmaster; he is planning to leave Hogwarts to the mercy of myself and the Carrows. Dumbledore—Dumbledore's portrait told me to give the Dark Lord the correct date of Potter's departure, but he has a plan to place decoys so that Potter will get away…"

"The Order doesn't know when they're going to move Harry," Hermione said quietly. "We're going to figure that out tomorrow. We're going to figure a lot of things out tomorrow, but for now, tell—tell the Dark Lord that the Order doesn't plan to move Harry any later than they day before his birthday. Tell him it's likely to be around then." She hesitated. "I'm not sure decoys are a good idea. That places everyone at too much risk."

"You have a better suggestion, I hope?"

Hermione closed her eyes, thinking. "The Floo is being monitored, and any Portkeys that go in and out of Privet Drive will give the Ministry a publicly acceptable cause to arrest us all—it will give Scrimgeour something to hold over us. We can't risk that." She paused. "And you can't Floo in and out of Privet Drive, which means the only option left would be Apparition."

"Potter is underage," Severus said flatly. "Even if someone takes him in side-along Apparition, they'll still be able to trace him. Waiting for Potter to Apparate the second he comes of age would be suicide."

"But if we Apparated out of there, to a Wizarding residence—like here, perhaps—and then Portkeyed from there to the Burrow…"

"The Ministry is keeping careful watch on all Order residences, including Grimmauld Place, though they cannot detect anything beyond the Floo network and magical signatures," Severus told her brusquely. "Normal means of transportation are being monitored, and will either get Potter killed or the lot of you arrested, which is likely just as bad, given that the Ministry is so heavily infiltrated. Albus's decoy plan is the only one that will keep you under the radar, and possibly get Potter to safety."

Hermione moaned. "Why did I insist that Harry return to Privet Drive? That was so stupid—"

"Yes, it was."

"I only insisted on it because Albus would have," Hermione said, frustrated. "I knew he must have had a good reason for it…"

"It still doesn't change the fact that Potter is now in a more vulnerable position than ever before."

"Fine," Hermione said. "Fine. We'll use decoys. It's best if the idea comes from someone other than myself—I'm already under enough scrutiny as it is."
"I'll take care of it," Severus said. Hermione felt his arms around her pull tighter. "Anything else? Now that Albus is dead, what does Potter plan to do?"

Hermione took in a deep breath. "I can't tell you everything, but all I can say is that Harry has an idea of how to defeat the Dark Lord, and I don't think he even entertains the idea that we might all just go back to Hogwarts for another year. We're probably going to be doing quite a bit of hunting for some things, and only Harry has a real idea about where they are."

"So you'll be going with Potter, then?" Severus asked quietly.

"Most likely, yes," Hermione said.

They sat there in the darkness of the room, and discussed a number of other things, but Hermione did not tell him about Selenius. When they parted that evening, she did not tell him that his son knew he was a murderer, and she did not tell him that Selenius was upset with her.

Because that was the last thing she needed her spy to be worried about, now.

~o~O~o~

The following day, the details had all been worked out, scrutinized, planned, and reworked to a flawless 'T'. Thanks to Mundungus's seemingly brilliant suggestion, there would be not one but seven Harry Potters leaving Privet Drive on the twenty-seventh of July, each with their own guard. Per Hermione's suggestion, the real Harry would be riding with Hagrid.

"No one would suspect it," she pointed out. "The Dark Lord would be expecting Harry to be under the wing of one of our top Aurors, not someone who he hardly considers a wizard. Hagrid is not exactly known for his magical prowess, and that's something that Tom Riddle will overlook in his arrogance. It's our best bet. And," she added, with a note of finality, "I trust Hagrid. If anyone can protect Harry, it's him."

Hagrid had looked torn between being mildly offended and mightily proud at her words.

The month was spent brewing Polyjuice Potion; Hermione was in charge of that, too. She set up a temporary lab at Tine Cottage, and attended the brewing at all the odd hours required. Selenius seemed to withdraw from her, merely entering the kitchen when he heard his mother get up so that he could watch her brew. He was sullen and bored, and knew he was being kept out of the loop, and wanted in—something which Hermione could not give him. He was not allowed outside beyond the mailbox, and was in effect as much of a prisoner as Sirius had once been. Suffice to say, he was not happy. His only consolation was that his mother still had the authority to homeschool him, and thus continued to let him expend energy in practicing magic.

Hermione soon discovered where all of her copies of the Daily Prophet were disappearing to. They were vanishing from the kitchen table, and when she knocked on Selenius's door at lunch one evening, when the Polyjuice Potion was nearly finished, she found him hastily stuffing a copy under his bed. To his surprise, however, she was not at all upset—at least, not visibly. She was not angry. She did not take him to task for stealing her papers and reading them. She merely left his lunch on the desk, looking worn and resigned.

Remus dropped by Tine Cottage the evening the Polyjuice was scheduled to be finished. He and Tonks had married in quiet, private ceremony, which Hermione had been present for, and after which she brought some cake back for Selenius. It was clear to her that Tonks and Remus were so deeply in love that they might fall into each other's eyes at any moment, and half the Order had been present for the quiet ceremony, but there was no explaining Selenius's presence to a group that small.
Selenius had tackled Remus into a hug upon arrival, grateful to have his uncle there, but the minute Hermione came into the room to announce that dinner was ready, the cold, sullen reception he gave her had Remus ask Hermione if she could wait a few minutes while he took Selenius aside. Hermione did not listen in on their conversation, but when Selenius came into the kitchen a few minutes later, he seemed less resentful and far more thoughtful. Remus must have talked some sort of sense into him, because though Selenius was still upset that Hermione was keeping him in the dark about his father, he seemed to be making more of an effort to be helpful—which Hermione certainly appreciated, because it was nerve-wracking and difficult work to do most of the administrative organizing for the Order while also looking after a school-aged son.

The fact that Dobby was there was also a great help; Hermione had hired the elf to help for three sickles a week, and he kept the house clean and presentable, taking care of chores so that Hermione could put her mind to other things. And, when she was extremely busy, he prepared meals for both Hermione and Selenius. Selenius seemed to have gotten on Dobby's good side from the start, because not only did the two seem to get along surprisingly well, Dobby also had a new pair of socks to add to his psychedelic collection. Dobby was really the only company Selenius had, other than his mother, who Hermione admitted was not much company right now at all—which perhaps explained how the elf came to become such a quick learner at chess.

Crookshanks resided at Tine Cottage now. He and Selenius had at first not quite gotten along; there had been a little spat involving Selenius waking up in the middle of the night spluttering with outrage when the cat had tried to climb onto him, and had accidentally stuck his paw in Selenius's mouth. Now the two got along, with the half-kneazle sleeping at the foot of the bed, and Selenius inviting him to sit on his lap when he was in a good mood. Other than companionship, there was another very good reason Hermione had brought Crookshanks; he had good instincts and could tell when someone was untrustworthy. Whether her son knew this or not, she expected Crookshanks to be a valuable asset in protecting him.

If there was anything Hermione was most grateful for, however, it was the fact that Dobby kept the house well-stocked with food. It was to the elf's greatest—and for Hermione, irritating—delight that she was too drained these days to argue with him when he insisted on paying for food out of his own wages.

"Dobby is a house-elf, and Dobby likes being paid," Dobby told her the one evening she had mustered up the energy to protest. "But Dobby is liking getting paid because it means money to spend, Miss… and Dobby likes spending money."

There was no arguing with the elf. She would have to console herself with the fact that he was even accepting payment in the first place. Otherwise, he would have asked for nothing more than a ball of knitting yarn a week or a new hat.

Hermione kept in touch with Severus through their rings. She was his informant, his link to the Order's information so that he could relay it to the Dark Lord. The trick to remaining in Voldemort's good graces was to give accurate information that they could afford to give; Death Eaters were already watching Privet Drive. If Harry tried to leave even without them knowing the exact date, they would be on him in an instant. There was little advantage to keeping the date a secret compared to the great gains it gave her husband.

When the Order got together at the Burrow a week before Harry was due to be moved, Hermione was outraged when Mad-Eye stood up and said that he did not think Hermione should come along.

"She's our one solid link to You-Know-Who's camp," the grizzled old Auror had growled, his wooden peg leg clunking as he got to his feet. "She's a damn sight more useful alive and with a
chance of getting to her husband than dead because a Death Eater decided to take a shot at killing Potter."

Hermione had slammed her hand on the table.

"I came up with this plan!" she snapped. "We're going through with it because I suggested it! I'm not about to stand back and let everyone else take the risk!"

"That's precisely why we can't let you go!" Moody had roared back at her. It was a mark of Hermione's deeply-ingrained training that she did not flinch as the man's voice raised in volume. "You don't realize how important you are to the Order, Snape! Albus came up with all the good plans, the big ones, but you were the one who kept everything running smoothly instead of falling apart while he plotted!" He slammed his fist down on the table in turn, now level with Hermione, who was fuming. "Albus once told me that he left you in charge of Hogwarts in his absence—for nearly five years! Now you've taken over the role as the Order's main strategist and administrator, and if you get your fool neck snapped being a bloody Gryffindor, we won't have anyone to replace you with!"

Hermione froze, staring at him in disbelief. Mad-Eye's magical eye whirled in its socket, and then locked onto her.

"That's right, Snape. When Albus died, you were the one who said we needed to reconvene. Not next week. Not next month. Immediately. You were the one who had Lupin and Tonks send us all a message to get Potter back to Privet Drive instead of the Burrow. You were the one who suggested we use Mundungus's suggestion of multiple Potters, all Polyjuiced. And," he added, now lowering his voice dangerously, "you've got someone else that needs protecting, don't you? There's no point in getting yourself killed if we can find a replacement for the job."

Hermione was petrified now, her eyes locked onto her old mentor, not really seeing him as her mind whirred frantically. She needed to be there; she couldn't let everyone else take the risk. And yet, there was Selenius to consider. But Severus was also going to be there on this hunt; with her job as his handler, what was she supposed to do? Stay out of the way, or stay there for damage control? And truth to be told, even if she did go along, what would she do? Neither of them could break character.

"Sometimes, Snape, I suspect that you knew Albus better than the rest of us," Mad-Eye grunted, slowly straightening up. "You were just as close to him as your Death Eater of a husband until the day he died—although you're the one who didn't betray him. Snape still has all of Albus's secrets, whatever he might have told him. So do you. Albus kept things close to the vest, but he was still too trusting. That's why we need you, Mrs. Snape."

Hermione inhaled sharply, trying to center herself. Moody was right. As much as she hated it, he was right. Her head suddenly snapped up at him, as another thought struck her—how did Moody know about Selenius? She had never told him—never—

His magical eye rotated slowly in its socket, and it hit her. Of course. He could see through walls. No doubt he had caught glimpses of Selenius, one way or another. She would not have put it past the Auror to inquire to Albus about the presence of another child in Grimmauld Place. No doubt, Albus would have told him—and entreated him to keep it secret. For that much, Hermione was grateful. Moody had no grudge against her. All he was doing was reminding her of who stood to lose if she failed to return.

She looked at him squarely.
"Fine," she said shortly. "Who will be my replacement?"

"There won't be one," Moody said evenly. "We'll add a final twist to your plan—one person leaves without appearing to take a Potter back with them. The Dark Lord will think Potter is Disillusioned or otherwise hidden with them." He narrowed his one real eye at her. "Shacklebolt has already agreed to do it."

Hermione looked up at her other mentor in alarm, who merely gave her a warm, reassuring smile.

~o~O~o~

Hermione was shocked when, two days before Harry was to be moved, Severus appeared at the door of Tine Cottage. She pulled the door open in surprise, and Severus pushed through and shut the door quickly behind him. She heard the lock click.

"We need to talk," he said in a low voice.

Almost immediately, Selenius's footsteps could be heard descending the stairs, no doubt eagerly hoping Remus had dropped by for a visit. Crookshanks, who had been resting in front of the hearth, got up and slunk out of the room. Hermione and Severus both turned around in time to see him come skidding to a halt at the doorway, where he seemed to look at his father with great confusion, as though uncertain that he was actually there. For a moment, he looked as though he was ready to turn back and go upstairs, but Severus extended a hand toward him.

Hermione had not told him about Selenius's behavior, or that he knew that his father had, for all purposes and appearances, murdered the Headmaster; as far as Severus was aware, nothing had changed between himself and his son. She half-expected an outburst, or for Selenius to retreat regardless. When her son hesitated for a moment, and then flew into the kitchen and tackled his father in a hug, Hermione could not help but breathe in an enormous sigh of relief.

Side-by-side, it was clear more than ever that Selenius had grown. At twelve, just a month shy of thirteen, the top of his head finally reached Severus's chest. And his mother would soon be in competition with him for the tallest in the house, when Severus was not home. Severus wrapped an arm around his shoulder in a quasi-embrace of greeting, mussing his son's wavy hair in a show of affection. Selenius responded by treating his father to a hug that could have passed for an attempted strangulation, and then pulled away.

"You're back," he exclaimed. "I thought you weren't coming back."

Severus scowled at him. "Whatever made you think that?"

Selenius opened his mouth as though to speak, and then quickly shut it, suddenly refusing to make eye contact with anything but the floor.

"He knows," Hermione said tiredly, welcoming her husband home with a kiss on the cheek before returning to the table to put together the notes she had been working on—notes which primarily consisted of ensuring that the routes each Potter doppelganger was taking were as safe and direct as possible. "About Albus, I mean. He knows." He gave Severus a pained look. "And he's not... happy."

Severus looked down sharply at his son, who was trying very hard not to scuff at the floor with his foot, as he was wont to do when put in an uncomfortable situation.

"I thought Mum was mad at you," he mumbled, his voice barely audible, "and no one would tell me anything about what's going on. I'm trapped here with nothing to do, and I don't have a damn thing
to look forward to."

It was a mark of how weary Hermione was that she did not protest at Selenius's language.

"And," he added, raising his eyes to finally look up at his father, "I still don't understand why you killed Headmaster Dumbledore. If… I mean… if that's true."

The last bit was said with uncertainty, and met with silence. Hermione and Severus exchanged looks, and then Severus's mouth pursed into a thin line as he removed his traveling cloak and hung it up on the peg by the door, and then pulled out a chair for himself at the table before motioning to one next to him.

"Sit down," he said imperiously.

Selenius obeyed, plunking onto the seat and scooting closer toward the table while angling his chair so that he was facing his father. His hands were gripping the seat of his chair; such was the state of affairs that it seemed he did not quite trust himself to stay in place.

"What I am about to tell you does not leave this room," Severus said quietly. "You will not tell anyone that I was here, nor let slip what we discuss. Am I understood?"

"Yes," Selenius said.

"Yes, sir."

Selenius shot a confused, perhaps even a touch wary look at his father. "Why?"

In response, Severus withdrew an envelope from the pocket of his robes and set it down on the table. It bore the Hogwarts crest, and there was no denying the familiar letter it entailed—a letter that Hermione herself had received what seemed like a life-time ago, when she was just eleven years old. Selenius slid it to his side and then plucked up, scraping his fingernail down the side to try and open it cleanly.

"At Hogwarts, your teachers expect to be addressed as 'sir' or 'Professor,'" Severus told him smoothly. "I advise you to get used to that now, because there are certain teachers there who will be rather… insistent, shall we say, on receiving proper respect." His lip curled into a sneer. "Even if they are undeserving of it."

"But that still doesn't explain why you murdered the Headmaster," Selenius exclaimed, dropping the letter into his lap, half-opened.

Severus's eyes narrowed. "I did not murder the Headmaster. I killed him. There is a difference."

"I see no difference!" Selenius cried.

"Then you are not thinking hard enough!" Severus snarled.

Selenius looked as though his father had struck him; for all that Severus was a strict, if occasionally faintly indulgent father, he had never once spoken to his son like that. Severus peered down at Selenius's face for a moment, and then his voice softened.

"Think over my words later, Selenius," he said quietly. "There are more important matters to be discussed. You cannot stay here all year, and then there is the consideration of your education—which is why you will be going to Hogwarts this year." Hermione had slipped the letter out of Selenius's lap by now, and was pulling it open to read the contents. No one else seemed to notice. "I
am Headmaster now, which means that you will be under my protection—under my care, as well as those of the other professors there."

"Protection?" Selenius asked sullenly.

"With Albus Dumbledore dead, there is very little standing between the Dark Lord and control of Wizarding England," Severus said evenly. "He has assigned two of his Death Eaters as replacement Professors."

Selenius stared at his father, his face draining of color as he took this in. "Death Eaters?" he repeated, as though unsure he had heard right.

"Yes."

Selenius dropped his eyes to his lap, and then fumbled for a moment before turning around to try and retrieve the letter from his mother. Hermione absently handed the envelope to him and turned away to continue her perusal, which her son found extremely unhelpful.

"There is another," Severus continued, his voice low. "Under the Dark Lord's command, only Purebloods are officially allowed to attend. But due to the fact that this would eliminate a good portion of our student body, the Dark Lord has decided to define this slippery slope by saying that any witch or wizard who can trace their magical parentage back by at least two generations."

"But I'm a half-blood."

Severus's lip curled. "Not according to your student file." He nodded at Hermione. "While you are at Hogwarts, you will be living a lie. You will neither be able to admit to myself or your mother as being your real parents. You have been furnished with a false ancestry that you will need to memorize and be willing to provide on the spot, should anyone question it."

He pulled out another set of papers from his pockets, and slid them over to Selenius, who picked them up, eyes scrolling down the first page, before looking up.

"You…" his expression faltered. "You've registered me as Selenius… Sirius… Black."

"You know the family history; you've lived in Grimmauld Place long enough, probably listened to Black complain about his pureblood-rot parents often enough," Severus said coldly. "Those are the details you will need to keep at hand. They will want more than just your recorded ancestry. They'll want details on what your parents were like."

"But Sirius…" Selenius began.

"Was childless, but the Ministry now seems to be under the impression that he had an illegitimate son," Severus responded indifferently. "Fortunately, the Dark Lord does not place much stock in illegitimacy, so much as in purity. As long as you play the part convincingly, no one will give you a second thought."

Selenius nodded slowly, and looked back down at the papers, reading them carefully.

Hermione frowned, and looked up from the Hogwarts letter. "Who does he list as his mother, then?"

"Unknown. To the Ministry, it will not matter, so long as he can point to the relevant parent," Severus stated smoothly. Hermione could tell he was not taking this well, despite it being his plan; to list Sirius as Selenius's father, even for the purpose of getting him safely into school, must have required Severus to quash a good bit of his pride and enmity. But the truth was that this was a
brilliant plan; Sirius had always been more conventionally handsome than Severus, but they shared so many similar characteristics that Selenius could easily pass off as the former's son.

He nodded at the letter in her hand, and Hermione quickly separated the acceptance letter from the supplies list before handing the former back to Selenius and pocketing the latter. Severus nodded toward the door, indicating to Selenius that it was time for him to leave. The boy stood up, gathering up his things, giving his father a hesitant, uncertain hug before leaving to go upstairs. Severus stopped him before he left, a strong hand gripping his shoulder.

"Don't forget what I told you earlier."

They waited until his footsteps faded away, and the door to his room closed, and then Severus turned to Hermione, who looked thoughtful.

"Wait," Hermione said slowly, looking up at him. "Sirius was supposed to be in Azkaban for twelve years. Selenius is eleven. How do you expect anyone to believe he could have sired Selenius while in prison?"

Severus's eyes glittered as he spoke.

"The Ministry knows he wasn't in Azkaban for twelve years."

"Fudge told them?"

"Something like that."

Hermione frowned, and then did the calculations in her head. "He was in Azkaban for four years. Even if we get away with lying and say that Selenius just turned eleven and not twelve, that would still mean Sirius would have had to father him while in Azkaban…"

"The Ministry only knows that he was not in Azkaban for twelve years," Severus said coolly. "They don't know the exact details. There's enough assurance in the ambiguity that they can let it slide."

Hermione bit her lower lip. "Alright."

"You look like a wreck," he pronounced, getting to his feet. "For someone who's only been doing research and planning, you look as though you haven't had a proper meal in weeks."

Hermione rubbed at her temple. "I'm stressed," she admitted. "There's a lot to do, and not enough hours in the day to finish it all." She glanced over at him. "You don't look much better yourself."

Instead of issuing a retort, Severus went to her side in two strides, and pulled her to him. She put up no resistance, burying her face in his chest, the closest thing to comfort that she had had in nearly a month. They stood like this for several minutes, and then Severus led her to the chair he had just vacated, and brought her down with him. She settled herself on his lap, resting her cheek against his shoulder with a sigh, before she finally said what they were both thinking.

"I hope this works," she said softly. She closed her eyes, and then reluctantly opened them, angling her head up to look at him. "What did you need to talk to me about earlier?"

"Hogwarts," Severus said quietly. "The arrangements we've made for him."

"You made, you mean." Her tone was weary, but the note of accusation was still there.

"I would have spoken to you about it first, but I thought it better just to get it all out of the way, just
this once," Severus murmured, burying his nose in her hair and inhaling deeply, before bending his head lower to nuzzle her cheek. "I want you to know that I will be responsible for purchasing Selenius's school supplies. They will already be in the school when he arrives; it is not worth the risk for you both to go to Diagon Alley."

"I'm perfectly fine with that," Hermione responded agreeably. "But how is he to arrive there?"

"The Hogwarts Express, naturally," Severus said. "But as to who drops him off—I was hoping you would be able to convince Molly and Arthur to do it."

"They'll have Ginny…"

"If one of them took him separately, Miss Weasley will be none the wiser," Severus said smoothly. "I would ask Arthur—Molly will no doubt want to look after her daughter, first and foremost."

Hermione nodded. "I'll bring it up tomorrow."

There was a pause, and then Severus said rather reluctantly, "Then if that's all, I had better go."

Hermione slowly got up, straightening. She deliberated for a moment as Severus went to fetch his traveling cloak, and then intervened. "You don't have to leave."

"This place isn't safe. Anyone from the Order could drop in—"

"The only one who could is Remus," Hermione responded reasonably, "and I highly doubt it. It's the middle of the night," she added, with a sudden glint in her eyes, "and he knows I don't take kindly to people dropping in on me at odd hours."

"Like me, you mean," Severus said, looking somewhat unconvinced, but the cloak remained hung up on its peg.

Hermione kissed him. "You're the exception, love."

It was her husband's turn to deliberate for a moment, but minutes later, his boots found temporary sleeping quarters in the upstairs hall, and the door to Hermione's bedroom shut behind the both of them.

~o~O~o~

Hermione awoke the next morning to feel her husband spooned around her, naked limbs entangled in the ever-present quest for closeness, and only took a cursory glance at the clock by the bed before snuggling back down to sleep again. The two of them had not gone straight to sleep last night, and now it seemed that neither of them were at all inclined to get up early this morning. Despite it being seven o'clock already, there was no Order meeting to attend, Dobby had no doubt presented Selenius with a better breakfast than anything Hermione could possibly throw together, and there were no immediate deadlines. Everything was resting upon the Order's success in getting Harry from Privet Drive. They would plan more extensively after that.

But there was no denying the nagging, itching feeling of wanting to prepare before then, too. She wanted to get ahead, have everything laid out before they needed it, so that the planning process would run more smoothly. More than one meeting had been interrupted or broken up until further notice because they had not had all the information they needed on hand. Furthermore, once Harry arrived, Hermione would be more restricted in her ability to jump from place to place.

A warm breath gusted along her neck as her husband shifted in his sleep, letting out a contented sigh.
Knowing he would have to leave soon, Hermione slowly brought a hand behind her to caress his cheek; he snorted in his sleep, his breathing suddenly quickening as she stroked the underside of his jaw with a brush of her knuckles, and another shift of his body told her that he was now awake. A hand drifted over her belly in a return caress, and he kissed her in sleepy greeting.

And then he reluctantly sat up. Hermione felt his body quivering against her as he stretched, and quietly slipped out of bed. She turned to look at him as he went to retrieve his clothes.

"Where's your notebook?" he asked suddenly, his voice roughened with sleep, but no less commanding.

In response, Hermione leaned down on her side of the bed, and after a moment of scrabbling her hand around under the mattress, held up the worn but otherwise unremarkable-looking brown notebook. Severus had not been able to fill her in deeply by way of his reports through their rings, and they had neglected to do a thorough report last night. She squirmed out of bed to retrieve a quill and ink bottle, and then sat back down, ready to write.

"The Dark Lord knows Potter is being moved this Saturday, at nightfall," he said quietly, not looking at her as he pulled on his trousers. "He does not know of the Order's specific plans in regards to moving him, although they know he will not be using any kind of transportation that is monitored by the Ministry—which is just as well, as it has been heavily infiltrated."

There was only the scratching of Hermione's quill coupled with the hiss of a belt being slid on, and then buckled; and then Severus added quietly, "The Dark Lord will not be using his wand with Priori Incantem by using Lucius Malfoy's wand."

Hermione startled at this, but jotted that down as well. This could prove to be a problem; the fact that Harry and Voldemort's wands shared twin cores was added protection for Harry, and something she had been counting on. She sat there for a moment, chewing on her quill, and then suddenly looked up.

"Even without the twin cores, Lucius's wand won't work for the Dark Lord because it won't recognize him as its master," she pointed out. "His spells will be weaker." She looked contemplative, even hopeful for a moment, as she added carefully, "It's also possible that because the wands recognize their owners, they might also recognize the owners of their twin-cores even without the wand being present…"

"Don't count on it," Severus said sharply. "Twin core wands have only ever been known to react to each other. It has nothing to with the owners themselves."

"But with Harry and the Dark Lord's unique connection…"

"I haven't the knowledge nor the time to even begin to try and unravel the issue of Potter's connection to the Dark Lord, wands or no wands," he snapped. "I would spend less time speculating on possibilities and more time ensuring solid protection for the boy, if I were you."

"I have," Hermione said coolly. "But I'm not about to overlook another avenue of advantage for Harry."

"Not the day before he's due to be moved," Severus responded shortly.

"I'm not about to wager Harry's life on it," Hermione returned with an edge in her tone, making a final mark in her notebook and setting it aside before getting to her feet. "But priori incantatem was always something we could count on being present in any magical duel between the two. Yet, we
know there's more to Harry and the Dark Lord than just their wands, which means that if I can find any reliable reason to believe that Harry can use that connection to his advantage, I will use it!"

Severus turned to look at her now, his gaze impassive. For a moment, they stared, eyes locked onto each other, and then her spy looked away.

"Sometimes, you are just like Albus," he said quietly, "always playing chess with peoples' lives, counting on the maddest of schemes to get them through."

Hermione shook her head slowly.

"I'm just trying to keep Harry alive," she said softly.

Severus gave her a hard look.

"Yes, that's what I thought Albus was doing, too," he said at last, buttoning up his shirt.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "What does that mean?"

Severus did not hesitate for a single moment when he uttered, "Nothing." He buttoned the cuffs of his shirtsleeves, and then before Hermione could protest this answer and demand he explain himself, he cupped her face and kissed her. It was one of longing, passion mixed with love, drugged with reassurance, and filled with a definite reluctance to pull away.

"I'll be back when I can," he said, pressing his forehead briefly to hers before withdrawing. "And let me know what Arthur Weasley says."

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Hermione Apparated to the Burrow the next night in time to see Remus, Kingsley, and Harry all standing outside. The thestral Kingsley had been riding was milling about, flanks heaving from exertion while sniffing around for a bit of food. They were the only ones back so far; Hagrid had managed to squeeze himself inside, and Hermione felt a jolt of alarm when she realized George was missing.

"Who else is back?" she demanded, striding forward. At once, two wands whipped out and pointed at her, as Remus and Kingsley both turned to face her.

"Hey!" Harry protested. "It's Hermione—"

"What did I give you for your seventeenth birthday?" Kingsley asked, without missing a beat.

"A watch," Hermione said without hesitation, holding up her wrist for him to see. At once, the Auror's wand lowered. "Now tell me—who's back?"

"Just us," Kingsley said. He looked angry. "We're alright, and Harry's here, but George lost an ear."

"Lost an—?" Hermione repeated, disbelievingly.

"Snape's work," Remus said bitterly.

"Snape?" Harry said, suddenly rounding on Remus. "You didn't say—"

"He lost his hood during the chase," Remus said, turning to Hermione. "Sectumsempra was always his specialty, wasn't it? I wish I could say I'd paid him back in kind, but it was all I could do to keep George on the broom after he was injured, he was losing so much blood."
Hermione took in a deep breath. "Let me see to him."

"His ear's been hexed off with Dark Magic, Hermione," Kingsley warned her as he accompanied her back to the house, leaving Harry and Remus outside to await the arrival of the others. "It's gone. It can't be grown back or put back on—"

"I said to let me see him," Hermione said in a low voice, her tone brooking no argument. "I've dealt with enough Dark Magic to last me a lifetime, and I know quite enough of my own, thank you."

They stepped inside, and headed through the empty kitchen and into the sitting room, which was crowded by Hagrid's presence in addition to Molly and Ginny. Hermione stared down at George, who was laid out on the couch, unconscious. The bleeding had slowed, but there was a gaping hole where his ear should have been. Suppressing the bile that rose in her throat with the ease of someone who had been doing it for years, Hermione rolled up her sleeves and pulled out her wand.

"I can't make it grow back…" Molly said helplessly, looking up at Hermione as she took a seat next to her. "Not when it's been removed by Dark Magic. But it could have been so much worse…"

Hermione did not respond. She recognized the spell; she already knew it was Sectumsempra, but the spell she had just silently cast left no doubt to it. Now she worked quietly, her wand hovering just inches above the vile gash. A few minutes later, the hole stopped bleeding completely, almost suddenly, as the trace of Dark Magic and the spell's natural after-effect to permanently scar was lifted.

"Let's try to grow the ear back now," Hermione said, sitting back. "While the wound's still fresh."

Without a word, Molly quickly got up to retrieve it. Ginny was staring at her, wide-eyed in astonishment. There was a sudden commotion from the kitchen, and Hermione twisted around in alarm.

"I'll prove who I am, Kingsley, after I've seen my son, now back off if you know what's good for you!"

Hermione had never heard Arthur roar like this before, and it seemed not even Kingsley dared stop him, for a moment later, Arthur appeared in the doorway. He was disheveled, glasses knocked askew on his face, and covered in sweat, but the moment he saw the state George was in, he immediately knelt down beside him. Fred appeared seconds later, his face pale.

"Arthur!" Molly sobbed, almost dropping the vial of potion in her hands, when she saw her husband. "Oh thank goodness!"

"How is he?" Arthur demanded urgently.

"He'll live," Hermione said, looking up at him. "We're hoping we can re-grow his ear."

Fred, whose face was drained of all color now as he dropped to the arm of the sofa, turned to look at her. He opened his mouth, perhaps to ask if that were actually possible, but then George stirred. Perhaps the noise of his father and twin's arrival had awakened him, but for whatever the reason, he slowly opened his eyes.

"How do you feel, Georgie?" Molly whispered, returning to her seat next to him and uncorking the potion.

"Saintlike," George murmured.
"What's wrong with him?" Fred croaked. He looked terrified, and turned to his mother, as though she had the answers. "Is his mind affected?"

"No," Hermione said, reaching for the potion before the shaking of Molly's hands could drop it, and urging George to sit up. "Not his sense of humor, at least. Drink," she added sternly, as George looked down cross-eyed at the bottle being offered at his lips. "All of it."

"Saintlike," George whispered, before taking a sip and swallowing it. "You see," he said, turning his head to the side with a wince to look at his twin, "I'm… holy, Fred. Geddit? Holey."

"Drink," Hermione snapped, pressing the rest of the bottle to his lips. "Before your mother dies of a heart attack. Or your twin," she added, looking up at Fred's pale, shaking face. "I don't know which one looks like they'll go first."

"Who are you, my mother?" George joked weakly, but he drank down the rest of the bottle.

"Very funny," Hermione said, pulling the empty bottle back and setting it down before placing a comforting hand on Molly's shoulder, as the woman broke down sobbing harder than before. "There, there, Molly… he's fine…"

Fred finally seemed to regain his voice.

"Pathetic," he said, shaking his head, but there was a note of hysterical relief in his voice. "Pathetic! With the whole wide world of ear-related humor before you, you go for holey?"

Yet, even with this proclamation, there was a wide feeling of palpable relief circulating through the room. Minutes later, the gaping hole around George's ear began to close, covering with new skin. He squeezed his eyes shut in consternation, as though he had just overdosed on his own brand of U-No-Poo, and then with a loud 'pop!' his ear suddenly reappeared. He brought a hand up to his head wonderingly, feeling the new flesh, and then turned to his mother with a grin.

"It looks like you still won't be able to tell us apart now, mum."

If anything, Molly only sobbed harder.

~o~O~o~

Bill, Fleur, Tonks, and finally—thank the gods—Ron made it back, shaken but unhurt. But with them came the worst news of the night: Mad-Eye was dead. Kingsley had been forced to leave to return to the Muggle Prime Minister, who he was currently guarding, and in the meanwhile, they had all sat down and laid out their stories to compare. The fake Potters had all been carrying rucksacks and owl cages with fake stuffed snowy owls, but Kingsley had done something rather clever; at the last minute, he had the idea to take Hedwig's cage and transfigured it into something that realistically looked like Harry, with Hedwig still inside, and then Disillusioned it.

To the Death Eaters, it must have looked as though Harry was riding Disillusioned behind the dark-skinned Auror. An Invisibility Cloak would have gone flying off, so they had to at least give the impression that someone was riding behind Kingsley. This was just as well, for the fake owl that had been with Harry and Hagrid had exploded in flames not thirty seconds upon leaving Privet Drive. Harry had apparently had to put it out by tossing the cage out of the motorbike, whereupon it had knocked one of the pursuing Death Eaters flat off their broom and set another's broomstick on fire.

Harry's relief at his owl's survival was immense. He had been wary about the plan at first, but Kingsley rightly pointed out to him that with his own safety to look after, it was best to have Hedwig fly separately. He had lost his Firebolt, however, which he was extremely upset about—not because
it was an amazing broom, but because it had been a gift from Sirius, which he held dear especially after losing him. The motorbike sidecar he had ridden in had taken a lot of damage, and he was lucky that most of what he had brought with him was intact.

Mundungus had panicked when he saw the Dark Lord himself going straight after Mad-Eye, and Disapparated, leaving Moody open and vulnerable. He had only been struck with a Stunner, but the fall to earth had certainly killed him. Despite the success of the mission, this bit of news sobered them all up at once. Hermione in particular felt the loss most keenly; she and Moody had argued quite a bit recently over plans for the Order, now that Dumbledore was no longer here, but she owed the old Auror a lot for the support and valuable lessons he had given her, and she had both respected and liked him. Hell, he had even attended her wedding. And now he was gone.

She felt the loss rather the same way Tonks did; Tonks had been the Auror's protégé at the Ministry, and the two had been close. There was nothing that would ever take away the emptiness of losing a long-time mentor and friend, but they hardly had time to grieve that night; they drank briefly in the grizzled old Auror's memory, and then the topic turned to serious matters. Hermione actually excused herself while the discussion turned to speculation on how the Death Eaters had known the date Harry was being moved, and offered to put Hedwig up with Pigwidgeon, if only to remove herself from the room.

She did not need her insides burning with guilt all night. Yes, she had given Severus the date. She had done it not to bring Harry down, but to help cement Severus's place in the Dark Lord's ranks. The snowy owl hooted softly at her as she carried her upstairs, her feathers a bit ruffled by the rather petrifying manner in which she had arrived at the Burrow, but otherwise perfectly all right.

Over the next two days, Hermione got the vague sensation that Harry and Ron were keeping something from her. The two of them were constantly whispering to each other without letting her in on the secret, and she saw evidence that they were planning to leave; she already knew that Harry and Ron were planning on finding the remaining Horcruxes and destroying them, but she had the idea that they were planning on including her in that little plan. On the third day, two days before Bill and Fleur's wedding, Hermione finally cornered them about it.

"We're not leaving without you," Ron assured her. "Blimey, we need you, because you're the only one of us who can make heads or tails of the stuff we'll need to know. But there are some ideas Harry and I are throwing around first…"

Harry had nodded quickly in assent at this, and Hermione had no choice but to let it go. She offered to help them get their things packed, and they both immediately took her up on this, leaving her both baffled and with an extra chore: she had been expecting them to hastily tell her it was not necessary and that they were doing it themselves, which only made her continue to wonder precisely what they were considering.

Hermione found an opening to bring up Selenius with Arthur, and was relieved to discover that he was more than happy to take him to the platform. It was as if he wouldn't have done it before, but he was now ever so grateful for her restoring George's ear, that he was glad to do what little he could to return the favor.

Hermione managed to communicate with Severus through their rings, and was distraught when he confirmed that the Death Eaters had taken Moody's body, though her husband was enormously relieved when she said that she had been able to restore George Weasley's ear. He warned her that the Dark Lord was planning on taking over the Ministry, and to be on the lookout over the next few days. Hermione assured him she would.

~o~O~o~
"—ow, ow, ow!"

"I'm sorry! Hold on, I'll get it—"

"Bloody—buggering—hell—yowch!" Ron cursed as Hermione wrenched a copy of *The Monster Book of Monsters* off of the redhead's ankle. His leg was fortunately mostly fine, though the book had torn a vicious hole in his jeans, which Hermione quickly repaired. "What are you doing with that book anyway?"

"Just trying to decide which ones to bring with us," Hermione said, panting as she held the book down on the ground, pinning it with her knees while scrabbling to buckle it shut.

"I forgot that we'd be hunting down Horcruxes in a mobile library—hey, is that my belt?"

"No, it's Harry's," Hermione said, and with a final grunt of effort, managed to lock to book shut in place. It snarled softly through its makeshift muzzle, and she wiped her hands off before placing the book in the smaller of the two piles laid out on the floor.

"Hey," Harry protested, "what are you doing with *my* belt?"

"Making sure that book doesn't attack you in the middle of the night," Hermione replied coolly. "Don't worry, it's being put to good use."

"Please tell me that's not in the pile of books you're planning to bring," Ron said, as he picked up *Hogwarts, A History* and turned it over in his hands. "This goes in the other pile, right? You'd never go anywhere without *this* book, right?"

"Come off it, you two," Hermione said, yanking the book out of his hands, but she was smiling. She placed it in the larger pile, and then picked up *A History of Magic*. "I'd better bring this one along—we might need it, too… and yes, I'm bringing *The Monster Book of Monsters*…"

"Well, I suppose that even if we don't actually read it, it could double as a weapon…" Ron said, looking at the bound and snarling book dubiously.

"Very funny, Ron."

"Listen," Harry said suddenly, sitting up straight on his bed. "I know you said after Dumbledore's funeral that you wanted to come with me…"

"Here he goes," Ron said, rolling his eyes and sharing a conspiratorial look with Hermione.

"Just like we knew he would," Hermione said, with a put-out sigh. "You know, I should really bring *Achievements in Charming*…"

"What, are you planning on casting a Cheering Charm on Voldy?" Ron sniggered.

"Listen!" Harry said again, louder.

"No, you listen, Harry," Hermione said, getting to her feet. "We're coming with you."

"But—" Harry protested.

"That was decided years ago, mate," Ron said, shaking his head. "We've both said we're coming, and there's nothing you can say that's going to change our minds."

"Any questions?" Hermione asked brightly.
"Are you sure you've though this through?" Harry persisted.

"Let's see," Ron said, holding up his hand and ticking off his fingers as he went. "Hermione's been deciding what books to bring in our Traveling Mobile Library for Dork Lord Hunters. She's got almost all our stuff packed into a horrible little beaded purse that she swears she didn't borrow from my mum, not that I believe her," he added casually, looking at Hermione, who merely snorted in response to this. "Oh, I also forgot, she's smuggled in Moody's remaining stock of Polyjuice Potion in there, right under Mum's nose. Yeah, I'm pretty sure she's ready."

Harry turned to look at Hermione, who had bent down to pick up another book. "What about your parents?" he persisted.

Hermione gaped at him for a moment, and then shut her mouth. She had visited her parents two weeks ago, and had returned without anyone else the wiser. Wendell and Monica Wilkins, as they now believed themselves to be, had spontaneously decided to take a rather eccentric-yet-permanent trip to no place else but Australia.

"I've taken care of them," she said shortly. She stood up.

"Go on, Ron, show him what you've done," she said, heading for the door.

"Nah," Ron said, making a face. "He's just eaten."

"So have I." She placed her hand on the doorknob. "You might as well give up on any protests, Harry, because Ron and I have already decided we're going with you. You're not about to change our minds."

She left, in time to hear Ron say, "She's right, you know. Okay, so come here, look…"

And that seemed to be that.

The day before the wedding, which incidentally happened to be Harry's birthday, the Burrow was crammed full of people. The bride's family was there, along with the rest of the attending Weasleys, which made the house feel quite full. Hermione helped Molly handle it all by assisting in the kitchen, and when Harry finally came down, sleepy-eyed and with a growling stomach, Molly immediately wished him a 'happy birthday' from both herself and Arthur, and indicated the smallest parcel on top of a pile of presents.

"It's traditional to give a wizard a watch when he comes of age," Molly said anxiously, as Harry opened his present. "I'm afraid that one isn't new like Ron's, it was actually my brother Fabian's, and he wasn't terribly careful with his possessions…"

Hermione felt something stab and twist itself in her gut as Molly said this. When Harry got up and hugged her, Molly caught her eye, and gave her a short nod. Unable to take it any longer, Hermione left the kitchen, her face a mask of stone.

Remus stopped by the Burrow later that day. He found Hermione feeding the chickens, and stopped over to talk to her.

"How are you holding up?" He prompted. For some reason, Hermione thought, he seemed rather down. "You know—it's been a month since…" he trailed off.

Hermione looked at him, unsure of how to respond.

Remus looked uneasy. "I mean, with Severus… Dumbledore…"
"I'm fine," Hermione said quietly.

"You don't look it."

Hermione closed her eyes.

"Do you ever feel guilty about something years after it's happened?" she whispered.

"I'm listening," Remus said, placing a hand around her shoulder. Hermione closed her eyes gratefully, although tears prickled threateningly at the corners of her cheeks.

"It's been nearly sixteen years since James and Lily died," Hermione said, her voice barely audible. "And even now, occasionally, I just get washed away by guilt. I try to hide it, and I don't usually let on that something's wrong, but—but now, all these years later, I still miss James…"

She felt Remus squeeze her shoulder comfortingly.

"I wonder what he would say if he saw me now," she said hoarsely. Her throat caught. "What—what he would say…"

They fell into silence. Remus seemed to sense that there was nothing he could say at the moment that would help Hermione, so he wisely switched topics, though he still kept a soothing grip on her shoulders.

"Has he tried to contact you at all?" Remus asked, his voice gentle.

"No," Hermione said, her voice suddenly cold, as though the subject caused her pain. She hated lying to Remus, but the deception was necessary. "I don't know why he would, anyway—he slew my trust in him when he finally decided I was expendable. I'm more trouble than I'm worth to him now."

Remus's face twisted in a mixture of pity and sympathy. "Right."

They stood there in silence for several minutes, and then Remus finally asked what it seemed he was really dying to know. "Er… Hermione? If you don't mind my asking…" he fumbled his words, and then blurted out, "how did Severus react, when he found out you were pregnant?"

Hermione stared at him.

"Why?" she asked suspiciously.

Remus's shoulders slumped. "No reason," he muttered.

Hermione could tell he was lying, but she responded honestly anyway. "At first, neither of us knew what to do, what to make of it. In a way, I suppose he was… appreciative, if it could be called that."

Remus chewed on his lower lip. "I see," he responded dully.

The door to the Burrow suddenly opened, and Molly leaned out to call them both in. Conversation cut short, they reluctantly returned back inside.

Harry's birthday dinner was interrupted by the arrival of none other than the Minister of Magic. Hermione stood up so quickly, pushing her chair back and nearly knocking over her glass, in her haste to pull out her wand. Ron actually yelped and fell backwards in his chair in surprise as Hermione leveled the tip of her wand with the lion-faced man. Scrimgeour looked mildly irked, if somewhat duly impressed by this demonstration of alertness.
"Mrs…” he began flatly.

"Granger," Hermione snapped.

"Miss Granger," Scrimgeour repeated, as though correcting himself. "You may lower your wand. I assure you, I have no intention hexing any of you."

"Oh?" Hermione asked lightly. "Prove it."

"Hermione, it's alright," Arthur said, coming to stand between Hermione and Scrimgeour. "It's him, don't worry, he came with me—"

"What color were the chickens last hexed?" Hermione asked at once.

"Green," Arthur responded quickly.

Hermione slowly lowered her wand. "All right," she relented.

"So sorry to intrude," Scrimgeour said, his eyes landing on the snitch-shaped cake on the table before flickering back up and bypassing Hermione to focus squarely on Harry. "Especially as I can see I am gate-crashing a party. Many happy returns."

"Thanks," Harry said, but Hermione could tell he did not really mean it.

"I require a private word with you," Scrimgeour continued, as though he had not sensed Harry's rudeness. "Also with Mr. Ronald Weasley and Miss Hermione Granger."

"Us?" Ron said, sounding surprised. "Why us?"

"I shall tell you when we are somewhere more private," Scrimgeour said smoothly. There was something about the way he said this that irked Hermione, particularly when he looked to Arthur and demanded, with a half-expectation of receiving a negative written on his face, "Is there such a place?"

"Yes, of course," Arthur said, looking nervous. "The, er, sitting room, why don't you use that?"

"You can lead the way," Scrimgeour said, turning to Ron without so much as a thank-you to Arthur, who he only remarked as an afterthought, "There is no need for you to accompany us."

"I'll be right there," Hermione said, her expression indifferent as Harry and Ron stood up.

"Don't make us wait," Scrimgeour said, but he nevertheless limped up to the house, with Harry and Ron at his side. Hermione waited until they were out of range, and then turned to Arthur. Keeping her voice as low as possible, aware that Fred, George, and Ginny were straining to hear every word, she asked, "How does he know?"

"Scrimgeour's done a bit of digging on you and the boys," Scrimgeour said smoothly. There was something about the way he said this that irked Hermione, particularly when he looked to Arthur and demanded, with a half-expectation of receiving a negative written on his face, "Is there such a place?"

"Yes, of course," Arthur said, looking nervous. "The, er, sitting room, why don't you use that?"

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"Scrimgeour's done a bit of digging on you and the boys," Arthur said, wiping sweat from his brow. "He—I believe he found the... records."

"How many people know?" Hermione whispered.

"Just him, I think," Arthur murmured. "He knows you're close to us and to Harry, so I believe I'm the first he asked about it... he asked for an opportunity to speak to you in private, which is why I brought him here tonight. He wouldn't let me hide the records, otherwise."

Hermione understood that Arthur had done what he could to try and keep her secret when put on the
spot, and she was extremely grateful. "Thank you."

"You'd better go on… the Minister doesn't like to be kept waiting…"

Hermione nodded, and with one last look at the snitch-shaped cake, she left. The minute she stepped into the house, it was to find Harry arguing face-to-face with the Minister.

"We're not going anywhere," he was saying, his expression fiercely determined. "You can speak to us together, or not at all."

Hermione saw Scrimgeour's face darken, and he glanced over at her, as though wondering whether it was worth insisting on it or not. Hermione closed the door behind her, causing both boys to jump, and she cleared her throat.

"Actually, I think the Minister's right," she said bracingly. "There are some things I need to talk to him privately about—and then, I think, we can all talk together."

"Hermione!" Harry said, looking outraged. Not at her, but with the situation as a whole.

"Please, Harry," Hermione said, pleading. "Just trust me on this."

She saw Harry and Ron both stiffen at this, as though considering her words, and then both boys reluctantly turned and left the room. Hermione and Scrimgeour listened to their footsteps as they disappeared upstairs, and then silence. Without another word, the two of them entered the sitting room, and Hermione shut the door and cast an Imperturbable Charm on it before slowly taking a seat. Scrimgeour nodded appraisingly at this.

"I'm glad you, at least, see reason, Mrs. Snape," he said, sitting back in the saggy old armchair that Arthur usually occupied. Hermione took a seat on the couch, feeling surprisingly vulnerable being alone. "As you have probably guessed, I am here to discuss Albus Dumbledore's will—among a number of other things, of course."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "It's been a month since he died. Why has it taken this long?"

"The Decree for Justifiable Confiscation—"

"Rubbish," Hermione snapped coldly, dropping all pretense of Hermione Granger the school girl. Scrimgeour obviously knew who she was, and she had no intention of using her mask as a means of walking over her. "That law was made to stop Dark Wizards from passing on dangerous artifacts. I doubt the Ministry had powerful evidence that this was what Dumbledore intended to do—you just wanted to get a chance to poke and prod at the contents first. You had no right to do that."

"You are not a Magical Law Enforcement Officer, Mrs. Snape—"

"Nor was I a teacher when Umbridge asked me if I was a 'Ministry-Trained Educational Expert,'" Hermione said dryly, but there was derision to her voice. "I'd been the Defense Against the Dark Arts Professor long before she toadied her way over there. Don't try that with me, Minister. I haven't the patience for it."

Scrimgeour looked at her levelly, though Hermione had the impression it was taking all of his self-control to do so.

"So," Hermione said, leaning back in her chair, "I suppose the thirty-one days are up? Can't think of a pretext to keep them longer than that?"
The man sitting across from her gave her a very nasty look at this, but nevertheless, reached into his cloak and pulled out a drawstring pouch, removing a scroll of parchment. He unrolled it, and for a moment, it looked as though he intended to read it aloud—and then changed his mind and simply handed it to her.

Hermione's face furrowed in confusion as she stared down at the parchment, and then her eyes widened, before her face turned inscrutably blank. Then she looked back up at the Minister.

"'To Mrs. Hermione Jane Snape, I leave her the property in Tinworth, for which she alone will know and be able to divulge the name for, in the hopes that she may have a beacon to call home in these dark times,'" she said slowly. "'To Miss Hermione Jane Granger, I leave her my copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, which I recently borrowed from someone else, and hope that she will find it entertaining and instructive before giving it back. In addition, I also leave her my favorite pair of thick, woolen socks, knowing that she will appreciate them.'"

"Dumbledore makes a lot of references in there that only you could possibly know," Scrimgeour said, pulling out a small book that Hermione recognized at once. It had been bought second-hand at Flourish and Blott's last Christmas. "What property? What is so important about that book? Who did he borrow it from? And why on earth would he give you a pair of socks, of all things?"

Without a word, Hermione took the book from him, and opened it. The book had belonged to someone else once—several 'someone elses', in fact, judging by the number of scrawling signatures on the first page, but the last name inside had been hastily crossed out and replaced in neat, cramped handwriting, with the name Selenius Sirius Snape. It was barely visible, but Hermione, who was looking for it, saw it very clearly. Underneath it, as though he had written it in good humor, was the name Albus Percival Brian Wulfric Dumbledore.

The first thing she thought was, When did he change his middle name to Sirius?

Her second thought was, When did Albus borrow this from Selenius?

A moment later, however, she shut the book and looked up at Scrimgeour.

"I don't know," she said at last. "It looks like a children's book. I rather think Dumbledore gave it to me because he thought I'd enjoy it."

The Minister gave her a disbelieving look, but decided to swoop down instead on the more interesting piece of the will. "That's all very well, but that doesn't explain why he would leave you a piece of property. Dumbledore made exceptionally few personal bequests. Why do you think you were singled out?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hermione said, her tone tinged with light sarcasm. "Perhaps it's because I worked at Hogwarts and for the Order for years before returning to my life as a student."

"Yes, speaking of that…" Scrimgeour began.

"You're about to ask how it happened," Hermione stated blandly. "Personally, Minister, I don't care to tell you about my life. All I can say is that I got thrown back in time roughly twenty years, and had to work my way back up to my proper timeline, all in the midst of a war. I worked with Dumbledore for years, Minister. I was a teacher and an administrative member of the Order—yes, Minister," she said, at Scrimgeour's interested look, "The Order is well-organized. Dumbledore, however, was a busy man, and he left a lot of the scheduling in my hands."

"So you admit that you were very important to Albus Dumbledore?" Scrimgeour pressed.
"We got on," Hermione said coolly.

"No one ever just 'got on' with Albus Dumbledore, Mrs. Snape."

"No," Hermione said, with a bit of a dark chuckle. "No, we got along splendidly. We had our differences, but he was a great man, and I both trusted and respected him—and I like to think that I earned his trust and respect in turn. He was an admirable man."

"What is the name of the property he left you, Mrs. Snape?"

"As if I'd tell you."

"It's Secret-Kept?"

Hermione pressed her lips together in a thin line, but did not respond. Scrimgeour's eyes narrowed, and he finally handed her the last item on the list: a neatly folded pair of thick, woolen socks woven in red and gold. Hermione took them, and upon seeing the expectant look on the Minister's face, reluctantly unraveled them.

It was something similar to the socks that Dumbledore had given Selenius years ago, only this time, there was a familiar hourglass stitched into one of them. The hourglass was on the foot of one sock, and wove up to the ankle, where it disappeared; the chain resumed on the other sock, and when Hermione jiggled them, the hourglass turned and rotated, while the chain shook and slithered around. Hermione stared at it uncomprehendingly for a moment, thoroughly nonplussed, and then looked up at Scrimgeour.

"What do you expect me to say?"

"I am aware of your little trip back in time, Mrs. Snape. Why would Dumbledore give you something that is clearly meant to resemble it?"

"I haven't a clue," Hermione said, plainly baffled.

Scrimgeour looked extremely displeased by this answer, but switched tracks yet again.

"There is another matter to discuss, Mrs. Snape, other than your acquisition of what I suspect to be a rather valuable property, an old children's book, and a pair of socks. It's clear to me that you have worked very hard to keep your little trip back and forward in time a secret, and I spent the past month gathering every scrap of information about you I could find. You've been part to some rather shady deals with my predecessor—"

"Shady deal, singular," Hermione snapped, "and it was for a good cause. Sirius Black was an innocent man who didn't deserve to be locked up in Azkaban for twelve years."

"You broke the law, Mrs. Snape, when you altered time—"

"That's not true," Hermione said calmly. "All I did was ensure that my actions affected the original timeline in the way I remembered them. Time loops, Minister, and what I did kept it going smoothly. Time remained as it should, and an innocent man got a few years of his life back."

"Nevertheless, Mrs. Snape, it's clear to me that you are very valuable," Scrimgeour continued. "Albus Dumbledore's will only serves as additional testament to that fact. The brightest witch of the age, with experience in the previous war… you would be a powerful asset to helping the Ministry fight against You-Know-Who and his followers. Most particularly, in apprehending Severus Snape."
"No," Hermione said immediately.

"I thought you were loyal to the Order? Surely you don't want to let your husband—"

"This has nothing to do with my husband!" Hermione spat. "I have every intention of dealing with him myself, after what he's done... but there's the rather pertinent issue of me not trusting the Ministry, Minister. Past experience tells me that we don't get along very well, and I don't like getting caught up in your stupid politics more than necessary. What you really want, Minister," Hermione said, raising her voice, "is for me to divulge all of my secrets, including the ones about Professor Dumbledore. You've been trying to decode and prod a children's book and merlin knows what else for thirty-one days, and you're hoping I'll be able to help you crack it. The answer is no, Minster."

Scrimgeour did not look impressed. "I know things about you that could be very damaging, Mrs. Snape—"

"Yes, but will you tell anyone?" Hermione challenged. "What good would it do? Half the Order already knows. If you told the rest of the world, all it would do is cause scandal and more panic and confusion, which would be more to Voldemort's benefit than yours. If you told Harry and Ron, all it would do is make it harder for us to complete our task in hunting down the Dark Lord—"

"So you are planning to go after You-Know-Who!"

"Of course we are, you nitwit! Dumbledore left us a task, and we intend to follow it through!" Hermione said, with obvious irritation. "So yes, Minister, you know some pretty damning things about me, but they won't do you one whit of good—knowledge is a double-edged sword, in this case."

"If you are so obviously planning to go after You-Know-Who, then why don't you let the Ministry help?" Scrimgeour demanded.

"Because the Ministry's already heavily infiltrated by the Dark Lord's followers," Hermione said flatly, "and you have a poor track record in efficiency. We don't need your bumbling attempts at making yourselves look good to interfere with our task."

The Minister stared at her, and the two glared angrily at the other for a moment.

"Your husband," Scrimgeour snapped, finally out of patience. "Has he tried to contact you?"

"No," Hermione returned curtly.

"Do you have any intention of helping him?"

"He killed Dumbledore, attacked me, and hexed George Weasley's ear off when we were retrieving Harry from his aunt and uncle's house," Hermione said blithely. "Do you really think I'm about to offer him my assistance?"

"Do you know where he is?" Scrimgeour pressed, frustrated at the lack of information. "Where he might be?"

"Wherever he is, I have no doubt there would be a dozen Death Eaters and the Dark Lord himself present," Hermione said dryly. "I doubt you'll find him alone. Where that may be, I haven't a clue."

The look of utter frustration and fury on Scrimgeour's face was rewarding while it lasted. The man eventually stood up, looking as though he would quite like to hex her, but refrained for civility's sake.
"Very well," he said, his tone laced with disgust. "Go retrieve your friends. We will conclude with the rest of Albus Dumbledore's will."

Without another word, Hermione got up and left.

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"You were alone in there for ages with him," Ron said, as soon as they were alone in his and Harry’s room. The birthday party had broken up shortly after Scrimgeour had left. Hedwig hooted and pecked curiously at the golden snitch Harry had received from Dumbledore’s will, which he now let flitter about the room. Ron was clicking the Deluminator on and off almost absently as he added, "What were you talking about?"

"Well, he left me The Tales of Beedle the Bard," Hermione said, flipping through the book, "but I haven't a clue as to why."

And indeed, she did not. What was Dumbledore trying to tell her? Entertaining and instructive… what was so instructive about an old children’s fairy tale? Was there any significance in the fact that he had borrowed it from Selenius, or did he so just happen to borrow it and decide it would be the perfect thing to pass along to her once he was done with it?

There was something else that had been on her mind now, and she had been turning it around and musing it over for several hours now. Dumbledore had left her Tine Cottage. Dumbledore had left her a house. The significance of such a gift might be lost on others, but Hermione had immediately grasped it for what it was. When she had first been thrown back two decades in time, she had not had any place of her own to call home. Hogwarts had been home to her for a long time, but she had merely been a ward of the school, another temporary resident. Spinner’s End had been Severus’s place, initially, and given all the Death Eaters who had been tramping in and out of it for the past two years, it felt more like a lair than a sanctuary.

Tine Cottage was now hers. Her home. Her family’s home. A place that she had invested time, love, and magic into, and could retreat to when she needed it. Where she had been homeless when lost in time, she was no longer. Dumbledore had given her something that she had come to value.

"Yeah, and he left me a Deluminator," Ron said, as a ball of light flew from the nearby lamp, dousing the room in darkness. Another click, and the ball of light flew back to the lamp, brightening the messy room up once more. "Which is pretty cool, actually, but I dunno how it's supposed to help us. I mean, turning off lights? How's that supposed to destroy You-Know-Who?"

"There has to be a connection between them," Harry said determinedly, snatching the snitch out of mid-air and examining it more closely. "A book, a Deluminator, and a snitch—what do they have in common?"

Hermione and Ron looked at each other.

"I dunno, mate," Ron said, shrugging. "Hermione?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Hermione said slowly. "We already covered the issue of flesh memories while Scrimgeour was in the room, and it seems pretty likely that there's something inside that Snitch Dumbledore gave you. The book—well, I don't know what he put in the book, I haven't had a chance to look it through properly…” she looked helplessly at Ron. "As for the Deluminator, as far as I know, it's just supposed to turn lights on… and off…”

"Wait," Ron said, suddenly looking excited. "There's something secret in the Snitch, and probably
something hidden in that book. There might be something else to the Deluminator, too!"

"So our only clue is that all three objects might have something secret in them?" Hermione said skeptically.

Ron's face fell. "That is bloody unhelpful."

Harry appeared to be thinking. "D'you lot remember my first Quidditch match?" Seeing the blank faces he got in response, he pressed, "This is the first Snitch I ever caught. Remember how?"

Ron's face suddenly brightened. "That's the one you nearly swallowed!"

"Exactly," Harry said. And without another word, he pressed the snitch to his lips. Hermione and Ron quickly leaned forward to look at it when he pulled it away, as though suddenly expecting something to happen. At first, nothing appeared to—and Harry lowered the snitch looking bitterly disappointed, when Hermione suddenly saw something appear on the sides.

"Wait—writing! There's writing on it—look!"

Harry nearly dropped the snitch in surprise, fumbling with it as he turned it over in his hands, the words gleaming on the engraved surface, in thin, slanted handwriting that Hermione immediately recognized as Dumbledore's. The brilliant, dotty old man.

_I open at the close._

They had barely registered the words when they vanished, leaving the surface as smooth and unblemished as before, and the three of them just as confused, if not more so. They repeated the process, first in consideration, and then in an attempt to get the snitch to reveal more—but the snitch remained unyielding. They could wring no more from it, and frustrated, they set it aside for the moment.

"And the sword," Ron said finally, sitting down on Harry's bed as they abandoned their attempts on the snitch. It flittered about the room again now, dipping here and there. "Why did he want Harry to have the sword?"

"Oh, Ron, isn't it obvious?" Hermione said, looking exasperated. At Harry and Ron's blank looks, she said, "The Sword of Gryffindor is Goblin-wrought. Don't you two know anything about Goblins?"

"Well, yeah," Ron said. "They can do magic without a wand, stuff wizards can't do. They're really secretive about it, though, they don't share with us."

"But the properties!" Hermione exclaimed, sitting up straighter. "The properties of Goblin-made artifacts are unique—they only imbibe that which makes them stronger, and repel all else!"

At Harry and Ron's continued looks of complete incomprehension, she finally snapped, "The Basilisk, Harry! You killed a Basilisk in your second year, and destroyed Riddle's diary with one of its fangs. The fangs were soaked in venom, but now the sword is too!"

Harry's eyes suddenly lit up. "The sword is imbued with Basilisk venom, and if that can destroy Horcruxes—that's it!" he said, sitting up. "Dumbledore wanted us to have the sword to destroy Horcruxes with! But..." he trailed off. "We haven't a clue where it is now, do we?"

"D'you reckon Dumbledore knew the Ministry would confiscate his will?" Ron prompted. "I mean, it seems pretty obvious, doesn't it? He couldn't tell us directly in the will, but if that sword's made for
killing Horcruxes, he wanted us to know that even if the Ministry couldn't just pretend to be good enough blokes and hand it over to us." He looked thoughtful. "Dumbledore just gave us a valuable clue, didn't he? Just five minutes ago, we hadn't the foggiest how to destroy a horcrux, even if we got our hands on one, but now—"

"But now we need to find the sword," Harry said, looking eager. "It's at Hogwarts. We could probably ask Professor McGonagall, I'm sure she'd give it to us."

"Alright," Hermione said. "That's one obstacle down—but that still leaves us with three things that we have no clue what to do with."

The three of them looked at each other, as though hoping for divine inspiration. At that moment, the floorboards downstairs creaked, and they all sat up in alarm.

"That's probably just Charlie, sneaking off to regrow his hair…" Ron said nervously. Molly had insisted on 'trimming' it earlier, much to her second-eldest son's chagrin.

"All the same, we'd better get to bed," Hermione said, rising to her feet. "It wouldn't do to oversleep."

"No," Ron agreed, clicking the Deluminator, and dousing the lights once more. "A brutal triple-murder by the bridegroom's mother might put a bit of a damper on the wedding. Come to think of it," he added quietly, as Hermione left the room. "She might even throw Pig in. No sense in wasting a good opportunity to get rid of him, the feathery git."

Pigwidgeon hooted dolefully from the rafters, twittering obnoxiously, causing Hedwig to give him a beady stare before gliding over to the other side of the room.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Chapter Forty

Please be warned that part-way through this chapter, the POV changes.

Wrackspurts and chocolate frogs for the win. :) 

Edit: I cannot believe how scatterbrained I am. While re-reading this chapter, I realized that part of it had been cut-off. I do not know why. I do not know how. All I know is that I am rushing to paste the missing part in before too many people see it. What is wrong with me?

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review!

Four o'clock the following afternoon found the wedding well underway. Almost all of the guests had arrived, although the appearance of the infamous Muriel Weasely Hermione had heard so much about was a bit of a nightmare, to be honest. The woman had an opinion to broadcast about everyone and everything, and no filter or tact to speak of.

"You look great!" Ron said, looking rather startled when Hermione reappeared in the marquee. "I wasn't expecting—wow."

"Always the tone of surprise," Hermione said dryly, though she was smiling. "Your Great-Aunt Muriel doesn't agree, I just met her upstairs while she was giving Fleur the tiara. She said, 'Oh dear, is this the Muggle-born?' followed closely by a comment on my skinny ankles and bad posture."

"Don't take it personally, she's rude to everyone," Ron said with a shake of his head. "You should hear her go on about my freckles."

"Talking about Muriel?" George inquired, emerging from the marquee with Fred at his side. "She just commented that my nose seemed to be off-center—or maybe my ears. She didn't really seem to be able to tell the difference."

"Bad eyesight," Fred said, nodding sagely. "I wish old Uncle Bilius was still with us, though; he was a right laugh at weddings."

"Wasn't he the one who saw a Grim and died twenty-four hours later?" Hermione asked, frowning slightly.

"Well, yeah, he went a bit odd toward the end," George conceded.

"But before he went loopy he was the life and soul of the party," Fred said, grinning. "He used to down an entire bottle of firewhisky, then run onto the dance floor, hoist up his robes, and start pulling bunches of flowers out of his—"

"Yes, he sounds like a real charmer," Hermione said, not wanting to contemplate this disturbing anecdote any further. Harry, on the other hand, was roaring with laughter.

"Never married for some reason," Ron said off-handedly.

"You amaze me," Hermione said with an apostrophic roll of her eyes toward the tent ceiling, but she was giggling despite herself.
And then they all burst into laughter. Hermione was still snickering when a lone latecomer arrived, and she turned around in time to see a dark-haired young man who was oddly familiar, and who Hermione only had three or four seconds to recognize—

"Viktor!" she exclaimed, dropping the beaded bag she was carrying with her and hugging the Bulgarian Quidditch Player. Ron picked it up, hefting it with a look of disbelief on his face at how heavy it was, and then shrugged and shoved it toward Harry, who took it while throwing his best friend a look that said very clearly *what do you expect me to do with it?* Hermione backed away quickly after a moment, blushing. "I didn't know you were—goodness—it's lovely to see—how are you?"

"Fine," Viktor said, smiling down at her as he handed Ron his invitation. "You look vunderful."

"How come you're here?" Ron asked, checking the invitation over and looking rather suspiciously at their guest.

"Fleur invited me," Viktor said, eyebrows raised. Hermione simply could not help herself, as she mentally sized him up and compared him to Severus. The two were so alike that sometimes, it was not difficult for her to wonder if she had been attracted to Viktor purely because he shared so many of the same characteristics that she would later find attractive in the man she married. But she was still very glad to see him; they wrote to each other on occasion, and remained good friends. He was the only person outside the Order who was aware that Hermione had a son, and he occasionally asked after him.

"I'll show you your seat," Harry said quickly. He was disguised as a Weasley cousin, which meant Krum would not recognize him, but he seemed to think it prudent to get the Bulgarian Quidditch Player out of Ron's vicinity. The two of them disappeared, leaving Hermione alone with Ron.

"Come on, we'd better get to our seats…"

The wedding went off without a hitch, and after Hermione congratulated the happy couple, she managed to find a moment to talk with Viktor semi-privately, joining him at a table that had not yet been filled up with curious people and Quidditch fans, all of whom seemed eager to meet the famous Seeker.

"You change every time I see you," Viktor commented, stirring his glass. "First, at the Quidditch World Cup, to sign your poster. Then at Hogwarts, where there were two of you—one not yet grown, and one already there. And here…"

Hermione laughed. "Now I'm rather stuck in-between, aren't I?"

Viktor shook his head. "You are a mystery." He paused, and then lowered his voice. "Your husband… did he really…"

Hermione shook her head. "I can't talk about it."

"I hardly believe it," Viktor said quietly. "When I first met him, he did not seem…" he trailed off.

"You don't think he did it, I suppose?" Hermione asked dully. "Suppose he's been framed?"

Viktor shook his head. "There were too many witnesses," he said. "But there is something strange about the way it was done. Too… flawless, yes? Too smooth."

Hermione stared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"
Viktor shrugged. "In Quidditch, I would be thinking that someone had just Confunded the ref-ree, because he called the wrong play. This does not seem much different. Whether your husband did it or not, I am thinking there is more to it than what meets the eye." He looked at Hermione. "Dumbledore was a brilliant man. A great man. I liked him very much. It is difficult to believe he died as easily as they say he did."

They brooded in silence for a moment, each unsure of what to say, when Viktor finally said, "I haff also had the… displeasure of meeting that man over there," he said, gesturing at a tall man in yellow. "Veasley and one of his cousins explained that he does not know what the symbol he is wearing around his neck is. I am wondering if you do."

Hermione squinted at Xenophilius Lovegood's neck, and shook her head. "I don't…" she said slowly.

"You do not know what that is?"

Hermione wracked her head for some clue, and shook it in negation. "I don't think I've ever even seen it before," she said honestly.

Viktor stared at the blond man with intense, pugnacious dislike as he answered, "He is wearing Grindelvald's sign upon his chest. It is carved into a vall at Durmstrang, he put it there when he was a student. I would recognize it anywhere."

"Grindelwald…" Hermione said slowly. "He's the Dark Wizard Dumbledore defeated years ago, didn't he?"

"Exactly."

Hermione shook her head. "I've never heard of it before in my life, and I'm pretty sure Mr. Lovegood hasn't either. That sign probably isn't all that well known in Wizarding Britain." She sat staring at Xenophilius Lovegood's neck for a moment, vaguely thinking somewhere that the symbol should be familiar to her, but she could not quite place it.

"Do you know where the sign originated from?" she asked, hoping it would jog her memory.

Viktor shook his head.

"Grindelvald may have lifted it off somewhere else," Viktor said. "It vhas probably a symbol of power that he came across and decided he vhanted to use. But what symbol or from where, I do not know."

He looked at the symbol once more.

"All I know is that man over there vears the symbol of Grindelvald, and were he not a guest, I would challenge him to a duel," he said, scowling.

~o~O~o~

"I simply can't dance anymore," Hermione said later, pulling up a chair beside Harry and fanning herself. She had the time of her life back there, but now she was dead on her feet. "Ron's gone looking to find more butterbeers. I managed to convince Viktor not to confront Luna's father, he looked rather like he wanted to… thankfully, he—" she broke off, looking at Harry, whose face seemed both strained and depleted of energy. "Harry? Are you all right?"

Harry shook his head. He opened his mouth to speak, but quickly shut it as something large and silver suddenly fell through the canopy above, gliding gracefully down to the floor. The lynx
gleamed brightly as it landed in the middle of the astonished dancers, some of whom seemed for a moment to think that this was part of the entertainment, until it opened its mouth wide and spoke in the deep, slow voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."

Hermione immediately jumped to her feet, wand at the ready, as the rest of the crowd took a moment to register this. Heads were still turning, people were slowly either stopping their conversations or dances, and the murmur of interested voices quickly gave way to rising panic as the message began to sink in. And then all hell broke loose, guests were running every which way, and Harry was jumping to his feet.

"I'll find Ron!" he shouted, disappearing into the terrified, near-stampeding crowd as they poured out from the tent, trying to get away as quickly as possible. Hermione had no time to stop him, and frantically scrambled around for her purse. But at that moment, she could not remember when she last had it. It had dropped when Viktor arrived, but Ron or Harry had picked it up, she could not remember which—

Buffeted by the crowd, Hermione was pushed outside the tent. She forced herself to remain calm, scanning the crowd as people rushed out, trying to catch sight of Harry or Ron. Cloaked and masked figures had appeared, and everyone who was in the Order had their wands out and on the defensive—

"Stupefy!" Hermione screamed, aiming at the first Death Eater in her line of view. He slid to the ground, and was immediately lost beneath the pounding feet. A moment later, she caught sight of Remus and Tonks, and sprinted over to join them.

"Remus!" she gasped, catching up with them. "Where's Harry and Ron?"

"Weren't they with you?" Tonks answered, looking frightened. "I thought they were with you!"

"No, I was with Harry, and then he went to find Ron—" Hermione broke off and aimed her wand at another masked figure that had Apparated less than twenty feet away from them, hitting him with another Stunner. "I don't know where they are!"

"We'll find them," Remus assured her, but his expression was grim. "Hermione, get inside and hide—"

"What? No, I have to find—"

"They're looking for Harry, and if they can't find him, they'll go after you and Ron!" Remus said angrily. "You can't be here!"

He was right. With a final duck and dodge, Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and Disapparated away.

~o~O~o~

Hermione remained pacing in the kitchen of Tine Cottage for several hours, desperately awaiting some form of news to reassure her that Harry and Ron had been found, and that everyone else was all right. Selenius had taken one look at his mother's pale, frantic face, and demanded to know what had happened.

And so Hermione told him. There was no point in keeping it from him. The Ministry had fallen—nowhere was safe if you were relying on the Ministry's laws for protection. She did not dare send a
Patronus, not until she heard from them first. Three sleepless nights passed with three unread *Daily Prophet* papers neatly stacked on the table, until Hermione could handle it no more, and finally opened them.

What she saw sickened her.

*Muggle-Born Register... Harry Potter wanted for questioning... Attendance at Hogwarts now compulsory...

School started in three weeks. As Hermione read further, she felt an odd pit of relief in her stomach as she realized that a student would only need to prove that they had at least one magical descendent. With Selenius's disguise, he would be safe—perfectly safe—

Her musings were interrupted by a wisp of silver bursting through the kitchen window, and Hermione jumped back in surprise as it solidified into the same, gleaming form as the lynx that had warned them all four days ago.

"*Harry and Ron safe, Burrow being watched, do not come out of hiding.*"

It melted away a moment later, and Hermione stood there, feeling an immense sense of relief. And then there was a knock on the door, which startled her out of her reverie so badly that she screamed.

"Hermione, it's me!" Remus's voice floated through. "Open up!"

Hermione quickly pressed a hand against the door, wand at the ready. "Prove it!"

"I am Remus John Lupin, werewolf, sometimes known as Moony, one of the four creators of the Marauder's Map," Remus said firmly, "and when you first came to Hogwarts in my sixth year, I comforted you on the floor of the Gryffindor Common Room while you cried."

"Oh, all right," Hermione said shakily, opening the door with relief as she let her friend in. "I'm sorry, but it's just—you gave me quite a fright…"

"Perfectly understandable," Remus said, closing the door behind him. "I just thought I would stop by and let you know that Harry and Ron are at Grimmauld Place. They were frantic with worry about you, so you might want to send them a Patronus to let them know you're fine."

Hermione breathed in deeply, letting the tension flow from her body as immense relief seeped in. "Thank merlin."

"They also told me to tell you that they found the real locket," Remus said, frowning as he took a seat at the kitchen table. "And that they've got your beaded bag. Ron said to thank you specifically for packing his toothbrush, by the way."

Hermione pressed a hand to her mouth to suppress a smile. Crookshanks, who had been sleeping in front of the window on top of the counter, yawned and stretched, blinking sleepily at them. "Right."

"Also…" Remus hesitated. "Arthur said he won't be able to take Selenius to the train. It took me three days to shake off the Death Eater that was trailing me, and the Burrow is being watched."

"Shite," Hermione breathed.

"I don't think Selenius could go anyway," Remus said, looking uncertain. "You've read the paper, haven't you? They require proof of at least one magical relative—"
"We've already taken care of that," Hermione said. "But I can't be seen taking him, and now…"

Remus stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I thought it might be possible to ask Fred and George," he suggested quietly.

"What?" Hermione exclaimed. "No! They don't know about him—or about my situation, even—besides," she added, "why them?"

"Because they've done a splendid job of knocking out the Death Eater that was trailing them," Remus said. "It was actually how I managed to eventually do it. They're smart and sneaky, they'd have no trouble getting Selenius in there and then getting themselves out."

"But…" Hermione protested.

"I can speak to them if you want," Remus said quickly. "I'll explain everything—"

"No," Hermione said.

"Hermione—"

"I said no, Remus!" Hermione snapped. "The more people we let in on this secret, the more likely it'll be given up! And then—and then—" She couldn't bring herself to say it, because even at this level, Remus wasn't supposed to know. But if Voldemort found out, then Severus's life would be forfeit.

"Hermione," Remus said firmly, "Fred and George are as trustworthy as any of us. If we explain to them, I'm sure they'll be willing to keep it secret, and help—"

"And what if they're not?" Hermione said coldly.

Remus stared levelly at her.

"Then we'll Obliviate them."

Hermione wavered for a moment, and then slumped down into a chair.

"Wouldn't it be possible to just… tell them enough to get them to help, but not everything?" she asked. "They don't have to know its Severus…"

"I can do that," Remus promised.

He left shortly after, and Hermione found herself putting Dobby out of work by making dinner herself, working at the counter as the last rays of sunlight filtered through the window. The fire-lit lamp that hung by it glowed, adding warm light to the room, and Hermione found herself gazing off into the distance as she mulled over Remus's words. Remus had not said it, but it was clear that he thought she was treating everyone with an undeserved amount of suspicion.

Her shoulders slumped. Had she been keeping secrets for so long that when it was time to let them unravel just a bit, she couldn't bring herself to do it? True, Fred and George were pranksters, and had acted irresponsibly in the past, but when it came down to it, they were on the ball and held fast just like everyone else.

She peered at her reflection in the window.

And when you first came to Hogwarts in my sixth year, I comforted you on the floor of the Gryffindor Common Room while you cried.
Gods, how long ago that seemed! She had been a different person then, yet that was where the pile of secrets had started to grow with alarming speed.

Her ring suddenly burned, and she yanked her hand up to her eyes so she could see it.

*Where are you?*

Hermione hesitated for a moment, and then wrote, *Safe.* He could be writing this under duress, with Voldemort commanding him to contact her.

There was a pause, and then the words melted away and were erased with, *and Selenius?*

Hermione felt relief. He would not have written this if the Dark Lord had been watching.

*With me,* she wrote.

*Good,* came the reply. *Potter and Weasley?*

*We got separated. I need to contact them.*

Her words hung there for a full minute, and then sank away with no response. Deciding that he must have gotten what he had contacted her for, Hermione lifted her wand, and tried to think of a happy memory. Despite the situation at hand, it was not too difficult. She drew out a long-buried memory of Gryffindor Tower raucously celebrating a Quidditch victory, with the marauders making themselves the life of the party, their laughter and cheer outrageously infectious—

"*Expecto Patronum!*

A large, furry form burst forth from her wand, laid itself out supinely, and then got to its feet and lunged forward, disappearing into the door. Hermione stared at it for a moment, utterly dumbfounded; she had not cast a Patronus in years, as there had been no reason to, but it had obviously changed. It had gone before she had time to get a good look at it, though.

Either way, she hoped Harry and Ron would realize that it was her. She would wait for a response from them, some kind of affirmation, and then try to find them. So far, it seemed they had found a safe haven at Grimmauld Place and located the Locket, which was an enormous achievement in less than a week's worth of work, in Hermione's estimation. They were already off to a good start.

~o~O~o~

It was a full week before Hermione received any form of reply. A large, silver stag burst through her kitchen window, as seemed to be the local fashion for Patroni, and came to a stop in the middle of the kitchen, pawing at the stone floor with a proud look about it, shaking its magnificently-antlered head as it spoke.

"*Sorry it took so long to respond!*" Harry's voice said apologetically, and a little louder than necessary. It was like the time Ron had tried calling Harry's house using a Muggle phone. "*It took us a few tries to figure out how to send messenger Patroni—that's what Ron says they're called, anyway. Also, your Patronus has changed, did you know that?*" Hermione shook her head in exasperation, and Harry continued, "*That aside, we're at Grimmauld Place right now, and we've figured out where the Locket is. Getting it is going to be a real problem, though. There are Death Eaters watching the house, so I don't know whether you can get in or not, but if you think you can, please come. We're glad you're safe—we were really worried. And there's loads more to tell you.*"

At long last, the stag closed its mouth, gave Hermione a final, piercing look, and melted away.
Hermione stood there, snorting with laughter. She had never heard anyone make such a wordy message for a Patronus in her life. Nevertheless, with every word, her sense of relief had mounted, and now she once again felt ready, free to take action with a direction. She knew where they were, and they were expecting her.

When she Apparated on the doorstep of Grimmauld Place, she quickly slipped inside, and had shut the door behind her with such speed that she had only had just a moment to glimpse the cloaked figures hanging about in front of the house. Selenius had been left at home alone with Dobby to look after him and strict orders not to leave the house. She had not taken more than a few steps inside when she heard Moody's voice whisper hoarsely out of the darkness.

"Severus Snape?"

Hermione jumped back in alarm, wand out and at the ready, when something whooshed over her like cold draft. For a moment, she felt the sickening sensation of her tongue rolling itself up, and then it vanished, leaving her with a slight sense of nausea. She did not have much time to recover; a dusty figure raised itself from the carpet, and Hermione stared in horror as the wasted figure raised a hand at her. She recognized the curse immediately, backpedalling as it advanced on her.

"I—I didn't kill you—" she stammered.

On the word kill, the dust-composed corpse-like figure exploded. Hermione hesitated for a moment, and raised her wand, expecting more, when she heard a voice calling from upstairs—

"Blimey—Hermione, is that you?"

"Down here, Ron!" Hermione said, relieved, as Ron appeared on the landing above, squinting down at her through the dust. Hermione quickly ascended the stairs, following Ron into the Drawing Room, where she saw Harry sitting in one of the chairs. He looked up when he saw her, and his expression immediately brightened.

"Hermione!" he said, standing up immediately and pulling her into a hug. "Thank goodness—I wasn't sure if our Patronus actually worked!"

"Trust me, it worked," Hermione said dryly, setting down the bag she had brought with her. "How have you been?"

"Going stir-crazy," Ron admitted, coming up behind her and pulling her into a hug. "Come check out what we found—come on—"

"Wait, aren't you going to tell me about the Locket—"

"That can come later," Harry said, directing her to the next floor. "We found something else."

Hermione had no choice but to follow them, as the boys led her up the stairs, and stopped her in front of one of the bedrooms. Ron tapped the fancy-looking sign on one of the door in front of them, looking excited. Hermione had seen it before, and merely pressed her lips.

"Regulus Arcturus Black," she repeated. "Yes, Ron, I know. He was Sirius's younger brother."

"Not just his brother," Harry said excited. "R. A. B. The locket, remember?"

Hermione startled for a moment as she realized Harry was right. The fake locket had been signed by someone named R.A.B—but—
"Harry, how can you be sure—" she began.

"We asked Kreacher," Harry replied. "He confirmed it."

Hermione gave him a skeptical, concerned look. "You'd trust Kreacher's word on this?"

"Well, normally, no," Ron admitted, glancing at Harry, "but over the last four days, there's been a bit of a… a reconciliation."

Hermione's eyebrows rose to her hairline.

"Do tell," she said.

They did. It was a lot to absorb, admittedly, but the earnest, excited expressions on the boys' faces could only convince Hermione that they were telling the truth. It shocked her how with just a single act—that was to say, presenting Regulus's locket to Kreacher—he had managed to repair several years' worth of bad blood between himself and the house elf. Yet, when Harry called Kreacher to him, the house elf was positively cordial, bowing as low to the ground as his snout-like nose would let him, and eagerly asking Harry if there was anything he needed done.

It was Harry's response, however, that highlighted it for her. Kreacher had finally responded to the olive branch offered to him, but the way Harry framed his requests was just as polite, friendly even, as he had ever done with Dobby. Kreacher disappeared with a loud crack as soon as Harry had asked if he would be willing to make tea for the three of them, and then Harry rapped on the door of Regulus's room, drawing her attention back to it.

"Like we said, we found R.A.B," Harry said, as Ron wandered down the hall, over to the next door, which was no doubt labeled with Sirius's name. "And we know where the locket is."

"You've told me that several times," Hermione said slowly, "but you haven't actually said where it is."

Harry hesitated, and then spilled it out.

"Umbridge," he said.

Hermione's jaw set at this, and she was about to respond when Ron interrupted from the other end of the corridor.

"Hey, guys… look at this."

Harry immediately went to join Ron's side, but Hermione stopped short the moment she realized what Ron was looking at. They were parked in front of the door at the end of the hallway, a door which was normally rendered invisible and unimportant to observers, but which was now plainly, clearly, visible. It only took Hermione a moment to realize why; the door registered the presence of those who knew it was there, and then made itself plain to observers. It had mistakenly materialized itself due to Hermione's presence.

"It looks like a closet," Harry said, unconcerned.

"Yeah, but I haven't seen it here before, and trust me, I've spent more time wandering through this house in the past few days than I care to remember," Ron said, with the merest trace of a grumble. He tried the handle. "And it's locked."

Hermione wrung her hands, and then regained control over herself, and stiffened. "If we don't know
what's in there, maybe we shouldn't—" she began.

"We cleaned this house inside-out back in fifth year," Harry said, pulling out his wand. "I'm not expecting a doxy attack." He tapped the knob. "Alohamora!"

There was an audible click, and Ron tried the knob again. Hermione trailed behind, helplessly, as they pushed open the door to Selenius's old room.

The first thing Ron said was, "Bloody hell."

Hermione could see why he would say that. From Harry and Ron's perspectives, they had just walked into something completely and utterly unexpected.

The room had not changed at all since Hermione had last seen it. She lingered in the doorway for a moment, and then slipped inside after the boys, hoping to salvage the situation. But really, there was nothing she could do. And, from first glance, there was also nothing immediately incriminating. There was the four-poster bed with its plain and simple coverlet, unmade as Selenius had left it. The handkerchief blanket Hagrid had given him, however, was still there. The pictures still lined up on the wall, moving and smiling, and Hermione saw Harry lean in closer for a better look as Ron poked around the room.

"Hey, check this out!" Ron said, picking up the miniature figure of Viktor Krum, and then pulling a pair of Omnioculars off the shelves. "We got this stuff from the Quidditch World Cup, too—" he turned around to look at Hermione. "Blimey, you don't think…"

"Hey," Harry said quietly.

"I don't know," Hermione said, uncertainly.

"I mean, whoever was here obviously was at the World Cup, I haven't seen this stuff sold anywhere else—and whoa," Ron said, tugging a notebook off the shelf and opening it. "This guy was nuts—you'd like him, Hermione, he's about as crazy for Arithmancy as you are…"

"Guys," Harry said louder.

"What?" Ron and Hermione asked in unison.

"Look at this."

Hermione went to join Harry, her eyes landing upon the photos on the wall with growing dread. Harry had placed his finger on the picture of Hermione and Severus in the staff room, with Selenius in Hermione's arms.

"That's him," Harry said. "It looks exactly like him. That's the toddler I saw in my first year."

"You're worried about the toddler?" Ron asked, looking distinctly ill. "Look at Snape."

"And the woman," Harry said eagerly, trailing his fingers along the wall. "That's my godmother. I recognize her."

Ron peered closer. "Hey, Hermione—"

"Yes, I know," Hermione snapped, pretending to be more interested in the photos than she actually was. "She looks just like me."

"Well…" Ron grinned. "Actually, I was going to say you're prettier, but okay. Her hair's neater,
though." He cocked his head to the side. "Although you have to admit that the resemblance is uncanny… you wouldn't happen to have an evil sister that we don't know about?"

Hermione elbowed him, smiling with something akin to relief. "Very funny."

Harry, on the other hand, was not laughing. His fingers trailed first from one photo, then the other, and then back and forth between them. His lips were moving, as though he were talking something over with himself, and Ron goggled at the picture of Severus smiling once more before turning around for another go at the shelves.

Finally, he turned around to look at Hermione.

"I was right," he said. "I knew it. My godmother's married to Snape, and that," he added, tapping the only motionless picture of the lot, pointing to Selenius, "is their son. But…" he trailed off.

"But what?" Hermione asked.

Harry chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, and then said, "I didn't know they were so close." Seeing the look of confusion on her face, he amended, "Sirius and my godmother—and look at their kid, Sirius and Remus… this had to have been taken in our fifth year… and here he is, with Fang, in Hagrid's hut…"

"Is he riding Sirius?" Ron asked, nodding toward the picture of Selenius hanging onto a big, black dog. The Remus in the photo was quickly ducking out of the way as he barreled past. "I thought first-years were small, but that kid's tiny."

"Ron!" Hermione chided.

"Well, he is!"

"You don't seem that bothered," Harry said. His voice sounded strange, like he was having a hard time breathing.

"Look," Ron said, setting the Omnioculars down and turning to look at Harry, "we've known about this for years, haven't we? We've suspected it, anyway. I admit that picture of Snape over there is kind of creepy—I always thought that if he ever really smiled, his face would crack in two—but we've found a link to your godmother, haven't we? Isn't that what you wanted?"

Harry did not seem convinced. "Yeah, but…" he struggled to express himself. "I mean, what was she doing here? In this house? This whole time?"

"Hiding, would be my guess," Ron said, now going through Selenius's carefully-organized bookcase. "Snape probably kept him here. Or your godmother. Maybe she lived here with Sirius while he was in hiding, she would have brought the kid along— ah-hah!" he said triumphantly. "Found it!"

"What?" Harry demanded.

"His name's Selenius Tacitus Snape," Ron said, holding up the notebook he had been looking through. "Kid signs his name in all his books."

"Selenius," Harry repeated, as though trying the word out. Ron's words seemed to have finally gotten through to him, and he had calmed down, and was now looking around the room with more curiosity than horror. In truth, Hermione had expected Ron to be the one to lose his head, and she had even half-expected to be recognized. But Ron had prevailed this round, and was bringing Harry
with him. "That's a bit of an odd name, don't you think?"

"The Selenius star system," Hermione could not help remind them, as she looked up once more at the picture of Selenius racing alongside Sirius on the beach near Tine Cottage before pulling the covers of the bed back and straightening them out. "We learned that in Astronomy. And the root of the name refers to a lunar deity in Greek mythology."

"His mum must've really liked star-gazing," Ron guessed.

Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him. "It's a common name in old wizarding families, Ron."

Harry did not reply. He stood beside the bed, staring silently up at the photos, still taking them in. Hermione had gone to Selenius's desk, and almost out of habit, began straightening it up. Ron was still looking through the books, passing over the equations and reading whatever had been legibly written in them. Hermione sat there, chewing on her lower lip, looking thoughtful and worried as Harry and Ron went through the relics of what had been her son's life. She could see the gears practically whirring in Harry's head, trying to piece some parts of the puzzle together, while Ron seemed to enjoy fiddling with Selenius's things. He immediately recognized Hagrid's work in the thestral carving, and spent several minutes tracing his fingers along one of the wings before picking up the small hat covered in pink feathers that hung on the thestral's head.

"Hey," he said, lifting it off the carving, "these are one of Fred and George's Headless Hats." Three bars of chocolate suddenly fell out of it, thunking to the floor, and Ron picked them up. "And Honeydukes. This kid is lucky—completely loaded with goods." He looked around the room with something akin to admiration and jealousy, and with a stab, Hermione remembered that Ron had rarely gotten anything more than hand-me-downs, with five older brothers before him.

"Wonder when he's coming back," Harry mused aloud.

Ron shook his head, waving the chocolate. "Doubtful. This stuff's old. Anyway, if Snape's kid was living here before Dumbledore died, it's pretty obvious that he's not here now. Snape probably took him away."

"Or my godmother," Harry said quietly.

Hermione finally spoke up.

"Harry," she said quietly, "I know you want to find out more about your godmother, but... we have something else to deal with first." Harry gave her a blank look. "Horcruxes, remember?"

Ron let out a sigh. "She's right, mate. We can always look through this stuff later. Anyway," he said, getting to his feet and unpeeling the chocolate and tasting it to see if it was still good, "we haven't told Hermione how we're planning on getting that locket from Umbridge."

"Oh," Harry said, finally pulling himself away from the photos on the wall. "Right."

There was a sudden crack in the doorway, and they all looked.

"Kreacher has the master's tea ready in the Drawing Room, with biscuits," Kreacher said, bowing, "when master and his friends is ready."

"Thanks, Kreacher," Harry said.

~o~O~o~
They were all finally caught up to speed. Hermione left shortly after, promising to bring back food to stock the house with, and Disapparated back to Tine Cottage. She made it a habit to sleep over once or twice a week at Grimmauld Place as August wore on and they spent more time actively planning and discussing not just how to infiltrate the Ministry, but also what the other Horcruxes might be and where to find them. Harry and Ron were under the impression that she was staying with the Order, which they thought was a good idea.

It was in the second week that Hermione received a Patronus message from Remus, telling her where to meet them. Hermione Apparated to the indicated location, which was a rather nondescript stretch of woods. What she found there, however, was rather shocking; there was a small tent with a kind of antenna poking out from the top, and when Remus invited her inside, what she saw made her jaw drop. Aside from the camp beds strewn around the tent, there was a strange set-up of wires and odd pieces of flesh-colored string criss-crossed around the room, all hooked up to what looked like a microphone. It was so messy that Hermione had to step over and under each string very carefully in order to get inside without knocking anything over.

From the ceiling, hung an owl cage. Hedwig was perched on top of one of the luggage racks stacked in the corner, and when she saw Hermione, let out a low hoot of greeting and glided down onto her arm. Hermione stroked her neck, smiling, before looking up at the twins.

"Hey," Fred said, looking up from where he was kneeling beside one of the pieces of flesh-colored string. "Welcome to the headquarters of Potterwatch. I see you've met our mascot, by the way."

"Potterwatch?" Hermione asked blankly.

"It's an underground Wizarding News Network that Lee Jordan designed," Remus explained, as he took a seat on one of the mattresses. "Fred and George are working with him." He reached out with two fingers to stroke Hedwig's beak. "Hedwig's staying with them for now, since it's not safe at the Burrow. We can't have any sign that Harry's left anything behind that he might come back for, so we brought her here for a bit."

Hedwig ruffled her feathers at this and closed her eyes, looking surprisingly content on Hermione's arm.

"We have to hijack the news station to make it let us in, and put in a password so that the enemy can't listen to our broadcasts easily, but it's bloody brilliant," George said, appearing behind Hermione. "Next password's 'Mad-Eye'. Don't forget to tell Harry and Ron."

"Anyway," Fred said, his expression suddenly serious, "Remus told us that you're in a bit of a bind."

"A rather bizarre one, too."

Hermione looked at Remus, who was shaking his head.

"I told them," he said. "They still can't believe you didn't tell anyone else about the time-turner accident."

Fred waved a hand. "It's not just the time-turner, Moony, my friend. It's the fact that she went back in time twenty years, and returned to this time with a kid and a husband. If that's not shock-worthy, I don't know what is."

"You'll forgive us for our heart attacks," George said, smiling. "I mean, it is hard to match up Miss Goody Two-Shoes with the Order's Right-Hand, isn't it?"

Hermione rounded on Remus. "What did you tell them?" she demanded.
"I explained a bit about what you did in the first war," Remus said calmly. "They needed a bit of context."

"But—" Hermione began.

"Look," Fred interrupted. "Whatever you did, we know a good bit of it now, at least enough to give us an idea."

"But no worries, because we're still going to help you," George said with a wink. "Besides, I owe you for my ear. If it hadn't been for you, when they finally make a statue in my honor, they'd have to name me something like George the Holey."

"And we couldn't have that, could we, Gred?" Fred said, looping an arm over his twin's shoulder.

"Not at all, Forge."

Hermione stared at the two of them.

"You'll do it?" she said at last. "You'll help Selenius?"

"Yes, they will," Remus said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "And more importantly, they've promised to keep it secret."

Hermione bowed her head.

"Alright," she said softly. "Thank you."

She was surprised, yet gratified, when Remus pulled her into an embrace. Hermione returned it, giving him a friendly squeeze.

"I always told you everyone in Gryffindor would be your friend if you let them," Remus said gently.

Hermione squeezed him even tighter, and then let go. "Yes," she whispered, emotion filling her voice. "You were right."

~o~O~o~

The morning of September first, Hermione took Selenius and his trunk to Fred and George's camp. He had just turned twelve the day before, and Molly had sent him a birthday cake and some presents collected from the Order members who knew him, but the celebration as a whole had been an understandably small affair. Introductions were properly made now, and while George shrank down his stuff, Fred looked down at Selenius, stroking his chin contemplatively for a moment, before his expression suddenly brightened.

"Ah-hah!" he exclaimed, sounding very much like Ron. "Now I remember where I knew you from — you were at Weasleys Wizard Wheezes. And," he said, looking up at Hermione, his face lighting up in realization, "you were with him—disguised, of course..."

"How do you remember me?" Selenius asked in disbelief.

"You're the only one whose mother would buy them ten galleons' worth of stuff at once," Fred said, grinning at Hermione. He placed a hand on Selenius's head, ruffling his hair. "Anyway, did you put them to good use? Please tell me you put them to good use."

"He's the reason your stuff was banned before term even started," Hermione said dryly. "I also have reason to believe your Reusable Hangman was making death threats to Mrs. Norris."
"Good," George said with an approving nod. He held out a hand to Selenius, as though to shake it. "Ready to go?"

Selenius nodded, and looked at his mother. Hermione looked as though she were fighting very hard not to cry, and it was Remus who seemed to be keeping her from doing so, by keeping a comforting hand on her shoulder. With another hand, George reached up for the owl cage hanging from the ceiling, unhooking it and lowering it to his side. The snowy owl inside ruffled her feathers and hooted softly, but made no protest.

"I'll see you for Christmas?" Selenius asked hopefully.

Hermione nodded, knowing she was lying to herself just as much.

Satisfied, he took George's hand. They stood there for a moment, and then there were two simultaneous, loud cracks of Apparition, and they had gone.

~o~O~o~

Selenius pushed his cart through the wall and onto Platform 9 ¾, with Fred and George flanking him on either side. A snowy owl hooted quietly from her cage, which rested atop her trunk. George had brought the owl—named Hedwig—with them, and said that he would be taking her with him. The owl was friendly enough, if a little stiff on reception, and Selenius had the vague sense that he had seen it before. George had not been quite straight with him on why he was taking this particular owl with him, but Selenius wasn't about to complain. The moment they were through, George immediately directed the cart over to the train, not giving Selenius a single moment to stop and take in the crowd around them. He hefted the luggage off the cart, and began loading it in while Fred grasped Selenius's shoulder and led him in the opposite direction.

"Right-o," he said, leading the way. "This is it."

"I was expecting more trouble," Selenius mumbled. It was not that he was disappointed, but rather that the whole operation was going smoothly had him feeling uneasy.

"So was I," Fred conceded, "but it looks like there aren't any of Voldy's henchmen hanging around here. Ready?" he asked, stopping at the door.

Selenius nodded.

"Remember what your mother said," Fred told him seriously. "Be good, stay out of trouble, remember your family tree…"

Selenius nodded again.

"And make sure to cause mischief every once in a while." Fred winked at him. "A little chaos every now and then is a good thing."

Selenius grinned at him. He liked the Weasley twins already. "Thanks."

"And please, do take good care of that owl."

He clambered on board, and found himself in the carriage corridor. It was crowded, with everyone trying to find an available compartment, or an empty one to reserve for their friends. He pushed his way through, poking his head into compartments here and there, trying to find a place to sit.

"Move—"
"Over here, this one's empty, let's go—"

"How was your summer?"

Now panicking slightly, wondering if there was even someplace left for him to sit, Selenius ducked forward hurriedly toward the back of the train, and promptly collided with one of the older students. He stumbled backward and looked up, and opened his mouth to apologize when he froze.

"Get out of my way," Draco Malfoy snapped, brushing past him. Selenius quickly righted himself, about to keep searching, when the older boy suddenly did a double-take and turned around.

"Wait, don't I know you—"

Selenius did not hesitate a moment longer. He dashed forward, bumping into several people, knocking things out of their hands as he pushed and shoved through, trying to lose himself in the crowd. Behind him, he heard some grunts and complaints as people tried to pick their things up, only to have them knocked out of their hands again as the older boy shoved them aside to go after him.

Not caring whether the compartment was already filled or not, but seeing that it was already part-way open, Selenius quickly ducked inside and slid it shut. The students he had just walked in on looked at him with bewildered expressions as he quickly looked around the compartment, looking for someplace to hide, and then dove underneath the seat. He saw the tall, round-faced boy look as though he were about to get up from his seat, but then the compartment door slid open again.

Selenius saw part of the blond's head poking in, but he did not seem to think to look down. A quick look, and he withdrew, though not before sneering at its other occupants. The compartment door slammed shut again. He stayed there for a moment, not daring to move a muscle, and then one of the other students got out of her seat. A pair of sneakered feet walked over toward him, and then a girl with blond hair knelt down next to him.

"You can come out, you know," she said. "There aren't any wrackspurts left, but you might attract them if you stay down there for too long."

~o~O~o~

The train had begun to move steadily now, leaving Kings Cross behind. Selenius made himself comfortable on one of the seats near the window, staring out as the countryside blurred past them, and then turned to the three older students he was sharing the compartment with, sizing them up.

There was the round-faced seventh-year who had introduced himself as Neville Longbottom. The blond-haired girl from earlier was Luna Lovegood, and it had only taken Selenius roughly thirty seconds to assess that she was barking mad, if not outright loony. The red-haired girl, however, he recognized after a moment's pause; he had seen her before, and when he got her name, he immediately remembered where. He had seen pictures of Ginevra Weasley before, and of course Molly and Arthur had occasionally talked about their other kids within his earshot. The red hair and hazel eyes were unmistakable.

When Selenius had introduced himself, he had no inclination to tell them who his parents were; and when he merely identified himself as Selenius Black, and as a first-year, all three of them had shut up immediately. Except for Luna, but Ginny had shushed the girl when she opened her mouth to speak. Now they all sat in awkward silence, Selenius's legs dangling a few inches off the floor and swinging as the train moved, and all he could think of right now was how much he wished his mother had simply had him Floo to Hogwarts instead. This was destined to be a long trip, and from the looks of it, and unpleasant one.
He could have gotten up to find another compartment, but he felt he was better off in here than wandering the rest of the train. Draco might see him again. It was not that Selenius did not want to see him, because in truth, he had very much been looking forward to seeing him again—but the boy had met him before, and questions would be asked.

Selenius had not even been sorted yet. He did not know what house he would be in. He would need to find a way to salvage the situation before he saw Draco again. Perhaps he might even find a way to speak to his father for help—or, since he now had an owl, perhaps he would send a letter to his mother for advice.

He leaned forward on his knees, lost in thought. Suddenly, the dreamy-eyed blond waved her hand in front of his face, startling him.

"What?" he snapped.

"Wrackspurts," the older girl said simply. "They were starting to get a bit aggressive."

"Thanks," Selenius said insincerely.

"You're welcome."

The train rocked steadily beneath them, the only sound in the compartment other than the white noise filtering in from the corridors and other compartments. Selenius hesitated for a moment, and then looked up at the seventh-year Gryffindor sitting across him.

"How do we get Sorted?"

It had never occurred to him to ask his parents, which he now felt to be a bit of an oversight on his part, especially since they had both taught there. Surely they would know. But now he was riding off into the unknown, and already had a problem that needed planning to get around—Draco Malfoy—and if he at least had some idea of where he was going to go, he could get onto that as soon as possible.

"Oh," Neville said, sitting up quickly. "There's a Sorting Hat."

Selenius stared at him blankly.

"You put it on your head, and it kind of pokes around for a bit, to decide where to put you," the boy said. Judging by the unimpressed look on Selenius's face, it seemed he was doing a poor job of explaining it properly, because he hastily added, "It's a talking hat—sings a song when you guys get lined up in the Great Hall, and then you each try it on. It calls out the name of the house it chooses for you."

"How does it choose?" Selenius asked.

"W-well," Neville said, blustering a bit. "It—er, it sort of… I mean, each of the four houses value certain qualities over others, so the hat sort of puts you in the house you best fit in."

Selenius raised an eyebrow at him.

"And you're a Gryffindor?" he asked skeptically.

"Where dwell the brave at heart," Neville said, with an almost resigned sigh.

~o~O~o~
The food trolley had come and gone, when the Hogwarts Express came to an abrupt, screeching halt. The chocolate frog Selenius had been unwrapping hopped out of his hand and thunked against the window in a rather disturbing fashion from the force of the train's stop, and slid down a few inches, leaving a chocolate smear on the window. Ginny and Neville both looked alarmed, and as Selenius got up to scrape his would-be snack off the glass, he suddenly wondered if this was not part of the plan.

"Is this normal?" he asked, as the chocolate frog let out a faint croak. "For the train to stop?"

"No," Ginny said, getting to her feet and pulling out her wand. "We're not there yet—I don't know why we've stopped…"

"So this is—bad, right?" Selenius confirmed, a sinking feeling in his gut.

"I think so," Neville said, as he pulled out his wand as well.

Luna looked unconcerned. She set down her copy of the Quibbler, and looked out the window.

"Oh," she said, pointing. "They're here."

"What?" Selenius asked, peering through the pane. Dark figures had appeared outside the train and were approaching, all cloaked and wearing masks, and he could not make them out very well. It was too dark. Still, they were getting closer. Panic rose in his chest. "What—are they?"

Ginny leaned over toward the window, and then reeled back.

"Death Eaters," she exclaimed. "But how? I thought—"

She broke off as the sound of the train doors opening echoed through the corridor. And then without warning, the door to their compartment was quickly pulled wide. Selenius scrabbled backwards in surprise, and then fear, as he recognized the cowl of the Death Eaters. There were two of them, one leaning into their compartment, another at its back and looking at the compartment across the aisle. From the sounds of it, other compartments were being searched, too.

The grotesquely-masked head swiveled slowly, as though looking for something, and then withdrew. In a flash, Neville was after him, blocking the doorway with his body as he leaned his head out into the corridor.

"Hey, losers!"

At once, it seemed, the train went silent. Selenius could imagine every Death Eater in the coach had their attention on Neville, and if anything, he shrank back further against the window. The chocolate frog in his hands croaked pathetically.

"He isn't here."

The Death Eater who had disappeared a moment ago to search another compartment suddenly reappeared, wand pointed at Neville's temple. Selenius could see fury and disdain radiating from the eyes behind the holes in the mask.

"What did you say?" the Death Eater demanded roughly, dangerously.

Neville opened his mouth to speak.

The chocolate frog in Selenius's hands decided at that moment to make another bid for freedom; it
leapt away, soared past Neville's head, and landed with another sickening thunk on the Death Eater's face. The man let out an undignified half-scream, stumbling backward as the semi-sentient sweet frantically tried to get away. Alarm erupted in the corridors, and there were several jets of light as the other Death Eaters, not understanding what was happening, immediately started hexing the source of the commotion. The man slumped to the ground with a whimper.

The chocolate frog landed on the floor, and began to half-drag, half-hop away. Selenius sat there, not daring to breathe as it trailed away…

And a moment later, was crushed under the heel of another Death Eater's boot.

~o~O~o~

"Well," Selenius said finally, half an hour later, "I guess… that was probably the most exciting thing any chocolate frog's done in its life."

"I used to have a toad," Neville said miserably. "Trust me, he wasn't much better off."

The Death Eaters had finally left, taking their unconscious companion with them, and thoroughly assured that Harry Potter was indeed not on the train. They had been enraged to discover that the source of their troubles was nothing more than an over-excited snack from the food trolley, and combined with their disappointment that their target was not present, they seemed ready to start hexing the lot of them to teach them a lesson.

It was a tall Death Eater who stopped them.

"Snape said he wanted the students to reach Hogwarts in one piece," he told them, when they had their wands raised and ready to start with Neville. "Our orders were to leave them unharmed. We didn't find what we came for. Let's go."

They had been extremely lucky, in Selenius's estimation.

Ginny crossed her arms and let out a huff of exasperation.

"I can't believe they were hoping to find Harry here," she said. "Honestly, what did they expect—that he'd be all packed up and riding the train back to school?"

"Well, why wouldn't he?" Selenius asked.

"Because he's on the run from You-Know-Who," Ginny said, "and Dumbledore's dead. Hogwarts isn't safe."

"Then why are we going?" Selenius wondered out loud. "I mean, if it's not safe…"

"Well, the Death Eaters aren't really interested in us," Ginny said. "To them, we're just students. They only want Harry. Or Ron. Or Hermione."

"Who?" Selenius asked blankly, feeling very out of the loop.

"You haven't been reading the news, haven't you?" Luna asked, looking up from her copy of the Quibbler, which she was reading sideways, for some odd reason. "Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. They're Harry Potter's best friends, so they're wanted by the Ministry, of course."

"But there are still some students who aren't coming back," Neville cut in. "Dean's not on the train. He couldn't prove his heritage to the Muggle-Born Registration Committee, so he's in hiding."
"Anyone who's a Muggle-born is in hiding," Ginny said. "They'd be arrested, otherwise."

Selenius remained silent. Ginny peered at him for a moment, and then said rather worriedly, "You aren't a Muggle-born, are you? Because if you are, the minute you set foot in Hogwarts…"

"I'm a half-blood," Selenius replied, a bit too defensively.

"They're going to want to know who, though," Neville muttered, turning his head to try and read the front cover of Luna's magazine sideways. "You have to be able to give names, or they're going to go after you anyway, like Dean."

"Si… Sirius Black," Selenius mumbled, turning away.

Ginny's jaw dropped. Neville looked surprised. Luna looked up from her magazine.

"You mean Stubby Boardman?" she asked brightly.

"That's not possible," Ginny said, looking dumbstruck. "You're lying. I mean, I get it if you're hiding your parentage, but there's no way that's going to fly, because Sirius didn't have any kids, and—"

"He wasn't married," Selenius replied defensively. "Anyway, I can prove it."

"Yeah?" Ginny demanded. "How?"

In response, Selenius dug into the pocket of his jeans, and pulled out a folded-up photo. He carefully flattened it out and held it up for Ginny to see. It was a picture of Selenius as a toddler, sitting at the table of Grimmauld Place with Sirius. Ginny stared at him in disbelief as Selenius quickly folded the photo up and put it away.

"But… but…" she said.

"I was there when your dad got attacked by a giant snake, and you lot wanted to go running off to St. Mungo's," Selenius replied sullenly. "I lived at Grimmauld Place. It's just that none of you ever saw me."

"I believe you," Ginny said, still looking as though someone had just poured cold water over her.

Luna looked at him curiously, tilting her head to the side as though trying to ascertain whether he was telling the truth, and then settled back down to her magazine.

Selenius had the disquieting notion that she did not really believe him.

~o~O~o~

"All right," Hagrid called, waving as they gingerly picked themselves off the little rowboats. "Firs' years over here… firs' years this way…"

Selenius immediately came to stand on the stone steps, where Hagrid was waiting for them. Other first years were slowly clustering around him, shivering slightly in the cold, but otherwise staring uneasily either up at the castle or the grey, gloomy, overcast sky. The other students were heading up to the castle in horseless carriages. Ginny, who had warmed up considerably toward him now, wished him luck for the Sorting, and then had disappeared in a carriage with Neville, Luna, and another seventh-year.

Hagrid had not recognized him immediately, and right now, Selenius had no intention of drawing attention to himself. He was hopeful that there might be an opportunity to visit Hagrid later, but he
was unsure if the half-giant was aware that he was staying under a fake identity, and didn't want to test that right now. Not in this company.

They had rowed across the lake. The water was a smooth mirror of black, like glass, only broken in ripples by the wind. The depths below were impenetrable from above, but more than once Selenius could have sworn he saw something with tentacles moving just underneath the surface. He tried to breathe easy, telling himself it was just the giant squid.

"Everyone make it all right?" Hagrid asked, surveying the cluster of students. "Got yer things? You, there—got yer hat?" A small girl was wringing water out of her black pointy hat, which had clearly taken a dip in the lake. "Let's go!"

And they marched their way up the steps, to the doors of the Great Hall. The other students had never seen Hogwarts before, and were all clearly amazed by what they saw—tall pillars that greeted them by towering intimidatingly, with gargoyles peering out at them from the approaching darkness. The fountain in the courtyard they trudged through, lights that shone from every window, making the castle look like a giant stone jack-o-lantern...

Yet, Selenius had been here before, and it was not new to him. He was too preoccupied to be fascinated. When they stopped at the doors, it was to find Professor McGonagall waiting for them.

"The firs' years, Professor," Hagrid said.

"Thank you, Hagrid." She looked as strict and stern as ever, but there was an edge of weariness to her that Selenius had not seen before. Perhaps it was just his imagination. Maybe she was just getting old. "I'll take them from here."

Hagrid nodded, and then gave the first years a friendly salute before pulling the massive doors open and heading inside. They shut behind him, and McGonagall took in a very deep breath, before she began to speak.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," she said tightly. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory and spend free time in your house common room."

She looked them all over sternly.

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin," she continued briskly. "Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honour." She inhaled sharply, and when she spoke again, it sounded a bit as though she had a bit of a head cold. "I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

"This year, there has been a change in staffing, which you may not be aware of," she said. "We have a new Headmaster, whom you will all meet in the Great Hall shortly." Her eyes landed on Selenius, and for some reason, they did not seem at all friendly. They lingered for a moment, and then she turned away. "I will collect you for the Sorting ceremony in a few moments' time. Please wait here quietly."

She left, ascending the stairs just as Hagrid had done, and closing the door behind her. The other
students all began to whisper nervously among themselves, but Selenius was hardly listening. He was too uneasy. Something was not right. He knew Professor Dumbledore was dead; his father had admitted to doing the deed himself. Selenius had spent two weeks with enormous difficulty in reconciling those two things, until he finally concluded that there must have been some reason, some very good reason, for his father to kill the previous Headmaster. What reason this was, he did not know.

But it seemed Hogwarts had changed. A fog of depression seemed to have settled over it, and he couldn't quite make sense of it.

And then there was the Sorting Ceremony. His father had been the Head of Slytherin; his mother was a Gryffindor. Which house would he be sent to?

All too soon, McGonagall returned, ordering them all to line up before leading them inside. They filed through the Entrance Hall, and a moment later, through the open doors of the Great Hall. Selenius blinked owlishly as the light of a thousand candles, all floating above the tables, lit up the otherwise dark and dreary ceiling, which was just as dark grey as the sky outside. All around them, hundreds of students were sitting at their house tables, some leaning in their seats and straining to get a look at the new arrivals. Selenius nearly jumped back a foot as a silent, silver-stained specter floated right in front of him, brushing his sleeve and making it feel as though his shoulder had been dipped in a bucket of ice. He recognized the Bloody Baron as he glided over to the table of black and green-clad students, turning his ghastly face upon the other tables with a look of pure disinterest.

The hall seemed deathly silent, for some reason. It was only now that Selenius realized this. None of the students sitting at the tables were talking. The only sound was a sudden clap of unexpected thunder lighting up the sky, and the first-years' footsteps echoing in the hall. Even the ghosts were silent, the Fat Friar most surprisingly, whom Selenius had always had the impression of being an amicable chatterbox.

And then they all halted abruptly. The girl trailing behind him very nearly collided with him, and despite being near the front of the line, she had to peer around him in order to see why they had stopped. Selenius had no trouble seeing, however; he was indisputably the tallest of the lot, and could see a good three or four inches over his fellow first-years' heads. Most of them were standing on their toes to see over him.

What he saw was McGonagall striding up toward the dais where—and Selenius’s heart leapt at this, glad for a familiar face that at least knew his situation—he saw his father standing. The teachers were all seated at the staff table, their faces set and stony, perhaps even a shade mutinous, but Headmaster Snape radiated aloof disinterest in the face of their disapproval. She placed a ragged, torn and patched hat that was so filthy that Selenius wondered if someone had buried it in Hagrid's garden for a year before unearthing it, on top of a wooden stool; and without another word, or even a direct glance at the raven-haired man standing beside it, she strode toward the table and stiffly took her seat.

His father stood there, as though waiting for something to happen; and then quite suddenly, the Sorting Hat shifted slightly, the ragged tear at the brim opening wide.

And then it burst into song:

_I may be patched and frayed,

With a thousand years to go to pot;

But I am the Hogwarts Sorting Cap,_
The smartest hat and all that rot!
Set yourself upon this stool,
Pull me down around your head;
I will see that of which you are made,
Clever, kind, cunning, or brave instead!
I will have a poke around your mind,
And send you to those whom you will be among;
So listen closely to the Sorting Hat,
This is my redundant song:
You may belong in Gryffindor,
Where dwell the brave at heart;
The House of Lions is full of daring nerve,
Courageousness sets them apart.
Perhaps you belong in Hufflepuff,
Where they are patient with toil;
The House of the Badger is hardworking and true,
And unfalteringly loyal.
And you may be in Slytherin,
Where await the most cunning kind;
The House of Snakes are slippery friends,
These ambitious folks use any means they can find.
Or you may find yourself in Ravenclaw,
Among those of keen minds;
Those who nest in the House of the Raven,
Are of the keenest kind.
So put me on, and have no fear,
I will sort you to where you belong;
Tug me snug around your ears,
And I will pull you from the throng;
Though by talent you are divided,
These are dark times that we live in;
The bonds that come from within
Should not be thus quartered.
I have sung, I have warned,
Let the Sorting now commence.

The hat quickly fell silent. A few murmurs could be heard coming from the house tables, but they died away as soon as they had begun. The new Headmaster seemed to have the ability to silence the students with little effort. Selenius watched his father's hand dip into the pocket of his robes, and a moment later, he carefully unrolled a long scroll of parchment. A moment's pause, and then he turned his attention to the waiting students.

"When I call your name, you will come up here, and place the Sorting Hat upon your head," he said smoothly. His gaze lingered on them, but it was not a friendly one. "Once you have been Sorted, you will make your way to your house table. You will await your turn in perfect silence."

His eyes glittered dangerously at them, and Selenius saw more than one student quaking in their shoes now. The hair on his back was standing on end of its own accord; he had been looking forward to seeing his father again, even if they had not parted on the best of terms, but now he was well and truly frightened. Yet, Headmaster Snape seemed entirely unconcerned with the terror he had inspired, unless it was to look faintly satisfied with himself, and he began calling out names.

The first-years left the line one by one, walking up to try on the hat. Some stumbled in surprise when called, others tried to look as dignified and centered as possible. They would sit on the stool, most of them trying not to look intimidated by the fact that the Headmaster was towering over them less than a foot away, and failing spectacularly. The first time the hat shouted out its decision ("GRYFFINDOR!") Selenius nearly jumped back in surprise, stepping on the foot of the girl behind him, and the boy who had just been sorted nearly fell off the chair. Selenius did not have long to wait; they had only been standing in line for five minutes when his name was called.

"Black, Selenius." There was no inflection in his father's voice to indicate that the name held any particular meaning to him. It was said with cold, sneering indifference, and he glared down at Selenius just as he had with every other student who had stepped up before him. Selenius walked up to the steps, and wordlessly picked up the hat.

He wondered if the torn brim that opened cut into the inside, and instead of putting it on immediately, he turned it over in his hands to look. The faint, repressed titters he heard coming from the tables should have warned him, but he did not register their significance until the hat was forcefully ripped out of his hands. He found himself being pushed onto his seat, and the hat was summarily yanked down over his eyes.

"A bit curious now, are we?" said a voice in his ear.

That was all the warning Selenius got, before the word "SLYTHERIN!" rang through the room. Before he had time to register what had just happened, the hat was suddenly pulled off his head, and he looked up in time to see his father's impassive face. Their eyes locked for a moment, and then Selenius looked away, pushing himself off the stool and making his way toward Slytherin table.

He saw a pale blond head sitting taller above the rest, and it was impossible to miss the fact that
Draco was scooting down the bench to make room. Selenius hesitated, for one long moment, and then hastily capitulated, sliding into the seat next to the older boy. The next name was called, and in the midst of the hat shouting out "GRYFFINDOR!", Draco folded his arms on the table and leaned down until he was level with Selenius.

It was the first time Selenius had gotten a good look at the older boy. His face was paler than ever, drawn, and with dark circles under his eyes. Yet, there was no mistaking those grey eyes narrowed in calculation, or the intelligence that glinted behind them. However ill he looked, he was in no way any less sharp—or curious.

"Selenius Black," he said, keeping his voice low enough for only Selenius to hear. "I don't suppose you're about to tell me that Sirrah is just a nickname, is it?"

Selenius felt it safer not to respond. Draco moved so that his mouth was directly at Selenius's ear, so that only he could possibly hear what he had to say next:

"In Slytherin house, your survival depends on how well you make allies," the pale blond whispered. "After this, I think, we're going to talk."

~o~O~o~

Draco leaned against the wall, arms folded, as he listened to Selenius's explanation. That he had lied about his parentage, not because of his blood purity, but because his father had been in the Order of the Phoenix—and since his death, Selenius had been shunted from house to house since then, and held a fake identity. Selenius had mixed in part-truths with blatant lies, and when he finally finished, he leaned back and waited for the other boy to take it all in.

Draco took several minutes to respond. But when he did, he looked thoughtful, staring into the fireplace of the empty Slytherin common room.

"So," he finally said, "who's your mother, then?"


"Name, Selenius. I'm looking for a name."

Selenius shrugged. Draco tapped his fingers on the arm of the couch for a moment, and then shrugged.

"Fine. I suppose it doesn't matter—you're the son of a pureblood, even if he is a blood-traitor, and that's what counts," he said coolly. "You'll do well in Slytherin house, Selenius, mark my words—but its people with the most obvious secrets who get struck down, first." He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at Selenius. "You need protection. Someone who has your back."

"I suppose that's you?" Selenius asked surreptitiously.

"Not without something in return, of course," Draco said off-handedly.

"I don't—"

"I'm not asking much," the blond interrupted, crossing his legs.

Selenius folded his arms across his chest. "I don't care what you're asking for. I'm not giving anything."
"Loyalty," Draco said, his voice almost coaxing now. "Companionship. Someone who can actually carry an intelligent conversation, and understands the concept of confidentiality. Surely that's not too much?"

Selenius hesitated. Draco had just listed exactly what he himself was looking for.

"In short," he clarified, "a friend?"

Draco smiled.

"A rose by any other name," he said.

~o~O~o~

For the first week of school, Selenius saw little of his father, except at mealtimes. Headmaster Snape had expressed no more interest in him than any other student, except perhaps to show preferential treatment to the Slytherins, but he seemed to be making a concerted effort at not showing unnecessary concern over Selenius.

It became immediately apparent to the other Slytherins that Draco had taken Selenius under his wing as his protégé, and as a Death Eater, those two things went hand in hand with Selenius having little to no trouble within his own house. He got along with the other first-year Slytherins, and a few second-years deigned to notice him, but mostly, everyone else seemed so self-absorbed that they paid him almost no heed. He was just a tall, wavy-haired first-year. Nothing special.

He tried to make friends with the other first-years, particularly those he shared classes with, but it was difficult. If they were not in Slytherin, they were wary and suspicious of him, despite any apparent good intentions. Often even outright hostile. Furthermore, he found that talking to other kids his own age was shockingly and despairingly awkward. He had little frame of reference to relate to them, and when he spoke, he sometimes found himself stuttering or outright stumbling over his words. Talking to them was taxing, and he found that many of the younger students had a tendency to mumble. It was nothing like what Selenius had ever experienced for as long as he could remember, and he found that despite the now ample opportunity he had to make friends with kids his own age, the only thing in his way was himself. Or rather, his social incompetency when it came to dealing with his peers.

Selenius found immediately that he did not like either of Malfoy's other friends—if they could be called such. Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe seemed to fulfill the role of bodyguard more than friend, and in a way, Selenius found himself able to understand and sympathize with Draco if he had been feeling lonely. He hadn't exactly been locked away from the world for the last twelve years, as Selenius had, but being in the constant company of two brainless gorgons had to fairly restricting.

Selenius was thrilled when classes began, but his enthusiasm was almost cruelly curbed the moment he saw the teachers. He had known them since he was a baby; he had grown up admiring them. But it seemed that Professor McGonagall had turned cold to him, barely paying attention to him in class. Sprout seemed a bit distant. Only Flitwick seemed to not hold his father's hand in Dumbledore's death against him, and Slughorn was absolutely oblivious, which made Potions and Charms the only two classes Selenius was truly able to enjoy.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was a nightmare. Muggle Studies, which had previously been optional, had been made compulsory. Selenius's first class with the Carrows was spent being told that rule-breakers would be subject to the Cruciatus Curse, and that Muggles were barbaric animals that needed to be put down. At the start of the second Muggle-studies class, Alecto Carrow asked students who had Muggle parentage to stand up.
Selenius had the good sense to remain in his seat.

As did every other student.

Alecto Carrow had looked at them all approvingly.

"Good," she said nastily. "No filthy blood in here."

She had then proceeded to explain to them that Muggles were like cattle, and that they were responsible for driving witches and wizards into hiding by attempting to hunt them down, and that anyone with such muddied blood was automatically inferior. By the end of the week, Selenius, who had been so looking forward to going to school, now wanted nothing more than to leave. He excelled in all of his classes, although he was merely doing passably with the Carrows by going through the motions of their class without putting his heart into it, and he was utterly miserable.

In truth, his only consolation was the fact that he now had someone he could call a friend. Draco set aside evenings to play chess with him, out of the presence of his bodyguards, which Selenius found to be something of a relief. After so many years of not having a friend closer to his own age, this need, at least, was being met.

He had tried to seek out Ginny Weasley and Neville Longbottom, but they seemed to be studiously avoiding him now. Luna Lovegood was the only one he could seem to catch up to, and she said quite plainly what Selenius already knew.

"Oh, they're a bit wary, you see," she told him one evening, in the library. She added unnecessarily, "You're a Slytherin, after all."

"So?" Selenius snapped. "That shouldn't make a difference."

Luna cocked her head at him. "I know it shouldn't, but haven't you seen what other Slytherins have been doing to them?"

Selenius fell silent, recalling the older Slytherins who had returned from detention, not to serve it, but to give it to the unfortunate students who had caught the Carrows' ire. Luna smiled at him.

"It's okay, though," she said simply. "I'll be your friend."

Draco had snorted at this later, when they were playing chess.

"Loony Lovegood?" he sneered.

Selenius, who had fallen back into the habit of not dignifying questions he did not like with a verbal answer, merely sent his knight to cut down Draco's queen. Deciding to drop the issue of the slightly-batty Ravenclaw, they played in silence, until Selenius finally broke the ice.

"Where's the Headmaster's office?" He knew where it was, but it had been so long since he had been there that he was no longer certain.

"Snape?" Draco said. "Why?"

Selenius shrugged. "He was the former Slytherin Head of House, wasn't he?"

"There's Slughorn," the blond replied sulkily.

Selenius raised an eyebrow at him. "Would you really go to Slughorn?"
Draco examined his face for a moment, and then laughed. "You're right. Slughorn's a has-been. If I were you, I'd go to Snape too."

He directed Selenius on how to get to the Headmaster's Office, and then offered to accompany him. Selenius shrugged.

"It's not really necessary."

"Fine," Draco said, sounding bored. "I'll get my Transfiguration done." He yawned exaggeratedly, and then stretched. "I still don't get why they keep McGonagall around here. She's just another has-been, too."

Selenius stood up. "As you say," he responded diplomatically.

He left the common room, exited the dungeons, and made his way up the stairs leading to the Entrance Hall when he suddenly stopped.

In bright red and gold paint, in lettering so large that it would surely give Filch a heart attack when he discovered what new mess he would have to clean, were the words: *Dumbledore's Army, still recruiting!*

Selenius stood there, quite at a loss for words, when suddenly footsteps caught his attention, and he whipped around.

"You!" Amycus snapped, halting at the foot of the stairs. "So you're the one who's been behind this!"

"What?" Selenius asked blankly.

"Don't play games with me, you little bugger!" In three long strides, the Carrow had grabbed Selenius's arm, yanking him forward painfully. "All over the Charms corridor and the third floor—those messages you've been spray-painting on the wall!"

"I didn't do it!" Selenius said hotly, trying to pull away. "I was just coming upstairs and found it!"

A sudden blow to the head knocked him to the ground. Dazed, Selenius stared up at the ceiling, pain pulsing in the back of his head where he had landed, and on his cheek where Amycus had struck him. Torchlight from above flickered and spun dizzyingly for a moment, and then a strong hand was dragging him back to his feet by the wrist and up the stairs. Selenius stumbled in place behind him, not quite able to regain his footing.

"We'll see what the Headmaster has to say about this," Amycus snarled.

A voice suddenly rang across the room.

"What do you think you're doing?" McGonagall said, appearing two landings above them, and staring in horror at the bruise forming under Selenius's left cheek. "Professor Carrow—Professor Carrow, is that a student?"

"Right in one," Amycus responded nastily. Triumphantly, he added, "Caught him at the scene of the crime!"

McGonagall was hurrying down the steps, wand raised, pale and tight-lipped as she approached. Selenius screwed his eyes shut in pain as the dull throbbing in his head refused to leave, but opened them again when the Transfiguration Professor grabbed the wrist that the Carrow was gripping.
"We do not manhandle our students!" she said, her voice filled with cold fury as she placed herself between Selenius and the outraged Carrow. "Just because he was found there does not mean he did it! There's no way he could have gotten through the castle that quickly."

Amycus scratched the back of his head. "His friends probably helped him," he said.

"Do you have any proof?" McGonagall demanded tightly.

"Well, he was there, wasn't he?" Carrow snapped. "I'm about to take him up to see Snape—he'll sort him out."

"I'll take him from here," McGonagall said sharply.

Selenius winced as Amycus's grip on his wrist tightened painfully—and then the man suddenly released him. Selenius watched him storm up the steps with unfocused eyes, and disappear off through the door leading to the Charms corridor, muttering furiously to himself. As soon as he had disappeared, McGonagall released his hand and tilted Selenius's chin up so that she could see him properly.

"Are you alright?"

Selenius tried to shake his head, but that only made the pounding worse, so he muttered, "No."

"Did Professor Carrow do this to you?"

"Yes."

Professor McGonagall straightened.

"We're going to take you to Poppy," she said decisively, "and then we'll take you to the Headmaster to sort you out."

Selenius was surprised by this radical change of attitude. The Transfiguration teacher had all but ignored him in her classes, and now she had intervened. Nevertheless, he was grateful, as she directed him toward the hospital wing.

"Did you spray paint those words on the wall?" she asked.

Selenius looked up at her. A nice, purple bruise had begun to form just underneath his eye, now forcing him to shut it.

"No," he said.

~o~O~o~

Poppy had him patched up in no time at all, and Selenius found himself no longer voluntarily walking up to the Headmaster's office, but now being marched there, as though he had committed some kind of crime. They approached the gargoyle, and for a moment, the Gryffindor Head of House hesitated, as though taking a moment to gather herself; and then she said, "Moonstone."

The gargoyle hopped aside, and the two of them made their way up the spiral staircase. A knock on the door, and then Selenius heard his father's silky voice command, "Enter."

They entered, and then stopped dead in their tracks. Amycus Carrow was already waiting for them there. His pig-like face turned to look at them, and at that moment, Selenius wanted nothing more than to turn and run back to Slytherin house. He suppressed the urge, and instead turned his gaze on
the Headmaster, who sat behind his desk, elbows resting on the surface, and fingers laced. He looked thoroughly unconcerned. If anything, his father's lack of reaction made Selenius even more frightened.

McGonagall spoke first. Lips twisting with distaste, she said, "Amicus claims he found Mr. Black in the Entrance Hall."

"The scene of the crime," Amicus repeated.

McGonagall's lips thinned. "Be as that may, there is no evidence of wrongdoing. Despite this, Amicus saw fit to subject him to corporal punishment before attempting to drag him up to see you."

The Headmaster's eyes glittered at this.

"Is this true, Professor Carrow?" he asked coolly.

"The little brat was trying to get away!" Amicus spat.

"Nevertheless, as Professor McGonagall has pointed out, just because he was present is no proof that he is the guilty one," Headmaster Snape said, leaning back in his chair. "I have told you I would allow the use of the Cruciatus as punishment for the most egregious rule-breakers, Amicus, but you are not to use corporal punishment indiscriminately. If you continue to do so," he added, his voice lowering dangerously, "I will be forced to revoke such permission."

"Ask him!" Amicus said, pointing a lumpy hand at Selenius. "Ask him if he did it!"

Selenius's father turned to look at him.

"Did you write those words on the wall?" he inquired.

"No," Selenius said vehemently.

"He's lying!"

"I doubt that, Amicus," the Headmaster said coolly. "There's no history with him. I suspect he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Amicus looked furious. He kicked the foot of one of the armchairs as he turned to leave, and there was an almighty slam as the door shut behind him. Selenius flinched, and then looked back at his father.

He swallowed.

"Dad?" he whispered.

The Headmaster waved a hand dismissively at McGonagall. "You can leave."

The Transfiguration teacher's lips pressed into a thin line at this, but she merely turned on her heels and left. The door shut quietly behind her, leaving the office in relative silence. Not a word was spoken for a moment, before his father gestured at the armchair Amicus had kicked.

"Sit down," he said imperiously.

Selenius obeyed, and he was about to open his mouth to speak, when one of the portraits suddenly spoke.
"Alecto Carrow is dragging Ginny Weasley to see Argus Filch for interrogation," the portrait said. "Something about spray-painting something on the third-floor corridor—"

Headmaster Snape stood up so quickly that he almost knocked his chair over. He left without a word, the door shutting with a tell-tale click behind him that indicated there would be no one else coming in. Selenius sat there, in the Headmaster's office, quite alone save for the company of the portraits. None of them, however, seemed to have much to say, murmuring behind their hands to each other.

The portrait hanging behind the Headmaster's chair, however, suddenly stirred. Selenius stared at the oil daubs of Albus Dumbledore as they came to life, and looked up at him.

"Hello," he said pleasantly.

"Er..." Selenius responded, not at all sure what to say. He swallowed, and cleared his throat. "Uh, I never got the chance to thank you properly..." he trailed off.

"For the pair of thick, woolen socks I gave you for Christmas two years ago?"

Selenius looked away.

"I suspect, however, that is not what you are truly interested in discussing."

"Did my father really kill you?" he blurted out.

"Yes," Dumbledore said simply.

Selenius stood up. "How can you be so calm about that? I mean, he's sitting in your chair, he's letting the Carrows teach here—"

"It's quite easy to be calm about my death, I think, because I am already dead," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "As for the Carrows, I'm afraid your father didn't have much choice in allowing that to happen."

Selenius inhaled sharply. "I don't understand. He murdered you—"

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "He did kill me, but murder it was not."

Selenius stared at him.

"I can't tell the difference," he said.

Dumbledore folded his hands in his lap. "Your father was responsible for casting the Killing Curse on me, because I asked him to," he said. "By that time, I was already dying. I would say your father did me a great favor, in doing this."

"You asked him to?" Selenius said, in disbelief.

"Of course." Dumbledore peered down at him. "Not that the rest of the world is aware of this, naturally. I assume you understand that I do not expect you to relay that to anyone else?"

"Of course not—but—"

"Then that's all you need to know, I think."

Selenius pressed the portrait for more answers, but it was as though Dumbledore had suddenly
turned deaf. Frustrated, and with more questions than before, Selenius had no choice but to abandon the topic. He went to return to his chair, when something glittering caught his eye. He stepped forward, peering through the glass display case at the large sword that rested on it, the large rubies on the handle sparkling brightly.

The name Godric Gryffindor was etched along the blade.

"That," said the voice of one of the portraits, and Selenius looked up in time to see its occupant leaning down closer to him, "is the legendary sword of Godric Gryffindor."

Selenius looked at it with undisguised interest. The portrait chuckled.

"Don't worry. Slytherin house has its own heirlooms, I'm sure."

The door suddenly opened again, and Selenius looked up in time to see that his father had returned. He strode over to the glass case where the sword rested, robes billowing behind him, and placed a hand on Selenius's shoulder.

"Enjoying yourself, are you?"

Selenius shrugged, looking back down at the sword, and then up at the wall.

"The portraits aren't that talkative," he said, with a meaningful look at Dumbledore.

The hand on his shoulder tightened slightly, and then Selenius found himself being turned around.

"That's not what I meant."

"Where's mum?" Selenius asked suddenly. "How is she?"

Selenius saw his father's jaw tighten at this. "As far as I know, she is perfectly safe. Where that is, I don't know. I didn't know. He shook his head. "That, however, is a topic for another time. We need to talk."

"I didn't do it," Selenius said at once.

"I know." His father seated himself in the Headmaster's chair, crossing his legs. "Have a seat. I'm interested in hearing about your first week of school."

Selenius found one word to sum it up, as he sat down in the chintz armchair. "Awful."

~o~O~o~

The next day, the Daily Prophet arrived at Slytherin table, and the news caused a bit of an uproar. It caused a bit of an uproar at every table, but Selenius tried to squeeze in to read the headlines over a fellow Slytherin's shoulder, which was a bit difficult, but he managed to catch a glimpse of the headlines: Undesirable Number One and Accomplices Spotted At the Ministry!

Selenius frowned, and peered closer, struggling to keep his spot as others crowded around for a look. The article was referring to events that had happened a little over a week ago, citing that three fugitives—including the one Selenius was most interested in hearing about, his mother—had been seen at the Ministry and escaped. There were rumors and speculation about what they had been there for, but satisfied that his mother was all right, Selenius finally retreated to allow someone else through.

He looked up at the high table, catching the dark eyes of the Headmaster for one long moment, before he returned to his seat.
Please review!

A/N: There was a tiny formatting problem with the Sorting Hat's song. My apologies.

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione thought Ron was handling the stress of the situation rather well.

Except for the food.

The distinct lack of food.

They could no longer go to Grimmauld Place. With Harry wearing the Horcrux and Ron's arm in a sling, it was up to Hermione to provide for the both of them. They had made it a rule that the person wearing the Horcrux could not leave the camp, and Ron was in no shape to go out. The prevalent presence of dementors and snatchers, however, had made this task extremely difficult. Yet Hermione managed, Apparating the two of them and their tent all over the countryside and putting together whatever meals she could make of the things they found.

Hermione considered taking them to Tine Cottage, but had ruled it out as an option. Scrimgeour had seen the will, and undoubtedly, so had other workers in the Ministry who had handled it before Scrimgeour had. Hermione had little doubt that the area of Tinworth was probably under heavy surveillance and scrutiny. They had already lost the sanctity of Grimmauld Place, and unless they were in dire straits, she wasn't going to risk Tine Cottage. It was their last resort, and she was saving it as such. Additionally, there was too much evidence of Selenius Snape's presence at the cottage, which she would have to remove first when time permitted.

Ron, who was crabby with hunger, was surprisingly appreciative of her efforts, and made sure to show it whenever she served up food. Harry made no complaints. Hermione was grateful to the two for their show of patience, because most of their suppers consisted of stolen food from farmhouses in addition to whatever she could find from the woods. She would have gone for other sources of food more nutritious than what could be collected from nature if it were not for the fact that she was doing all she could to avoid recognition. They could not afford to be found; they could not afford the injuries that would surely come with being found and trying to escape.

"Look, there's no food, but it's not your fault," Ron had grunted one evening when Hermione had come back nearly empty-handed, and was preparing a few toadstools to make a kind of soup. His belly growled audibly. "My arm's in a sling, so there's not much I can do, either. There's no point in wasting our energy bickering about it."

He turned to look at Harry, who was brooding silently in the corner of the tent.

"Oi, it's my turn to wear the damn thing," Ron said, reaching out his good hand for the horcrux, startling Harry out of his reverie. "Give it here."

Harry quickly lifted it off his neck and handed it to Ron.

Hermione bit her lower lip. "I've been thinking," she began.

"Good," Ron said. "We need it."
Hermione gave him an exasperated look. "If you would let me finish," she said, "I was going to tell you that I've been thinking about the other horcruxes, and where they might be."

"Well?" Harry asked quietly.

"Well, we know that the Dark Lord likes making horcruxes out of valuables, usually somehow linked to the Founders," Hermione said. "The Locket, Hufflepuff's Cup…"

"Don't forget the ring," Harry said.

"Yes, so that's three horcruxes, although the diary was an exception to this rule—and we know that he made seven," Hermione said patiently. "I've already discarded the idea that he found something of Gryffindor's, because there's only the sword, but what if there's something of Ravenclaw's?"

"Yeah," Harry said, "but what?"

"Well, I've been reading The Tales of Beedle the Bard again…"

Ron groaned.

"Either serve up those toadstools or just spit it out, Hermione!"

Hermione set their meager helpings on a plate, and pushed one in Ron's direction. "Help yourself. So as I was saying, I took a look, and something just… clicked. There's a symbol on the top of the page of one of the tales—a triangle, a circle, and a line drawn down the middle… it's the same one connected to Grindelwald." Harry and Ron looked at her blankly. "Remember? Luna's father was wearing it at the wedding?"

"Oh!" Harry said, his face lighting up in recognition. "Right. But what does that have to do with it?"

"The symbol is attached to a story called The Tale of Three Brothers, and the symbol represents a cloak, a wand, and a stone," Hermione continued thoughtfully. "Dumbledore fought Grindelwald, and left us this book that has Grindelwald's symbol in it. There are three parts to that symbol, and I thought, that with three horcruxes left unknown, there might be a connection."

"Not bad," Ron said, stuffing his face with the toadstools. "Brilliant, actually. So where do we find them?"

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "I don't know," she admitted. "But it gives us something to look for, doesn't it? Instead of wandering aimlessly out here?"

Neither boy seemed to want to look her in the eye as the declined to respond. Frustrated, Hermione went to bed early. Cold temperatures came as the sun began to set in earlier, unsurprisingly, as it was late fall, and Hermione found herself immensely grateful for the woolen socks Dumbledore had bequeathed her.

Though she still had no idea why the dotty old headmaster had given them to her in the first place.

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Hermione, Harry, and Ron were all staring at each other, wide-eyed. They had just eavesdropped on a pair of goblins, Ted Tonks, and Dean Thomas. After hearing about the attempted theft of the Sword of Gryffindor—and the fact that the one in the glass case was fake—something seemed to click. Nigellus Black had stalked out of his portrait frame still wearing a black blindfold, courtesy of Hermione, and they seemed unable to get further answers from him. It did not seem he had any
"If the sword can destroy horcruxes," Harry said excitedly, "and the one that was in Snape's office was a fake—then where's the real one?"

"I don't know," Hermione said frantically, thinking hard. "I mean, he obviously knew the Ministry was going to interfere, but if he was using a fake, where would he hide the real one? Surely somewhere obvious, Harry, somewhere he would have hinted at—"

"He didn't," Harry said, looking disappointed. "Any ideas, Ron?"

The red-head shook his head. "Not really. Couldn't he have hidden it somewhere else in his office?"

They continued to throw ideas out, but none seemed very likely. Eventually, they turned off the lights and went to bed, deciding to return with fresh ideas in the morning, but Hermione did not drift off immediately.

Quietly, silently, she tapped her ring with her wand.

*Sword of Gryffindor that was in your office is a fake,* she wrote.

The words disappeared a moment later. A reply was etched in their place. *I know.*

Hermione's eyebrows rose in surprise. *Where is the real one?*

For a full minute, there was no reply.

And then the words *I have it* appeared.

When Hermione finally fell asleep that night, it was after much tossing and turning, wondering how they were going to work this out. Dumbledore had obviously intended for Harry to have that sword, but how to get it delivered, neither she nor Harry were certain.

But there was one thing Hermione was sure about. They needed to get it as soon as possible. The Locket needed to be destroyed soon, before it destroyed them all. She did her best to not have to be the one to wear it, but it was difficult. It made Harry depressed and angry, and it made Ron snappish and sullen. But it brought out the worst thoughts in her. The horcrux seemed to whisper into her ear that there was an easy way to end this all by simply killing Harry and Ron and then going to join Severus's side, and she quashed it with as much strength as she could muster. But it was resilient. It never went away. And it made her feel as though it were tending to a seedling of something dark and ugly inside her.

Sometimes, she would find herself playing with the knife Sirius had given her for Christmas three years ago, often tempted to stab the locket with it, but knowing it would do no good. She always kept the knife on her, especially now; Harry and Ron had never seen it, since she kept it attached to her leg, but it was there. Furthermore, it was a comfort to her to know she had it on hand.

The following days were spent debating places the sword might be hidden, but try as Harry and Ron might, their guesses seemed desperate and far-fetched, each worse than the last. Ron eventually lost his patience.

"I thought you had a real plan," he groused. "You know, that Dumbledore had told you what to do —"

Hermione came up behind him, and began lifting the locket off his neck, as Harry replied, "Look,
I've been straight with you from the beginning—I've told you everything Dumbledore's said to me, and I can't think of anything he's said about a hiding place. It's not like he said, 'Here, Harry, this is where I plan to leave the Sword of Gryffindor to you after I die'—it's not like that!"

"Yeah, I know," Ron said, as Hermione reluctantly put the horrible thing around her neck. "But what good is that?"

They continued to move around the countryside, never staying in one place for too long, and with increasingly little hope of unraveling some obscure clue that Dumbledore might have left them. Hermione spent every free waking moment going over *The Tale of Two Brothers*, sometimes to reread the story and hope an idea came to her, other times to stare down at her son's name in it.

Sometimes, she would excuse herself from the tent to search for food. In those times, she would often pull her locket out from under her shirt and open it, gazing longingly at the picture of her husband and son. She would hold the sheepskin up to her nose, breathing it in, but she tried to conserve it; each time she did so, it seemed to lose a little more of its magic, of the scent she so longed to wrap herself up in again. Each time she did, she had to try harder to picture her husband's face with the sharp clarity of the intimate moments that the sheepskin reminded her so much of.

They continued to try and interrogate Phineas Nigellus about the Sword of Gryffindor, but the portrait continued to turn their questions around on their heads and instead prod them with leading questions about their whereabouts. Hermione knew Severus was the one in the Headmaster's office, and that Phineas was likely trying to find out on his orders, but it left her wondering why her husband simply didn't ask through their rings.

The days grew shorter as winter approached, and they were no closer to locating the sword or another horcrux. Harry suggested several times that they go to Godric's Hollow, but Hermione hedged on this, and Ron supported her on this one. As of right now, Severus still had the sword, and going to Godric's Hollow to look for it was both unproductive and unnecessarily risky.

"We're trying to keep a low profile, aren't we?" he asked Harry pointedly one evening, as they ate dinner. Hermione had managed to steal two whole chickens from a local farm, which meant that for the first time in weeks, they would go to bed with a full and satisfied belly, and even have a little bit leftover. "I bet you anything there are Death Eaters watching there, like they were at Grimmauld Place."

But still, Hermione could tell Harry had not given the idea up. She understood that he wanted to see his parents' graves, but beyond the risk factor, Hermione simply did not want to. A man she considered a brother and a woman she had gotten along with reasonably well and respected had both been dead and buried for sixteen years. Had there been a body to bury, Hermione would have insisted on laying Sirius to rest with them, but there had not been. She knew that eventually, Harry would win, and they would have to pay the place a visit, but for now—she would use that time to steel herself.

It was nearing Christmas when Harry finally convinced her.

"It's Godric's Hollow," he told her stubbornly. "There's a connection, Hermione, there has to be—Godric's Hollow, Godric's Sword…"

"Harry's got a point," Ron said, perking up now that the suggestion finally seemed to have merit. Hermione bit her lower lip. "Fine, but under one condition."

"What?" the two demanded in unison.
"I'll go to scout it alone, first," she said firmly. "And we move the tent before I go."

"What?" Ron said, outraged. "You're not going alone!"

"Yes I am, or no one is going at all!" Hermione snapped. "I'm easier to disguise than either of you, and I've had more practice in sneaking around the past few months, nicking food, than either of you put together!"

They had a long, drawn-out argument over this, but Hermione eventually won. The agreement was that after she returned, if it was safe, they would all go together.

"So, where are we?" Ron asked, after they had moved their tent again.

"The Forest of Dean," Hermione said matter-of-factly, as she began warding the area while Harry and Ron unpacked their things. She saddened just a bit as she added, "I went camping here once with my mum and dad."

The ground was blanketed in snow, and they were quick to set things up so that they could get inside and warm up. Hermione had acquired several bell-jars, which she kept the tent heated with by filling them with blue-bell flames. As the weather had continued to worsen, she considered taking them to Tine Cottage, but immediately shot the idea down. Her godson would demand answers that Hermione couldn't give, and she considered Tine Cottage only to be a last resort of safety. They were safe out here, and Tine Cottage was still too compromised for them to risk setting up in such a cozy place.

Ron placed a hand on her arm as Hermione readied herself to leave for Godric's Hollow.

"You sure about this?"

Hermione nodded tightly. "You stay here to look after Harry," she said. "He needs you. Don't let the locket get the best of him—or you." She double-checked her beaded bag, and then pocketed it. "You should take a break from trying to figure out the sword and listen to Potterwatch for a bit. The new password is 'Padfoot.'"

"Right," Ron said. He pulled her into a hug, and then turned to retreat inside the tent. "Make it back in one piece, all right?"

Hermione waited until the tent flap closed behind him before closing her eyes and Apparating away.

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Hermione slowly walked into the graveyard, making her way to the marker under which James and Lily were buried. Everything was covered with white, and snow was still falling, but for now, everything seemed to be… peaceful. Christmas music floated out from the nearby houses, interspersed with the faint sounds of laughter and cheer.

She passed a marker, and then paused and backtracked for a moment to peer down at it. It was not the name **Ignotus Peverell** that was so clearly etched into it that caught her attention, but rather the eye-shaped mark carved into the stone. The same one that Hermione had seen in Selenius's copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard.*

For a moment, Hermione imagined what she would otherwise be doing on this day, if she were not on this godforsaken horcrux hunt—celebrating with Severus and Selenius.

"I see no difference! It hurt me to see them die painful and useless deaths just to fulfill a madman's
entertainment, and it nearly kills me to know that I had to see the same thing happen to James and Lily! I was purely an observer then, too, because I can't change time no matter how much…"

Hermione closed her eyes, unable to stop the prickle of tears as she recalled a conversation that had taken place nearly sixteen years ago, sparked by the memories of the graveyard at Godric's Hollow.

"No matter how much I want to, I can't save everyone... and this situation was simply no different than all the other deaths I couldn't stop."

Sometimes, she had to ask herself why. Why had she not tried to save James and Lily? Surely there was something she could have done. Sixteen years after the fact, she could imagine all sorts of schemes, each admittedly more elaborate than the next, that she might have tried in order to save her friends. She could have done something to rip Voldemort from his body as Lily's protection had done before, James and Lily could have gone into hiding for fourteen years, by necessity—inconvenient, but it would have at least meant they would live. But now it was too late, and the time for reconsideration was long past gone.

It was hard for Hermione to remember the woman she had been back then. Even harder to recall what she had been like before her little tumble back in time. Now she had spent the last fifteen years trying to protect Harry, because he was her godson, best friend, and deep down, because she still felt guilty over the deaths of his parents.

*The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.*

Now she knelt down in the snow in front of the grave, tears flowing freely down her cheeks as she pulled out her wand and silently drew out a wreath of lily-white flowers. Stashing her wand back up her sleeve, she carefully arranged the flowers on the gravestone, almost lovingly, and stood up. She would stay longer if she could, but her time here was short, and it was risky to stay alone for long. She was here to scout around for Death Eaters—of which she had thus far seen no trace of—and judge whether it was safe for Harry and Ron to come.

The ring on her hand suddenly burned, and she quickly yanked off her glove to read it.

*Where are you?*

Hermione retrieved her wand and tapped it. *Godric's Hollow.*

Severus's response was immediate. *Get out of there! NOW!*

Hermione stared at the ring in confusion, and then pulled herself away as the sudden crunch of snow caught her attention. Behind her, she saw a familiar figure shuffling toward her—Bathilda Bagshot, her face as pruned and wrinkled as Hermione remembered it. She hesitated for a moment, tempted to greet the first friendly face in a long time, and perhaps find some clue—and then decided to obey Severus's directive.

The ring burned once more. *Come to me.*

Hermione focused her magic into the ring, drawing on its abilities to locate its twin, and Apparated away.

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She was shocked when her feet landed in the middle of the snow-bound Forest of Dean. A gloved hand clapped itself against her mouth to stop her from making a sound, and she whipped her head around to look at the person it was attached to. Severus held his other finger up to his lips, in a
gesture for her to be silent, and then pointed to Hermione's left.

In the distance, she could see the tent. Harry and Ron were there, for the lights were on, making the tent glow warmly, but they were no so far away that they wouldn't hear her if she spoke loudly. Severus's hand dropped from her mouth, and he demanded quietly, "What were you doing in Godric's Hollow?"

"Scouting," Hermione whispered. "Harry wanted to visit his parents' graves, and we thought there might be something there—we're running low on ideas."

Severus let out low hiss of disbelief. "It's a good thing you didn't take Potter with you—the Dark Lord has set a trap there, in case he decided to visit."

"I didn't see any sign of one," Hermione said. "At least, not in the short time I was there. I only got to go through the village and stop by the graveyard."

"The Dark Lord's made a construct for Nagini that looks like Bathilda Bagshot," Severus said harshly. "He's had her wandering around the village looking for any sign of Potter, just in case he should appear."

Hermione inhaled sharply. "Bathilda Bagshot? Are you sure?"

"Yes, why?"

"Because I saw her," Hermione whispered. "At least, I thought I did. Right before I left."

She saw Severus swallow hard at this. Her heart was pumping rapidly now. What would have happened if she had not Apparated away, when she had?

"I contacted you when I didn't see you with Potter and Weasley," Severus said softly.

"It's a good thing you did," Hermione said, placing her hand over his. "How did you know where to find us?"

"Phineas Nigellus overheard you mention that you were in the Forest of Dean," Severus replied smoothly. He cupped her other hand in his, leaning forward to nuzzle her hair for a moment, as though to refresh his memory of her, before he added, "that's when I came here. I left the Sword of Gryffindor for Potter to find."

"He has it?" Hermione clarified

"He does."

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you," she whispered.

"The Dark Lord's horcruxes," Severus said quietly, "have you found any more of them?"

"We know that two of them were already destroyed by Dumbledore—a diary and the ring that cursed his hand," Hermione said, leaning into his chest. The wool of his cloak was scratchy, but smelled of him, and she breathed it in deeply. He released his hands to wrap around her, pulling her close to him, and she ticked off, "Now we can destroy the locket—"

"Potter and Weasley already took care of that."

"You watched?"
Severus nodded curtly.

"Then that leaves us Hufflepuff's cup, but we're not sure about the remaining three," Hermione admitted. "I keep thinking there's some link between the legend of the Cloak of Invisibility, Resurrection Stone, and Elder Wand, but the more I think about it, the less likely it seems that the Dark Lord would have bothered to search for something out of a children's tale, much less turn them into horcruxes."

Severus worked his jaw for a moment. "Have you considered another of the Founders' objects?"

"Like what?" Hermione asked miserably. "I can't recall anything of Ravenclaw's, and certainly nothing of Gryffindor's that he might have gotten his hands on—and what would the third be?"

Severus pursed his lips. "There must be something of Ravenclaw's, I'm sure of it. I'll see what I can find on my end. As for the other..." he trailed off.

"What?" Hermione demanded, though she kept her voice hushed. "What other?"

"Albus once told me that there would come a time when the Dark Lord would keep Nagini close to him," Severus said slowly. "At first, I didn't understand the full implications, but now... I do."

"Nagini?" Hermione said blankly. "You think he turned his snake into a Horcrux?"

"It seems very likely."

Hermione nodded, twisting the watch around her wrist thoughtfully. "That's seven, then, if we're right about something of Ravenclaw's." A pause, and then she abruptly switched topics. "How is Selenius doing?"

"He..." and here, her husband hesitated. "He is doing well, all things considered. He was disappointed that we would not be spending Christmas together."

Hermione rubbed a gloved hand against her cheeks, wiping away the trail of tears she had shed in the graveyard, and trying not to let more lose at the thought of her son. "What house did he get sorted into?" Hermione had not thought to ask this through their rings. She had been too preoccupied to think of anything else other than horcruxes, the Sword of Gryffindor, the blasted Locket, and how much she missed her family. She had almost forgotten that Selenius would have been Sorted this year.

"Slytherin."

Hermione inhaled sharply. In a way, she was not all that surprised, although she had to admit that she was worried. "And how is that working out for him?"

"Surprisingly well," Severus murmured. "He's already befriended Draco, and for the most part, he keeps a low profile—although I'm beginning to suspect that he's had a hand in the last few incidents involving your Dumbledore's Army group. He denies everything, but he seems to spend half his time with Slytherins, and the other half with a group of students who are all most certainly the ringleaders." He nuzzled her cheek for a moment, and then added, "He's spending Christmas with me, but he misses you."

Hermione felt her heart warm at this, and sighed softly. "Will you let him know that I miss him, too? Give him all my love."

"I will."
She kissed him then. His lips were warm, his taste wonderfully familiar, and she felt herself melt against him as he pulled her closer against him. The cold nipped at their exposed skin with cruel teeth, but they kept it at bay by pressing against each other as closely as possible, taking advantage of this rare occasion in which they could abandon their roles, if only for a moment, and be who they were—two people who still intensely, passionately loved each other.

When they pulled away, Hermione carefully took her husband's hands in hers, pressing her lips to his knuckles; a caress of warm breath against them, and she let go. They once again fell back into the roles they had been forced into, parting without another word. The quiet sound of Apparition was masked by the crunching of snow under boots as Hermione made her way back to the tent.

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"Well, Harry and I were waiting for you to come back, weren't we?" Ron said, almost bouncing off the bed with excitement as Hermione examined the ruined remains of Slytherin's locket. "So we were sitting here, and I was fooling around with my Deluminator again—"

"I thought you'd stopped doing that," Hermione said half-heartedly.

"Well, while you're around, anyway. Because it drives you nuts. But Harry didn't mind, and it gave me something to do while listening to Potterwatch—"

"And?"

"The Deluminator started acting oddly," Ron said. "It—I don't know." He looked at Harry for help. "I mean, the lights went on, then off, and then when it was supposed to turn on again, they did, but then this blue ball of light sort of formed…"

"It just hovered there in mid-air for a minute," Harry said, "and then floated outside."

"So we followed it," Ron continued, "because we figured that it was another clue of Dumbledore's, right? Follow the little blue light?"

"And right outside our tent, just beyond the wards, there was this silvery shape," Harry said. "It was a Patronus. A lioness, I think. And the ball of light just went through the Patronus and… disappeared."

"And then?" Hermione pressed, now extremely curious.

"Well, the lion turned around and started walking away, so we decided to follow it, didn't we?" Ron said impatiently. "So we did. I mean, we had some reservations of course, about following a glowing lion out in the middle of nowhere, but it didn't seem evil. Just watchful."

"And it led you straight to the Sword of Gryffindor?" Hermione guessed, leaning down to pick the shiny blade off of Harry's lap and examine it.

"Yep," Harry said. "Stopped at the edge of a pool not too far from here, and then vanished."

"That was when I thought we might've fallen into a trap," Ron added sheepishly, rubbing the back of his head, "but then we noticed something glittering at the bottom of the pool, so we went to investigate."

"And that's where you found it?"

"Of course," Ron said. "So we broke the ice, and tried summoning it, but obviously, that didn't work..."
"Obviously," Hermione sighed.

"So Harry dove into the water to try and get it—but of course, the stupid prat forgot to take that bloody horcrux thing off him first, and so just when he was about to grab the sword, it started trying to strangle him. The ice-cold water wasn't doing him any favors, either."

Hermione buried her face in her hands. "I'm gone for less than an hour, and already, you almost get yourselves killed?"

"Seems like it," Ron said cheerfully.

"Well, long story short, Ron had to jump in and save me," Harry said, grinning self-deprecatingly. "We got the sword, and then we laid out the horcrux and stabbed it."

Hermione stared at them.

"That's it?" she said in disbelief. "All you have to do is give it a good, long poke with the sword and the putrid piece of Voldy's soul in it goes bye-bye?"

"Well, it was a bit more complicated than that," Harry admitted. "You tell her, Ron."

"Well, Harry had to open it up with Parseltongue, and I think the locket tried to defend itself," Ron explained. "It started showing me stuff that it knew would—er—hit a nerve." He looked uncomfortable for a moment, and then added, "But it didn't matter, because I still managed to stick it."

"We still don't know whose Patronus it was," Harry muttered. "But I think it might have been my godmother." He looked at Hermione. "I mean, who else is left? Dumbledore trusted Snape, so maybe he trusted Snape's wife, who happens to be my godmother, and he left the sword to her."

"I dunno," Ron said. "I still think it might've been Professor McGonagall. She was in the Order, wasn't she? She was the Deputy Headmistress—I bet she was really close to Dumbledore. Dumbledore might've left the real sword with her," he added hopefully. "She's the Head of Gryffindor, isn't she? That would explain her Patronus."

"But enough of that," Harry said, leaning forward. "What about Godric's Hollow?"

Hermione took in a deep breath.

"We won't be going to Godric's Hollow," she said.

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With the locket out of the way, the three of them were feeling a lot more hopeful about their task. Hermione laid out the idea that there was something of Ravenclaw's that might be a horcrux, which they had already gone over before, along with the added suggestion that Nagini might be a vessel for Voldemort's soul, as well.

"I don't know," Harry said thoughtfully, lying on his back on one of the bunkers. "I mean, Dumbledore told me it's pretty risky for someone to entrust a part of their soul to a living thing. He said it was possible, but…"

"Come off it, if Dumbledore said it was possible, what he really means is that he's ninety-nine
percent sure, but he hasn't been able to confirm it," Ron said, with a roll of his eyes. "Add that bloody snake to the list of things we need to poke with the Sword of Gryffindor. Next?"

"Well, next we sort of have to figure out where Nagini is," Harry said slowly.


"Bathilda Bagshot?" Harry said in alarm.

"The real Bathilda Bagshot's dead," Hermione said. "You-Know-Who set a trap using his snake."

"But if the snake's a horcrux, why would he risk her getting killed?"

"It's a calculated risk," Hermione agreed, "but he probably thinks Harry wouldn't be wary of someone who looks like they might be another source of information from Dumbledore, and he thinks he has other horcruxes to fall back on."

The three of them fell silent for a moment, and then Harry said, "Then let's go to Godric's Hollow. We can get rid of the snake there."

Hermione bit her lower lip. "If You-Know-Who's set a trap, and he expects to use Nagini to stop you, it means he also has some kind of alert system for his snake. That means we would have to be extremely quick."

"Wait," Ron said suddenly. "You said you saw the snake disguised as Bathilda, right? That means the snake saw you?"

"Yes," Hermione said uncertainly.

Ron flopped back in his seat. "Forget it, then. You-know-who probably knows his trap failed by now, and he's got her back with him."

"We should at least check it out," Harry said stubbornly, but Hermione shook her head.

"Ron's right," she said. "Nagini's probably long gone now. When I left, it was clear to anyone who was watching that I did so because I realized I was in danger—You-Know-Who would have realized that, when he learned the trap failed. It's too risky going again just to check, too—if anything, You-know-who's probably set another kind of trap, probably worse. I was lucky to find the first. We might not be so lucky again." She turned to look at Harry. "I really think we should focus on finding Hufflepuff's Cup and whatever the Ravenclaw horcrux is, Harry. Once we've taken care of those two, You-know-who will realize he's getting low on them, and keep Nagini at his side. We should bank on that."

Harry sighed, staring up at the ceiling of their tent. "Fine. Any ideas on the Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw horcrux?"

Hermione and Ron looked at each other, equally at a loss for ideas.

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The next several weeks were spent trying to locate Hufflepuff's cup, the only next solid step they knew to take. While Harry and Ron focused on this, however, Hermione put her time and energy into figuring out The Tale of Three Brothers. It was clear to her that the sign of the Deathly Hallows had been inked in by hand, and not printed with the book, and she was convinced that there was a
An invisibility cloak to cheat death. An unbeatable wand made of Elder. A stone that could bring back the dead. There was something here, Hermione knew, and she just had to find it.

"Stone, cloak, wand," Harry and Ron would sometimes hear her repeating under her breath, like a mantra. "Stone, cloak, wand, stone, cloak, wand—"

"You're going to drive yourself batty if you don't stop," Ron finally said one evening, coming to look over Hermione's shoulder. "We get it already, a cloak, a stone, a wand—what's the connection?"

"I don't know!" Hermione said, throwing her hands up in frustration.

"Hermione, have you considered that you might be reading too much into this?" Ron prodded. "I mean, it is just a children's tale—"

Hermione jabbed her finger at the eye-like symbol that had been hand-drawn on the top of the page. "Dumbledore drew that on here, I'm sure of it. He meant for me to find it, and now he means for me to figure it out." She buried her face in her hands, elbows resting on her knees. "Why couldn't the bearded bastard have just told us all of this to our face when he was alive? Git."

"You're not the only one who's been wondering that," Harry said bitterly.

"Well, if sitting here stewing in our own juices isn't helping, what will?" Ron demanded. "Surely there's someone we can talk to, or maybe there's a book somewhere that you need to reference from—"

"Wait," Hermione said slowly, sitting up. "That's it."

"Which one?" Ron said hopefully. "Expert or book?"

"There might be someone we can talk to," Hermione said, carefully closing The Tales of Beedle the Bard in her lap, "but it's a fairly long shot…"

"Who?"

Hermione hesitated.

"I have a—a friend," she said slowly. "An acquaintance, really. I don't know where he is, so I'd have to find him, but he's worth talking to."

"Who?" Ron repeated.

Hermione hesitated again.

"Okay, you're making me worried now," Ron said. "It's not Xenophilius Lovegood, is it? Because I know Harry told us he was wearing it around his neck at the wedding, but the man's so batty, he probably wouldn't know the first thing about it—"

"No, it's not Lovegood," Hermione said distractedly.

"And Viktor Krum already told me that it was Grindelwald's symbol, but he didn't know anything else about it," Harry said. "There's no use going to him, either."

"I wasn't talking about Viktor," Hermione said, getting to her feet. "I wouldn't expect you to know him. I'm going to have to do a little searching."
"But who *is* he, Hermione?" Ron demanded.

"I'm not telling you just yet," Hermione said, now bending over her cot and picking up her traveling cloak. "Like I said, I need to do a little searching."

"Why aren't you telling us who he is?" Ron said.

"More importantly," Harry said quietly, "what aren't you telling us?"

Hermione pursed her lips for a moment as she pulled her traveling cloak over her shoulders, and then sighed. "He's a vampire."

Harry gave her a blank look, which told Hermione that he knew next to nothing about vampires, and then turned to look at Ron—which confirmed for her that he was waiting for Ron's reaction to judge just how bad the situation was. To her surprise, however, Ron did not explode. She saw his blue eyes widen, and his jaw dropped slightly, but he collected himself with admirable haste.

"A—a vampire? But—why? They're dangerous, looking for one would be like a mouse looking for a cat that wants it for a snack—"

"I've never asked him how old he is, but if we're lucky, he'll be old enough to remember what the mark was for before Grindelwald made it his," Hermione said, fastening her cloak. "He's a friend of mine, Ron. He's gone out of his way to help the Order before, even when it's to his disadvantage to do so. I trust him. My only real concern is finding him."

"I still think that's a really bad idea," Ron said, and there was palpable apprehension in his words. "But even if you go looking for him, you shouldn't go off on your own alone—"

Hermione turned around to look at him.

"Excuse me, but who went off to scout around Godric's Hollow to make sure it was safe?" she said. "Raise your hand if it was—oh," she said, thrusting her hand into the air. "It was me, wasn't it?"

Ron's ears turned red. "That's different—"

"Not really," Hermione interrupted. "If all three of us had gone, we would have been loud, noticeable. We would have walked right into a trap, and very possibly dead by now. And given all the practice I've had in getting through places as inconspicuously as possible—"

"It was very different," Ron argued. "We knew where you were going, and we expected you to be back within a reasonable amount of time—this could be you going off for *days*! And if only one of us went with you, it would leave the one left behind vulnerable—it's like leaving your king unguarded in chess! It's a very stupid idea!"

Hermione drew herself up. "That's why the two of you have to stay here," she said. "We don't have the luxury of letting me take back-up, or leaving one of you here to look after camp. Letting me go alone is the best option."

Hermione saw Ron work his jaw, and then turn to look at Harry, who had been watching their debate silently. Their scarred friend sighed, removing his glasses to rub at his eyes, and then looked up at Hermione from where he sat on the bed.

"If Hermione's got a lead, then I think we have to trust her," he said quietly. "I don't like it any more than you do, Ron. It's risky, and we don't know if it'll bear out or not—but she's right when she says she can sneak through places without being noticed, and I think—I think we have to let her do this."
Ron inhaled sharply. "Fine. I can see I'm not going to win this, but it's just—Hermione, if we lose you, we lose the war." He looked her in the eyes as he said this, his face set and determined. "Whatever else happens, you're the one who keeps us going in the right direction—you stop us from wandering aimlessly off-course. It's just—you do so much else, and I don't know how you expect us to do this on our own without you."

Hermione moistened her lips, thinking. "Alright. I won't leave immediately. I need to plan where to go anyway, where to start my search…and in the meantime," she said, tugging her cloak off with a sigh, "I'll be giving the two of you some badly-needed survival courses."

~o~O~o~

Hermione spent the next two weeks examining old maps and inking them in places she planned to check. When she wasn't taking Harry and Ron through the woods to show them specifically which berries, mushrooms, and tubers to dig up—with a warning that if they couldn't match it to the ones she had shown them exactly, and that if they didn't recognize it they ought not to eat it—she was finding a private moment alone to contact her husband through their rings.

She had explained to Severus that she was splitting up from Harry and Ron temporarily to seek out Sanguini. He had offered to join her, and Hermione had hesitated in accepting. On one hand, she badly wanted her husband by her side. On the other, she was not certain he could afford to abandon his post at the school to join her. So she told him that she would think about it, and took her time in weighing whether or not he should come. He had nevertheless helped her narrow down her search greatly by speaking to Dumbledore's portrait, whereupon the two of them learned that Sanguini was still working undercover in the vampire community in Britain. There were only a few places in the isles where vampires regularly congregated together, which were circled in red ink on her maps.

By the time she left Harry and Ron, camped in another area of the Forest of Dean, this time in near a spring that held some fish—Ron had spent the better part of their first afternoon there learning how to cook trout—she had a good idea of where to begin, was confident that her two friends would be alright, and had made her decision.

Yes, she had written on her ring. Please come.

It was how she found herself standing in the middle of a forest clearing somewhere beyond the outskirts of the town of Inverness, her face hooded by her traveling cloak, and quite alone. There was still snow on the ground, and it made her think of Severus—the fact that they had missed his birthday, which had been back in January, and that they would now both be walking into the middle of vampire territory in the middle of February. It was a terrifying thought, for Ron had the right attitude in his general fear of vampires, but it was necessary.

The crunch of boots on frozen leaves and snapping twigs jolted her upright, and she flicked her wand to ignite it before holding it out toward the forested gloom. A cloaked figure slipped out from behind a tree, and her face slowly brightened into a magnificent smile as the visitor came to a halt several feet away to pull down the hood obscuring his face. She did the same, lowering her wand and running forward quickly to meet him, throwing caution into the wind as she embraced him. Gloved hands came to wrap around her, tugging her closer to him, and he bent forward to kiss her.

They were alone. Right now, they were together again, not concerned about what the Dark Lord's followers would think, and not worried if Harry or Ron would see them. This seemed to lift a huge burden off of them at once, no longer constrained by their roles, they were able to use this moment to express in the flesh what they could not through their rings. Their love, as affectionate and enduring as ever, and could not be fully explained through short words alone.
"It's so good to see you again," Hermione whispered, burying her face in his chest, reveling in the warmth and security his presence provided for her. "I still don't know how you managed to make enough excuses to leave the school, but—you're here."

She felt Severus's hands fumble with her hair for a moment, pulling it lose from its messy ponytail to twist it into an approximation of the chignon she had always worn, and then felt something poke the back of her neck as it was slipped through it. She brought a hand behind her head to feel it, and then smiled as her fingers brushed against the silky softness of rose petals.

"The Dark Lord has allowed me to leave Hogwarts because there are, as you undoubtedly know, some very valuable ingredients in the wilderness of northern Scotland," Severus said smoothly, caressing her cheek with his thumb. "It's not the first time this year that I've left on that excuse. I also made it unmistakably clear to the Carrows that if a single student does not make it on the train home for the Easter holidays—intact—they will both serve as food for the more predatory dwellers of the Forbidden Forest."

"And the Dark Lord allowed you to make that threat?" Hermione asked, surprised.

Severus was silent for a moment, twisting a loose strand of her hair through his fingers, as though considering his reply. "The Dark Lord finds the Carrows to be zealous enforcers, but he considers the students of Hogwarts to be valuable—both as potential hostages and as future recruits of his regime. He agrees, as I do, that the Carrows often overstep the boundaries I've laid out for them—and which he approves of—regarding how to handle the unruly ones, and frankly does not seem to mind the idea that if they overstep in my absence, he will have to send replacements."

"That's surprisingly generous of him," Hermione murmured.

"I believe he left the Carrows with me because he does not know how else to employ them," Severus admitted, his tone indifferent. "They're as bumblingly incompetent as they are sadistic, and I believe the Dark Lord is growing tired of them. The only reason he hasn't punished them further is because they were among the followers who were at his resurrection."

"I see," Hermione said, snorting slightly at this. "So he's left the most dunderheaded of his lot with you, and if they can't survive your regime, so much for that?"

Her husband's thin lips twisted into a wry, grim smile. "Yes."

"For once, I approve."

"Don't be too pleased with that," Severus said waringly, placing a hand on her shoulder and nudging her into accompanying him into walking back through the trees he had appeared behind. "He could send someone worse—the Carrows are, at least, somewhat manageable. Fenrir Greyback and his lot are not."

Hermione followed as they made their way deeper into the woods, the faint lights from the town ahead that had been peeking out through the treetops in the distance vanished as the canopy grew denser. Hermione caressed the rose Severus had placed in her hair before pulling her hood up over her face, nodding to herself in approval as her husband did the same. They both had their wands out, casting light around them so that they could find their way while the sky above grew darker overhead.

They had trekked up a good distance, the ground getting steadily steeper, by the time they stopped for the night. They did not bother finding a clearing to make themselves comfortable, but instead found a crowded space between several trees that some transfigured blankets and the usual array of
protection spells made a serviceable sleeping spot. They wanted to be the ones doing the finding, not the ones being found, and staying off of the beaten path was the best way to do so.

Very little had been said between them as they walked, and it was not surprising as to why. What was there to talk about? Hermione did not need to ask how the students were, knowing that she would hear little else but bad news—and telling Severus about what she and her two companions were doing was not safe. It was best if he knew as little as possible about how the trio traveled, not because she did not trust him, but because she was starting to understand why Dumbledore had been reluctant to tell him everything. It only made Severus's job harder, keeping information from the Dark Lord, if his thoughts were primary occupied by the forbidden information. It meant there was more that could slip through, more to sort through and consciously decide to hide. The last thing he needed was the added trouble of something as inane as what Harry and Ron were up to; it would be damaging if the Dark Lord found out about their covert get-together.

As Hermione snuggled up against Severus, cocooned in their blankets as they were, their only protection against the cold aside from a Warming Charm, she considered this predicament they were in. They couldn't talk about very much of the war; they couldn't even make idle chit-chat about their lives, for fear of saying the wrong thing. The only thing they could get out of this reunion was the comfort of each other's presence.

Their current state of contemplative and companionable silence did jog her thoughts, though.

"Severus?" she whispered.

There was a muffled response close to her ear, where Severus had buried her face in her curls.
"Mmh?"

"Do you remember how this all started?" Hermione asked quietly. "When I fell back in time and arrived in your year at school?"

Her husband slowly lifted his head. "How could I forget? You were there for less than two days before we wound up in detention together."

Hermione found herself smiling at the memory. "And you kept me hanging after that, thinking you were going to try and get revenge on me for slapping you—"

"I had considered it." She felt Severus shift beside her, wrapping his arms around her to hold her closer to him.

"Well, in the end, I spent some time on edge thinking you were going to make me pay for that, when all you were doing was waiting to see if I'd return that book you needed."

"And instead, you got me the complete set of notes that Black had destroyed," Severus replied dryly.

Hermione paused. "When did you start to see me?" she asked. "I know that you said that you'd realized you'd fallen in love with me, when we went out for ice cream on your birthday—but before that? What made you notice me as—me?"

"Why the sudden curiosity?" Severus murmured.

Hermione shrugged, feeling her cheeks turn pink, though whether it was from embarrassment or cold, she could not say. He let out a deep sigh at this, and she glanced up at his face to see him thinking carefully for a moment, before he finally replied.

"It might have been after Slughorn's party," he said slowly. "The first one you attended, where I
gave you back the book. At that time, I'd realized that you were something of a curiosity. But it wasn't until the day we shared an assignment in Arithmancy that you really caught my attention—but that was mostly because you were being an insufferable know-it-all."

Hermione let out a sound that might have been a suppressed peal of laughter. "And probably because I climbed all over you, trying to get that assignment back."

There was a pause, and then Severus admitted quietly, "That was the first time someone had ever treated me like that. You didn't know me very well, but you also didn't care—my appearance and personality didn't make you afraid of me. You didn't hesitate to overlook the parts of me that caused others to keep their distance."

Hermione placed one hand on his cheek. "I hate to tell you, Severus, but dealing with your seventeen-year-old self was far less terrifying when I'd had five years of dealing with you as my Potions professor under my belt."

In the dim light, she saw her husband's smirk. And then his expression leveled out into an expression of indifference, though Hermione knew that to not be the case. "My awareness of you wasn't immediate. I knew you then, but I don't think I began to understand you as a person until we started studying together. We mostly ignored each other at first, but you... well, being you, that didn't last for long."

Hermione smiled with amusement at the memories his words evoked, and then spoke. "We started trading knowledge like it was currency. You had this book with so many novel tips and tricks written down in the margins, and you were using spells I hadn't even known existed... naturally, I wasn't about to leave you alone."

Severus let out a huff of laughter at this. "And the longer you stayed around, the more I got to know you—and not entirely by choice. You weren't afraid to stand up to me, but you also weren't afraid to impose your company on me despite any less than warm welcome I might have given you."

"And I grew on you, I suppose?"

"Like poisonous toadstools," her husband assured her sardonically.

"How flattering of you," Hermione said dryly.

"Nevertheless, I can certainly say that by the time you followed me through the tunnel of the Shrieking Shack to stop me from being mauled by a werewolf, I was most certainly aware of you. Especially when you stayed to comfort me afterwards, instead of..." he trailed off.

Hermione caressed his cheek. "Earlier that year, when I'd first arrived, I broke down in the common room crying. Remus was there for me then—he comforted me and made sure I was alright. He was a good friend to me, and I just... when I saw myself in you then, I just wanted to be a good friend to you when you needed it most, too."

Her husband closed his eyes. "I know."

"You do?"

"Yes. You still are."

Hermione kissed him lightly on the lips. "And then you held off taking the Dark Mark for a year."

"That was how much you'd already affected my life then," Severus murmured. "Imagine how much
difference you've made to me now, after twenty years."

"Oh, I can imagine," Hermione said, nuzzling him. "After all, we've ended up here, haven't we?"

At this, Severus's arms tightened around her, and his face buried itself in her neck once more. It was a clear indication that the discussion was over, though the fact that he was smiling told Hermione that it was on a good note. She did the same as well, though she found better comfort in his chest, trying not to get her face caught on the buttons of his robes as she closed her eyes to sleep.

The second day started out very similar to the first, though this time, neither of them held back on conversation. Occasionally, they would lapse into silence. On other instances, they would stop long enough for Severus to kneel down and examine the ground, taking a moment to test the frozen earth for something—sometimes, he came up with a prize, some Potions ingredient which Hermione had overlooked, which would spark her curiosity enough to ask about it.

They came across an unremarkable-looking plant, which Hermione would have easily passed over, but which Severus fingered for a moment with an expression of controlled curiosity on his face. He prodded at the fennels, and then plucked a single stem of the plant off.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, bending down to examine the plant. "I don't think I've seen any part of it used before."

"Silphium," he responded shortly.

"And?" Hermione prompted.

"The plant itself has a variety of properties which were well-known in ancient times," Severus said, getting to his feet, turning the stem over in his palm with an expression of considerable interest. "In the Muggle world, it is considered extinct because it was over-exploited. In the magical world, in places where it is never thought to be capable of growing, and where humans rarely tread… you may be lucky enough to come across a magical variety. But given its rarity, one must be careful not to over-harvest it."

Hermione tilted her head to the side as she took in the stem. "What are you planning on using it for?"

She knew for certain that she was not imagining her husband's smirk as he slipped the plant into his pocket. "You'll find out tonight."

That night, they found another tiny space between trees that was not quite a clearing, yet had sufficient room for them to situate themselves. Hermione set up their protective wards, and then made short work of the edible plants and a single trout that they had managed to collect throughout the day, turning it into a kind of fish stew. It was admittedly not the most appetizing of things she could have come up with, but they made do with what they had, and it was not unpalatable. As soon as they had eaten, Severus took over the small fire that she had used to cook with, pulling out several plants that he had picked from earlier and filling the iron pot she had brought with water.

She lay back on the blankets, staring up at the starry sky through the holes in the forest canopy above, both unable and unwilling to sleep alone. It was early yet, and with nothing but the bubbling of the pot to break the silence, she found herself thinking about the very three objects that had sent
her out in the middle of a presumably vampire-infested forest in the first place. A stone, a cloak, and a wand. Together, they fit into a sort of symbol which Dumbledore had inked out very clearly on a page in Selenius's copy of *The Tales of Beadle the Bard*.

She had brought the book with her. With nothing else for it, she pulled it out, rolling over onto her belly and lighting her wand so that she once again found herself reading the tale of three brothers. With a Warming Charm over her and the blankets, it was oddly cozy, sitting up and reading tonight.

An hour later, Severus had banked the fire, and Hermione set the book aside, expecting him to crawl under the blankets with her, when he instead pushed a cup of a strange, syrupy-looking potion the color of shallow amber in front of her. She blinked, lifting it up to her nose for a sniff, and then set it down.

"It smells… vaguely like the Contraceptive Potion I used to take regularly," she said, struck by the resemblance. "Although this is definitely more pungent—and thicker, too." A sudden thought hit her. "Is this... the Silphium you found earlier…?"

"Correct."

The blankets shifted, as Severus slipped underneath them with her. Without another moment's hesitation, Hermione lifted the mug to her lips, and ignoring the appalling taste, swallowed it down. She tapped the mug again, filling it with water, and drank it down to clear the lingering taste. Satisfied, Severus picked up the mug and tossed it aside, before rolling over and getting to work on her clothes.

They were neck-deep in unknown territory, and yet, her partner's foremost concern aside from their immediate survival was making the most of their time together to have sex. Hermione almost shook her head in an amalgamation of disbelief and amusement at this; some things, it seemed, didn't change. Nevertheless, part of her, the part that was not ruled by logic and reasoning and rationality wholeheartedly agreed that Severus had the right idea, and it was the side of her that prompted her more than warm response to his advances. Clothing was discarded in what amounted to miraculous contortions to get it all done underneath the warmth of the blankets, and then he was over her, pinning her underneath him, kissing and nibbling his way down her neck to turn his attention to her breasts.

She had nearly forgotten what it was like. Nearly six months with hardly any contact, and her body was sluggish in responding, but it was also quick to remember. She ran her hands up and down his body, taking note of his visible ribs, and feeling an odd emotion well up in her when she realized that her own body was not filled out any better. But the sensations were pleasurable at the least, and the affectionate caresses he bestowed on her laid her nervousness and worries to rest, warming her to the core and washing away the compounded stress that had been steadily weighing her down.

Their movements were restricted as they tried to move the blankets as little as possible, not wanting to let cold air in. When she felt his erection pressing against her, she felt a momentary flutter of panic. She had taken the concoction Severus had brewed earlier, but it was not the same as the one she normally took. It was different, unfamiliar, and she didn't know for certain that it would work. But she pushed those worries away almost immediately; she trusted her husband, and she also trusted his skill at brewing. He could put together almost anything if he had the right base ingredients at hand; his knowledge of potion-making was exceptionally intuitive, and she had no doubt that he, at least, knew what he was doing.

In another sense, he most certainly did know what he was doing. He was inside her now thrusting deeply until he was seated as far as he could go, and she heard his familiar, masculine sigh of appreciation as he stilled his movements. Taking a moment to enjoy the slick, inviting warmth of her
body that squeezed around him like a hot vise. His head tilted forward, his face obscured by his black curtain of hair, as he breathed in deeply, no doubt trying to control himself to make this moment last.

Hermione reached up to cup his face between her hands, pulling him down so that she could feel the warmth of his thin lips on hers. Underneath the blankets, sheltered from the world, and in the privacy of being alone… they had this moment of reprieve. She honestly had not thought she would get to see her husband again without them being on opposing sides before the war was over, and this was the greatest gift she could have been given under the circumstances.

Their coupling was gentle and slow, though not even that could hide the heated passion that simmered between them. Naked skin was pressed against naked skin at every point that could be met. Though he had her pinned on her back, resting his weight on her, he was not so heavy that he smothered her—though he certainly encompassed her, blocking out the world around them as he kissed, licked, nibbled, and suckled on whatever he could reach. She laid back and let him, not because she was thinking of something else, but because she simply wanted to let it happen. To close her eyes and surrender herself to the sensual ministrations.

This wasn't about her satisfaction, not this time. There was no marvelous peak, no reaching orgasm. That was purely physical pleasure. This, however, was a balm to her tattered emotions and frayed nerves, this calm and easy way of making love. There was no goal here to drive her out of her mind with pleasure, as had been Severus's intent the first time they had ever made love. For her, this time, the act of making love was pleasure in of itself, in a place that ran deeper than her loins. This was simply an exquisite sort of comfort, a kind of giving and receiving of connection.

When they had finished, neither made any indication of moving. Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him tightly to her, as though to discourage him from pulling away. They stayed together in silence, save for their heavy breathing and pounding heartbeats, which was occasionally interrupted by the sound of blankets shifting or of heavy sighs that expelled warm puffs of air into the cold night. And then at last, Hermione removed one arm so that she could stroke his face, gazing into it as though to memorize it.

"You know," she whispered, her voice so soft that it was barely audible, "I don't think that in all those years we've spent together, you've ever asked me when I first realized I loved you."

There was a heavy sigh, as her husband turned over on his side. He lowered his head to her chest, pillowing one cheek on her breasts, and remained silent for a moment before he finally spoke. "You're right—but I believe I can guess when you first realized the love you had for me wasn't entirely platonic."

Hermione closed her eyes, smiling. "Why do I even try? Of course you've already got it all figured out."

Even with his face turned away from her, she knew he was smirking. "The day I first kissed you in the library—and you responded. That was when you realized there might be something more." He twisted his head to the other side to glance at her. "And when you saw me again at Slughorn's party, and kissed me—and then snuck out into the hall. I could tell, then, because it was clear that you were… afraid. Because at that moment, when you realized you loved me, you also realized it could lead to heartbreak."

Hermione's eyes flew open at this, startled by his accuracy. "Were you using Legilimency on me?"

His smirk grew wider. "No. I didn't dare. You would know if I had." His lips twitched, as though he were about to smile, but then his expression softened as he turned his head away. "But I wouldn't
Hermione placed a hand on his head, running her fingers through his hair. She knew what he was saying, but she still had to voice it. "You know what I was thinking because you felt the same way."

"I can see that your schooling hasn't been wasted, if you can finally take a synopsis and compress it into a summary."

"Don't get snarky with me," Hermione chided, rapping him lightly on the head for this, "or I won't tell you when I realized that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you."

His head lifted slightly at this and an ear twitched, a silent admission of interest. She grinned sleepily at him, and then said, "Can you guess?"

"Knowing you, it will probably be something sentimental, such as when we bought that sheepskin rug," her husband muttered.

"No, earlier than that," Hermione said, leaning back and crossing her arms behind her head. "When we first started talking about whether we'd ever want a family together." Severus turned to look at her, his expression blank, and she elaborated, "It was when Lucius Malfoy stopped by to tell you that you were expected to show blatant favoritism to the Slytherins—when you explained why the Dark Lord was content to let you keep me around." His face lit up with understanding. "It was when you asked me if I'd ever want children—and I remember having to think it over for a moment. When I realized that I wanted a family and a future with you."

Severus blinked slowly for a moment, and turned away without another word. For a moment, Hermione wondered if she had said something wrong, but after a few seconds' consideration, he set those fears to rest by explaining what was on his mind.

"The Dark Lord… at that time, he expected you to become a wife or mistress and become breeding stock—those were my exact words then, too." He fell silent, and then said, "When the Dark Lord returned, that was the least of his concerns, though you'll remember my telling you that he was irate at the lack of viable recruits his followers had made during his… absence. But once the Prophecy was destroyed, he returned to considering long-term plans… and he also made it very clear that you were starting to become more than just a thorn in his side."

Hermione winced. "If I recall, he was enraged about what happened at the Department of Mysteries."

"Yes. Enough to take it out on Draco, to punish his parents. But that aside," Severus said, lifting his head to look at her directly, his face impassive, "since your de-aging and the fact that he still views you as valuable despite your sullied heritage—he has been reticent to have you killed, because as always…"

"Because as always, he thinks I'm controllable," Hermione said seriously. "Because you're his right-hand man, and he suspects that I'm a weakness of yours. And because I'm close to Harry, having someone in a position to pull my strings makes me invaluable as a source of information."

"Yes. But right now, he wants you out of the way, not whispering into Potter's ear."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. "I can see where you're going with this, and I don't like it."

"You think I like it any more than you do?" Severus snapped. "Part of the reason I've kept my communication with you as restricted as possible is because the Dark Lord's made it very clear to me
that if the opportunity ever presents itself, I'm to take advantage of it to impregnate you. The less we knew of each other, the less likely he was to think I'd have the chance. You would be out of the way while still proving a useful asset to him."

"And are you going to take advantage?" Hermione asked quietly.

"No. Never without your consent." He sat up a bit more. "And particularly not with as much flippancy as the Dark Lord would expect—having had one child and not been able to take care of him on our own because of the Dark Lord, I'm not about to have another in the thick of another war just because he has ordered me to. Just because he wants you put to good use and put out of the way at the same time." He rubbed his face with one hand, looking more tired than Hermione had ever seen him. "Thank the gods we kept Selenius's existence a secret from him. Our son has suffered enough already—I hardly want to bring another child of mine into this climate."

Hermione pressed her face into his chest. "And by not taking advantage… you haven't given me a report in months, so I wouldn't know, but do you suffer for not following his orders on this?"

Her husband seemed to take a moment to consider his answer, not as though about how much to tell her, but in deciding how best to phrase it. "Right now, his foremost interest is finding Potter and controlling Hogwarts. You're a target while you accompany Potter, but you are not his most direct concern. He has only ever brought it up twice—the first time was after you broke into the Ministry, and the second was when you apparently detected the trap he had set in Godric's Hollow."

Hermione bit her lip. "So essentially, it's only when I get into the thick of things—make myself noticeable. Make things difficult, muddy the waters, or outright ruin his plans solely because I'm present."

"Yes."

Hermione nodded slowly. "Well, I can't help doing my job… but after this, as long as we continue to keep communication minimal… the worst that is likely to happen is that he'll hint at you that perhaps you ought to try and keep your wife in check. But he hasn't specifically and directly ordered you to hunt me down and rape me."

"No. If he wanted me to do that, he would have been unmistakably clear about it."

Hermione gave him a steely look. "If his orders on that ever change, you're to tell me right away. Am I understood?"

His face contorted into a grimace. "Yes."

"And…" Hermione hesitated, unsure if she wanted to venture into such territory, but plowed on. "Is there anything else I need to know? Either as your wife or your handler?"

Severus shook his head. "Nothing that I can afford to tell you."

"Well then," Hermione said heavily, laying her head on the ground and pulling the blankets over them more securely, "I suppose that's it, then."

~o~O~o~

Their destination was a small village that would never be found on a Muggle map. There were several tiny, unobtrusive cottages dotted around a small square, which seemed to be defined solely by the fact that it contained a bar. Hermione and Severus were not the only ones who walked through with their faces covered; there hardly seemed to be a head that was not obscured in some
way, and when Hermione saw one of them lower their hoods to bend over a strange sort of water barrel outside of the bar, a flash of violet eyes and sharp teeth crossed her vision before they turned the tap, and something dark and red poured out into his waiting lips.

It was daylight now, which would explain why there were so few vampires wandering the square—she could only see three or four, all walking slowly and not remaining for long—and why they were all insistently covered from head to toe. It was to Hermione's and Severus's advantage, then, that they were able to fit in without being immediately recognizable as human. When they peered through the cracks of one of the cottages, they glimpsed about a dozen prone bodies on beds, mattresses, and even on the floor, all snoring away. They canvassed the village once, and then slipped back into the forest for privacy to talk.

"We'll have to wait for nightfall, when they start to come out," Hermione said, rubbing her hands together to keep them warm. "I'm surprised any of them are out at all—although since it's still winter, the sunlight's probably weak enough for them to venture out at earlier hours… but Sanguini isn't any less of a vampire than the rest of them, so if he's here, he's probably asleep."

"Walking into the heart of a vampire community when they're awake and hungry is just asking to be killed," Severus said quietly. "If we search the buildings during the day, they'll probably be too sleepy to notice or care—we should ascertain whether Sanguini is here first, before walking straight in."

Hermione bit her lip. "I should have thought of that. It's still fairly early in the day—it's not even noon. Should we start now, while it's still light out?"

"We're too close to the area for it to be safe to camp out until tomorrow morning," Severus muttered. "It's either now, or we waste another day walking back to where we last slept and then hunting around for this place again."

"Right," Hermione said, trying to suppress her nervousness. "Right. Let's start with the first one, then…"

As it turned out, her husband was correct. Upon opening the door to the first cottage, slipping inside and shutting it behind them quickly, the vampires residing within hardly even stirred. One or two blinked sleepily at them, and the rare one lifted up its head to give them a bleary look. But they were like a pride of lions sleeping in the afternoon sun, only dangerous at the wrong time. Hermione and Severus carefully checked each face, and when they finally looked up at each other, shook their heads in negation and left.

The second yielded similar results, though one vampire had opened its eyes long enough to look at Hermione, let out a sniff, and mutter something about food. In the third, two woke up cursing violently at them while another badly aimed a shoe at them. It would have been amusing if Hermione had not been utterly terrified when the shoe missed her, and smacked into the nearest vampire sleeping at her feet. In the fourth building, however, Hermione and Severus stopped dead in their tracks when they realized one of the vampires in there was wide awake. No—wide awake was not the right term, for he looked half-asleep, but he was certainly awake, sitting upright in a chair in the corner and reading a book. He looked up at them with tired eyes from behind a pair of spectacles, and then went back to reading, hardly giving them a second glance as they surreptitiously began checking the faces.

As they left, the vampire muttered something to them. Hermione turned around to look at him, despite her better judgment, to ask him to repeat himself. Louder, the vampire said in a slurred voice, "What are you looking for?"
Hermione and Severus exchanged covert looks, and then Severus rumbled, "Sanguini."

"He's not here." The vampire's eyes flickered up from his book to them, and then back to the book.

"Oh," Hermione said, disappointed. "I—do you happen to know where he might be?"

The vampire gazed at his book intently as he said, "He doesn't live here. He only comes in the evening to feed." And at last, he looked up at her again, and Hermione thought she saw a rather hungry look in his tired eyes. He gave an audible sniff, and then sat up a bit straighter, though his words still came out with the consistency of a drunken bard. "You're human. What are you doing here?"

"We're not vampire hunters," Severus responded shortly, before Hermione could open her mouth to speak.

"We're friends of his," Hermione added quietly, endeavoring to keep her voice down as more than one sleeping vampire began to perk awake with latent interest. "We need to talk to him."

The vampire licked his lips thoughtfully, his violet eyes standing out against his pale face. "Drop by in the evening. I'm sure you'll find him then."

Without another word, Severus took her hand and pulled her toward the door. They shut it behind them, and without another word, made their way back into the cover of the woods.

"It looks like we'll have to walk into the lions' den after all," Severus sneered, once they were clear of the village. "We might be able to disguise ourselves, but we can't stay for long—as you've already noticed, the longer we remain, the more likely they are to identify our scent."

"Then we should go in when he's most likely to be there," Hermione said decisively. "By late nightfall."

"That's also the most dangerous hour to walk into a cluster of vampires."

"It's a gamble, but if we try playing it safe, we're more likely to waste our time coming back every evening until we catch him, and they'll come to recognize us anyway," Hermione pointed out. "We should endeavor to get in quickly, find him, and then get out."

Severus lifted a finger to his lips, tracing it as he always did when deep in thought. "The vampire we spoke to did not appear especially aggressive. Sanguini had a human companion before going undercover—Worple, wasn't it?"

Hermione nodded. "Worple lived with vampires for a number of years—he documented his experiences while in their communities and covens." She paused. "Those vampires were not aggressive either, even though Worple did mention more than one close call when they hadn't fed recently. We might... it's possible these are not especially dangerous. Or that they're tolerant of humans, provided they're not hungry."

"We saw one of them drinking blood, earlier. They don't appear to have a food shortage."

"And if there are more, then even if Sanguini can't help us, he might know someone who can."

They looked at each other.

"Well," Hermione said at last. "At least we know that the worst that can happen is that we won't walk out of this human."
"I don't fancy making love to a living corpse for the next several hundred years," Severus remarked snidely, his expression twisting into one of distaste.

"Well, neither do I. Let's try and make sure it doesn't come to that."

~o~O~o~

Walking into a bar at night was a simple matter. Walking into a bar at ten o'clock in the evening, and where all of the customers were vampires, was not. Nevertheless, when two cloaked figures slipped inside at that late hour, there wasn't a single vampire that threw them an untoward glance. The bar was not lively—though every table was taken, and every barstool was occupied; the atmosphere was somber, depressing even. Pale, corpse-like figures sat listlessly with mugs of something dark red between their hands, sipping it and looking at each other with tired, thousand-mile stares. Their conversation consisted of mumbled, muttered words that were too low for Hermione to make out. There was the odd one that looked more animated than the rest, or was engrossed in a book or poking at some odd object or construct, but the majority of them lived up to their name in looking half-dead. It was like walking into a room full of tranquilized caffeine addicts who had not had a proper shot of coffee in days.

Hermione found herself mentally shaking her head in disbelief. All those essays she had read and written about vampires had made them out as some of the most dangerous and deadly creatures known to man—and here, she could hardly imagine a less intimidating crowd. Yet, she did not let her guard down; she more than anyone else was perfectly aware of how looks could be deceiving. Vampires had the potential to be incredibly strong, and their seemingly-harmless manner could flip if so provoked—or motivated. Lax though they seemed now, they could turn deadly in an instant.

Attempting to fit in, they moved slowly about the room. Unfamiliar faces met their gazes at each table, and twice, Hermione almost mistook the wrong vampire for Sanguini. They were able to take their time, because the smell of human blood cloyed and disguised the scent of two live ones in their midst, but Hermione was eager to be in and out of there as quickly as possible.

And then, at last, she saw him. Sitting near the end of the bar, staring at the wall behind the bar as though it would explain the nature of the universe to him, and sipping at a mug of dark red blood that gave color to his lips—the very vampire she was looking for. She jerked her head at Severus to let her know she found him, and with him watching her back, she approached their target, sidling up next to him and leaning against the counter so that her face was close to his.

"Sanguini?" she said, keeping her voice low enough so that only he could hear.

His eyes flickered toward her, as though she were barely important enough to warrant the attention—and then his gaze suddenly sharpened, and she saw his entire body suddenly give a tiny jerk, as though to restrain himself from doing something. She jerked her head at Severus to let her know she found him, and with him watching her back, she approached their target, sidling up next to him and leaning against the counter so that her face was close to his.

"Hermione Snape?" he muttered hoarsely, his tone one of utter disbelief.

"Yes," Hermione whispered.

Slowly, very slowly, he set his cup down. As though it were taking all his willpower to do so, he pulled his hands away from the cup. "What are you doing here?" he rasped.

"I need to speak with you."

"In… here?"
Hermione didn't even blink as she replied, "Somewhere else would be preferable, certainly."

With an enormous, weary sigh, Sanguni got to his feet. He drained the mug in one large gulp, letting out an exhalation of appreciation before shoving the cup away. He pulled his own cloak over his body more securely, hooding his face, and then with a nod toward the door, followed Hermione out. Severus appeared behind them a moment later, but it was not until they had reached the gloom of the surrounding forest that crept up around the cobblestone square that they finally spoke.

"Is this about my debt to you?" Sanguini asked, without preamble. His voice was scratchy and hoarse as always, but his words were clear.

"Not a debt, no," Hermione said, pulling her cloak back. "Just a favor. I… truth to be told, Sanguini, I don't consider you indebted to me. But I thought you might be willing to help me."

The vampire's violet eyes glittered with interest. "With what?"

Without another word, Hermione reached underneath her cloak, rummaging into one of the pockets of her robes, before pulling out the worn copy of *The Tales of Beadle the Bard*. The vampire took it in his bloodless hands, and the book fell open at the page that had been creased permanently in place, having been read so often before. The vampire's face remained bored and impassive for a moment, and then his head slowly tilted to the side, as though in interest.

"A children's fairytale," the vampire uttered. There was a note of amusement, censure, and derisiveness all wrapped into each and every raspy syllable.

Hermione's shoulders slumped. "So you don't know about its significance?"

There was a long pause, and then Sanguini pointed to the inked symbol at the top of the page with a pale, yellowed finger.

"You mean the sign of the Deathly Hallows?"

Hermione gave him an uncomprehending look. "Are we talking about the same thing?"

Sanguini rotated the book around so that Hermione could see the book properly, his finger still pointing clearly to the symbol at the top. "This is the sign of the Deathly Hallows, which was developed in reference to this fairytale."

Beside her, she heard Severus snort in derision, and mutter something that sounded suspiciously like "Damn you, Albus." Hermione straightened. She was now more baffled and confused than ever, but it seemed that Sanguini knew something about it—she had no references for what he was telling her, but she was interested.

"To be honest, Sanguini… I've never heard of it," she said slowly.

Sanguini's corpse-like face morphed into a toothy smile.

"The Stone, the Cloak, the Wand," he said, pointing to a different part of the symbol with each word. Hermione's eyes widened as the familiar mantra that had so driven her to frustration in earlier weeks was repeated to her. "The symbol had three parts, which each represent a different part of the three gifts that Death gave to the Peverell brothers."

The name *Peverell* seemed vaguely familiar to Hermione, but she could not quite place where or why, and set it aside for the moment.
"So the tale is real?" Severus interjected skeptically.

"I find it highly unlikely that Death himself appeared in front of those three wizards to give them gifts," Sanguni rasped. "More likely, they were simply each an inventor of a powerful magical object which passed through lore as a set of three."

She felt her husband’s tension drain ever so slightly. "Yes, that seems reasonable."

"What about Grindelwald?" Hermione interjected. "He used that symbol."

"He ripped it off of the tale," Sanguini replied harshly. "He himself was looking for the Deathly Hallows—his arrogance and determination to master them led him to use the sign for himself."

"So let's assume that these three wizards each made one of those objects," Hermione said. "What's their relevance?"

"So the tale goes, mastery of all three objects would make you the Master of Death," Sanguini whispered, and there was a glint of longing in his violet eyes. "The Resurrection Stone brings back the dead, though their revival is incomplete—not unlike the fate that has befallen me and my brethren. The Invisibility Cloak mentioned is unique because its integrity never wavers. And the wand…” he spread his hands in a gesture of openness. "I do not know."

He handed her back the book.

"I've spent the last several hundred years with nothing better to do but research that which I used to be," he said hoarsely. "Any wandmaker will tell you about a certain wand that has continuously dipped in and out of existence over the years. Whether it is really made of elder, I have not the faintest clue. But wizards and witches have spent their entire lives searching for those three objects, and have most often failed."

Hermione took the book, gazing down at the symbol before her, whose mystery was slowly being unveiled to her, bits and pieces at a time. "Did Professor Dumbledore ever discuss the Deathly Hallows with you?"

"Yes."

Severus let out a sound of surprise. Hermione looked up at the vampire sharply. "What did he say?"

Sanguini smiled pointedly at her. "He said that you might seek me out for answers."

Hermione and Severus looked at each other, both seemingly at loss for what to say. And then Severus said, rather quietly, "The Cloak."

"I—what?"

"Potter—Potter's Invisibility Cloak. James Potter received it from his father, and his son inherited it the first Christmas after he came to Hogwarts. Most Invisibility Cloaks lose their usefulness after a time—as Sanguini said, their integrity wavers. They get damaged, or the spells fall apart… but Potter's hasn't."

Hermione's eyes widened at this. Sanguini gave him a pale smile.

"And… the night Lily was killed… Albus was borrowing Potter's cloak." Severus seemed to struggle with himself for a moment, and then said, "I saw it when I went to visit Albus after… it was on his desk."
Hermione stared down at the book for a moment, and then snapped it shut.

"That's how he was able to give Harry the Invisibility Cloak," she said. "Because he already had it. But nearly ten years passed between the time Albus had possession of the cloak, and the Christmas he gave it to Harry. But he wouldn't have needed it in the first place—he knew how to make himself invisible without a cloak. Which means that he took it because he wanted to examine it…"

"And he had ten years to examine it."

Hermione paused.

"What do you think he found?" She asked quietly.

"The Hallows," Severus muttered. "The Cloak fits the description—Potter's family was certainly pure-blooded and old enough for it to have been passed down for that long." There was a trace of bitterness to his words. "Albus must have suspected it was one of the Hallows, and took it to confirm it for himself—and by sending you on this ridiculous quest to find it, he must believe that it's real. He must have found something."

Hermione turned to look at Sanguini, wearing an expression of utter blankness. "He wants to make Harry the Master of Death?"

Sanguini shrugged. "I don't know." He gazed up at the sky for a moment, and then with a dip of his head in her direction, turned and began to slowly walk back in the direction they had come. "But you will have to figure that out for yourselves. Dawn will be approaching soon, and I must be hidden."

Hermione stepped forward, placing a hand on his shoulder, and causing him to twitch in surprise. "Of course. And Sanguini—thank you."

The vampire looked over his shoulder, first at her hand, and then at her, before giving her a toothy smile. And then he slipped away, disappearing into the night, and leaving Hermione and Severus well alone. One moment, he was there. The next—he was gone.

Severus waited until she had turned around to face him before he said, with a tone of obvious and snide derision, "Albus wants to make Potter the Master of Death?"

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "I don't know. Obviously, it's just—I don't know. Now I have a better idea of what they mean, what they might be, where Dumbledore wants us to look… but I'm not any closer to understanding why he wants us to search for them. Or—or where to find them."

Severus's lip curled. "If we are correct, you are already in possession of the Cloak. Sanguini said that you could ask any wandmaker about the elder wand, and you would probably get an accurate guess as to its last or current location. And as for the stone…"

Something suddenly struck Hermione. "That's it! The snitch!"

"The—what?"

"Harry—Dumbledore bequeathed Harry a golden snitch, the first one he ever caught, the one he nearly swallowed in his first Quidditch match—"

"The one where you set my robes on fire?" Severus asked snidely.

"Yes, and when he rattles it, you can hear something inside it. But that something would have to be very small and dense, which means that a stone—a tiny stone would be a good guess—Dumbledore
probably also found the stone and gave it to Harry!"

There was a pause. "Of course. He wouldn't have sent you into this mad hunt without a few pieces already in place. This just leaves you with the wand to locate."

Hermione's shoulders suddenly slumped. "If we're right…"

"Of course we are," Severus snapped. "This has Dumbledore's signature written all over it—it's mad enough, and the pieces fit. There's nothing else it could possibly be."

Hermione pressed her fingers to her temple. "Do you know what this means? Not only do we have three more Horcruxes to find, but also a piece of the Deathly Hallows."

"Surely you weren't expecting Dumbledore to make this easy for you."

"No, but you would think that with so much at stake, he might at least give some semblance of it!"

"But he has, hasn't he?" Severus iterated softly. "He already destroyed several Horcruxes, and left you in possession of two of the Hallows."

Hermione let out a strangled sound of frustration. "But still with no real understanding as to what the Hallows are supposed to do—what does being the Master of Death even mean? And the Horcruxes are nearly impossible to locate. The two that we do know of, we don't know where they are, and we're at loss for the third. It's just—Dumbledore left us an incomplete puzzle."

"Perhaps if you opened the Snitch, you could use the Resurrection Stone—"

"And bring Dumbledore back? Oh, that would be a lovely conversation, that would."

Severus paused, and then said, "You know very well that in all likelihood, that is what Dumbledore expected you to do, in the end."

Hermione chewed on her lower lip. "No, I don't think so. Dumbledore never struck me as the sort of man who would try to evade death—he always treated it as the natural, expected order of things… he was prepared to move on. I think he's done with the world of the living. I think… I think that if he had meant for us to bring him back, he would have made it easier for Harry to open the Snitch. As of right now, our only clue as to how are the words we saw written on it—'I open at the close.'"

Severus's entire expression went blank. "And those words mean nothing to you?"

"No. Nothing." Hermione searched his face. "Do they seem familiar to you?"

"Familiar? No."

"Well," Hermione said bracingly, though her tone was rather resigned, "at least we got something out of this trip. Now I know what to start looking for."

Severus met her eyes. "It's time we departed."

Slowly, Hermione placed her hand over his. It was cold, but then again, so were hers. Her husband placed his other hand over hers, and holding it gently between his own, lifted it up and pressed it to his lips. It was a silent good-bye, as intimate as they could get. Hermione pressed a kiss to his cheek, and then with great reluctance, knowing that they would now have to resume their disguised roles as enemies the moment they left, they stepped apart.

She looked him in the eye. "After this, I may have to do something that will seriously tick your lord
To her surprise, his lips quirked upwards, ever so slightly. "I know."

And here, she smiled. "Give Selenius my love."

A moment longer to take in his face, and then she spun on the spot, and a squeezing sensation accompanied by a loud *crack* had her spiraling away.

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Hermione found herself being hugged half to death by both boys when she arrived where she had left Harry and Ron, before being promptly dragged back inside and pestered for the full recollection of where she had been and what she had learned over the four days that she had been gone. As soon as she had made herself a cup of tea, Hermione sat down on one of the bunks and gave them an edited version of what had occurred. She shortened her story to say that she had trekked out to vampire territory, found Sanguini, gotten what she needed, and then returned—before diving in to tell them exactly what she had found out. When she finished, they sat there in silence for a moment, before Ron finally spoke.

"D'you think he was telling the truth?" he asked finally.

"I think so," Hermione said, sitting up straight, picking up the Wizarding Wireless and fiddling with it. "I trust him. I have no reason to believe he would lie."

"Deathly Hallows," Harry echoed, reaching for his Invisibility Cloak and holding it up for them to see. "If you're right—if that tale is true…"

"It's a mad tale," Ron said faintly, sitting down on his bed. "Mad… I s'pose the moral of the tale is that you're supposed to pick the Cloak, but if it's really just a—I dunno, a watered-down version of a real story about three wizards who invented some really powerful objects—it's wicked. Mad, but wicked."

"And if we've got the stone in the Snitch, other than the wand, we just need to figure out how to open it…"

They spent the rest of the evening heatedly and excitedly debating where or how they might locate the wand, and throwing out more suggestions for Harry in how to crack the snitch. Harry entertained most of their ideas, even going so far as to take Hermione's copy of *The Tales of Beadle the Bard* and read it aloud to the snitch, hoping that might work, but still to no avail. Finally, the dawn approached, and dwindled down to mostly involved Hermione and Ron heatedly debating, with Harry lying on his back in his bed quietly, until the lattermost finally interjected—

"Marvolo Gaunt!" he said suddenly, sitting up.

"Sorry?" Hermione and Ron said together.

"Marvolo Gaunt! You-Know-Who's grandfather! In the Pensieve!" Hermione suddenly schooled her expression as she recalled those sessions Dumbledore had with Harry, while Ron stared blankly at his best friend, who continued, "With Dumbledore! Marvolo Gaunt said he was descended from the Peverells!"

Hermione's head suddenly snapped in Ron's direction, almost giving her whiplash. That was where she had heard the name *Peverell*. Of course.
"The Peverells," she said suddenly. "When I was in Godric's Hollow, one of the gravestones there had the name Peverell on it, along with the Deathly Hallow marker on it. And the ring," she said, remembering the night she and Severus had come to Dumbledore's aid, just before the start of Harry and Ron's sixth year. "The one Dumbledore cracked open with the Sword of Gryffindor in his office—that ring?"

"Yes, yes!" Harry said excitedly. "Marvolo Gaunt said it had the Peverell coat of arms on it! I saw him waving it in the bloke from the Ministry's face, he nearly shoved it up his nose!"

"The Peverell coat of arms?" Hermione said sharply. "Could you see what it looked like?"

"Not really," Harry said, brow furrowing as he tried to remember. "There was nothing fancy on there, as far as I could see; maybe a few scratches. I only ever saw it up close after it had been cracked open."

Hermione's face went smoothly blank, as it tended to do of its own accord now, when she was trying to think something through in the complete privacy of her mind. Harry took it to mean she was listening, for he continued:

"Marvolo Gaunt was an ignorant old git who lived like a pig," he said, "all he cared about was his ancestry. If that ring had been passed down through the centuries, he might not have known what it really was. There were no books in that house, and trust me…"

Hermione tuned Harry out for a moment as she contemplated this. A conversation from over a year ago floated up again, from another day spent in Dumbledore's office.

"If I am right in assuming that Harry has told you about the previous memories I have shown him, you will surely recognize the name Morfin Gaunt…"

Harry had told them about how Tom Riddle had frame Morfin for the murders of Tom Riddle, Sr. and those of his parents, and taken the ring that Dumbledore had been seen wearing before he died. The one he had cracked open in the office.

"It was a stone, wasn't it?" Harry said now, and Hermione turned sharply toward him. "What if it was the Resurrection Stone? That's probably what Dumbledore put in the Snitch—we might have another clue as to how to open it, if we know what's in it—"

Ron's mouth fell open.

"Blimey—but would it still work if Dumbledore broke—"

"I don't know if it would still work, but it probably never— it probably—" she suddenly broke off.

"Why did you put on that ring? It carries a powerful curse, surely you realized that. Why even touch it?"

"I… was a fool… sorely tempted…"

"Tempted by what?"

Dumbledore had not answered. Indeed, Hermione had occasionally asked herself over the last year why the Headmaster had put on such a dangerous object.

Where was the temptation? Who would Dumbledore want to bring back?
Another memory surfaced this time—one of meeting Bathilda Bagshot on Harry's first birthday, nearly sixteen years ago. A woman Hermione had found to be an old but quiet, pleasant woman, who was interesting enough, and had chattered on about a variety of topics, not the least of which included Dumbledore. Hermione had merely dismissed most of what she had said as the senile ramblings of a woman in her dotage, but a worm of doubt now wriggled its way in her mind. Vaguely remembered conversations about Grindelwald, Ariana Dumbledore, something gone terribly wrong… but she had been so young then, and even if not as terribly naïve as Harry and Ron were still, she had still viewed the Headmaster with something akin to wide-eyed wonder. Had not truly made the connection between a picture of the young, auburn-haired man Bathilda had shown them to the wizened, silver-bearded one she had known then.

While Bathilda had lost her ability to hold her tongue with age, Dumbledore had not. He had kept his secrets close to the vest. He had not responded to Severus's question as to what, precisely, he had been tempted by. And yet… and yet…

"Hermione?" Harry asked tentatively.

Had there been someone he wanted to see again? Someone he wanted to talk to, someone he needed absolution from? Because in truth, if Beedle the Bard's tale was right, the Stone was designed to torment someone who meant to bring back a lover—but was perfect for getting a last word, a last chance to say good bye, to ask for forgiveness, or to get a blessing…

It would make sense that if Dumbledore believed the ring possessed the Resurrection Stone, and if Bathilda's ramblings had been right… that he would have been sorely tempted to see someone again, if only to speak to them.

Had it worked? Or had the curse on the ring struck him before he found out?

Hermione closed her eyes. It seemed to fantastical, so impossible, and yet, it was frighteningly the only plausible explanation that put the tale of the Deathly Hallows neatly together and explained Dumbledore's actions.

"It fits," she said suddenly, wonderingly. Harry and Ron were looking at her in alarm, as though they thought she had just gone mad. She sat up straight. "The ring… I'll concede this, Ron, that it's very possible that the ring Dumbledore cracked open was the Resurrection Stone…"

Harry goggled at her. "You're serious?"

Hermione nodded stiffly, and got to her feet, and began to pace. "We've got the Invisibility Cloak, which lends credible evidence to the Hallows existing, due to its unique longevity and effectiveness. We've got a possible identity of the stone, which Dumbledore got cursed when he tried to use because of the fact it was a horcrux—"

"Wait," Harry said suddenly, "how do you know he tried to use it?"

Hermione glared at him. "According to you, Slytherin's Locket didn't try to defend itself until you opened it, which you had to do in order to destroy it. If you wanted to use the Locket's properties, you probably would have had to open it then, too."

Ron whistled. "Good thing Harry didn't try opening it while wearing it."

Hermione felt a shudder run down her spine at this, but continued nonetheless. "It would make sense that Dumbledore would have had to try and use the stone in order to be able to destroy the horcrux within, in order to use the Sword of Gryffindor."
"Which leaves us back to my other question," Ron said. "Does it still work?"

Hermione twisted the watch around her wrist compulsively as she thought this through.

"My friend said the cloak gave constant and impenetrable concealment, no matter what spells were cast on it," she said carefully. "It would follow that the other two Hallows would be just as durable, wouldn't it?"

"And it wouldn't make sense for Dumbledore to send us looking for the Hallows if he meant to destroy one of them," Ron agreed. "After all, according to the legend, you need all three objects to become the master of death."

"If it's true," Hermione murmured. "Which I'm pretty sure it is…"

Harry suddenly gasped, and then began clawing at the pouch around his neck.

"Dumbledore had my Cloak the night my parents died!" He managed to undo it, and began feeling around inside it, rummaging frantically. "I already—we already knew that, but my mum told Sirius that Dumbledore borrowed the Cloak! This is why! He wanted to examine it, because he thought it was the third Hallow! That's proof, right there—"

He pulled out the incomplete letter, and pushed it toward Hermione, who picked it up with shaking hands.

"Ignotus Peverell is buried in Godric's Hollow, you said so yourself!" Harry said, dawning comprehension slowly lighting across his face. "He's my ancestor! I'm descended from the third brother—the Invisibility Cloak—it all makes sense!"

Hermione carefully handed the letter to Ron to read. In Harry's excitement, he had dislodged the snitch from his pouch, and as he bent down to pick it up, Hermione saw a lightbulb go off in his head. He picked up the little golden ball for a moment, his eyes widening with something akin to wonder, and then he jumped to his feet.

"The Snitch—he left me the Resurrection Stone in here for sure, and since we've definitely got the Cloak, and since we know You-Know-Who is searching for something—that he wants something from wandmakers, the ones he's been hunting down lately—!"

Hermione caught a glimpse of what she herself must look like when she had discovered a fascinating and vital answer to a particularly difficult problem, and then the light suddenly died. He stuffed it back in the pouch, and looked at Ron, who looked rather taken aback.

"That's what he's after," he said quietly. "I've been having visions of You-know-who searching for something—and this is it. The Elder Wand. He probably doesn't even care about the other two Hallows, but the only one we haven't got is the one he wants."

~o~O~o~

Two weeks later, they were still fiddling with the dials of the Wizarding Wireless. Potterwatch had been off the air for three weeks now, which meant the three of them were desperately hoping to find out what had happened to their best news source.

Finally, something seemed to click.

"I've got it, I've got it! Password was 'Wulfric'! Get in here, Harry!"
They all crowded around to listen.

"...apologize for our temporary absence from the airwaves, which was due to a number of house calls in our area by those charming Death Eaters."

"That's Lee Jordan!" Ron whispered gleefully. "Best commentator at Hogwarts, and now this..."

"...now found ourselves another secure location," Lee was saying, "and I'm pleased to tell you that two of our regular contributors are here with me this evening. Evening, boys!"

"Hi."

"Evening, River."

"They're still using codenames?" Harry asked unnecessarily.

"Of course. Lee is 'River', Remus is 'Romulus', Kingsley is 'Royal'—"

Hermione shushed them both so that they could listen.

"—meanwhile, in Gaddley, a Muggle family of five has been found dead in their home. Muggle authorities are attributing the deaths to a gas leak, but members of the Order of the Phoenix inform me that it was the Killing Curse—more evidence, as if it were needed, of the fact that Muggle slaughter is becoming a little more than a recreational sport under the new regime—"

"Fred also changed his name to 'Rapier'," Ron whispered. "George is 'Squire' for some odd reason —"

"Yes, Ron, I know! Shh!"

"Listeners, I'd like to invite you now to join us in a minute's silence in memory of Ted Tonks, Dirk Cresswell, Bathilda Bagshot, Gornuk, and the unnamed but no less regretted, Muggles murdered by the Death Eaters."

The radio went silent for a moment, as were the three of them. They waited there, yearning to hear more, yet afraid of what news might come of it.

"Thank you," said Lee's voice. "And now we would like to turn to this evening's guest speaker, March Hare."

Harry, Ron, and Hermione all exchanged odd looks.

"Thank you, River." It was the weary, tired voice of a man whom Hermione took a moment longer to recognize. Xenophilius Lovegood. "I just want to say that I recently got a house call from some Death Eaters and they... they informed me... they took my daughter." he seemed to have difficulty speaking, but he managed to anyway. "I—we know that it is easy to tell others what to do best, but often forget to do it ourselves... but if any of you—if any of you know where she is—please..."

"Luna?" Harry said suddenly, sitting upright in alarm. "That—that was Xenophilius Lovegood, wasn't it? They took Luna?"

"Shush!"

"...and that we have to remember that—that even in the most difficult of situations—we should do what is right..." there was a pause. "And I hope that if anyone who can help—if anyone is listening—to please do the right thing." His next word was tremulous. "Please."
"Thank you, March Hare," Lee's voice said sympathetically. "Listeners, for those who are still standing strong to resist Basilisk Snogger and his merry little band of evil gits, please keep an eye out to help those in trouble. And now, we have Royal here—"

"So Xenophilius went and joined Potterwatch?" Ron said, shaking his head in disbelief. "Wow."

"My god," Hermione said quietly. "His daughter—they took his daughter. I hope—his message will remind others, too, who have difficult choices to make, but—"

"...and what would you say, Royal, to those listeners who reply that in these dangerous times, it should be 'Wizards first'?"

"I'd say it's one short step from 'Wizards first' to 'Purebloods first' and then to 'Death Eaters'," Kingsley's deep voice said. "We're all human, aren't we? Every human life is worth the same..."

"I hope Luna's all right," Harry said quietly. "I really do. She's got more backbone than people give her credit for."

"Excellently put, Royal, and you've got my vote for Minister of Magic if we ever get out of this mess..."

"She really considers us her friends," Harry continued, looking up at Hermione. "She—you know, she always stuck by our side, she was always honest... sometimes maybe a bit too much, but that was just Luna—I hope she's still alive..."

"Romulus, do you maintain, as you have every time you've appeared on our program, that Harry Potter is still alive?"

"I do," Remus said firmly, his voice now appearing on the Wizarding Wireless. "There is no doubt at all in my mind that his death would be proclaimed as widely as possible by the Death Eaters if it had happened..."

"She's probably in Azkaban," Ron said shortly.

"I hope not," Hermione said softly.

"She'll survive," Harry said determinedly. "Luna's tough. Tougher than you know."

"Surviving Azkaban is one thing, Harry," Hermione said, remembering Sirius. "Whether one comes out of it whole is another."

"...what would you say to Harry if you knew he was listening, Romulus?"

"I'd tell him that we're all with him in spirit," Remus said, and then hesitated slightly. "And I'd tell him to follow his instincts, which are good and nearly always right."

Another pause.

"And... to the Professor... my friend, if you are listening..."

Hermione suddenly held up a finger, signaling to Harry and Ron to be quiet.

"...always remember that we are out there, and to not be afraid to ask for help. That little Padfoot is safe, and that Prongs... I think Prongs would be proud of you, too, after all that you've done."

Hermione placed a hand over her mouth, trying not to choke as she held back tears. She quickly
schooled her expression, glancing over at Harry and Ron, who had thankfully not noticed; their eyes were glued to the Wizarding Wireless, their expressions intense and surprised. She got up at that moment, backing away to sit on one of the lower bunks, burying her face in her hands.

James…

"…as our listeners will know, unless they've taken refuge at the bottom of a garden pond or somewhere similar, You-Know-Who's strategy of remaining in the shadows is creating a nice little climate of panic. Mind you, if all the alleged sightings of him are genuine, we must have a good nineteen You-Know-Whos running around… and, if that were true, they'd probably be spending more time trying to eliminate each other than taking over the world…"

"Don't we wish," Fred said, his tone merry.

Hermione ran her fingers through her hair, pressing her face into her palms. If there was one thing she hoped now, it was that Harry was right about Dumbledore giving him the Resurrection Stone through the golden snitch, because if he had, Hermione wondered if it might not be possible to talk to him herself… to have his forgiveness, for not having tried to save him…

Tears threatened to fall, but Hermione worked her facial muscles so that they held back. She could not afford to cry right now. Crying required a safe, private place to get emotional, not the middle of the wilderness with two boys who would have no idea of what was wrong, especially when they needed her to be on the alert at a moment's notice.

"…the rumors that he keeps being sighted abroad?" Lee asked.

"Well, who wouldn't want a nice little holiday after all the hard work he's been putting in?" Fred asked. "Point is, people, don't get lulled into a false sense of security thinking he's out of the country. Maybe he is, maybe he isn't, but the fact remains that he can move faster than Severus Snape confronted with shampoo…"

Hermione let out an almost hysterical, giggled snort at this. She rubbed at her eyes for a moment, and then sighed and went back to brooding. James had been like an older brother to her. The protective, older brother who had come in with Remus and Sirius to make her feel welcome, to help her adjust to her new time-line… he had been kind to her, generous, if a bit exasperating at times, but Hermione still missed him dearly and felt enormous guilt rising up in her, guilt that had been ruthlessly suppressed for nearly sixteen years.

What had brought it out again? Was it Dumbledore's death? The fact that whenever she looked at Harry, she sometimes confused him for James, if but for his eyes? Her visit to Godric's Hollow?

"…you very much for those wise words, Rapier," Lee said cheerfully. "Listeners, that brings us to the end of another Potterwatch. We don't know when it will be possible to broadcast again, but you can be sure we shall be back. Keep twiddling those dials: The next password will be 'The Professor.' Keep each other safe: Keep faith. Good night."

Hermione looked up in time to see the radio's dials twirl, the lights behind the tuning panel go dim, and then it turned off. Harry and Ron were beaming now, looking happier than Hermione had seen them in months.

"Good, eh?" Ron said happily.

"Brilliant," Harry said with a grin.

"It's so brave of them," Hermione said, sitting up slowly. "If they were found…"
"Well, they keep on the move, don't they? Like us…"

"But did you hear what Fred said?" Harry asked excitedly. "He's abroad! He's still looking for the Wand! I knew it!"

"Harry—" Hermione said tiredly.

"Come on, Hermione, why are you so determined not to admit it? Voldemort's after the Elder Wand!"

"I believe you, Harry, it's just—"

"It means we need to find it before he does!"

"I know, Harry, but Ollivander's gone, and Gregorovich is probably dead, so we don't precisely know where to start—"

Quite suddenly, Hermione stopped talking, and it was immediately apparent to the other two why. The Sneakoscope on the table, which Harry had been carrying around with them, suddenly lit up and began to spin. Voices could be heard suddenly outside the tent, and Hermione jumped to her feet, wand at the ready. The lights suddenly flickered out at the familiar click of Ron's deluminator, and the tent went dark.

And then a raspy, hoarse voice called out to them.

"Come out of there with your hands up! We know you're in there! You've got half a dozen wands pointing at you, and we don't care who we curse!"

---

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione moved quickly. She flicked her wand at her beaded bag, summoning *The Monster Book of Monsters* from it, and then directing her wand at Harry, wordlessly aiming a Stinging Hex to his face. There was no time for a more complex spell, as the people surrounding them in the darkness approached, as they crawled out of their tent. Hermione unbuckled the belt around the book, stroking its spine to keep it quiet, as they came out. She waited until they were all within range, wand partially hidden by her sleeve, before casting her next spell.

"*Fulmensa!*" she hissed, snapping her wrist in the face of the man closest to her. She snapped her eyes shut for a split second as blindingly bright light exploded outwards from her wand, and she opened her eyes to find the approaching men either staggering on their feet or crumpled to the ground, clutching their eyes. The bright flash, appearing so suddenly out of the darkness, had worked exceptionally well. Harry, who had been down when she cast the spell, blinked through his swollen and puffy face as he got to his feet; on Hermione's other side, Ron was whimpering, his eyes screwed shut.

Without another moment of hesitation, she tapped the book, casting a wordless *Gemino*: The book multiplied and spilled out of her hands, snapping and snarling, and there was the sound of pained yelps and startled cries as they began biting viciously at the ankles of Snatchers.

"*Run!*" she ordered, grabbing Harry and Ron's wrists and dragging them forcefully to their feet, heading for the safety of the trees. "*Go! Now!*"

She saw Harry stumble forward, grab Ron's arm, and the two of them headed off for the woods. Hermione wheeled around and ducked back inside the tent, snatching up the Sword of Gryffindor off of Harry's bunker, and wheeled around, wand raised, to find that one of the Snatchers had already gotten up and was peering blearily into the tent, trying to shake an aggressive book off his foot.

His wand was pointed straight at her.

"*Stupe—*"

Hermione did not wait for him to finish the incantation. Something reared up inside her, a combination of fear, instinct, and certain rage guiding her body. A single step, a leaping bound forward, and she let lose an angry roar, her hands turning into claws as she tore through the man. She felt her body shift, responding to her rage, the animalistic urges of her Animagus form finding purchase to make the abrupt, emotionally-triggered first-time transformation. She barreled the man over with her weight, and the next moment, she lunged at the other man waiting behind her first victim.

There was a sudden shout as the Snatchers who had been temporarily incapacitated got to their feet, still battling against the enraged books, but able to make out shapes in the darkness now and realize what they were dealing with.
"A lion!"

"Bloody hell—"

Hermione tore through one, two, three of them, dodging the spells sent her way, knocking her attackers by sheer power and speed, and then lit out for the trees. The sound of feet pounded after her closely, but Hermione knew with some level of well-merited satisfaction that none of them could keep up with a lioness.

The scents of the forest rushed at her, intoxicating her senses, and she could immediately smell Harry and Ron, still hear them fumbling about in the dark trying to get away. A series of yells alerted her to the fact that she was still being followed, and she abruptly veered off to the right, slowing down to let them keep her in their line of sight, and hoping to lead them away from the boys.

She heard the sounds of Apparition, the tell-tale cracks as her pursuers tried to Apparate to a spot just ahead of her, but she was too quick—and they too foolish. The moment they appeared before her, she barreled into them, knocking them ruthlessly to the ground, their wands rolling off into the darkness of the underbrush. Spells flew over her head, and despite the danger of the situation, Hermione felt an exhilarating sense of freedom, a thrill of excitement as the ground blurred under her.

Another figure cracked into being before her, and Hermione leapt up, claws outstretched, ready to take him down. But the man did not have his wand pointed at her; he stood there, arms outstretched as though to embrace her, his face set into a terrible snarl—

Hermione barreled into him, knocking him to the ground, and leapt to merrily continue on her way when she realized that the man she had just knocked down—Fenrir Greyback, the pungent canine smell coming off of him—was gripping tenaciously onto her ears, hanging onto them. Hermione did not waste a moment, snapping her neck towards his to bite him, only for him to sink his teeth into her shoulder instead.

Hermione let out a snarl of surprise; what kind of mad person bit a lioness? There was no way he could win, and he only had seconds left to live given the fact that Hermione could easily snap his neck with a blow of her paw, but the reason for his sudden decision to make a chew-toy out of himself became instantly clear as the pounding footsteps behind her grew louder. He was merely a distraction, to delay her enough that his companions could get a clear shot on her—

Immediately, she leapt away, her fur tearing off in his teeth, and narrowly missing a spell by inches. But he still had hold of her ears, clutching desperately, dragging her down—

A spell hit her back, and darkness exploded behind her eyes. She slumped to the ground, her head pounding with pain. Stars sparkled in her vision, and she felt another spell hit her, a flash of blue and white light coloring her vision in a painfully dizzy way. Her body shuddered as it was forced back into its human form, and she rolled over with a moan, barely able to see through the darkness.

"That, you lot of incompetents, is how to catch an Animagus," she heard Greyback snarl, and there was the sound of mixed whimpers and apologies.

Dizzily saw two figures, their faces blank in the darkness, lean down and grab her arms, hauling her to her feet. The Sword of Gryffindor slipped out of her hands, falling to the ground with an audible thump, and Hermione vaguely registered Greyback bending down to retrieve it. A hand painfully grabbed her hair, twisting it and pulling it back, and wandlight was shoved in her face.

"Ve-e-ery nice," Greyback said. "Oh, very nice indeed. Looks goblin-made, that." Her head was
pulled back further, and Hermione gritted her teeth at the pain, as Greyback grabbed her chin tightly, forcing her to look at him face-to-face. His breath was stale and rank, and smelled of rotting meat, and Hermione grimaced as he demanded, "Where did you get something like this?"

Hermione looked blearily up at him, forcing herself to see through the pain, and then spat in his face. Greyback pulled himself away with a snarl, and brought a hand up to wipe the spit off his face, sneering down at it in disgust before wiping it off on his pants. A moment later, Hermione's gut exploded with pain, and her knees gave out from underneath her at the blow to her chest.

"What's your name?" he rasped.

Hermione did not respond. She saw Greyback's hand rise, as though to strike her, when a voice broke through the darkness.

"Greyback! Guess who we've got?" The sound of feet running through the underbrush came to a halt next to the werewolf. "We caught up with 'er friends—you won't believe who 'eve found—"

"Spit it out, Scabior," Greyback snarled.

"Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley," the man said, sounding rather out of breath. "Just barely caught up with 'em—tried to pretend they were Slytherins, but then we saw the scar on 'is face—" he stopped, and Hermione felt someone toe her knee. "What've we got here?"

Greyback was leering at Hermione now, running his finger up and down the length of the sword in his hands.

"What's your name, pretty?" He asked, leaning closer to her face. "It wouldn't happen to be Hermione Granger, would it now?"

"Go to hell," Hermione croaked, regaining her voice. She struggled to regain her footing, but her feet slipped uselessly on the ground.

"Well, this changes things, doesn't it?" Greyback said, sounding very satisfied with himself. In the light, Hermione saw the evidence her claw marks had left behind on his face, gleaming ruby red and dripping, but the werewolf seemed unconcerned. "We'll take them all to You-Know-Who. Won't he be pleased?"

"The Ministry, then?" Scabior asked.

"To hell with the Ministry," Greyback growled. "They'll take the credit, and we won't get a look-in. I say we take him straight to the Dark Lord."

"Will you summon 'im? 'ere?" To Hermione, Scabior sounded both awed and terrified.

"No," Greyback snarled. "I haven't got—they say he's using the Malfoys' place as a base. We'll take them there." He gave Hermione a nasty grin. "Perhaps they'll let me keep the little Mudblood as a reward."

Hermione merely pulled back her lips in a snarl, but said nothing. Her wand was still in her pocket, and her knife was on the inside of her jeans; in light of the chase, they seemed to have all forgotten that she was armed when she dropped the sword. Her wand, knife, and her wedding ring. There was hope yet.

"Let's head back to their camp—we'll bring the rest of 'em with us… Grab hold and make it tight—Scabior, you take the girl, I'll do Potter when we get there…"
The count of three, and then Hermione felt the squeezing sensation of Disapparition.

~o~O~o~

"What is this?" She heard the disdain in Bellatrix Lestrange's voice as Scabior threw her to her knees on the gravel leading up to the front door. Light spilled out from inside.

"This is Potter's Mudblood—Hermione Granger," Scabior said proudly, as though he had done the deed himself. "Greyback will be along in a minute with Harry Potter, and his blood-traitor friend Weasley. We're here to see He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

For a moment, it looked like Bellatrix would shut the door in the man's face—but then she stepped out, grabbing hold of Hermione's hair, and pulled her head up so that she could see better. There was no mistaking the sadistic glint in her eyes as she examined Hermione's face, assuring herself that it was indeed her. And then she abruptly let go, looking up at Scabior with a frown.

"Potter? You said you've got Potter?"

There was the sudden sound of multiple Apparitions from somewhere behind them, and Scabior said, "Here 'e is, ma'am."

"Fine," Bellatrix said coolly. "Bring them in."

Hermione and the others were shoved and kicked up the steps into the entrance hall, which was lined with portraits. Hermione glanced up, squinting in the bright light, watching their occupants move and shift around in their frames, though she couldn't make any of them out. The pounding in her head was little help. A moment later, Narcissa Malfoy appeared, passing her over and instead going straight to Harry, whose face was still puffy and swollen.

"Are you sure it's him?" she asked in clipped tones.

"I know 'e's swollen, ma'am, but it's im! If you look a bit closer, you'll see 'is scar. And this 'ere, see the girl? The Mudblood who's been traveling around with 'im, ma'am. There's no doubt it's 'im, and we've got 'is wand as well—"

Narcissa stood up.

"Follow me," she said, leading them across the hall. "My son, Draco, is home for his Easter holidays. If that is Harry Potter, he will know."

The light of the drawing room they were led into was painful to behold after the darkness of the night outside, but Hermione still managed to make out still more portraits lined against the purple walls, lit by a crystal chandelier which hung from the ceiling. Two figures rose from the chairs in front of the ornate marble fireplace, and as Hermione was once again forced to her knees, this time on cold stone floor, she recognized the shorter one as Draco.

"What is this?"

"They say they've got Potter," Narcissa said coldly. "Draco, come here."

There was a bit of shuffling, and then Hermione heard Greyback rasp, "Well, boy?"

Silence followed, and Hermione twisted her head upwards a bit so that she could see. Draco was examining Harry's face, though he was keeping his distance from Greyback. Knowing this was her one chance, she twisted her head forward, swinging the chain of the locket forward, and grasped the
tiny phial of Felix Felicis in-between her teeth. She was not good at magic without her wand, but she focused all of her energy into this one, silent spell: *Finite Incantatem*.

The Unbreakable Charm around the phial melted away, and Hermione pulled it into her mouth as though it were a pacifier. Another massive effort at wandless and wordless magic, and to her relief, her prodigious skill in Transfiguration came through: the phial vanished. Potion filled her mouth, and Hermione swallowed it down.

At first, she felt no different. And then, as though mapping out a path for her, her mind began to point out and notice certain things, formulating a path of stepping stones that she only needed to follow…

"Well, Draco?" Lucius demanded. "Is it? Is it Harry Potter?"

"I can't—I can't be sure," Draco said, his eyes staring at Harry's forehead, refusing to make eye contact with Harry himself.

"But look at him carefully, look!" Hermione heard Lucius hiss. "Come closer!" He grabbed the back of his son's robes, thrusting him forward. "Draco, if we are the ones who hand Potter over to the Dark Lord, everything will be forgiv—"

"Now, we won't be forgetting who actually caught him, I hope, Mr. Malfoy?" Greyback said menacingly.

"Of course not, of course not!" Lucius said impatiently. His eyes landed on Hermione, and narrowed. "Draco, come here. If you can't make out Potter's face, at least confirm that it's his companions—that's Weasley over there, no doubts about that red hair, but her…"

Draco came and knelt down in front of her, his face pale and drawn as he looked. There was a moment of silence, and then everyone's heads jerked over in Ron's direction as he began to struggle. He banged the back of his head into his captor's face, and all at once, everyone was on him, wands pointed, hands grabbing—

Draco frowned, and reached for something glittering and silver around her neck, his actions ignored by the man holding her down, as he was too busy focusing his wand on Ron. Hermione did not dare protest Draco's fingers as he quickly snatched the locket from around her neck, as it would only draw attention to it from her other captors, and she heard Ron let out a shout of some kind as Draco snapped it open. Hermione pleaded silently with her eyes for him to not say a word, to not hold the locket up for all and sundry to see—

For a moment, it looked as though all the color, or what little of it that had been left in Draco's face, had drained away. Then—luckiest of luck—he snapped it shut, hastily getting to his feet and stuffing it in his pocket, as Bellatrix pulled out a knife and held it to Ron's throat.

"If you don't stop struggling, it won't matter if we hand you to the Dark Lord dead or alive," she hissed.

Ron stared up mutinously at her, but ceased. Hermione's eyes flickered back to Draco, who was staring down at her with something akin to shock, disbelief, and confusion—and then he turned to look at Harry.

"I—I don't know," he said uncertainly.

"We had better be certain, Lucius," Narcissa said, turning to her husband, her tone icy. "Completely sure that it is Potter, before we summon the Dark Lord… it looks like his wand, but—"
"Wait," Greyback interrupted. "Do any of you know if Granger is an Animagus?"

Silence fell upon the room. The Malfoys all slowly looked at each other, and then at her; Hermione could not blame them for not immediately recognizing her. She was a mess, covered in dirt and grass stains, her face bruised, and faint teeth marks still in her neck.

"I don't know…" Hermione heard Lucius murmur. "I've never heard…"

"I'm certain, I'm certain that it's her!" Bellatrix said, stepping forward and grabbing Hermione's hair again, pulling her head back. "I went to school with her, I recognize her! And if it's her, and she's with the Weasley, that has to mean this one—" she jabbed her finger at Harry "—is Potter! We should have summoned the Dark Lord already!"

"I was about to call him," Lucius snapped, grabbing Bellatrix's wrist to stop her from pulling back her sleeve. "I shall summon him, Bella, Potter has been brought to my house, and it is therefore upon my authority—"

What happened next, Hermione was not sure quite how to describe as anything else other than a laughably absurd squabble, were the situation not so dire. Bellatrix and Lucius fell into argument over who would place the summons, which was then interrupted by Greyback, who reminded them of just who had captured Potter, and who would be getting the gold. Hermione glanced over at Harry and Ron's frightened faces, as well as the other captives—a goblin, and one of Hermione's former classmates, Dean Thomas.

The arguing suddenly stopped.

"STOP!" Bellatrix shrieked. "Do not touch it, we shall all perish if the Dark Lord comes now!"

Everyone in the room froze; Lucius, whose index finger was hovering above his Dark Mark; Draco, who had stepped in and was physically trying to separate his father and aunt; Narcissa, who had grabbed Bellatrix's other wrist to stop her from striking her son. She strode out of Hermione's vision, and when she tried to twist her head around to look, another hard and painful yank to her hair forced her to face front again.

"What is that?" she heard Bellatrix say.

"Sword," Greyback rasped.

"Give it to me."

"It's not yours," Greyback hissed. "It's mine. I found it."

There was a loud bang, and Hermione saw Greyback sidestep quickly, the Sword of Gryffindor gleaming at his hips where he had hung it at his belt. There was a roar of anger from his fellows, and when she tried to twist her head around to look, another hard and painful yank to her hair forced her to face front again.

"What is that?" she heard Bellatrix say.

"Sword," Greyback rasped.

"Give it to me."

"It's not yours," Greyback hissed. "It's mine. I found it."

"That locket, Mudblood," she heard Draco whisper in her ear, as Greyback was forced into a
kneeling position, the Sword of Gryffindor yanked from his belt and now held in the bone-white hands of Hermione's nemesis. "Where did you get it?"


Draco's grip on her shoulder tightened painfully, but he said nothing else.

"Where did you get this sword?" Bellatrix demanded.

"How dare you!" Greyback was struggling against the magic that bound him on his knees, and he bared his yellowed, pointed teeth at her. "Release me, woman!"

"Where did you find this sword?" Bellatrix repeated breathlessly, brandishing it in Greyback's face. "Snape sent it to my vault in Gringotts!"

"The girl was carrying it," Greyback rasped, his eyes landing on her now. "Release me, I say!"

Bellatrix waved her wand, allowing Greyback to spring to his feet, but he did not approach; he was too wary of her now, having had an unpleasant taste of her skills with a wand, and prowled behind the nearest armchair, his dirty, curved nails digging into its back. Bellatrix turned her attention on Hermione, and then on Draco.

"Move this scum outside," Bellatrix said, indicating the unconscious men. "If you haven't got the guts to finish them off, leave them in the courtyard for me."

Draco made to leave, but his mother interjected.

"Don't you dare speak to Draco like—"

"Be quiet!" Bellatrix had lost all vestigial illusion of patience; her voice had risen to a scream. "The situation is graver than you can possibly imagine, Cissy! We have a very serious problem!"

She stood, panting slightly, her eyes wild, looking down at the sword. Then she wheeled around to the other prisoners.

"If it is indeed Potter, he must not be harmed," she muttered, talking to herself now. "The Dark Lord wishes to dispose of Potter himself… But if he finds out… I must… I must know…"

She turned back to Narcissa.

"The prisoners must be placed in the cellar, while I think what to do!"

"This is my house, Bella," Narcissa said, attempting to reassert herself. While this was admirable, Hermione rather felt that Narcissa should have known better than to try and do this when it was very clear that her sister was off her rocker. "You don't give orders in my—"

"Do it!" Bellatrix shrieked. "You have no idea of the danger we are in!" Her hair was all over her face now, making her look terrifying, demented. A thin stream of fire was issuing from her wand, burning a hole into the carpet, as though her wand was reacting to its owner's own erratic, out of control nature.

Narcissa hesitated for a moment, and then addressed the werewolf.

"Take these prisoners to the cellar, Greyback."
"Wait," Bellatrix said sharply, her eyes falling upon Hermione now. "All except… except for the Mudblood."

Greyback gave a grunt of pleasure at this, no doubt envisioning the torture Hermione would be put under—or hoping that he had finally earned his reward.

"No!" Ron shouted, struggling again. "You can have me, keep me!"

"Ron, shut up!"

Bellatrix, who had raised her hand to hit him, froze. Ron, whose mouth was open in protest, looked at Hermione in shock. Harry was shaking his head frantically.

And then a cruel smile lit across her face.

"Ah, yes. The Mudblood," she crooned. "Always doing the right thing. Well," she said, waving a hand dismissively at Ron, much to Hermione's relief. This situation was dire, but it seemed that the best turn of events possible were unfolding before her, if it could be called that. "Take them down to the cellar. If she dies under questioning, I'll take him next."

"You can't kill her," Lucius interrupted sharply, as Greyback forced the prisoners to shuffle out of the room. "Severus—"

"Snape can do without his pet Mudblood," Bellatrix hissed.

"She's his wife, Bella."

Bellatrix ignored Lucius. Draco opened his mouth, as though to ask something, and then shut it.

"Step aside, Draco."

He obeyed, and a moment later, Hermione was once again pushed down to her knees. Bellatrix pulled out a silver knife, hacking at the bindings around Hermione's wrists. As soon as they were loose, Hermione snapped her head back as Ron had done, to try and catch Bellatrix off-guard, but found herself forcefully shoved and pinned down. Bellatrix pressed the blade to her throat in threat, keeping her from raising her head. Out of the corner of her eyes, illuminated by the firelight, Hermione could see all three Malfoys standing back, each wearing a different expression that fell into the similar range of unease.

Harry and Ron were gone. Her secret was up now, and all Hermione could hope to do was bank on her son's friendship with Draco to keep Selenius's presence silent. So far, he had not said a word.

"Well, well, Mudblood," Bellatrix said, knife poised over Hermione's throat. "We meet again. Not exactly the circumstances I had imagined, but good enough." She pointed her wand at Hermione, and she felt invisible restraints pin her wrists to the floor, preventing her from lashing out. She gritted her teeth at this, but said nothing. "Now tell me—where did you get that sword? I know Snape sent it to my vaults in Gringotts—did he lie? Did he give it to you?"

Hermione had a sudden flash of memory, of her seventh year of Hogwarts, hexing Bellatrix and knocking Crouch to the ground, followed closely by the painful memory of watching twelve Muggle women be tortured and killed. Her jaw set at this. She was not about to let herself become a victim. Schooling her expression, settling back in the mask she had once worn in her younger years out of habit and necessity for survival, she looked up at Bellatrix, her gaze calm.

"Hello, Bellatrix," she said coolly.
"Where did you get the sword?" Bellatrix demanded.

Hermione smiled. Despite the threat of the knife, by all appearances, she seemed perfectly calm, pleasant even. In a way, it was disturbingly very much like Dumbledore. "I stole it."

In the peripheral of her vision, she saw Draco staring at her with something akin to disbelief, as though he had never quite seen her properly before. She saw Bellatrix's face contort at this, and then she plunged the knife into Hermione's arm. Hermione clenched her jaw, refusing to make a sound, despite the urge to scream; she had known it was coming, she was prepared for it, but she wasn't going to give Bellatrix an inch of pleasure out of it. Warm wetness welled up under her sleeve, and Hermione watched as Bellatrix yanked it up so that she could see her work. Blood pumped down her arm, pooling on the floor, and Bellatrix turned to give her look of demented frustration.

"Tell me!" she hissed. The tip of the blade rested at the top of the first gash, and she demanded, "Tell me, you filthy little Mudblood! Where did you get it?"

It took all of Hermione's willpower to suppress the urge to cry; the pain was overwhelming, but she suppressed it. Face impassive, she calmly turned her head to the side to look at her.

"I suppose you've wanted to do this for a long time?" she said. "Twenty years of pent-up frustration pouring out, Bella? I suppose you weren't happy to find Slytherin down by a hundred and fifteen points in the morn—gkk!" Hermione bit down on her lip with a hiss of pain as Bellatrix pressed down on the blade, forming another gash.

"I'm going to ask you again!" Bellatrix shrieked. There was no semblance of control left in her. "Where did you get this sword? Where?"

Hermione breathed in deeply, centering herself, and then slowly turned to look at Draco. He was staring at her, his face pale and bloodless. She smiled grimly, and then slowly looked back at Bellatrix.

"We all have secrets, Bella," Hermione said meaningfully, hoping Draco would catch her drift. "Do you have any you want to tell me before you kill me? After all, we went to school together—I know you love to play with your food, and frankly, I can't think of a single reason why I should tell you anything."

"If you die under questioning, Weasley is next!" Bellatrix said.

"It's not like Ron will tell you anything, either," Hermione said loftily. "Besides, he doesn't know. I'm the one who found it. He hasn't a clue."

Pain seared into Hermione's arm again; looking to the side, she saw that Bellatrix had carved out the letter M, barely visible from the thickness of the blood running down her arm. The knife plunged in again, but instead of pulling it out, Bellatrix was now carving the last few letters into her left forearm.

\[ U\ ...\ D\ ...\ B\ ...\ L \ldots \]

"Well," she breathed, "it looks like you really intend to kill me after all." She chuckled; and for a moment, she herself sounded mad to her ears. "You do realize you're killing me for nothing, Bella? The sword's a copy, a fake."

"A copy?" Bellatrix screeched. "Oh, a likely story!"

"But we can find out easily!" Lucius said, stepping forward quickly. He was looking at Hermione with an expression she could not quite decipher, as he said, "Draco, go—go fetch Wormtail, tell him
to bring the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!"

Draco disappeared quickly, looking back fearfully over his shoulder as he left. Hermione waited until he had gone, before she said quietly, "I wonder what Severus will say when he finds I'm dead."

"Snape can do without you!" Bellatrix hissed. She jabbed her wand at Hermione. "CRUCIO!"

Hermione convulsed underneath her for a moment, writhing in pain, but refusing to cry out. Her entire body was screaming, but she forced it away, biting down on her lip so that she was drawing her own blood—she had dealt with worse before, she had to, Mad-Eye had nothing on Bellatrix Lestrange—

And then it stopped.

With effort, Hermione tried to reach for her wand, though her arm was too far away, and it was in her pocket. Desperately, she tried to use magic anyway, wordlessly running the spell over and over through her head, hoping for something of a miracle. Dumbledore had been capable of wandless magic; she knew it was possible. But she had never learned how to do it, but really, it couldn't be that much different from the discipline of wordless magic—

Bellatrix's knife was raised again, now hovering over her left hand, ready to bring it down—

Hermione felt a tingle in her palm, like several short spurts of energy forcing their way through a clogged gateway, and her arm jerked in surprise when the bonds pinning it suddenly vanished.

With a grunt, Hermione swung her knees up, and then struck out at Bellatrix, catching the other woman in the chin, knocking her away. She quickly rolled to her side, ignoring the pain searing in her arm, but there was no way she could move quickly enough; three wands were already pointed at her. She bared her teeth, reaching down for the inside of her leg, swinging Sirius's knife up in time to block Bellatrix; the other woman was back on her feet, and had lashed out at Hermione with the dagger still clutched in her hands. Forcing her injured arm to move, even as she scooted backwards frantically to avoid two concurrent jets of red light that left smoking indents in the floor, Hermione thrust it into her pockets, and pulled out her wand.

"Why does she still have her wand?" Lucius demanded, as Hermione threw up a Shield Charm. "She was supposed to have been disarmed—"

"Never mind that now!" Bellatrix shrieked, as Hermione threw herself behind the sofa, narrowly dodging the next barrage of curses. "Stop her!"

Hermione bit into the handle of her knife, quickly switching her wand into her uninjured hand, and pointed it around the corner of the couch. Cradling her bleeding arm, she flicked her wand, grateful that she was capable of wordless magic. There was a sound of explosion, as the marble fireplace tore apart, followed by the sound of debris raining the floor; Hermione heard Narcissa scream, "Draco!" and peered around the couch in time to see lady Malfoy dragging her son back from the fray, pulling him toward the door. Lucius was on the ground, his wand a foot away from his outstretched hand; Hermione summoned it her hand, where it smacked into place beside her other wand, and she stuffed it into the pocket of her robes.

Bellatrix was getting to her feet, and Hermione quickly pulled back as a jet of green light soared past her, centimeters from her cheek.

"Where?" Bellatrix shrieked, as a flash of green exploded into the wall over Hermione's head. "Where did you get that sword? Tell me!"
Panting now, more with pain than anything else, Hermione responded by poking her wand under the couch, bending down quickly to find her target's feet, and then let loose with a Choking Hex. There was a sudden screech from her opponent, and Hermione quickly sat up to see Bellatrix dangling a foot in the air, fingers frantically clawing at her neck, where an invisible force was slowly squeezing the life out of her.

Hermione ducked forward, summoning Bellatrix's wand to her, stashing it into her pocket, and then stopped to survey the room.

Narcissa and Draco had disappeared. Lucius was on the floor, unconscious. The room looked as though a meteor shower had passed through; the walls were peppered with holes, and large chunks had been gouged out. The fireplace was in collapse. The chandelier above was just barely hanging on.

"Mud…blood… bitch…" she heard Bellatrix gasp, kicking and struggling helplessly. The dagger she had been using was on the ground below her several feet away, impotently out of range.

Hermione kept her wand pointed at her, refusing to lower it as she slowly bent down and picked up the abandoned Sword of Gryffindor. Sudden footsteps announced the arrival of a latecomer, and Hermione whirled around.

Wormtail stood there, his short stubby stick of a wand pointed at her, although he was wearing such an expression of shock at the scene before him that Hermione rather doubted he even remembered it was there. The sight of the once-elegant drawing room, with her standing at the center, blood dripping, with a wand in her hand, and a knife in her mouth, must surely have been a frightening sight to behold. She stared at the watery, ratty man in surprise for a moment, and then her face turned hard.

She pulled the blade from between her teeth, gripping it with her wand. She was starting to lose feeling in her other arm.

"Hello, Peter," she said calmly. "It's nice to see things haven't changed."

"You—you—" Peter spluttered, backing away slowly.

"Peter…" Hermione said, now turning her wand on him. "I never did understand why you joined the Dark Lord in the first place."

Peter froze.

"I—I don't understand what there isn't to understand about it," he whimpered, eyes blinking and twitching with nervousness at the wand aimed between his eyes. The sudden dripping of something warm and wet on her leg made Hermione glance down for a moment, to register the blood on her arm streaming down onto the ruined marble steadily, but then she looked back up.

The goblin, who was limp-shuffling at Wormtail's side, looked on curiously. His eyes landed on the sword in Hermione's hands, and she saw his expression change into one of recognition.

Hermione looked at Peter. This was something she had been dying to ask, but really, there had never been an opportunity to. She heard a strangled choking sound from behind her, and ignored it. "I don't understand what your motivation for joining was. Mary was killed by Death Eaters—"

"No, she wasn't," Peter suddenly snapped, looking jumpy. His watery eyes couldn't seem to hold still, and he was blinking too much. "I killed her. She was a weak witch, the Dark Lord told me to prove myself—"
Hermione's wand snapped to attention, quivering threateningly.

"You?" she said. "You killed Mary?"

Peter did not answer.

"Well," Hermione said softly. The room was starting to feel a bit unsteady to her, and she forced herself to stand straight. "That doesn't explain anything at all, does it? You killed a kind, gentle woman who loved you because you were too afraid to petrify that worm you call a spine."

"She was a Muggle-born," Peter said, but there was a hesitancy to his words. "There are better witches, purer ones, more worthy of a servant of His Lordship."

"Are there really?" Hermione asked. She hesitated for a moment, and then pressed her uninjured wrist against the deepest cut, the first M, applying pressure to try and stem the bleeding. "You seem rather alone, Peter, for a man who killed anybody who ever meant anything to him for a bit of power and protection."

Peter did not respond; Hermione watched him turn and run, leaving his prisoner behind. She turned to look behind her, and saw that Bellatrix's eyes were still fixed hatefully on her, though they were tinged with red, and her lips were turning blue.

A sudden cry of "Oof!" made Hermione wheel around and duck down in time to avoid being hit by Narcissa; she had reappeared out of nowhere now, with Fenrir Greyback at her side. The werewolf had kicked the goblin aside, and the two of them were firing off spells. Hermione threw up a Shield Charm, but the next spell went past her, striking Bellatrix. It released her from Hermione's hold, causing her to collapse to the ground, gasping and coughing for air. Hermione stumbled, ducking another spell, and then swung the Sword of Gryffindor around at Bellatrix.

"Relashio!"

The sword exploded out of Hermione's grip with a loud bang, skittering along the floor. She saw the goblin throw himself at it, picking it up and holding it between his bound hands with difficulty, yet looking remarkably triumphant. She wheeled around, wand raised to retaliate, when Narcissa was suddenly thrown to the ground, gasping and coughing for air. Hermione stumbled, ducking another spell, and then swung the Sword of Gryffindor around at Bellatrix.

Hermione saw Bellatrix out of the corner of her eye, scrambling for her dropped knife, and she moved to stop her; but the other woman was too quick, snatching it up, and Hermione was too slow with pain and blood loss to stop her as she wrapped her arms around Hermione's neck—

"STOP OR SHE DIES!"

Hermione faintly saw Harry peek out around the corner of the couch he had just ducked behind, and then vanish. Using the last of her strength, she jabbed her wand under Bellatrix's chin. The other witch froze.

"I don't think so," Hermione said quietly.

Bellatrix opened her mouth to speak, but there was a sudden grinding noise that caught their attention. They all looked up. They had just a moment to watch the chandelier above them tremble warningly, and then there was an ominous chinking sound as it began to fall. It was directly above Bellatrix and Hermione, and the older witch immediately dropped her prisoner, sliding out of the
way as it came crashing down—

Hermione grunted with effort as she threw herself to the side, rolling out of the way. The next minute, the chandelier shattered into a tiny million pieces on the floor, and Bellatrix's hand had closed around her throat, slamming Hermione to the ground. Hermione's wand went skittering to the side, and she clumsily tried to hold onto her knife—

_Shluck._

She let out a sharp gasp, eyes widening with surprise as she felt Bellatrix drive her silver dagger into Hermione's side, pushing it in to the hilt. She stared at it for a moment, as though she couldn't quite believe it had just happened—that the dagger was actually stuck in her side, that it was real. Hermione balled her hand around her knife, the blade part cutting into her palm, as she drove what she could hold of it into her enemy's belly, only an inch or two. The older woman fell back, staggering to her feet, and Hermione felt a wave of nausea rise in her as blood filled her mouth.

She spat at the ground, swiping her wand up with fumbling fingers and pointed it at Bellatrix. Two wands flew from the pocket of her robes, and Hermione tried to catch them, but they glanced off her fingers. Ron saw them, however, and lunged. Hermione's head hit the ground again, unable to move with the dagger stuck in her side, and barely able to lift her hand to move her wand. Bellatrix bent over her, and roughly yanked the dagger free.

Hermione let out a scream of pain, whimpering pitifully as she watched Bellatrix lift it up again, one hand pressed to the wound at her side, the other raising the dagger in triumph.

"And now, we summon the Dark Lord!"

And she pressed two fingers to the Mark.

There was a sudden cry from Narcissa, and Hermione and Bellatrix's heads both snapped to the side. Greyback was collapsed against the wall; but Narcissa was still standing. Her wand was pointed at the wreckage that remained of the doorway.

"Dobby!" she screamed. "You! You dropped the chandelier?"

It was surreal, in the midst of this bloody battle, to watch the tiny elf trot into the room, shaking his finger at his old mistress.

"You must not harm Harry Potter!" he squeaked.

"Kill him, Cissy!" Bellatrix shrieked, Hermione momentarily forgotten. There was a loud crack that accompanied her words, and Narcissa's wand suddenly flew across the room, skittering to the floor.

"You dirty little monkey!" Bellatrix howled. "How dare you take a witch's wand! How dare you defy your masters!"

"Dobby has no master!" Dobby squealed defiantly. "Dobby is a free elf, and Dobby has come to save Harry Potter and his friends!"

Hermione felt someone grab her wrist; she had one moment to look up into a pair of wide blue eyes, surrounded by a mop of flaming red hair and freckles. The last thing she saw was Bellatrix whipping around to look at her disappearing victim, and she vaguely registered the pain in her leg that accompanied a loud _thunk_ before the world spun into blackness, spiriting her away.
Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Silently, Draco stared into the fireplace of the empty common room, waiting for Selenius to come back from detention. He had always known Longbottom and the Weasley girl would be a bad influence on him, but now he finally admitted to himself that they had not lured Selenius in with naïve idealism. Obviously, his mother had already done that for them. Checking that the common room was well and truly empty, he dug into the pocket of his robes, and pulled out the locket he had lifted from Granger, rubbing his thumb over the sheepskin backing. With a mother like Hermione Granger, Draco was surprised that Selenius wasn’t as much of a spout-off know-it-all with plans to save the world as she was. But now he at least understood why his younger protégé disagreed vehemently with his views.

When Draco had first discovered Selenius had joined the D.A, sometime around mid-November, he had been tempted to abandon him— but a nagging reminder that he owed the boy a great deal for his help with the Vanishing Cabinet stopped him. They had argued about it in hushed voices long after everyone else had gone to bed, until they had finally exhausted the topic a week later, eventually resigned to never seeing eye-to-eye on the issue, though they constantly sniped at each other about it. He had thought the boy was being a bit of a prat, to be honest; it was obvious that Purebloods were superior. How could he not see the power they held now, at their very fingertips, with the history of the oldest lines in their heritage to reinforce them?

It was true that Selenius had made some strikingly good points in counterargument to this, but Draco had dismissed them out of hand, not wanting to bother mustering up the energy it would take to poke holes through the raven-haired boy’s logic. But now, things were different.

He flicked the locket open.

His godfather was still there, smiling motionlessly and younger than Draco ever remembered him, with Granger at his side— who seemed to be several years older than she was now. Selenius was in her arms as a toddler. Then there was another picture, this time Selenius as Draco knew him, looking only slightly younger than he was now. It was obvious to Draco now that no one was supposed to know the truth about Selenius; that up until now, he had been a very well-kept secret.

It was also clear to him that almost everything he had believed about Hermione Granger wasn’t worth the parchment it was written on. That's all it was, really; her written records of exam achievement, her obnoxiously consistent high grades in every class, her ability to write a three-foot essay in cramped hand-writing when only one foot was necessary and still have time to spare being a thorn in his side, tagging along after Potter and Weasley like she was their bloody mother.

He shut the locket, unable to stand not being able to make sense of it. Of anything, really, for that matter. His aunt Bellatrix had gotten consistently worse since returning from Azkaban, but last night had reached a new height of bloodthirsty horror that Draco had never witnessed before. Perhaps it helped that he was rarely at home, still being of school-age, but last night…

That reminded him. He still needed a wand. Potter had disarmed him when had had burst out of the
cellar with Weasley at his heels, and taken it with him. He had tried to wrestle back his wand, but Weasley had pushed him back and shut the cellar door behind him. He had found the ratty man's body in there, and by all appearances, he had been strangled by his own silver hand. It was not until Potter and his friends had left that his mother had finally let him out; he had only a few moments to see the damage done to the drawing room before she had pressed an illegal Portkey in his hands and sent him away.

Sent him away before the Dark Lord could arrive.

Draco was stubbornly convinced that Purebloods were superior, but now considered that to be mutually exclusive to the Dark Lord's cause. His parents had sent him away because they knew they would be tortured for failing to hand Potter over properly. The Dark Lord had set him a task last year that everyone had been certain he would fail, and it was only by sheer luck and his own cunning that he had not. Sheer luck, and the fact that Snape had stepped in when he needed it most.

Snape. And Snape's son.

Draco's mind was no longer reeling at this, but he was now brooding, thinking over his next move carefully. Last night had been the final proverbial Exploding Snap card that led to his disenchantment with the Dark Lord. He could not outright declare his withdraw of support—in fact, that would be a bloody stupid thing to do. But now he needed to look at other options to get himself and his parents out of this mess alive. His father was obviously in no position to, and his mother...

Selenius might be able to help him. He was a direct link to Snape. Snape was supposed to be the Dark Lord's right hand man, and yet, and yet...

_Mine_, Granger had whispered. _My son. My Selenius._

It might sound insipid even to his ears, but surely a woman who spoke of her son in such a way, who was bossy and impertinent as Granger, wouldn't resign herself to sending her son to Hogwarts and under her husband's protection if she didn't trust him? And surely Selenius wouldn't hold such strong, one-sided views about the value of non-Purebloods if his father felt differently. Selenius was Draco's key to finding out where Snape actually stood in all of this.

Snape had _married_ the Mudblood. If anything suggested that he might not be on the Dark Lord's side, that had to be it.

Granger's words had shocked him, admittedly. But now he had a grip on himself, and was trying to puzzle together the last few things.

How had Granger managed this feat of—of having a family that she was physically too young to have?

If she was on Potter's side, what did that mean about Snape?

His grip on the locket tightened as he considered the last question: How much did Selenius already know about the situation? Information was practically a currency in Slytherin, and if Draco wanted answers, he was going to have to give Selenius something in return; and all he had to offer was the information that he had watched his aunt torture her, and that all he knew was that she had escaped.

Of course, judging by the blood pooling the floor, he was not entirely sure she was alive. No, he was certain she was alive; by all appearances, she had fought like a bloody hellcat. But what condition she had left in, he could not precisely say. He did not think it was good.

He had never seen her as he had seen her last night, though. Confident, even in the face of torture,
wearing a mad smile at the prospect of death. Such stupid, foolish, if grudgingly admirable Gryffindor bravery and bravado. He had also returned in time to see her blow the fireplace apart—she had not only mocked his aunt to her face, which he had thought was more along the lines of a dying person trying to get the last word in, but had gotten the upper hand and dueled them to a standstill—and then escaped. Who the hell had thought Granger was even capable of that? As much as he despised Gryffindors, he had to admit that there was some part of him that was in incredulous awe at this display of raw power, tenacious skill, will to survive.

No wonder Potter and Weasley had survived being on the run for this long.

His musings were cut short by the sound of footsteps. Draco looked up in time to see Selenius come in, exhausted, and by all appearances, more than ready to trudge off to bed. Undoubtedly, he had spent the entire evening helping to scrub off the very words he had painted onto one of the corridors, advertising recruitment for the D.A. Without hesitation, Draco stood up, coming to stand between the first-year and the stairs leading to the boys' dormitory.

"What is it?" Selenius asked tiredly.

Without a word of response, Draco held up the silver locket for him to see. It dangled in his fingers, spinning slowly, and he watched as all traces of weariness faded rapidly from the younger boy's face.

"That's..." he began uncertainly, reaching out to take it. He opened it up. "It—it's... that's my mum's... that's my mother's locket!"

Draco released the chain, letting it drop into Selenius's hands.

"How—it's hers, she never takes it off," Selenius said, looking up at him. His eyes were accusing, his tone demanding. Looking at him now, Draco wondered how he could have missed the traces of his godfather in him so easily. "Where did you get it?"

Draco inhaled deeply, and then set out the bait. "What can you tell me about your mother?"

Selenius gave him a sullen, suspicious glare. His entire demeanor was withdrawn; he was now clutching the locket to his chest, as though afraid Draco would try to snatch it back. "Enough," he bit out.

"I'll tell you what I know," Draco said, trying to keep his voice as smooth and non-threatening as possible, "if you'll tell me a bit of your family history."

Draco watched closely as Selenius's eyes flickered indecisively, torn between demanding to know what had happened to his mother, and keeping his silence as he had undoubtedly had been taught to do. He looked down at the locket uncertainly for a moment, and then straightened up again. There was a look of fierce determination—traces of Granger in him, no doubt, she always wore the same stubborn look on her face—and just a trace of cunning around the edge.

"You owe me for lending you that book last year," he suddenly.

"I played chess with you," Draco responded, undeterred. "I kept my end of the bargain."

"Father told me what happened. The help I gave you was worth far more than what I requested," Selenius countered. Draco saw his grip on the locket tighten; his knuckles had turned white. Yet, he was not giving in without a fight. "It's like I didn't ask for full payment then."

"I took you under my wing here at Hogwarts, and gave your mother a chance to escape last night," Draco said, bargaining ruthlessly with this half-truth. Upon seeing the contents of the locket, he had
solidly denied knowing for certain whether the prisoner whose identity in question was really Potter. It was not as though he had run to Granger's rescue, but this small action would serve him well enough as a bartering chip. "I would say that debt has been paid in full, if not more."

"Any Slytherin worth his salt would say that," Selenius muttered, looking away.

Draco's lip curled with grim amusement at this; Crabbe and Goyle would never have the intelligence or wit to say or recognize such a tactic, but Selenius was a Slytherin to the core, even if he had gotten a little help in the way of tutoring from Draco. Salazar himself would have been proud, if it weren't for the fact that his mother was one of the most aggravating Mudbloods in existence.

"That's true, but it doesn't change the fact that I'm right," Draco said, folding his arms across his chest, "and that if you want to know what happened, you're going to have to give up a bit in return."

Selenius wibbled for a moment, and for just a split second, Draco felt a stab of pity for him. But then he pushed it away. It wasn't as though he was planning to use whatever information he got to hurt Selenius—at least, not directly nor deliberately. He was too fond of the boy for that, and despite what he has said earlier, he still knew he owed Selenius a great deal—not just for his loan, but because he still owed Snape, and part of the debt extended to his son. He could almost ignore the fact that he had a Mudblood for a mother. But he needed information too, and Selenius was the easiest person to extract it from—the only other person he could hope to get it from would be the current Headmaster, and the odds of him coming out of such a discussion unprepared were next to none. He wasn't stupid.

But he could tell Selenius still needed a little convincing. He placed a hand on his shoulder, and began directing him toward the fireplace.

"Look, I'll tell you my side of the story first," Draco said, trying to sound casual and off-hand as Selenius flopped down on the couch. It was a calculated risk, showing most of his hand at once without guarantee of pay, but there was more than one way to skin a kneazle; and right now, he needed this particular kneazle skinned quickly and thoroughly. "Then you can tell me what you know."

~o~O~o~

Harry and Ron sat in the kitchen of Shell Cottage, sipping at their cups of tea, despite the fact that neither of them were thirsty. Hermione was still upstairs, being looked after by Fleur and Dobby; she had not awoken since she fell unconscious after Ron had Apparated the both of them out of Malfoy Manor, and she was still in bad shape.

"I've owled Mum for some potions and advice, but we've done all else we can do," Bill told them later, having finally come down to talk to them. "She's alive, and Fleur's managed to take care of the worst—they taught a lot of useful healing spells at Beauxbatons, thank merlin—but she's still in a bad way."

"But she'll be all right, won't she?" Harry asked desperately.

"Of course," Bill reassured them, "but it's going to take time, that's all."

Ron shook his head at this.

"I can't believe what she did," he said. "She just—she just put herself between us and Bellatrix. And by the time we got free, she'd already done a number on the place. Bloody hell."

Harry looked down at his broken wand, which had been snapped cleanly in two, and lay on the table.
as though waiting for a funeral. A bit of phoenix feather was poking out of one end. "Yeah," he said quietly. "If it weren't for her, we wouldn't have gotten out of there at all."

"Sorry about your wand, mate," Ron said apologetically. "I just—"

"It's fine, Ron. I already told you that." Yet Harry couldn't seem to help but look as though someone had just chopped his right hand off and poured stinksap on the wound. He held up the black hawthorn wand he had taken from Draco. "At least I've got another wand to work with. And it doesn't hurt to have spares on hand," he added, endeavoring to sound encouraging as he referenced the ones they had found in Hermione's pockets when Fleur had tossed down her mangled and bloodied robes.

"Maybe we can ask Ollivander to make you another," Ron said hopefully, but Harry shook his head.

"We haven't got the time."

"Time for what?" Ron asked. "Last I looked, we weren't going anywhere soon."

Harry rubbed his scar for a moment, and then said, "We're still hunting for horcruxes. Just because Hermione's laid up doesn't mean we're not doing some planning, and I think I may have found where You-Know-Who's hid Hufflepuff's Cup."

"What?" Ron said, his teacup clattering to the table as he nearly jumped out of his seat with excitement. "Where?"

"The Lestranges' Vault in Gringotts," Harry said firmly.

Ron slumped back in his seat. "What?" he asked blankly. "I thought we were looking for places You-Know-Who's been, places he's done something important. When was he ever inside the Lestranges' vault?"

"I don't know whether he was ever inside Gringotts in the first place. He never had gold there when he was younger, because nobody left him anything," Harry said thoughtfully. "He would have seen the bank from the outside, though, the first time he ever went to Diagon Alley. I think he would have envied anyone who had a key to a Gringotts vault. I think he'd have seen it as a real symbol of belonging to the Wizarding world. It wouldn't be the first time he's left a horcrux in the possession of one of his Death Eaters."

"I dunno…" Ron said. "I mean, it makes sense when you say it, but that leaves us with another problem. How the bloody hell are we going to break into Gringotts?"

"We'll talk to the goblin," Harry said firmly. "Ask him for his help. I've got gold, loads of it… if he wants it, he can have it."

Ron shook his head in disbelief, and sighed, before looking up at the ceiling.

"I wonder how Hermione's doing," he said quietly.

"Fleur still won't let us see her," Harry said, looking down at his tea, which now looked rather unappetizing. "I mean, Bellatrix stabbed her in the side, carved up her arm, and then threw that knife into her leg at the last minute… she's lucky to be alive."

"Bill said that he was surprised she hadn't already bled out," Ron said, suddenly looking rather ill at the prospect.
"Hermione's tough," Harry said quietly. "Come to think of it, she's the one who's had our backs the whole time… getting food, setting up camp, scouting around Godric's Hollow, searching for her vampire friend to get information on the Deathly Hallows… and when we accidentally invoked the taboo, she went out there with a plan and managed to grab the sword with her. And then she makes it possible for us to escape back at Malfoy Manor. If it weren't for her, we wouldn't have made it this far."

"Finally noticed, have you?" Ron said.

"Ron…" Harry started, but the red-head waved him off.

"Forget it, mate. It's not that. It's the fact that you've spent the last few months wallowing around in your own head." He shrugged. "I sometimes thought you never even noticed."

Harry exhaled slowly. "I noticed. But sometimes I'm too much of a prat to remember to say 'thank you.'"

Ron stared at his teacup intently for a moment, as though trying to read the leaves, and then looked up.

"What?" Harry asked. "Did they finally spell 'die, Ron, die'?"

Ron grinned at this for a moment, and then the smile slid off his face. "Were you listening back there when Bellatrix went off her rocker, while Draco was trying to identify you? About Hermione?"

"Bellatrix is deranged," Harry said slowly, "but… not in the way that she would start misremembering people, I don't think…"

"I was thinking more along the lines that she might have mistaken Hermione for your godmother," Ron said, picking up his teacup and promptly dumping it out in a small potted fern near the door. "I mean, think about it, Harry—they do look a lot alike. And it sounds like she went to school at the same time as Bellatrix. It says a lot about your godmother, though—thought you'd pay attention to that."

"I don't know," Harry said, sounding frustrated. He rubbed at his forehead, as he always did when his scar began prickling. "I can't place my finger on it. Sure, they look alike, I can't deny that—but Hermione's definitely not her. But you have to admit, she's changed over the past few months, hasn't she? She… I don't know. It sort of felt like she was different, after the Department of Mysteries."

"And maybe Bellatrix really is just plain nutters," Ron said, setting his now-empty cup back down. "And what was Greyback saying about an Animagus?"

"I don't know," Harry said, picking up the black hawthorn wand and pointing it at his teacup. A mutter, a flick, and it levitated into the air, floating itself toward the potted plant before promptly dumping its contents. "But as soon as Hermione's awake, I've got some questions for her."

"That was different," Harry said grimly. "We were kids then. But right now, we can't afford any secrets."

"Really?" Ron said. "It doesn't seem that much different, to me. If Hermione's got secrets, I reckon"
it's because she's got a good reason for them. Especially the Time-Turner, that was a pretty big deal, being able to go back a couple of hours... besides, it's not like we don't have secrets of our own. It's not like we've been telling her everything, right?"

Harry was rubbing his scar insistently now, and grimacing. "She didn't need to know about what you saw when you destroyed Slytherin's Locket, and she doesn't need to know that I've still been getting things from You-Know-Who through our link. I don't know. All I know is that Hermione's different, and I want to know why."

"At least it's not a bad sort of different, anyhow," Ron said reasonably. "At least she's not like Dobby —since he become a free house elf, I've never looked at tea cozies the same way again."

~o~O~o~

Selenius fell silent after Draco had finished recounting the previous night.

"So, she's okay?" he asked, picking at the fabric of his robes listlessly. He was staring down at the fire, refusing to make eye contact. "She's alive?"

Draco made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "Of course she is. She got away, didn't she?"

Selenius opened his mouth to speak, but Draco overrode him. "I've told you what I know. Now it's your turn." Leaning forward in his seat, he said, "Start from the beginning. Granger's too young to look as old as she does in that photo—how did that happen?"

Selenius stroked the sheepskin on the back of the locket, before flicking the clasp open and peering down at the smiling visage of his parents. "My... my Mum was never entirely forthcoming about it, but my uncle Sirius told me anyway... Remus, too, parts of it at least..."

Draco listened intently, waiting impatiently for him to go on.

"They said she got thrown back in time in her fifth year. Right before the D.A got caught, then," Selenius said slowly, choosing his words with care. "She escaped, but Harry Potter didn't, so he was taken up to the Headmaster's office... to... you know, they were looking to expel him and sack Professor Dumbledore... and Mum couldn't let that happen." Without skipping a beat, he skimmed over the fact that she had been planning to use a Time-Turner to go back a few hours and prevent them from being caught, and said, "She got into an accident that sent her back in time by almost twenty years. She ended up in April of... 1977, I think."

"How?" Draco demanded eagerly. There was a glint of interest in his eyes that Selenius didn't quite trust to be pure curiosity. It was just on the side of greedy.

Selenius just shrugged. "I don't know. They never told me. But anyway," he continued smoothly, "they didn't have a way of sending her back to 1996, so she built a life for herself there, I guess. She fell in love with Dad, and then they had me... and then when I was ten, she de-aged herself and just—slotted herself back into her timeline, I suppose. Pretended to be student, stepped in for the version of her that got thrown back in time, and continued where time left off..." He suddenly looked troubled. "She used to stay at Grimmauld Place more often until then... I didn't get to see her, much, after that..."

He trailed off, and fell silent, lost in thought.

The older boy stared at him incredulously. "That's it?" he said, his tone disappointing and unbelieving. "She just gets thrown back twenty years, marries, has a kid, and then goes back to being a student? No bloody house-elf crusades? No..." he gestured vaguely at the air, searching for
the right word, "lobbying, no trying to change things?"

Selenius shook his head.

"Bloody Gryffindor," Draco said, sitting back in his seat disgustedly.

Selenius felt it necessary to defend his mother. "She did rescue my uncle from Azkaban," said sullenly.

"What? She helped Black escape Azkaban four years ago?"

Selenius frowned. "Sirius wasn't in Azkaban four years ago. Mum got him out of there—this was before I was born, mind," he added, snapping the locket shut.

Draco looked. "That's not possible," he said, but Selenius could tell that his mind was still on the time-traveling bit. "There would have been a huge scene if Black had escaped from Azkaban—"

"He didn't escape!" Selenius snapped, irate. "Mum made some kind of deal that got him out of there—as long as he remained hidden, the Ministry would pretend he was still there. He only got a lot of attention when he went out of hiding four years ago." He kicked the couch with his heel, and then added morosely, "After that, I couldn't really see him often. Not until we moved to Grimmauld Place, and then it was more like a prison than anything else."

Draco's eyes narrowed, as though Selenius had just said something particularly of note, and then said, "She made a deal?"

"Forget it," Selenius said, moving to get up. "I don't know anything else about it—"

"No, wait," Draco said, grabbing his wrist and keeping him seated. "Your father—Professor Snape—he knew Gra—your mother had helped Black cut a deal out of doing prison time?"

Selenius hesitated.

"Actually…" he said, "at first, I don't think he knew. I'm pretty sure Mum kept it a secret from him until he came out of hiding… Dad never got along well with Sirius, they were always having a go at each other…" He finally looked up at Draco. "I don't really remember all that well. I was really young, and I spent time on and off between my parents and my relatives…"

"Relatives?" Draco asked sharply.

Selenius shrugged. "Mum's Muggle-born, and she had an aunt and an uncle who were also Muggles—she modified their memories to make them think they were my parents. I…" he looked away again, pausing for a moment to gather his words, and then said, "I think—well, Sirius said she wanted to keep me from getting mixed-up in her mess, she hoped I could lead a normal life." Selenius gave the older boy a thin smile. "But it didn't work out. Uncle Remus said she missed me too much, and I was too unhappy. Dad wasn't particularly fond of the idea, either."

Draco stared at Selenius with an expression somewhere between disgust and horror.

"Your mother sent you to live with muggles?" he repeated.

Selenius looked up at him squarely for a moment.

And then said, in a rather uncanny mimicry of Draco's tone just moments ago, "Your mother lets you live in a house with a homicidal aunt?"
Severus shut the door to the Headmaster's Office with such force that a few of the portrait frames seemed to rattle ominously from where they hung. All pairs of oily paint-daub eyes were on him as he strode across the room, but he could not have cared less.

He slammed a hand down on his desk, finally able to express his fury and frustration in the relative privacy of his office.

Lucius had sent him a message detailing the Golden Trio’s capture and subsequent escape. Potter and Weasley had escaped with hardly a scratch, but Hermione had not. As soon as the Dark Lord had left Malfoy Manor, Lucius had informed him of exactly what had gone down, and from the sound of it, Hermione had not left under her own power. Weasley had Apparated away with her, because she wasn’t able to do it herself.

His wife. The thought of her bleeding to death in whatever wild moor they ended up in, in the incapable hands of Potter and Weasley, turned his blood to ice. They would fumble uselessly, not knowing what to do—and Hermione had been stabbed in a vital place. His wife was strong—stronger than many people gave her credit for—but there was no possible way for her to simply walk away from that.

All of this had been over twenty-four hours ago. His knuckles turned blindingly white as his fingers pressed against the surface of the desk. If there had been any hope of him helping her, it would have had to have been just after she escaped.

Right now, the odds of her being alive were slim. And because they had not even his wife’s bag on them, he could not ask Phineas Nigellus to hop into his other portrait and see what he could glean from them. Was she still alive? He looked down at the ring on his finger. They both had runes inscribed into the underside of the band, infused with magic, but surely even they were not powerful enough to keep his wife alive for a little over a day without receiving proper medical care…

Desperately, he pulled out his wand, and tapped the ring, trying to see if he could get a fix on her location. If she were dead, he would still get a fix—but…

The magic prickled along his hand as the ring tried to find its other half, and then subsided—with no response. Severus’s breathing quickened. If there was no response, that meant she was somewhere under the protection of the Fidelius Charm—that was the only possible explanation. Not even the usual wards put up around their tent could stop him from finding her, which meant it had to be something stronger.

Very few places were under such protection, where Potter and Weasley would go to. His first thought was Grimmauld Place, but he immediately discarded it; he had access to the house, which meant that the ring would have bypassed such protections. It had to be somewhere else. But if that was the case, there was a chance, a slight possibility that Hermione had gotten the care she needed. That she was alive.

"My dear boy," he heard the portrait right above the desk say, "all is not lost. I am certain she is alive…"

A growl ripped itself from Severus’s throat as he turned his eyes up to the late Headmaster Dumbledore. "How do you know?"

"There are portraits in Malfoy Manor that have doubles here at Hogwarts—"
"That's not what I'm talking about!" Severus spat.

"—and it is just as likely that wherever they have gone, there is also probably a portrait here that can
get there, too."

Severus turned away from him, tapping his ring with his wand once more. "Tell the other portraits to
check every house under a Fidelius Charm that they have access to." A few other portraits shifted
uneasily, and he snarled, "That goes for the rest of you! Now!"

"Temper, temper," Phineas remarked snidely, as he stalked out of his frame.

~o~O~o~

When Hermione woke up in one of the bedrooms in Shell Cottage, she was at first momentarily
confused about where she was. The room looked vaguely familiar, even though she was positive she
had never seen it before in her life—and when she gingerly sat up, pressing a hand against her side
with a grimace as she did so, she saw the view out the window. She heard the low hum of voices
floating up from downstairs, where several people were talking—Harry and Ron among them—and
satisfied that she was, at least, somewhere safe, she pressed a hand to her chest, feeling around for
the chain.

And a moment later, the memories came rushing back.

Her locket was gone.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
"You shouldn't move too fast," Bill advised her, as Hermione gingerly tried to get to her feet. Her left leg was wrapped up in a bandage, to cushion it against the brace that Bill had manufactured by Transfiguring a few sticks and some old socks. Fleur had done a good job of healing it, and she could walk on it, but it needed a bit of support. "And make sure to hold onto the railing when you go downstairs—"

"I know," Hermione snapped tiredly, as she pushed herself off from the bed, wobbled unsteadily for a moment, and then found her balance. "How long have I been in bed, again?"

"Three days," Bill said, folding his arms across his chest, his expression dubious as Hermione stumbled toward the door. "Are you sure you don't want help?"

"I'm fine." Hermione leaned against the door handle for a moment, trying to ignore how exhausted and sore she was. Her side had also been expertly healed, but if she twisted around too fast, or jerked quickly, there would be a sharp wave of pain. Her upper arm also hurt, too, from where Bellatrix had carved the letters spelling out 'Mudblood'. No longer in danger of bleeding out though she was, her body still needed time to heal entirely, with the help of some potions Molly had sent. "Are Harry and Ron downstairs?"

"Yes," Bill said, ignoring Hermione as he grasped her upper arm, keeping her on her feet as he swung the door open. She didn't bother to struggle against his assistance, but allowed him to make sure she didn't go crashing to the floor as they headed down the hallway for the stairs. "They've been worried about you. They'll be glad to see you up and about. Dobby, too," he added as an afterthought.

"Dobby's here?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"Dobby helped Fleur look after you," Bill said airily. They halted in front of the stairs, and Hermione gripped the railing, before taking a tentative step down. "Watch yourself, now."

"Thank you, Captain Obvious."

Bill held his free hand up in surrender. "Hey. At least this way, if you fall and break your neck, no one can say I didn't try to help you."

Hermione gave him a look of exasperation, and then her expression went blank. "You're not happy with me, are you?"

"Well," Bill said baldly, "you are being a bit of a cantankerous git."

"Forgive me," Hermione said snarkily, taking another step down. She was in a horrible mood, not the least because her locket was gone. What would happen to it now? What would Draco Malfoy do with it? Who would he show it to? "I'm so sorry if I'm tired, sore, and aggravated after narrowly escaping from a wand and knife fight with a madwoman who was intent on carving me up. I assure
you, it is no direct reflection upon your otherwise unassailable character."

Bill stared at her for a moment, and then said, very quietly, "You know, sometimes you sound just like him."

"Who?" Hermione asked blankly.

"Snape."

Hermione yanked her arm out of Bill's grasp, ignoring the pain in her side, and began walking down the stairs, one heavy step at a time. "Get over it, Bill." She paused four steps down, and then slowly turned around to look at him. "And not a word to Harry and Ron."

She saw Bill rub the bridge of his nose with one hand for a moment, and then he said, "I don't intend to tell them anything, Hermione. And after what went down at Malfoy Manor, believe me, I have every confidence in your loyalty. It's just… you've picked up so many of his habits, sometimes it feels like I'm back in school again." His hand dropped to his side. "And you were my Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, you know. For about two years." He scratched the side of his chin. "And seeing you now, pretending to just be another seventh-year drop-out, after two years of seeing what you could do with a wand when you wanted to…"

Hermione bit her lower lip for a moment, and then sighed. She took another step down, then another, and stopped at the last bottom step to look at him.

"I suppose that does seem a bit odd," she contended. A pause, and she said, "I'm sorry for being a cantankerous git. There's a lot going on, and it has nothing to do with you—in fact, I'm grateful for the hospitality you've shown me." She closed her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm just—I'm sorry."

Bill smiled, pulling the scars on his face tight. "That's better."

When she got to the kitchen, Harry and Ron nearly knocked over their chairs to get to her. Harry pulled a chair back from the table for her, while Ron immediately grabbed the arm Bill had been holding earlier, making Hermione give them both exasperated glares as she allowed herself to be ushered into a seat. The older Weasley appeared a moment later, peering through the doorway to make sure she was fine. Fleur, who had been sitting at the table, got up, giving Hermione a bit of a relieved smile, and then left with her husband, heading back upstairs.

"How are you doing?" Harry asked, as Ron pushed a plate of bacon toward her. "Feeling better?"

"A bit." Hermione rubbed her side for a moment, and then admitted, "Bellatrix did a number on me."

"But you're okay?" Ron said, as he flopped back down in his chair, folding his arms on the table. "You're not about to—er—faint?"

"I'm perfectly fine," Hermione asserted, taking a moment to appreciate the appetizing appearance of the food in front of her before she got to work on it. "I might have trouble walking for a bit, or moving quickly, but I'll be up and about on my own soon enough."

"That's… good," Harry said, looking at Ron for a moment, before turning his attention back to her. "Because we've figured out where Hufflepuff's Cup is—at least, I think we have—and…"

He hesitated.

"We… well, we also wondered a bit about why Greyback mentioned an Animagus form," he said slowly.
Hermione stared down at her plate.

"Where's the Hufflepuff horcrux, Harry?" she asked quietly.

"Gringotts," Harry said, without hesitation. "In the Lestrange vault. But—"

Hermione didn't wait for him to finish. "I've been trying to achieve my Animagus form since third year," she said calmly. "But this is the first time I managed to do it." She gazed at him steadily. "It wasn't a conscious thought, Harry. I wasn't trying to change then. But I think I was angry and afraid enough that it just… happened, when I needed it."

"So, what are you?" Ron asked eagerly.

"A lion." Hermione took another bite of bacon. "I don't know if I'll be able to do it again, intentionally, but I don't feel like trying. It's dangerous to try it on your own until you've got the gist of it, because it has the potential to backfire and go horribly wrong—I'm lucky it didn't here, for me."

"Ah, well," Ron said, looking disappointed as he leaned back in his chair.

"So," Hermione said shortly, "how are we planning on getting into Gringotts?"

~o~O~o~

"You are an unusual wizard, Harry Potter," Griphook said slowly, as Hermione and Ron sat beside Harry in the goblin's room. "Rescuing a goblin and… a house-elf."

Dobby, who was sitting on top of a crate in the room and knitting what appeared to be a sweater out of bright orange yarn, looked up at this.

"Dobby rescued us, not the other way around," Harry said impatiently. "Griphook, we need to ask—"

"You could have left the house-elf behind," Griphook interrupted slowly, folding his mending fingers in his lap. "You grabbed him before you left."

"Harry Potter is a great wizard," Dobby piped up, the needles in his hands still clacking rhythmically as he worked. "He is friend to house-elves."

"So I see," Griphook said, twisting his thin black beard thoughtfully, "but he is still a very odd wizard."

"Right," Harry said, and Hermione could tell he wanted to move this along. They still had Ollivander to talk to. "Well, I need some help, Griphook, and you can give it to me."

The goblin said nothing, gave no sign of encouragement, but Hermione could see that he was listening intently—and looking at Harry with an expression of utmost interest.

"I need to break into a Gringott's vault."

Griphook stared at him for a moment.

"Break into a Gringott's vault?" he repeated. "It is impossible."

"No, it isn't," Ron countered. "It's been done."

"The same day I first met you," Harry reminded the goblin. "My birthday, seven years ago."
"The vault in question was empty at the time," the goblin snapped, and Hermione rather thought he seemed offended at the idea that Gringotts was not as impregnable as advertised. "Its protection was minimal."

"Well, the vault we need to get into isn't empty, and I'm guessing its protection will be pretty powerful," Harry stated candidly.

"You have no chance," Griphook said flatly. "No chance at all—"

"Dobby thinks Harry Potter can do it," the house elf interjected, halting his knitting and lowering it to look up at the goblin. Griphook stare down at the tiny creature with a look that fell somewhere between surprise and disdain, which Dobby ignored as he added, "Harry Potter has overcome many dangerous obstacles before, very dangerous, very impossible. Dobby thinks he can do it again!"

Griphook looked at him a moment longer, and then back up at Harry.

"I'm not trying to get any treasure for myself," Harry said quietly. "I'm not trying to get anything for personal gain. I'm—" he worked his jaw for a moment, and then said suddenly, "Griphook, can I trust you?"

Griphook crossed his fingers under his chin for a moment. "We shall see," he said.

Harry took a deep breath, and plowed on. "You-Know-Who is using a type of Dark Magic to split his soul and place it in other objects. In order for us to have a chance at killing him, we need to destroy those objects first. We think one of them is in the Lestrange vault."

Griphook narrowed his eyes. "I see," he said carefully.

"Do you believe me, Griphook?" Harry asked. His expression was open, but determined. "Will you help us?"

The goblin looked out the window for a moment, without answering. They sat there in silence, save for the click-clack of Dobby's knitting, and then Griphook finally turned back to give Harry a slantwise glance.

"If there was a wizard of whom I would believe did not seek personal gain, it would be you, Harry Potter," he said finally. "Goblins are not used to the protection or respect that you have shown this night." He paused. "Not from wand-carriers."

"Wand-carriers," Harry echoed.

Griphook opened his mouth to speak, but it was Hermione who answered.

"The right to carry a wand has long been contested between wizards and goblins," Hermione said quietly. They all turned to look at her. "You saw how Bellatrix reacted when Dobby disarmed Narcissa Malfoy—that's the kind of prejudice they've faced for centuries."

Griphook looked at her appraisingly.

"Well, they can do magic without wands, can't they?" Ron interjected.

"That is immaterial!" Griphook snapped. "Wizards refuse to share the secrets of wandlore with other magical beings, they deny us the possibility of extending our powers!"

"Well, goblins won't share any of their magic, either," Ron retorted. "You won't tell us how to make
swords and armor the way you do. Goblins know how to work metal in a way wizards have never —"

"It doesn't matter," Harry interrupted. "This isn't about wizards versus goblins or any other sort of magical creature—"

Griphook gave a nasty laugh.

"But it is, it is precisely that!" he sneered. "As the Dark Lord becomes ever more powerful, your race is set still more firmly above mine! Gringotts falls under Wizarding rule, house-elves are slaughtered, and who amongst the wand-carriers protests?"

"We do," Hermione said, rising slowly to her feet, grasping her side as she did so. "We protest—that's what we're doing right now. I'm hunted just as much as any goblin or elf, because I'm a Mudblood—" Ron made a sudden reactionary movement at this, and Hermione snapped, "Yes, Ron, that's what I am. My parents are Muggles, and I'm proud of it—but Griphook," she said, turning back to the goblin, "I've got no higher position under this new order than you." She gave a bitter smile, and then pulled up the hem of her shirt just enough so that the newly acquired, ropey pale pink scar that ran across her side could be seen. It stood out starkly against her skin. She dropped it after a moment. "It was me they chose to torture back at the Malfoys, Griphook. Not Ron, who's a blood-traitor. Not Harry, who's the one they've wanted all along. Me, because I'm deemed to be worth no more than an expendable animal."

She gingerly sat back down, and added quietly, "It was Harry who set Dobby free—he risked Lucius Malfoy's wrath when he tricked him into handing Dobby a sock."

Dobby was nodding vigorously at this. Griphook eyed the house-elf's odd attire askance.

"You can't want the Dark Lord defeated more than we do, Griphook. That's why we're on this mission, risking our necks to find and eliminate those objects that he's stored those rotten pieces of his soul in." She slanted her eyes at him. "We've shared some information about the Dark Lord that we haven't told anyone else—and that we expect you to keep mum about. We're not just asking you for your help—we're also telling you exactly why we're asking for your help."

Griphook's eyes narrowed so much that they were reduced to slits, and then he pointed a yellow-nailed finger at the Sword of Gryffindor, which was leaning against the wall in the corner.

"If you want the assistance of Goblins, you must learn to accept our laws," he said curtly. "The Sword of Gryffindor was paid for by Godric Gryffindor, and was never returned to its proper owner after the original purchaser's death. Thus, we consider it stolen."

Hermione shook her head.

"Wizards and Goblins are going to have to come to a compromise on those kind of laws, once this is all over," she said. "The original maker of the sword is long dead—surely, then, you can't claim it belongs to any single goblin."

Griphook glared at her.

"Besides," she added calmly, "we need the sword in order to destroy the objects the Dark Lord's used. This sword's imbibed Basilisk venom, which is one of the only known substances that can permanently damage the objects—when they hold a piece of someone's soul, they can't be destroyed by normal means. But once all of this is over… when we get peace restored again…"

She took a deep breath.
"I would be willing to negotiate with the Goblins for the right to purchase the Sword of Gryffindor and make it the property of the school." Griphook's black brows rose at this. Harry and Ron gaped at her. Hermione ignored this, but plowed on, "The Sword of Gryffindor was made for one of our founders—"

"Wizarding arrogance!" Griphook snapped.

"Griphook, goblins make their armor in such a way that wizards can't hope to alter their essence with spells," Hermione said tightly. "The sword has Godric Gryffindor's name carved into it. Unless the goblin that made it was named Godric Gryffindor, I doubt it was made for anyone else but our founder. It seems only right to us that as long as the sword is paid for properly, with the intention of it to belong to the school, then it would be the property of Hogwarts for as long as Hogwarts remained standing."

Griphook gave her a long, hard look.

"If you want wizards and goblins to work together, then we need to find some sort of compromise," Hermione warned him. "Neither of us can arbitrarily give up our understanding of how property is passed on, which is one of the other main issues of contention between wizards and goblins, other than the right to carry wands. We need that sword, Griphook, and we need your help in making sure that such a compromise is possible to make in the future—when the Dark Lord's dead."

Griphook gazed at her levelly.

"I have never," he said, "in all my life met a wand-carrier willing to… compromise."

Ron made a disparaging noise, but said nothing. Griphook ignored him.

"I require time to consider what you have said," he said. "I shall think about it."

Ron looked ready to protest, but Hermione threw him a look that silenced him. They all stood up, and quietly made to leave, when Hermione stopped at the door and turned to look at him.

"Ollivander is the finest wandmaker in Britain," she said. "He's staying here to recover, like you. Perhaps you could talk to him a bit. About wandlore."

Griphook bowed his great domed head in acknowledgment.

As the door closed behind them, Hermione could have sworn she saw the goblin smile.

~o~O~o~

Hermione stood on the rocky outcropping just beyond Shell Cottage, gazing down at the ocean. After they had finished interviewing, a few last pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place, and three days later, Hermione was using the quietly crashing waves to drown out the buzzing in her head as she tried to make sense of what she had just learned.

Harry had finally put it together. Gregorovitch had the Elder Wand. Grindelwald had stolen it from him. And then Dumbledore had defeated him in a duel, and taken his wand.

Dumbledore was dead.

And now, according to Harry, Voldemort had it.

She did not know if Severus knew what had happened to her. She had not been able to contact him
while inside the cottage. Once or twice, she thought she saw a figure following her through the landscapes that hung in Bill and Fleur's house, but whenever she turned to look at it, it would turn away and pick its nose, as though not the least bit concerned with her.

She was surprised to sense soft footsteps coming up behind her, and when she turned around, she saw that it was Luna. The other girl was smiling as she came to stand next to her, crossing her arms behind her back, and staring down at the water. She was looking much better than when Hermione had last seen her the day before—she was finally gaining back a bit of color, a bit of her vivaciousness.

"How are you doing?" Hermione asked.

"Much better," Luna said, turning her wide blue eyes to look at her. "Thank you."

"Have you..." A lump rose in her throat, but Hermione struggled to get past it. "Have you spoken to your father?"

"I sent him an owl," Luna said happily. "He was very relieved, you know, that his message on Potterwatch got through. He said to say thank you."

Hermione gave the younger girl a self-deprecating smile. "It was Harry and Ron that discovered you at Malfoy Manor, not me," she said. "They were the ones who got you out."

"Dobby spoke to me earlier," Luna said. A dreamy expression came over her. "He came to help Harry."

Hermione nodded soberly. "Yes."

Luna tilted her head to the side for a moment to look at Hermione, and then she said, "You know, I've been thinking that there's someone else I know who looks very much like you."

Hermione gave her a baffled look. "Who?"

"Selenius Black," Luna said, as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "He has your nose."

Hermione tried to suppress the alarm that roiled through her, but there was no disguising the shock on her face, no matter how quickly she covered it by forcing her expression to turn blank and inscrutable.

"You're telling me you think I have a cousin at Hogwarts because of his nose?" Hermione asked, trying to sound skeptical.

Luna righted her head, but did not remove her gaze from Hermione.

"I know, it sounds silly doesn't it?" she said.

"Very," Hermione said, trying to calm the frantic beating of her heart. She could hear it pulsing the familiar lub-dub frantically, like a butterfly flapping its wings to try and escape a spider web. "I don't even know who that is."

Luna shrugged. "He's about as much of a magnet for wrackspurts as you are."

Hermione gave Luna a sad, self-deprecating smile, as her mind turned to thoughts of Selenius. She had not seen her son since September first. It was now the middle of March. Almost seven months
had gone by. Absently, she felt around for the chain of her locket, which she was so used to caressing for comfort, and once again felt a stab of pain when she realized it was gone.

Luna was watching her closely.

"I think we'd better get back inside," she said. "I think the nargles are starting to come out. Were you missing something?"

Hermione sighed, and turned to start walking back toward the house. Her gait was slow, but she was recovering.

"It's nothing," she said. "Thank you, Luna."

Her ring suddenly burned, and she stopped. She turned away from Luna's gaze, as though interested in the crashing waves, and quickly glanced down at her fingers.

*My orders have changed.*

"Hermione?" Luna asked.

Hermione swallowed, feeling a lump form in her throat.

"It's nothing," she repeated.

~o~O~o~

Griphook had finally agreed to help them. Negotiations over the price of the sword were made, as a first condition of sorts; Hermione would not allowed to let the goblin extort an undeservedly exorbitant amount from her, and thus, the two spent well over an hour haggling a price. Harry was present, since he had staunchly told Hermione that he would help pay, and Ron offered to help Luna and Dean collect some driftwood for a fire.

Griphook had placed the value of the sword at roughly the price that a Firebolt had cost when the broom first came out, and then tried to multiply it for every decade that passed since it had been 'stolen'. Hermione and Harry had both shot this down at once, arguing that they were paying for the value of the sword, not for the value of keeping it on a yearly basis. Griphook had stubbornly argued that since it had been stolen for so long, it ought to be worth more for the insult and inconvenience it had cost the goblins. Eventually, after much haggling and arguing, Hermione agreed to pay twice the sword's initial value. She and Harry split the cost of the sword evenly between them.

But Hermione wasn't about to do this without getting her pound of flesh, first.

"If the Goblins want to be able to make more deals like this one, they're going to have to participate in this war," Hermione said, her expression blank as she faced off with Griphook. "You've been doing a good job of staying out of the conflict as best as possible, but you brought up a very good point when you said that our race was still set above yours in regards to power and political clout. The thing you have to realize is that this isn't just a wizard's war—this is a war against an ideology that wants to place a select type of wizards permanently at the top of the chain, which affects us all. Which means," Hermione stressed, "that if you want things to change when this is over, you're going to have to be a part of it."

Griphook bared his teeth at her.

"You want to make us expendable foot soldiers," he snapped.
"No," Hermione said firmly. "I want you to participate when and where you can. If you have the opportunity to sabotage the Death Eaters, do it. If you have the opportunity to help someone—human, goblin, house-elf, or anyone else in need—do it. If you need help, ask for it. I'm not asking any more of you than what we've asked of anyone else. But if you just keep avoiding taking sides in this war, when it's finally over, everyone—wizards, centaurs, house-elves, vampires—they're going to ask where you were. They're going to ask why they should negotiate with you."

Harry was looking at Hermione as though he had never quite seen her before, at least not like this. Griphook folded his hands, eyeing Hermione with a look that fell somewhere between disgruntled admiration and intense dislike, but his expression was thoughtful.

"Don't expect Goblins to take orders from Wizards," he said flatly, sitting up straighter. "We are not house-elves."

Hermione shook her head. "I don't expect you to be any more subservient to wizards than we expect to be of you."

Griphook nodded slowly.

"After we break into Gringotts," he said, "I will speak to my fellows, though I guarantee nothing."

Hermione eyed him levelly, carefully turning his words over in her head for a moment, and then nodded.

"Thank you," she said.

"And now," Griphook said, his eyes glittering, "I believe we have some plans to make."

~o~O~o~

Dobby had not only volunteered, he had insisted upon being a part of Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Griphook’s plan to sneak into Gringotts. Hermione had been hesitant about it, but Dobby was adamant that he be allowed to help Harry. They spent the next few weeks meticulously planning, and it was apparent after their first meeting that Dobby could actually be more useful than they initially realized.

There was only enough Polyjuice left for one person, which Hermione had decided would be her; she would be disguising herself as Bellatrix Lestrange, having plucked several long curly black hairs from the robes that she had come back from the manor with. It had, thankfully, not been washed before she had woken up—in fact, Fleur had been planning to throw it away, but Bill had insisted upon leaving that up to Hermione. She had actually hugged Bill in gratitude when she learned this. Sirius's knife had been stored with her ragged and woebegone garments, and Hermione was relieved to get it back. She discarded Bellatrix's dagger; she had not been the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher for nothing, and she had not slacked off in her lessons when Faulker was teacher; there was no denying the dark magic imbued within the blade. Hermione considered it a liability, and figured that its properties were likely responsible for her slow recovery.

Hermione found herself observing with something akin to curiosity and approval at the interaction that grew between Griphook and Dobby. During their planning, Griphook had expressed nasty delight at the idea that they would have to hurt other creatures—and wizards—in order to reach the Lestrange vault; any admonishment from Harry, Ron, or Hermione would have been ignored or dismissed, but when Dobby threw in his own opinion of the goblin with high-voiced impertinence, Hermione could see the goblin quickly reassess the house-elf. There was something about the way
that Dobby stood up for himself and was yet more than willing to help others that undoubtedly sparked Griphook's curiosity.

Not that the goblin would ever admit it to any of them.

Yet, soon enough, Griphook requested that only Dobby be the one to bring his food to him at mealtimes. Raised eyebrows from the wand-carriers notwithstanding, Dobby was more than happy to do so, although he stayed in the goblin's room for a disconcertingly long time that far exceeded what it took to make a simple delivery. Occasionally, whispers of conversation could be heard through the door, but Hermione had shooed Harry and Ron away to prevent them from eavesdropping—although she herself did it ruthlessly.

What she discovered was that Griphook spent much of his time questioning the house-elf about nearly everything—what it had been like to serve the Malfoys, what it had been like to work at Hogwarts after having difficulty finding paying work, and then—eventually—what it had been like to work for Harry, and then Hermione, when he inquired about what other people he had worked for. He asked a great deal about the on-goings of Hogwarts from the intimate viewpoint of an elf who saw everything and yet was hardly noticed.

It was impossible to say what Griphook was thinking, at these times. Yet, Hermione could see a look of deep, cunning consideration in his eyes when he dealt with them while they planned their break-in to Gringotts, and there was no denying the fact that out of them all, he was the most polite to Dobby. Hermione, dare she even suggest it, thought that perhaps the two were starting to become something very much like friends.

Yet, she kept her suspicions to herself.

She was fast recovering from her stint at Malfoy Manor, but there remained a certain shortness of breath, a kind of difficulty in flexibility that she had never suffered before. Her leg had healed, but there was still a gash where the dagger had sunk in, piercing the bone; it had been reduced to a pale red line against the whiteness of her skin, but sometimes, when she turned her leg a certain way and put her weight on it, there would be a sharp prickle of pain.

Her side was not much better. Twisting around suddenly caused sharp, crippling pain; Hermione had begun doing exercises several times a day to try and regain her mobility, slowly bending her torso from one side to the other, and twisting around as far as she dared go, but there was no denying that recovery would take more than just a few healing potions. When Bellatrix had stabbed her, it had gone in deep; had the other woman struck her higher up, somewhere between the ribs, Hermione was certain she would not have survived.

Fortunately, by the end of the month, she was well enough to move around without flinching reflexively from expected pain. She found herself oddly delighted when she could turn around one morning without the slightest hint of protest from her body, or a prickle of warning from her leg. It was also the same morning that they were finally prepared to pay Gringotts a visit.

Remus had stopped by a week or so earlier, in late April, giddy with happiness to inform them that his son had been born. He had barreled past Bill with the usual identification routine in order to tell them all the good news. Hermione had nearly squealed with surprise at this, pulling him into a congratulatory hug, and immediately peppering the proud father with questions.

"We've named him Teddy, after Tonks' father," Remus told her happily. Bill went to fill their goblets with wine to celebrate the occasion, grinning broadly at the news. "His hair was black, but it turned ginger within the hour—I don't doubt that by the time I come back, it'll be blond. Andromeda says Tonks' hair started changing color the day she was born. He's definitely a morphmagus," he said,
holding Hermione tightly in a bear-hug and then releasing her, "and definitely no trace of werewolf in him!"

"That's fantastic!" Hermione said, unable to quash the silly smile on her face. "That's just—it's great, Remus. Absolutely wonderful."

Remus nodded enthusiastically, and then peered over her shoulder to look at Harry, who was standing just behind Hermione, and looking equally delighted.

"You'll be his godfather, won't you?" he said, moving to clap a hand on Harry's shoulder. "And you—" he looked at Hermione. "You'll—you'll be his godmother?"

"M-me?" Harry stammered, surprised.

"You, yes," Remus said happily. "Of course, Dora agrees, no one better!"

"I—yeah—blimey," Harry said, but he was still grinning. "Of course."

Remus turned to Hermione, who looked like a deer caught in the headlights. She saw the eager, hopeful, drunk-up-on-giddiness expression on Remus's face and the congratulatory delight on Harry's, and knew that the whole room was waiting expectantly for an answer.

"I—yes, of course," she agreed, feeling an odd flip-flopping sensation in her stomach as she looked at Harry. For a moment, she found herself looking at him as a baby, when she had held him before his forehead had been marred with a lightning-shaped scar. The way he had tugged with wide-eyed curiosity on her curls, quieted from wailing while James and Severus came to an understanding. And then, oddly, she found herself remembering what it had been like to hold her son for the first time, almost twelve years ago; a mop of downy black hair, light blue eyes that would later darken to solid black three or four months later, rosy cheeks that stuck out against skin so pale as to rival her husband's.

Her godson was grown up now. Her son was just now entering school, and it seemed like a lifetime ago that she had been holding him in her arms and tucking his hair behind his ears. And now…

She shook herself from her thoughts and picked up a goblet of wine, raising it up for all to see.

"To Teddy Lupin," she said, throwing Remus a flushing grin. Everyone immediately scrambled for a goblet, and raised it with hers.

She knocked her glass against the new father's in a toast.

"A great wizard in the making!" Remus said enthusiastically, and they all drank.

"And a boy who's lucky enough to have two wonderful parents who love him," Harry added, lowering his goblet. He was looking at Remus with something between admiration and longing, as though he were silently wishing that he had been as fortunate as Teddy—and in a way, Hermione had no doubt that was what he was thinking. "I hope you have a lot of happy years to look ahead as a family."

"Hear, hear!" Ron said.

And now they were making their way to Diagon Alley. Hermione had taken a draft of Polyjuice Potion, and transfigured her robes into the sort that Bellatrix had been wearing. She had had no issues charming Ron's hair black—she had so much practice on her own that it was of little consequence to do the same to his—and had given him a set of grown wizards' robes from Bill, the
kind the elder Weasley had used on his curse-breaking trips. It would be difficult for anyone to mistake him for Ronald Weasley.

That left Harry to follow them silently under the Invisibility Cloak, with Griphook riding on his shoulders. Dobby was able to follow behind unseen, being quite capable of making himself invisible. Thus, when they turned a corner down the street, all people saw was Bellatrix LeStrange and a tall, imposing sort of man at her side.

Hermione put her acting skills to good use, striding purposefully with a sneer on her face as she looked at the ragged, homeless, and broken people who slunk against the walls of nearby buildings, begging for change, some of them yelling or breaking down into piteous sobs when they saw her, thinking that she was the real Lestrange; it tore Hermione's heart in two, to see what had happened to all these people, but she kept Bellatrix's face in a stony mask of apathy and contempt.

She suspected more than one of them might have tried to attack or approach her, if she had not carried herself in this manner. Right now, they all saw Bellatrix LeStrange looking confident and powerfully unconcerned; few would dare make an attempt.

She was surprised when, just as she was about to pull open the doors leading into the entrance hall of the Wizarding bank, her ring flared red-hot against her skin. But she was preoccupied now; she couldn't check it in this company.

She continued up the steps leading to the bronze doors of Gringott's, resisting the urge to pull her hand up to her finger for a better look as she did so, and made herself a quick note to respond at the earliest available time. The warmth of the metal quickly subsided, but before they could reach the top, a voice from behind stopped them.

"Why, Madam LeStrange!"

They all whipped around to look, and Hermione straightened herself further as a face she recognized —Travers, whose tall and thick build combined with his balding crown of bushy grey hair were unmistakable—approached, striding toward them.

"What do you want?" Hermione snapped, letting her irritation show.

Travers halted, looking rather offended by her tone.

"I merely sought to greet you, but if my presence is not welcome…"

"Oh, not at all," Hermione responded coolly. She adjusted herself, looking rather bored, yet trying to make her expression a bit more welcoming—no, that wasn't the right word. A little less… aggressive, when directed at Travers. "What brings you here?"

"I was about to ask you that, myself," Travers said, ascending the steps leading to Gringotts, and stopping next to her. Hermione felt Harry brush against her as he hastily tried to get out of the way. "I must confess, I'm rather surprised to see you out and about, Bellatrix."

"Really?" Hermione asked, raising an elegant eyebrow at the older man. "Why is that?"

Travers coughed into his hand. "Well, I heard that the inhabitants of Malfoy Manor were confined to the house after the… ah… escape."

If Hermione had been herself, she would have waved him off with an excuse. But she was playing Bellatrix LeStrange, who was a little more reactionary in these sort of situations, if Hermione's experience with her was anything to go by.
She therefore contorted her expression into a practiced, snobbish sort of sneer, as though he were beneath her and she simply could not believe Travers had the idiocy or temerity to question her, and looked down rather disdainfully at him.

"The Dark Lord forgives those who have served him most loyally," she responded haughtily. "Perhaps you credit with him is not as good with him as mine is, Travers."

Travers looked rather affronted at this, but seemed to concede to this, and if he had had suspicions before, it seemed that they had been laid to rest. Unfortunately, it also didn't seem he had any intention of leaving.

"So what can you tell me—" and here, he lowered his voice, "—about what happened at Malfoy manor? Rumors are rampant through the ranks, of course, but none of us truly know what went on… I heard you lost your wand in a duel," he added, glancing down at Hermione's pocket. "Surely you don't plan to go out and about without one? Whose…?"

"I don't know what rumors you've been listening to," Hermione said coolly, flicking her wand out of her pocket for Travers to see, "but reports of the theft of my wand have been greatly exaggerated. Of course," she added contemptuously, "my dear brother-in-law lost his—again. Perhaps that's what you're thinking?"

Travers seemed rather both taken aback, appeased, and intrigued by this. Casting around for a moment, he said, "Who's your friend? I do not recognize him."

"This is Dragomir Despard," Hermione said, without skipping a beat. "He's a foreigner from Transylvania, and unfortunately speaks very little English."

"Indeed?" Travers said, looking polite, but wary. "How do you do, Dragomir?"

"'Ow 'ou?" Ron said, affecting a heavy accent as he extended a hand. Travers hesitated, and then shook the proffered hand with two fingers very quickly before pulling away, as though afraid that Ron might contaminate him. Hermione watched him try to discreetly rub his fingers on his robes.

"So what brings your—er—sympathetic friend here to Diagon Alley, today?"

"I need to visit Gringotts."

"Alas, I also," Travers said, with a bit of a dramatic sigh. "Gold, filthy gold! We cannot live without it, yet I confess I deplore the necessity of consorting with our long-fingered friends."

"Come along, then," Hermione said, turning away. "We have wasted enough time dawdling here."

"Of course. My apologies, Madam Lestrange," Travers said, falling into step behind her.

They were stopped by the guards, two wizards with long golden rods that Hermione recognized as Probity Probes. She hesitated for a moment, wondering if she should protest, as Bellatrix might if she were to be offended, but Travers ascended the last few steps before she could decide. He nodded to both wizards, and they raised the golden rods up and down the side of his body, before nodding him through.

Hermione strode past them without being subjected to the rods, both guards looking slightly dazed for a moment in the way that a person Confunded often did—thanks to Harry, from underneath the
cloak—and they went to stand beside Travers.

"One moment, ma'am," one of the guards said, raising his probe after Hermione.

"But you've just done that!" Hermione snapped, her tone brooking no argument in its commanding, arrogant tone.

Travers looked around, one eyebrow raised, as the guard looked stupidly down at his rod. He looked up at Hermione, and then turned to his companion.

"Yeah, you've just checked them, Marius," the other guard said, looking a bit bewildered himself.

Without another moment of hesitation, Hermione swept through the doors. They entered the hall with the inner doors, which were made of silver, and bore a certain poem that Hermione had become familiar with over the years.

Enter, stranger, but take heed
Of what awaits the sin of greed
For those who take, but do not earn,
Must pay most dearly in their turn.
So if you seek beneath our floors
A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware
Of finding more than treasure there.

Hermione refused to let herself pause a moment longer than necessary in order to read it, instead sweeping past the goblins who guarded this second set of doors, Travers and Ron at her side, and Harry, Dobby, and Griphook most certainly following close behind. They entered the vast marble hall, lined on each wall with a single seamless counter, and goblins stationed every so often on the stretch, inking records or balancing gold.

Hermione decisively strode toward an elderly-looking goblin, falling back as Travers approached first to present his key, with the pretext of explaining the workings of Gringotts to their visiting 'foreigner'.

"Enjoying yourself?" she asked, her voice so low as for Ron to have to strain himself to hear. In truth, she was frightened. This was a suicide mission no matter how one looked at it, and despite Hermione's many years of experience, she had very good reason to be wary of this venture. Yet, she remained in character as best she could, knowing Ron would understand what she was really asking.

"Et es innerestin'," Ron said, stroking his chin without skipping a beat.

Hermione took a deep breath, centered herself, and then stepped forward.

"Madam Lestrange!" The goblin exclaimed, evidently startled at her sudden appearance seemingly out of nowhere, but he quickly rallied himself. "Dear me! However may I help you today?"

"I wish to enter my vault," Hermione said.

The old goblin seemed to recoil at this, and out of the corner of her eye, Hermione saw Travers hanging back, watching the proceedings carefully. At once, it seemed several goblins had looked up from their work to observe. Inside, Hermione felt her gut roil in warning—there was something wrong here.

"You have… identification?" the goblin asked carefully.
"Identification?" Hermione snapped. "I've never been asked for identification before! What is this?"

The goblin shrank back further, his eyes flickering between Hermione, Ron, and Travers, before returning to his current customer.

"Your… your wand will do, Ma'am," the goblin said.

"As if I would ever let a goblin hold a witch's wand!" Hermione said, her voice raising slightly into the shrieking pitch that often signaled Bellatrix was about to lose control. Nevertheless, she snapped it out of her pocket, gripping it tightly, pointed in the general direction of the goblin, who looked as though he would rather be anywhere but here, today.

"Do you not see it?" she snapped.

"I… I…" the Goblin stammered. "We were informed that your wand had been… s-stolen…"

"By whom?" Hermione demanded threateningly.

"I…" suddenly, the goblin straightened up, no longer on the verge of trembling, and reached down for a piece of parchment, examining it. "It seems we were mistaken—it was… another incident of wand-theft, Madam Lestrange, not yours. I am terribly sorry for the mix-up."

Inwardly, Hermione was confused by this turn of events, but she nevertheless took it in stride.

"Then take me to my vault," she hissed. "I've had enough of this nonsense!"

He clapped his hands, and a younger-looking goblin appeared. A leather bag was procured, jangling loudly as the goblin hopped down from his stool and lead them toward one of the many doors leading off the side of the hall.

"Wait! Bogrod!"

Another goblin suddenly scurried around the counter, skidding to a halt in front of them. A hasty bow to Hermione, and then he said to Bogrod, "Forgive me, Madam, but there have been special orders regarding the vault of Lestrange…"

"I haven't forgotten them," Hermione snapped, although her mind was reeling with horror at how unprepared they were for whatever those special orders might have entailed. Dare she try Legilimency? Without another moment to hesitate, she turned to glare down at Bogrod, appearing impatient even as she forced her way into the Imperiused goblin's unprotected mind. She had scant seconds to skim the surface, before turning to the other goblin.

"I am fully aware of the extra protection I demanded for my vault," she said coldly.

The other goblin looked faintly relieved. "Yes… very well then…" a moment to whisper something to Bogrod, who waved him off, and then he left; the Imperiused goblin strode toward the doors without another word, with a rather vacant-looking Travers following behind. They entered a rough, stone-hewn passage lit with torches, and the doors slammed shut behind them with ominous finality.

Harry pulled off his invisibility cloak, and Dobby suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Neither Travers nor Bogrod looked surprised at the sudden appearance of the Undesirable Number One of Britain; they were well and truly under Harry's spell.

"We're in trouble," Hermione said, before he could open his mouth. "They're suspicious. They've obviously been ordered to watch the vault."
"What do we do, then?" Ron said, looking at the door they had just passed through. Hermione had a sinking feeling that it was locked. "Do we leave, while we can?"

"We've gotten this far, and if we get out now, we'll probably never get another chance," Harry said determinedly. "I say we go on."

"Good!" Griphook interjected, his arms crossed as he looked up at Harry. There was a glint of appreciation in his eyes at Harry's stalwartness. "Now let's see here..." he approached the cart, trailing a finger along the edge, before turning back to them. "We will need Bogrod to control it, as I no longer have the authority to do so. But there will not be room for the wizard—although Dobby is more than welcome to ride," he added, with a slanted look at the house elf.

Dobby nodded enthusiastically at this.

Harry pointed his wand at Travers. A pause, and then his face turned fierce, as he utterly quietly, "Imperio."

Travers suddenly jolted forward, and began trotting along the track at a smart pace, disappearing into the torch-lit gloom.

"What...?"

"I'm making him hide," Harry said. "That'll keep him out of our way."

Hermione pursed her lips, as she watched the older man's retreating back. A memory from long ago, of him sitting at the far end of a lit table full of bone-white figures, where a row of bound and Disillusioned Muggle women awaited their fate, flashed through her mind. Another memory, of Marlene's death—as well as the rest of the McKinnon's, and Sirius's enduring grief—rose up like a violent, sickly wave in the back of her throat.

"No," she said suddenly, placing a hand on Harry's wrist. Travers stopped in his tracks, weaving slightly in place, as she continued, "he's a Death Eater, Harry. You mustn't forget that. He would kill us in a heartbeat—he's too much of a liability to leave wandering around."

Ron shifted uncomfortably at this. "Hermione..." he began.

"He—he murdered the McKinnons," Hermione continued, trying not to let her voice choke with emotion as she was once again treated to a memory of a smiling Marlene McKinnon, dancing wildly with Sirius Black after a Quidditch game gone spectacularly well. "And he—he kills Muggles, for fun. Why does he deserve our mercy?"

"That doesn't sound like you," Harry said slowly.

"Harry, weren't you listening to Remus earlier?" Hermione snapped. "When you were escaping from Privet Drive—you disarmed someone who was trying to kill you, and that caused every Death Eater in the vicinity to zero in on you! We're not school children any more, Harry! You can't just get people off your back by casting Expelliarmus at them, or Imperiusing them to wander off—"

"When we start killing people, we're just as bad as they are," Harry said quietly.

Hermione stared at him as though she had just been slapped in the face.

"Fine," she said emotionlessly, turning her wand on Travers. "You can keep your moral high ground, Harry." A silent flick of her wand, and Travers ambled off on his way again, disappearing around the corner. Sooner or later, he would stumble upon one of the many defenses that
accompanied the upper-level vaults. "After all, I'll always be here to do the dirty work when it needs to be done—scouting, stealing food, tearing a few people apart to make sure we get away from Snatchers with the Sword of Gryffindor..." she gave Harry a hard look. "Just leave it all to me."

Harry stared at her unblinking, his face set. "We never forced you to do any of that stuff—"

"Guys," Ron said, holding his hands up placatingly, trying to separate them. "This isn't the time to start fighting—"

"No," Harry agreed angrily, "but we do need to have an understanding here. I have no intention of becoming the same kind of people that I'm fighting—people who use any means to justify killing others—"

"Hermione wasn't saying anything like that, mate—" Ron protested.

"No, Harry's right," Hermione snapped, turning away. "It doesn't matter. Forget I said anything."

"I think," Griphook said sleekly, "that she has a point." All four of them snapped their heads around to look at him, and he continued, "You have told me that this is a war—and in war, there is no moral high ground to one's actions, are there?" He let out a nasty chuckle. "War is about survival and victory. Inevitably, whether or not you directly end someone's life, your actions for one side will have far-reaching consequences for everyone. That is, after all, why an individual chooses to fight, despite being only a small part of the larger picture."

And here, he grinned, showing his pointy teeth before gesturing at Bogrod.

"If we are successful, my friend Bogrod here, or another goblin, will be forced to tell the Dark Lord what happened—and I have no illusions about his lack of mercy. He views us as expendable, so he will have no qualms about killing the messengers—whomever they may be. But that matters not to you, wizard, does it?" His eyes narrowed into slits as he turned to look at Harry. "After all, as long as we get what you seek and destroy it, you are one step closer to destroying him—would you say, then, that the end justifies the means?"

Harry stared at Griphook, and then turned to look at Bogrod's vacant expression with something akin to growing horror.

"I—I hadn't thought of that," he said weakly.

"Of course you hadn't," Griphook said mockingly, approaching Bogrod and waving a hand in front of his face, receiving no response. "Even after declaring that you don't consider us expendable, your actions still demonstrate otherwise."

The chamber fell into silence at this declaration, and then Dobby pipped up.

"Harry Potter, sir, remove the Goblin's curse, sir. Let us see if we can talk to him."

Hermione glanced down frantically at her watch, and then back at Harry, wishing she had simply kept her mouth shut. They were wasting too much time, but if she hurried them through this, it would only alienate the goblin assisting them.

Harry looked down at Dobby for a long, hard moment, and then slowly pointed the wand he had taken from Draco at the Bogrod.

"Finite Incantatem."
The goblin startled for a moment, blinking a bit dazedly at them. His eyes widened as he registered the company with him, and he opened his mouth, no doubt to start shrieking for help—Hermione had her wand ready to silence him—when Griphook clamped a hand over his mouth. He hissed something in rapid Gobbledegook, the words coming out as a strange harsh, rasping set of syllables. Bogrod struggled for a moment, and then yanked Griphook’s hand away.

Fortunately, he lowered his voice.

"You have brought thieves into Gringotts!" he said, his voice somewhere between a panic and a shriek, and Hermione could tell it was taking all of his willpower not to start shouting. "I would have thought better of you, Griphook—you—you—"

He was so furious, he seemed unable to finish his sentence. Griphook, however, had no such compunctions, and they all looked on with worried, confused, and dubious glances as his began yammering quickly to the goblin who they had dragged into this mess. They could not understand a single word of it, but the expression on Bogrod’s face was enough.

It went from fearful, to enraged, to surprised, and then something akin to horror and disbelief.

He finally interrupted Griphook with a single, harsh word. "Gook."

Griphook desisted.

And then Bogrod said, in perfect English, though his voice was undeniably taut with fury, "I will… assist. But there will be much to answer to for this, Griphook."

Griphook gave the older goblin a pointy smile. "Degook."

Hermione wrung her watch on her wrist for a moment, and then said, "We haven't much time, guys. My Polyjuice is about to expire—"

"So you are not Madam Lestrange!" Bogrod exclaimed.

"Of course not," Griphook snapped.

Bogrod looked tempted to snap back, but he settled for an expression of disgruntled relief. "That's all very well, then, but how are you expecting to get there? You have not been here for a while, Griphook, so you would not know about the additional protections." He looked at Hermione critically. "Polyjuice will set off the alarms."

"It should be done in five minutes," Hermione said, glancing at the face of her watch. "Where are the alarm trips?"

"At the waterfall," Bogrod snapped, walking toward the cart and climbing inside. He seemed sourly resigned to helping them. "You have time, yet—though you must remove all other concealments you have utilized."

Ron quickly pointed his wand at himself, muttering the spell to cancel Hermione's Color-Change Spell on his hair. Black faded to red, and he was once more a unmistakable ginger. Harry stuffed his Invisibility cloak in his pocket, and then they all began clambering into the cart. Dobby hitched a ride on Harry's shoulder. With a final glare at Griphook, who had seated himself comfortably near the front and was looking thoroughly unconcerned, Bogrod started the cart. It lurched forward, and then began to slide forward slowly, before quickly gathering speed.

"One speed only," Griphook said with a satisfied smile, as Dobby clutched tightly onto Harry,
wrapping his stick-thin arms around Harry's neck and holding on for dear life.

The cart swerved and twisted along the tracks, sending them careening ever deeper throughout the maze of stalactite-covered caves and tunnels. Ron had shut his eyes and was bent forward in his seat, as though he was going to be sick. Harry was gripping the sides of the cart and his hair looked as though it would never lie flat again, not with all the hair-gel in the world. Dobby was rapidly losing tea cozys, as they flew off his head one by one and snagged and caught in the tracks behind them—not that the elf was particularly concerned with them at the moment, as he was more focused on not letting go of his anchor to the cart.

Somewhere along one of the turns, Hermione felt herself change; her skin bubbled and shrank, and her robes no longer fit quite right as they went from covering the taller and skinnier form of Bellatrix Lestrange to the somewhat shorter and curvier form of Hermione Snape. She struggled in her seat for a moment as best she could to adjust the robes so that they were not strangling her across the neck, before quickly gripping the seat of the cart as they went through a stomach-churning hairpin turn that made her slam into Ron next to her, wrapping her arms around his neck in her overlong sleeves and squeezing her eyes shut, ignoring the urge to vomit—

And then she heard Bogrod shout, "Here we go!"

Hermione forced her eyes open in time for a splash of cold water to hit them as the cart ran through the waterfall, and she quickly pulled away from Ron and looked down at her soaking robes. The cart continued merrily on its way, water flying off of them and chilling them to the bone as it made a sharp turn downwards, like some mad roller coaster ready to take them off the edge of the world.

"We're almost there," Griphook said, and Hermione gave the goblin a baleful stare for he seemed to be enjoying himself. This cart ride was hell for them, but neither goblin seemed particularly bothered. "So far, it seems, the enchantments have not detected us. Yet."

Bogrod turned to glare at him. "That is the least of our concerns, Griphook. Once we've gotten the wand-carriers out of here, we'll have to convince everyone in the bank to help us prepare for siege."

"Seige?" Harry asked in alarm, grabbing Dobby and yanking him off his shoulder, so that he could hold the house-elf securely in his arms, using them like some kind of roller-coaster seatbelt. "What —?"

"The Dark Lord!" Bogrod snapped. "He will undoubtedly learn of this theft, particularly if we don't find a way to help you escape with your prize quietly." He looked at Griphook. "We are not sending our fellows to deliver the message to him so that he can kill them—kill us all—"

"You could just leave Gringotts," Ron suggested, looking a little green around the gills as the cart took another swerve.

Bogrod looked at him.

"Where would we go?" he said. "Where else would we be so protected, so united, after helping you wand-carriers with your mad scheme? No," he continued, looking at the darkened walls of the enormous cavern they were spiraling through with something like pride. "Gringotts is the pride of all Goblins—since its return to our control in 1865, we have made preparations necessary to prevent wizards from laying claim to its management again." It was his turn to give the boys a pointy-toothed smile. "When the Dark Lord sends his followers for us, they will all be in for an exceedingly… nasty surprise."
"I don't doubt you," Ron said weakly.

"That is," Bogrod said, with another sour, sideways look at Griphook, "if they agree to this rather than lynching you on the spot—and myself, too, for that matter! Helping wizards break in to one of our oldest and deepest vaults—I cannot believe you have successfully dragged me into this insanity!"

"Your concerns have been duly noted, you stuffy old bladvak," Griphook said, crossing his fingers, looking thoroughly unruffled as the cart made a final, screeching, sharp bend and then began skidding to a stop. "But you know as well as I that we have been waiting for an opportunity like this for centuries—who are we to pass it up, even if it means helping wand-carriers?"

Bogrod muttered something doubtlessly uncomplimentary under his breath in Gobbledegook at this, and then pulled the lever he had been directing up, causing the cart to come to a final, ear-splitting halt. The goblins both hopped out of the cart with practiced ease, while Harry, Ron, and Hermione, with Dobby in tow, clambered out unsteadily. They stumbled for a moment, trying to regain their sense of balance, and then righted themselves once more.

"Right," Ron said, clutching his stomach. "If I ever get a Gringotts vault, I think I'll stick to one of the ones near the top, if that's all the same to you."

"Lucky you, mate," Harry said, helping Dobby to his feet. The house-elf tottered unsteadily, not quite up to speaking yet. "Whoever first opened my family's account didn't take that into consideration. Hagrid almost got seasick, the first time he took me to get some gold out of my vault…"

Griphook gave him a satisfied smile, and then turned to Bogrod, who was shaking the leather bag of metal tools to check that they were all there, before giving Griphook a disgruntled nod and starting down one of the passageways. They all followed, Dobby still riding on Harry's shoulders and looking slightly dazed by the ride: Hermione suspected that very few house elves had ever had quite such an experience.

"All right, Dobby?" Ron prodded, in a surprising show of concern, as they followed their guides through the tunnels on foot.

"Dobby—Dobby thinks he will be all right, sir," the house-elf said, gripping Harry's hair and still swaying somewhat. "Dobby has never ridden a Gringotts cart before, and Dobby— Dobby thinks he should not like to do it again anytime soon…"

"Right," Harry said firmly. "Griphook, how long until we reach the vault?"

"Not far, Harry Potter, not far…"

"Wait," Hermione said suddenly, pulling out her wand and pointing it upwards at the waterfall they had passed through earlier, still pouring in the distance. "Protego!"

"What is that?" Bogrod demanded.

"If anyone else comes after us by taking that route, they'll find themselves taking a very nasty trip down," Hermione said grimly, stowing her wand. "It'll also warn us—so far, it seems we've gone through with minimal suspicion, but if they realize there are impostors down here…"

"Duly noted," the older goblin said, turning to shuffle away. "This way, then. And watch your step."

They followed, not saying a word between them, though the two goblins continued to converse in Gobbledegook as they picked their way through; it was impossible to translate their words, but from
the sound of it, Hermione decided that they rather seemed as though they were somewhere between
sniping at each other and exchanging information—whether it be about Gringotts or Griphook's
experience since leaving the bank, Hermione could not say.

They at last turned a corner, all of them halting abruptly in their tracks as they registered the sight
before them.

A domed, circular chamber hewn from rock greeted them, but it was not unoccupied; a gigantic
dragon was chained to posts which rose from the ground and prevented it from leaving, but
nonetheless left it capable of causing injury to anyone who came within range of its fiery breath. Its
great, spiked wings flapped every so often, helping it hold its balance when it sat up, although for the
most part, it kept them pinned close to its body.

It let out a roar when it heard them, and they all instantly scrambled back as it sent a jet of fire toward
them.

"It's partially blind," Bogrod panted, wheezing slightly before taking the leather bag and pulling out
several strange-looking metal tools that, when shaken, made a sound that resembled nothing so much
as a clamor of hammers and anvils at work. He passed a pair to Griphook, and then gestured for
them to follow. "But it will retreat when it hears these."

"That's cruel," Hermione murmured.

Bogrod opened his mouth to speak, but Griphook interrupted. "If you're interested in changing
things, Miss Granger, you had best be prepared to make deals with us."

"Dobby thinks not," the house-elf spoke up, no longer dizzy or swaying, but still riding comfortably
on Harry's shoulders. "Dobby does not see why deals should be made for acts of kindness."

Griphook snarled something under his breath, but turned away without direct response.

They began shaking the instruments, and the dragon immediately recoiled; its milky-pink eyes stared
cloudily in their direction as they edged along the wall, the clangers making such a din as to keep the
dragon well at bay. They slid into one of the passages, and as soon as they were all in, and safely out
of the dragon's range, Bogrod set his clangers down and placed a hand on the door of the vault.

The door melted away, and they all quickly slipped inside. The dragon let out a hoarse roar, and a
lick of flame could be seen in the corner of the doorway. Hermione saw Ron shudder.

"I'm glad I didn't have to deal with one of those mad things in fourth year, like Harry," he said,
shaking his head. "What a nightmare."

The room they had entered was an enormous cavern in its own right, crammed from floor to ceiling
with glittering gold and precious jewels. Strange animal skins hung over piles of gold, odd glittering
potions with seductive and elaborately carved casks; to Hermione, it seemed like nothing less than
the cave of wonders, and she was about to take a step forward when Griphook grabbed her robes,
halting her.

"You must all move very carefully," he said, with a look at Bogrod. He quickly released her, and she
hastily stepped back. "If you touch something, even by accident, it will multiply itself and burn
anyone who touches it, and you will not be able to tell the fakes from the real one you seek—worse,"
he added, "you will be drowned in a sea of gold. Therefore, take care."

"How would the Lestranges expect to take anything out of it, then?" Hermione asked.
"She would have notified us in advance to remove the protections," Bogrod admitted gruffly. "Already, I am sure many here suspect you are an impostor, though I confess you have played your part well—no alarms have gone off, yet. But it takes time to remove them, time that we do not have."

There was a sudden clunk, and they all whipped around in time to see the door reappear, and seal shut.

"Not to worry," Griphook said, before any of them could protest. "Bogrod can get us out. Now start searching! And light your wands while you're at it, will you?" They all started for a moment, and he snarled, "Are you wizards or not?"

"As if I need to be reminded of that," Ron muttered, as his wand appeared, lending light to the room. "Hermione might, though."

"Very funny, Ron," Hermione said, but it was with a tinge of good humor as she, too, lit her wand. Careful not to touch anything, she waved it over the room, looking carefully. Something glittered silver and gold, and at once, she recognized the fake sword. "There's the sword S—Snape put in the Lestrange vault..."

"I don't see Hufflepuff's Cup," Ron said, peering carefully at a table laden with fine dining utensils. "We need more light—hold on." There was a familiar click, and the light from their wands suddenly went out. Hermione wasn't sure if it was Griphook or Bogrod who let out the exasperated sigh, and Ron said, "Whoops—sorry—hold it—there!"

At once, little orbs of light spread out around the room, and they could see everything lit as clearly as day. Ron pocketed his Deluminator, and they began to carefully pick their way through. None of them said a word as they eventually stopped moving, not wanting to risk brushing up against something in their search. Their gazes slowly rose higher, toward the ceiling, as nothing remotely resembling Hufflepuff's cup or the emblem of Ravenclaw caught their attention at eye-level—

"Wait!" Ron said, pointing at a crevice near the top. They all immediately looked, and Hermione saw a glint of gold, a badger-shaped handle wrought onto an elegant cup. "Harry, I think I see it!"

"But how do we reach it?" Harry said. "A Summoning Charm won't—"

"Dobby can do it, Harry Potter!" Dobby said, leaping to his feet.

"But you can't touch it with your hands—wait!" Harry turned to Hermione. "Hermione, give me the sword—" Hermione quickly fumbled in her robes for her beaded bag, rustling it for a moment as she searched, before drawing out the blade by its hilt. She handed it carefully to Harry, who knelt down and gave it to Dobby. The house elf's hold on the blade wobbled for a moment as he took its heavy weight, but then steadied. "Dobby, can you Apparate up there and hook the cup onto the sword by the handle—without touching anything else?"

"Yes, Harry Potter, sir, yes!" At that moment, Dobby looked like nothing more than a knight in an armor of bedraggled tea cozies—of what was left of his collection—and a sword that was about twice as tall as he himself was. It was slightly ludicrous.

Yet, a moment later, they all looked up at the sound of Dobby's Apparition, and he landed on a nearby ledge just short of the cup. He teetered for a moment, and then began inching forward with the sword.

"This is madness," Bogrod muttered, wiping his brow. "Pure madness... a house-elf Apparating in Gringotts... I never thought—"
He broke off as Dobby swung the sword wildly, nearly losing his balance as he tried to take a poke at the cup, and then righted himself. He wore a look of pure determination, and inched closer to the edge…

"Careful!" Harry called.

The sword hooked the handle, and for a moment, it looked as though Dobby might plunge by the weight alone; but then he shifted the handle, wedging the cup further on the blade, and then without bothering to back up, disappeared with another loud crack!, landing on the floor at Harry's feet, nearly sending the sword and cup skittering into a nearby pile. Hermione let out a tiny shriek at this, but Dobby thankfully righted himself without touching anything.

"Brilliant!" Ron said, leaning down to pick up the sword, hoisting it into the air with the cup still firmly lodged onto it. "Should we do it here, d'you reckon?"

"No," Hermione said shakily. "If what you've told me is true, the horcrux in it will try to fight back, and that might upset the stuff in here… we should get out first…"

Bogrod looked at Griphook.

"The sword?" he said. There was an edge of demand to the question.

"Later," Griphook said, trotting back to the door.

Picking their way once more through the piles, with Ron clicking his Deluminator as soon as they were at the entrance, casting the room in darkness once more, they edged their way out of the vault with nothing less than fervent relief. Another loud clunk, and it sealed shut behind them. Bogrod retrieved his clankers, and they once again began to edge their way back toward the passage they had come from. The dragon roared at them, but continued to recoil and refrain from attacking as they passed, and as soon as they were safely on the other side, Harry gestured for Ron to set the cup down.

"Can we touch it now?"

"It's out of the vault's perimeters—I believe, yes," Bogrod said, peering down at it with interest.

"Alright. We should take care of it now, before we do anything else," Harry said decisively, taking the handle and bracing the cup against the ground, using his foot to hold it in place as he slid the blade free. He paused, and then glanced at Ron; something passed between the two of them, and then suddenly, he thrust the sword at Hermione.

"You should do it—here?" Griphook asked, his eyes glittering with interest.

"Why not?" Ron asked.

Griphook rubbed his fingers together, and looked at Bogrod. "If you do it here, and destroy it—may we have the remains?"

Hermione paused, as she lifted up the sword. "What do you want it for?"

"After you have destroyed its properties, it would be a nice project for our metalworkers, in repairing it," Griphook said, and there was no denying the look of greed and opportunity in his eyes. "After all, you will have no further use of it after this."
Harry hesitated, and then to Hermione's surprise, he reached for the mokeskin bag around his neck, where both his snitch and broken wand were, and retrieved the remains of Slytherin's locket that he had also stored there.

"I'll do you one better," he said, letting the chain slide through his fingers. The shattered windows of the locket shone off its jagged edges in the dim light, and Griphook reached out for it, examining it closely. "You can have them both—and then once all of this is over… if you can restore both of those objects… we'll pay you for your trouble."

Griphook and Bogrod exchanged very satisfied smiles.

"Those objects—they're both a part of Hogwart's history," Harry admitted. "It seems a shame that we have to destroy them in order to kill You-Know-Who… but if you repair them, I'll personally ensure it's worth your time."

"Guess you're right, mate," Ron said, looking at the locket he had helped destroy. "I mean, I know the Slytherins are all a bunch of prats, but I feel kind of bad that we're taking away Hufflepuff's only heirloom… I mean, that stuff's important, isn't it?"

Griphook took the locket, stashing it away in his vest, and turned to Bogrod.

"You have a deal, Mr. Potter," he said.

Harry held out his hand. The goblin hesitated for a moment, looking rather surprised by this gesture, and then took it. They shook firmly, and then pulled away. Harry nodded at Hermione.

"Go ahead. Let's get this over with."

Hermione steeled herself to the task, raising the sword over her head and taking careful aim. The cup shone brightly in all its glory, so beautiful, such an amazing piece of enchanted work, that it was hard for Hermione to wrap the idea around her head that she had to destroy it. The badger on the handle was elegantly carved, and the whole thing was a piece of art in its own right—even if its real value was in the magical properties it was purported to hold.

It was difficult to believe that it held a piece of Voldemort's soul in it.

She was about to bring it down, when a sharp shooting pain tore through her side and her leg, lacing through each blasted letter on her upper arm, and she almost dropped the sword. She gasped, letting go of the handle with one hand to grip her waist, where the scar from Bellatrix's dagger was prickling painfully.

"Hermione, what's wrong?" Ron demanded.

"Noth—it's nothing," Hermione said, straightening up. "It's just—my side and my leg, that's all…"

Bogrod inquired something in Gobbledydegook, to which Griphook responded in kind, no doubt explaining what was happening. He was most certainly not a stranger to Hermione's scars, nor the reason she had them.

"It must be the cup," Harry said, tapping it with the toe of his shoe. "You were right, when you said it would try to fight back." He looked at her with concern. "D'you—Ron or I could—"

"No," Hermione said, and she bit her lower lip, forcing herself to disregard the pain as she straightened herself up with renewed determination. "No. I can do this. I'm not going to let a little pain stop me."
Ron placed a hand on her shoulder. "Those wounds almost killed you—"

"Oh, honestly, Ron!" Hermione said, lowering the sword slightly to look at him. "I'm not helpless, in case you haven't noticed!"

Ron looked up at the ceiling, as though expecting divine inspiration to tell him how to articulately express himself on this matter. "It's not about you being helpless, Hermione. Trust me, we've noticed. But the last thing we need is for that horcrux to—I dunno, cut those wounds open again, when we're miles and miles underneath the earth, or something like that. It's obviously going for the weak spots, isn't it?"

Hermione took in a deep breath. "I—yes, you're right, but it's just—" she shook her head. "Let me do this. Please."

Ron squeezed her shoulder gently, but he did not remove it. "Alright. Do it. But I'm here to support you."

Hermione looked at him, quite at loss for words at that moment. And then she released her side, where the pain had begun to fade, and pulled him into a one-armed hug.

"Thank you, Ron," she said quietly, before pulling away. She gripped the sword with both hands, and lifted it up. "Alright. Here goes—"

Pain exploded in her side again, and tore viciously at her leg, but this time, Hermione was prepared for it. She brought the sword down on the cup, the level of its retaliation increasing with every split moment the blade swung closer to it, and she let out something like a scream of agony when the Sword of Gryffindor finally connected to the cup. It sank into the metal with a loud clang, but Hermione did not hear it as the pain raced through her body and exploded into the back of her skull, as though someone had tried to hit her from behind with a sledge hammer. Squinting through her eyes at the cup, she saw something dark and cloudy explode its way out from underneath the blade, before smoking upwards like a fire smothered.

There was a terrible scream, as the cloudy mist took shape into the face of Tom Riddle as Hermione had known him—as she had remembered, from that time she had first met him face to face, when he was still visibly human—and then it burst outwards. A moment of coughing, of backing away, and they all watched as it let out a dying moan and faded away, seeping through the stone walls around them. Gone. Hermione stood there for a moment, staring at the burnt and mangled remains of the cup, and then dropped the sword and sank to her knees, gripping her side.

The pain was reduced to a dull throbbing now, and for a moment, Hermione suddenly imagined she had an inkling of what it was like for Harry, all those times he had complained about his scar prickling. But then she pushed the thought aside, grasped Ron's hand with the hand not gripping her side, and gratefully had him help haul her back to her feet. She was panting hard, still gripping her side, but the ache was fading.

"...so you were telling the truth," she heard Griphook murmur, and Hermione saw him bend down and scoop the cup's remains off the ground with the care of someone trying to scoop ash.

"You didn't believe us?" Harry asked, with a wry smile as he bent down to retrieve the sword.

Griphook tucked the cup into his vest with the locket, and steepled his fingers together, looking contemplative. "You cannot blame me for having doubts. Until now, I have never heard of such things as these—nor do I ever wish to encounter it again," he added, looking at the ground with revulsion, where there was slight charring from when the cup had exploded against the ground. "For
all I knew, you could have cooked up a clever lie to trick me into helping you steal something else. But now I can say, without a doubt, that you are the most honest thief to have ever set foot in Gringotts. I am assured of that."

He patted his vest pocket. "I will keep my end of the bargain. Now, we must get you out of here, whilst we still can."

They were about to set off up through the path they had come through when there was a sudden shout ahead of them; they all froze, and the sound of screams permeated the air, albeit from a long distance away—

"The waterfall!" Hermione said. "Someone must have tried to come through it—they know we're here!"

"How?" Ron demanded. "I mean, we didn't set off any alarms, didn't we?"

"No, but it's possible they contacted the Malfoys," Harry said darkly. "We raised their suspicions, by claiming there had been a mistake—I wouldn't be surprised if they decided to double-check. And now they know."

"There is no other way out of here but through those tunnels!" Bogrod snapped. "How are we to get you back to the surface?"

Sudden shouts from ahead, closer this time, combined with the sound of pounding footsteps, alerted them to the fact that they were no longer alone. Many footsteps.

"They've brought security!" Griphook said. "We must hide you—"

"There's no point, they'll only find us eventually!" Hermione said, whipping out her wand and pointing it at the tunnel. "Griphook, Bogrod—you go on ahead, pretend that you were forced to help us get down here, and blend in with the other goblins. We'll find a way to escape."

"We shall take our leave." With a nod to Hermione, and then Harry and Ron, and lastly to Dobby—who swept his last remaining tea-cozy off his head in salute—the goblins both disappeared down the tunnel, vanishing from view even as the sound of approaching bank security grew louder, now with distinguishable shouting.

"—they're here! They're over here, with these vaults—"

"…the clangers, you fools, grab the clangers…!"

"Nice, Hermione," Ron said, gesturing at the tunnel. "So how do we get out now?"

"Give me a moment to think!" Hermione said, her wand pointed at the passage in preparation to hex, her mind turning rapidly. "There's no way out except those carts—we can't Apparate—do Portkeys work?"

"Griphook already told us that!" Harry reminded her urgently. "You can't Apparate in or out, and the same goes for Portkeys or anyone would be dropping in—"

"—damn it!" Hermione cried. "We should have thought of this possibility before—Stupefy!"

A jet of red light struck the first man who came through, and he fell to the ground, quickly
disappearing as two more, followed by a horde of angry rioting goblins poured through the tunnel. Harry and Ron instantly put up Shield Charms, and spells began to fly against them, but they would only last for so long.

"And Dobby can't just pop us in and out of here, it's not like Hogwarts, goblins use different wards —"

"This is normally where I'd ask you if you're a witch or not," Ron said, as he put up another shield, when a curse finally broke through the first, shattering it, "but as I don't have any ideas myself—"

"I've got one," Hermione panted, glancing back the way they had come. "It's a really mad one, mind, but—"

"Dobby—" the house-elf began.

"Dobby, remember that dragon back there?" Hermione said, ducking quickly as a jet of green light finally broke through their shields. "I need you to Apparate us—all three of us—onto its back. Without getting us into its range of fire."

"What?" Ron shouted, eyes wide. "No!"

"Dobby will do it!"

Hermione suddenly saw Harry and Ron stumble, and then disappear with an audible crack; Dobby had only been able to grab the two of them at once. Without another moment of hesitation, Hermione aimed her wand at the ceiling.

"Diffindo!"

The walls came crashing down, barring her pursuers' path, and she turned tail and ran back down the tunnel, in the direction of the blind dragon. She tore out of it in time to see Harry and Ron seated on top of the creature's massive head, holding on for dear life, with Dobby hanging on wildly to Harry's shirt in an effort not to be thrown off—because indeed, it did look as though he might be flung against the wall at any moment. The dragon was rearing wildly, thrashing in place, lashing out at the goblins and wizards alike who were trying to advance on it in order to get at their targets.

Hermione hesitated, momentarily at a loss as to how to cross the room in order to reach her companions. The way forward was clear, but that was because the goblins were intelligent enough to avoid the path of its fire; they were attacking on the sides. Yet, it was so thick with enemies that Hermione knew there was no possible way she would weave through it intact.

She took a deep breath, willing herself not to listen to the voice of fear and reason screaming in the back of her mind, and lunged directly in the cleared path, where the dragon's head was sweeping toward again, maws opened wide in preparation to breathe fire.

She heard Harry scream, "Hermione!" just as she threw herself on top of the dragon's snout, grabbing hold of its nostrils to haul herself up. Her saving grace was the fact that it had been so caught off guard by the unexpected maneuver that it had jerked back in surprise rather than drawing out to spew flames. Jets of light were missing her by lucky inches now, as she clung desperately to the small horns protruding from the creature's face as it tried to shake her off.

She saw Ron grab the back of Harry's jumper as he threw himself forward, heaving himself over the hill of the dragon's head, and holding his hand out to her. Dobby was still clinging tightly to his other arm. Their fingers were a few inches too far apart, and they strained to reach. Another spell struck near Hermione's head, and the dragon abruptly swerved its head to the side in pain and rage, and
Hermione—whose grip was less sure than Harry's—felt herself slip down about a foot down the dragon's face.

They did not have much time left. Soon, it would be too late for them to get away, if they continued to delay. Precious seconds were being wasted. Readjusting her grip, she quickly pulled one hand away and thrust it into her robes, drawing out her wand. With scarcely a second to aim, she pointed at the shackles on the dragon's hindquarters. With a wordless flick, they snapped free. She aimed down, ignoring Harry's shout as she slid down yet another few inches as her grip weakened, and at the chains on the dragon's front legs. They, too, snapped free a moment later, and she flicked her wand up at the dragon's neck for the final seperation.

There was a sudden jolt as the dragon realized its freedom, and began charging forwards. There were cries of pandemonium as their attackers quickly began to draw back, though not soon enough as the dragon's wings swept the length of the room, flattening them all with brute strength, clipping against the rocky outcroppings. And then with a lunge, as though to test just how much freedom it had been given, it sprang into the air. Claws scrabbled madly against the walls, and through it all, Hermione's grip finally slipped.

She felt herself falling. It was odd, that moment where everything seemed to be suspended and floating, even as the light filtering in from above seemed to fade as it shrank further away. She grappled for her wand, but she could not aim it, and she was tumbling toward the ground too fast to think—

With a cry of desperation, she grabbed for her wrist, knowing that it would not work, knowing that it had to fail, yet having nothing to lose by trying—

Her fingers fumbled on the dial, flicking it out, and she barely twisted and shoved it in before the ground rushed up to meet her. There was a yank behind her naval, as though someone had stuck a hook in it and was reeling her in, and she realized relief as she felt herself spinning away.

Away… to Hogwarts.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
A/N: This week hasn't just been busy— it's been chaotic. The internet is going wild! It's like watching a hydra of live wires lashing around, igniting sparks that set everything around them aflame— it's gloriously amazing and terrifying at the same time. I have summer programs to apply for, college resumes and meetings to arrange and attend, schoolwork to do, and in the middle of all of this, the internet is rioting.

Let's start a riot, a riot.

And you're concerned about me updating one measly time a week?

Big thanks goes out to my beta, SSB!

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own. I do not own. I do not own. You know, because even with that triple-disclaimer and the fact that I'm not making money off of this or reposting the entire Harry Potter series word for word... well. SOPA, ACTA, and PIPA might just not care, eh?

Please review!

She landed in the familiar, circular office with agonizing force. Her head slammed against the floor, and her back and shoulders protested with pain. With a groan, she forced herself to roll over and push up onto her knees, before weakly glancing around. At first, she saw the portraits, focusing on them to try and manage her dizziness, but this was perhaps rather unhelpful, for they were all moving and talking frantically, in no small alarm at her sudden appearance. But when she looked down again, she saw a pair of black boots standing inches from her, and slowly looked up.

She was not certain who was more shocked; she or Severus. Yet, in an instant, she had been hauled to her feet, and a wand pointed at her throat.

"How did you get here?" he snarled.

"With—with the watch Kingsley gave me for my seventeenth birthday," Hermione gasped, as the world began to slide back into proper focus again. The pain of impact was receding quickly, and she was now able to stand on her own two feet.

The wand fell away slowly. For a moment, she watched his face sliding in and out of focus as it changed from shock to relief, and then her nose come up against warm, comfortingly familiar wool as he wrapped his arms around her and held her close.

"It's you…" she heard him whisper. "It's really you."

For a long moment, they were reunited after the months apart; and then they reluctantly pulled away, knowing that time was of the essence; Hermione should not be here, which meant there had to be a very good reason for why she was.

"You can't be here," he said suddenly. His words were harsh. "My orders… they changed—what we last discussed—why you have deliberately ignored my message—"

"I didn't get it," Hermione said. "I couldn't check my ring."
Severus stiffened. "Why?"

"We… we broke into Gringotts," Hermione interjected, her voice barely above a whisper. She gripped the sides of his arms tightly, as though it was her only anchor. "Harry, Ron, and Dobby all got away, but at the last minute, I almost didn't." Her eyes slowly traveled from his face to the portrait above his desk, where Dumbledore was gently snoring. "I… I had no idea that the Portkey would work."

And then she laughed, albeit with a slight edge of hysteria to it. "Thank merlin that it did."

Severus's hands on her shoulders suddenly clenched. "You broke into Gringotts? What for? I gave you the real sword—"

"We weren't after the sword."

"Then—what?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but then suddenly winced as another unexpected sharp-shoot of pain raced up her leg, and impaled her side. Was this what it was going to be like for the rest of her life, always in fear of punishment from her body?

"Hermione?" His fingers tightened, digging into her arm. "What's wrong?"

"I… even though I got away from Bellatrix, I didn't…" Hermione was not sure how to explain it to him, and simply pulled away, seating herself on the nearest armchair and reaching down to pull her robes aside and lift up the leg of her jeans. The ridge of pink scar tissue stood out harshly against her skin. "She got me on the leg with her knife… and my side… she carved me up a bit, too, when she was torturing me… I'm healed, I think, but the pain occasionally acts up again…" she looked at him. "I think it might be cursed…"

Severus said nothing, merely came to kneel beside her chair, and without another word, lifted the hem of her jumper. A second gash greeted him, running along Hermione's side, just as stark and visible as the one on her leg. He did not stop to pause for long before he pulled her left arm free of its sleeve, at her urging, and then tugged it partially free of the jumper she wore for a good look.

The word mudblood met his perusal, as out of place on her arm as Harry's scar had always been on his forehead. It was like a brand all of its own, a sign that she had been marked.

Hermione watched something akin to rage fill his eyes, glittering with hate and a lust for retribution, as he took in what had been done to his wife. And then he released the shirt, allowing her to slip her arm back in.

"What did you go to Gringotts for?" he demanded quietly.

"Hufflepuff's Cup," Hermione confessed.

"You found it?" he asked sharply.

"I destroyed it myself."

He expelled a breath neither of them had realized he had been holding, and got to his feet. "So that's… that's just Nagini and one other unknown Horcrux left…"

"I'm fairly certain that unknown horcrux is somehow connected to Ravenclaw," Hermione said. "We just don't know what it is…"
"We'll deal with that question later," Severus said abruptly, but Hermione could see that he was still deeply unsettled. When he turned away to return to his desk, she was suddenly struck by how different he looked; he was pale and sallow, much more so than she remembered, and there were shadows under his eyes. His hair was as greasy as ever, and his nose was just as hooked as always. He was faring no better than she was. He reached into his desk, and pulled out a familiar, silver, sheepskin-backed object, and Hermione's breath caught as he lifted it up for her to see. "Firstly, I believe… I ought to return this to you."

Hermione got to her feet, favoring her non-injured leg as she did so, to take it from him. She held it to her face for a moment, relishing in the familiar scents that had almost faded completely from the wool, and turned it over in her hands before flicking it open.

"How… you told me the full story…"

"Draco approached me with it," Severus said quietly. "He gave it to me in exchange for an audience—a confidential one. After…" he hesitated for a second, trailing a finger down her hair before taking a lock and curling it around one finger with something akin to reverence, before continuing, "after what happened at Malfoy Manor, he came to the conclusion that following the Dark Lord is no longer in his family's interest."

"He's on our side?" Hermione asked suddenly.

"Doubtful. He's merely no longer on the Dark Lord's side. He has no interest in becoming an agent of the Order's, or doing any other sort of self-sacrificing work; he merely wants to get himself and his family out of this whole ordeal alive."

Hermione chewed on the inside of her mouth. "That makes him a threat still, doesn't it?"

"Not precisely. It simply means that he still requires motivation in order to go out of his way to help us."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. Her hair slipped free of Severus's finger, and she slowly wrapped her arms around him, sighing with something between relish and relief at this singular opportunity they had to just—to just simply lower their guard and be open with each other again. With each other. For she knew the moment would not last for long.

"How is Selenius?" she whispered.

"Physically, he is fine. He was distraught when he got the details of what happened at Malfoy Manor—from Draco, not from me," he added sharply, when Hermione's head snapped up at him. "Draco gave the locket to him first, to demand an explanation, before coming to me."

"How much does Draco… know?"

"At this point, I am forced to assume that he knows everything. At the very least, he knows a great deal—enough to get the gist of our history, and Selenius's."


Severus's hands squeezed her shoulders comfortably. "It could be far worse; he could still be an active threat, and I have been saved the trouble of trying to give him a reason to trust me with the secret of his defection. As of right now, he is not our enemy."

Hermione nodded against his chest, and then gazed out the window.
"I wonder where Harry and Ron are," she said quietly. "They escaped on a dragon—we planned on coming to Hogwarts to find the last Horcrux, but we haven't any idea where to begin, nor how they're going to get here now…"

"A dragon?" He repeated disbelievingly, but then shoved that revelation aside. "Do you plan to leave Hogwarts now, to search for them?"

"No. I'm going to start looking for the Horcrux, and send Harry and Ron a messenger Patronus to let them know where I am." Hermione sighed deeply. "Did you get any bright ideas about the Ravenclaw horcrux? Because frankly, I have none."

Severus hesitated, and then his head tilted forward, his face obscured by his greasy curtain of black hair. "I only found out about the one known heirloom of Ravenclaw's—a tiara of some sort, but I haven't any idea as to where it is. It's often referred to as the lost diadem of Ravenclaw. That's the message I sent you through the ring. It certainly isn't at Hogwarts, and the last person to know of its whereabouts isn't speaking."

"Who…" Hermione opened her mouth to ask, but suddenly stopped, looking as though she had just been smacked in the face. "Of course. Who else would know but the ghost of Ravenclaw? The grey lady—but she never says a word to anyone—"

"Then we had better speak to her."

~o~O~o~

Hermione sent her Patronus to Harry and Ron, and then proceeded to join her husband on his usual nightly patrol around the castle, Disillusioned at his side. They passed the Carrows twice, before they made their way toward the library, having traversed the rest of the castle from top to bottom in their search for the Grey Lady. They ventured between the bookshelves, silently searching, only to be met with equal silence.

They had little time to appreciate their reunion; though they stayed close by each other's side, and Hermione's hand occasionally strayed to her husband's arm to grip it tightly, as though for comfort—or perhaps as an alternative to pinching herself to believe that this was all real, that they were both really there again—they still had a job to do. Something that could not wait.

Memories seemed to wink out at her from every corner, like the wispy spirits of a life lived long ago: the space between two bookcases that she and Severus had shared their first kiss in, the study table that they had often shared as students, and even the table that she had often dragged Harry and Ron to in their earlier years to study with her…

Hermione pulled away from her husband for a moment to peer into the darkness beyond the window, looking at the moon-lit lake the distance, sparkling with shards of white light across its deceptively smooth surface. Dusk had long since gone, and the world was now enveloped in the star-lit cloak of night. She turned to look up at the second floor, hoping to find something between the bookshelves that they could see, but nothing availed itself to be of any unusual interest.

The eerie silence of the castle was starting to get to her. Were it not for the fact that there were two Death Eaters patrolling, or that Hogwarts was under the Dark Lord's control, or that she was not here under the guise of invisibility and darkness, it would simply be a peaceful, uneventful night. With something akin to weary resignation, she at last returned to Severus, shaking her head.

"I don't see the grey lady anywhere," she murmured. "Or any other ghost, for that matter."
"This is pointless," Severus said quietly, and there was a trace of bitterness in his voice. "We haven't any clue where it is—and if a ghost doesn't want to be found, then it is nigh impossible to convince it otherwise. We have searched everywhere; there is no trace."

"Do you know what it looks like?" Hermione stopped to look at him. "How did you come across it, anyway?"

Her husband drew himself up, his expression weary. "One of the Ravenclaws had skipped an appointed detention with Alecto, and she couldn't get into their tower to find them. She called me up to let her in."

"And?" Hermione pressed, curiosity piqued.

"We didn't find the Ravenclaw, but while we searched, I discovered a statue of Ravenclaw in their common room—and I noticed that she was wearing it." He sighed and glanced up toward the second floor of the library, where the balcony's lonely rails stretched across the length of the room. "I later found an opportunity to subtly question Filius about it—he confirmed the existence of the object."

"And the missing student?" Hermione said automatically.

"Probably hiding out with the other members of your little defense club," Severus said, and there was a trace of a sneer in his words. "They are likely hiding in the Room of Requirement, but neither of the Carrows seem to be aware of this—and why would anyone assume that I know?"

Hermione very nearly snorted, but then her attention turned back to the subject of the diadem. "So we know what the object is, and you know what it looks like—but there's only one person who could tell us where it is…"

"As you can see, she's not making it easy for either of us." This was said with bitterness.

Hermione took his hand in hers, and squeezed it lightly. "There has to be something. Let's—let's try to reason it through. Assuming the Dark Lord knew about this diadem that once belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw, he would have found it somehow, and after turning it into a horcrux… what would he do? He certainly hasn't been carrying any of the others around with him, save for perhaps Nagini, which means he's left it somewhere."

"It's possible that it's not even at Hogwarts."

"No," Hermione said determinedly. "There's no other place he has a connection to that we can find—he makes horcruxes out of important things, and then leaves them in places that are significant to him. He has this thing about leaving his treasures in meaningful places. We haven't found one at Hogwarts—at least, not one that he deliberately placed—yet. If this is the last one before Nagini, it has to be here!"

"Then where would he hide it?" Severus hissed.

They stared at each other for a moment, both of them at a loss as to what to say; then quite suddenly, Severus let out a muffled exclamation, gripping his arm. Their heads both snapped toward his Dark Mark, but after a moment, its summons faded again. He looked up at her.

"The Dark Lord," he cursed. "Potter's on the move again—that's his warning to his Death Eaters, for us to be on the alert."

"Harry's here!" Hermione whispered urgently. "He has to be! That's the only reason the warning would come now, we escaped from Gringotts hours ago. But—"
"I need to see to this. Continue your search—no," he amended hastily, as he prowled back the way they had come, heading for the doors. "Don't bother. Go find Potter. We haven't any clue as to where the Ravenclaw horcrux is, and with Potter, the situation has just changed—"

"No."

Severus paused, turning around sharply to look at her. "Pardon?" he said softly.

Hermione stepped forward, until she was face to face with him.

"I'm going with you. Harry will be there. I need to be there."

"I am not going in search of Potter."

This drew Hermione to a halt.

"If Potter is here, then I am bringing all the students to the Great Hall, after I contact the Dark Lord for further instructions. They need to be taken out of the way; Potter cannot be sidetracked by trying to avoid detection. You find Potter, Hermione—I will continue to play my role."

Hermione took all of one moment to absorb this, and then carefully cupped her husband's face in her hands. A moment stretched between them, this one moment that they had left together, and then she gently kissed him. There was no passion to it now, no drive of desire behind it; it was a simple act of wishing. Hope. That this would work. That somehow, this was going to finish it.

She pulled away.

"All right," she whispered. "Let's do this, my love."

~0~O~0~

Hermione rushed down the corridor, pressing herself against one of the walls as students began filing in the direction of the Great Hall. Many were dressed in their sleepwear, some looking tired; many yawned as they slowly bumbled their way through the crowd, stumbling their way down the stairs, guided like sheep by their Prefects and the Head-students. The Heads of House lagged behind, watching their charges with worried but staunchly determined expressions; Hermione had the disquieting impression that they were making sure a student did not disappear out from under their noses. Hermione caught glimpses of familiar faces as the students all finally mingled together on the staircases, making their way down to the Entrance Hall: Neville's tall, broad-shouldered figure, his still-round face; Luna's blond hair and wide blue eyes—she had obviously returned, though Hermione was a bit surprised by this. A few familiar faces from Gryffindor tower, and at the foot of the bottom steps, she saw the pale, pointed face of Draco Malfoy overseeing the Slytherins pouring in from the dungeons…

Selenius. Where was Selenius? Had he already gone inside? Her hair charmed black, her eyes temporarily shaded blue, and with her robes Transfigured to match those of the other students trudging forward, Hermione ducked into the crowd and then broke ranks, making her way down to the hall with haste. Where was Selenius? Where was her son?

As the last of the students finally filed in, and the Heads followed, Hermione saw Minerva make her way toward her.

"Come along, now," she said tiredly, though her voice was stern. "No dawdling—let's go…"

She trailed off as she came to face Hermione, and she saw something spark in Minerva's eyes,
stopping the Transfiguration teacher in her tracks as she took in the familiar guise. A pause, and then with only the barest of nods, she turned and headed for the hall. Hermione made to follow her, when a hand came to grip her shoulder.

"Get in the hall," Malfoy snapped, yanking her around to face her. "No sneaking off n—"

And he, too, broke off. The face of a strange student made him halt, and then as he slowly picked his way through the changes made to her face, comprehension dawned upon him. He gaped at her for a moment, at a loss for words, and then looked at her neck where a familiar chain lay tucked underneath her robes.

"Granger?" he hissed.

Hermione straightened up, and looked him squarely in the eyes. "That's Snape, to you."

They were the last students outside the Great Hall. They were late. Draco hesitated for all of one moment, and Hermione could see the gears turning rapidly in his head, working a mile a minute like a mouse on a treadmill with a deadline. And then she saw him back off; his aggressive stance melted away, and he instead began stalking toward the doors. No alarum. No noise. No confrontation. Without another word, Hermione followed, and the door shut behind them ominously.

The long house tables were gone, and the hall was clear. As though they had done this before, the students assembled themselves into rows and columns, the ones closest to the front standing at the most attention. Hermione hurried to slot herself in near the back beside Draco, and then dared to peer toward the dais where Severus stood, flanked by his two deputies.

A yank on her sleeve pulled her back, and Hermione saw Draco's wand flick tellingly, no doubt casting a privacy spell of some sort, before he turned to face her.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded quietly.

"That's not important right now," Hermione snapped, though she kept her voice lowered to a whisper. "Where's Selenius?"

"First years are up front. Show me your locket—that'll tell me all I need to know."

Hermione pulled the chain out from under her robes without a moment's hesitation, flicking it open long enough for him to confirm its contents, and then tucked it back away. "I appreciate you not showing it to anyone else. Although I wish you had not told Selenius about what happened to me while under your family's... hospitality."

Draco did not flinch, but merely gazed stonily at her. He looked as though he were about to respond, but quickly clamped his mouth shut as Severus's low, deep voice rang through the hall with smooth clarity.

"Many of you are surely wondering why I have summoned you at this hour."

The students all shuffled in place, exchanging uneasy glances; Hermione had the sense that this was not the first time they had all been summoned this late, either, nor had the outcome been favorable. They had clearly come to expect the worse—and Hermione could not blame them.

"It has come to my attention that earlier this evening, Harry Potter was sighted in Hogsmeade."

So, Harry was not inside the school yet. But he was close. Hermione listened intently, as Severus stepped down from the dais, slowly making his way through the organized rows of students,
intimidating them with his very presence. The Carrows looked on with smug, eager satisfaction. The other teachers' expressions hardened.

"Now, should anyone, student or staff, attempt to aide Mr. Potter…"

The students shifted uneasily. The threat hung in the air for a moment, before being concluded: "They will be punished."

"Potter's here," Draco muttered. "Of course. That's the only reason you'd be here, too, Granger."

"Quiet!" Hermione hissed under her breath.

"...in a manner consistent with the severity of their transgression. Furthermore, any person found to have knowledge of these events, who fails to come forward, will be treated as..." The threat once again hung in the air for those in the room, all of whom were now most certainly listening, eager for what scraps of news about The Boy Who Lived they could grasp in addition to not wanting to be taken to task for inattentiveness. "...equally guilty."

He came to a halt, halfway down the hall, surveying the students around him, ensuring he had their full and undivided attention. At this moment, it was hard for Hermione to see him as her husband; he was a different man right now, a cold one, whom all the students feared to some degree and with good reason.

The man who had murdered their previous Headmaster.

Silence met the great hall as his words died away; it seemed none of the students dared even to breathe.

"No one?" Severus asked lightly of the hall, gazing at the rapt, uncomfortable demeanor of his audience. There was an edge of inflected disbelief of his words.

Silence met his words, but it was tense, as though the students were expecting one of their fellows to be called out to be made an example of; it was as though they feared the Headmaster knew someone in the room who was withholding information, and was waiting for their denial, for the perfect moment to strike. That was the air of terror that circulated through the room.

He took another few steps forward, now drifting toward those near the back of the room. The upperclassmen. The students who were the ringleaders of the group that made it their mission to resist him all year.

"If anyone in here has any knowledge of Mr. Potter's movements this evening I invite them to step forward." His eyes passed over the students around him once more. "Now."

He was close now, close enough that Hermione could see him clearly. His face was impassive and despite the fact that he was demanding information under threat of punishment if thus withheld, his expression was not at all inviting.

This was it. He had delivered his message. What more was there to say? No one was going to step forward, and now he had no excuse to keep them here any longer while Harry—

At that moment, a figure with black hair suddenly separated himself from the throng. Hermione was not the only one who stared on with wide-eyed shock, mouth agape, as Harry Potter strode out to the center of the room, appearing in the flesh.

"It seems, despite your exhaustive defensive strategies, you still have a bit of a security problem,
Headmaster." Harry was standing there, wand drawn, and wearing a pair of school robes he had undoubtedly borrowed from someone. How he had managed to slip in and fit in without detection, Hermione did not know. Yet, here he was, and if there had been anything he could do to reaffirm peoples' faith in him, it was this foolish, daring stand here in the Great Hall.

"How dare you stand where he stood!" Harry was advancing now, and Severus's wand was out, pointed at him, but no spells erupted on either side. "Tell them how it happened that night. How you looked him in the eye, a man who trusted you—and killed him."

Severus gazed at him for one long, incomprehensible moment. His expression was undefinable, lips parted as though he would like to defend against Harry's accusations, but no sound came out.

"Tell them!"

The doors to the Great Hall flew open. Hermione barely had a moment to register the arrival of what seemed like half a dozen faces of the Order of the Phoenix—and the relief that came along with it—before she moved into action.

The Carrows had leapt forward now, wands raised, but before Harry could prepare to take them down or shield himself, Hermione had lunged forward to come to his defense. She was not alone. She and Minerva came to stand between Harry and their three adversaries, and before another word could be spoken, sparks ignited and it was all they could do to remain on their feet. Hermione had no time to focus on Severus as she took on Alecto and Amycus Carrow, disarming them with ease before brandishing her wand upwards; a moment later, the both of them were lifted into the air, grasping their throats as though their windpipes were being crushed by a pair of invisible hands.

There was cheering; Hermione saw their dropped wands snap under the sneakers of several students who had broken ranks and were advancing on their headmaster, who was now dueling with Minerva and being backed up the steps behind him with nowhere else to run—

"Fight back, you coward!" she heard Minerva yell, as Severus blocked yet another spell without directly retaliating, sidestepping and twisting this way and that. "Fight, you—"

"Dad!" Out of nowhere, Selenius had appeared, preparing to throw himself into the fray. Hermione had all of one shocked moment to leap forward and grab him by the back of his robes, yanking him away before he could get caught in the crossfire. He struggled, trying to pull free. "Dad!"

Without so much as a change of expression, Severus threw up a Shield charm, blocking Minerva's next attack. He spun in place, a black maelstrom of robes, ducked toward the window, and without a moment's hesitation, rammed himself into the pane. He ran into it—ran through it. There was a sudden, almighty crash as the glass broke and shattered, leaving a jagged hole in its wake.

Unthinkingly, Hermione sprinted forward, quickly peering through the hole, half-expecting to see Severus falling to his death.

But what she instead saw gave her pause; the sight before her was so surreal, so peculiar, that she had to blink several times to confirm what she was seeing.

He was flying.

Selenius pushed her aside, leaning out the window, gripping the sharp edges without caring that the glass dug into his palms; his hair was wild and unkempt, plastered against his face as it ran up against the night wind, and his expression was one of panic and terror. It changed, though, as Hermione's had, when he realized that down was not where he should be looking, but up.
Hermione saw his jaw drop for a moment, and then he slowly retreated. He looked down at his hands, and then up at her. Without hesitation, she dispelled the charms that had changed her appearance, and his eyes lit up with immediate recognition and relief.

"Mum?" he whispered, his voice barely audible.

Before Hermione could respond, the hall had erupted into chaos. The teachers were stepping forward now, trying to get the students together, all of whom were celebrating the departure of their headmaster. In the middle of it all, she saw Harry and Ron pushing their way toward her, trying to reach her—

"Hermione! You made it!" Ron shouted gleefully, finally pushing his way past a fifth-year blocking the way and pulling her into an enormous bear hug. Hermione let out an 'oomph!' of surprise at this, and Ron released her. "We were really worried, you know—didn't know how you'd get out of Gringotts. Wanted to go back after you, but we didn't know how—we were terrified until we got your Patronus." He grinned at her. "Thank merlin!"

Hermione winced. "Ow—my arm…"

Ron stared at her with something akin to horror. "Right—sorry—I completely forgot."

Hermione gave him a bit of a watery smile. "It's all right. Really, I was more worried that you and Harry would come back for me—the point was to make sure you got away." She laughed. "I still have a few tricks up my sleeve."

Harry had caught up with her now, pulling her into a hug. Hermione felt a moment of relief that they had all made it to Hogwarts relatively unscathed—but when he released her, Hermione suddenly realized that the hall had turned fairly silent now. Selenius—who was still standing by the window not six feet away from them, trying to rub the blood off his hands on his robes—was looking around warily. The students had lowered the volume of their cheers, but were still thoroughly scattered around the room, and Hermione watched her son quickly melt into the crowd.

"Oi!" Ron said, starting after him. "Hey, you—!"

But Ron never got to finish his words. At once, a booming sound cut through the chatter, silencing the hall with a spell of terrible fear as a high, familiarly cold voice reverberated powerfully through the room. It stopped Ron in his tracks.

"I know that you are preparing to fight."

There were several screams as people began to realize who was talking; some covered their ears, as though that would drown out the terrible sound. Others were gripping each other tightly, or huddling by the wall, as Voldemort continued undeterred:

"Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you."

People parted as Selenius passed through; his ringed cry during the earlier fight had been unmistakable, but now people were far more concerned about the Dark Lord's message than the Headmaster’s son. He was making his exit, and Hermione watched with bold relief as a blond-haired figure stopped him mid-way and then joined him, both of them slipping out the hall. She would have gone after him—she wanted to go after him—she could hardly believe he had slipped up at that moment, though at the same time she could not blame him—but if Draco was with him, and her husband trusted Draco insofar as to his affection for Selenius and his disloyalty to the Dark Lord…

"I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood."
She had a mission here. She could not forever run after her son, watching from close by to make sure he did not trip and fall along the way...

She squeezed her eyes shut, forcing her feet to remain rooted to the spot as the doors closed behind her only child's retreating back.

*You had better keep him safe, Malfoy,* she thought fiercely.

"*Give me Harry Potter, and they shall not be harmed. Give me Harry Potter and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter and you will be rewarded.*"

Her son was a Slytherin. He was clever. He was cunning. He knew when to get out, and to do it with an ally. She had to trust him.

*"You have until midnight.*"

The hall grew remained silent as Voldemort's voice faded, and before it could erupt into screams again, Hermione held up her hands, commanding silence. All eyes were on the three of them—they, the Golden Trio—and when Hermione signaled for everyone to remain quiet, they obeyed. She slowly lowered her hands, when it seemed that chaos would not break out quite yet, and turned to Harry.

*"Harry,"* she said. *"Ravenclaw's horcrux. We need to find it."

Harry took in a deep breath and nodded, with a final glance at the doors Selenius had vanished through with Malfoy, he turned to look at Ron.

*"We figured out what it was,"* he said. *"Thanks to Luna, really. It's—it's called Ravenclaw's Diadem."

*"That's what I found out too, but I haven't a clue as to where to look—"

*"What are you waiting for?"

All heads suddenly snapped up to look at the cluster of Slytherins, of whom Pansy Parkinson was one. She was pointing straight at Harry.

*"But he's here! Harry Potter is here—*get him!*

At once, it seemed, the great hall rose in a mass of wands all pointed—not at Harry—but at the Slytherins. A sudden choked, gasping sound caught Hermione's attention, and she finally looked up at the two Death Eaters still suspended in the air. Alecto's lips were turning blue, and her eyes were rolling into the back of her head. Hermione deliberated for a moment, and then released them. Two bodies thumped to the ground, and without bothering to check if they were all right, Hermione flicked her wand at them.

A golden net wove spun itself out of the tip of the vinewood, wrapping around the two Death Eaters and hauling them into the air. It solidified, and as though suspended by water, they floated; wandless and helpless, it was the only alternative better than killing them. Hermione did not have it in her to kill them in front of a hall full of students. This would have to do.

*"Thank you, Miss Parkinson,"* Minerva said shortly. *"You will leave the hall first. If the rest of your house could follow."

It was not a question. Defeated, Pansy shrank back in the group, but finding no opening, was the first
to be led out of the hall by the caretaker. The other Slytherins followed suit, and the hall silently waited until the last had left before turning once more to face Minerva, who had finally been granted her earned position of Headmaster—Headmistress, in this time of crisis.

"The rest of you are to follow Mr. Filch in just a moment," she said, turning to address them. "Older students who wish to stay and fight may do so, but as we have little time to place protections on the castle, we require that you evacuate as quickly and calmly as possible." She clapped her hands. "Ravenclaws, if you please!"

One by one, the other three houses filed out in the Slytherins' wake. When they disappeared, it was clear that the remaining students were only a small portion of the ones who had been there to begin with. Yet, the teachers still had to herd the underage students on their way, when a third of Hufflepuff elected to remain behind, and almost half of Gryffindor had to be chivved out for not being of-age. Despite this, when all was said and done, the support of the remaining students was still rather appreciable.

"Now," Kingsley said, coming to stand beside Minerva. His deep, soothing voice carried throughout the great hall, capturing everyone's attention. "We have less than half an hour until midnight. This is what we must do…"

Harry grabbed Hermione and Ron's arms, pulling them together so that he could talk to them quietly.

"I'm going to go look for the diadem," he whispered. "Stay here and help fight. I'll be back soon."

"Harry," Hermione began, but Ron cut her off.

"Go on, mate. We've got this covered."

Without another word, Harry squeezed their arms in a last gesture of appreciation, and then sprinted off.

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Harry made his way down the corridor, attempting to locate the Grey Lady—at least, that was her name. Nearly-Headless Nick had said that was her name. But it did not look as though she was anywhere in the vicinity, and having already traversed several floors in his search, Harry was starting to get frustrated that she was nowhere to be found.

He passed the students who were making their way up to the Room of Requirement for their evacuation into Hogsmeade through Aberforth's tavern, and upon reaching a deserted corridor, pulled out his map, searching for Ron and Hermione's names. Ron was still there, in the Great Hall, though he was now over with a cluster of students at the far side, undoubtedly working on Kingsley's orders. But as Harry searched, he felt growing panic that the name Hermione Granger was nowhere to be found. He had left her there just over twenty minutes ago—

A familiar name drew his eyes, and momentarily distracted, he looked.

Near his tiny dot, were two other tiny dots, traveling down a nearby corridor. Separate from the other students, Draco Malfoy and Selenius Snape were getting away on their own. Harry quickly stuffed the Marauders Map back in his pocket, and started down the next corridor. It was a long shot, but if Hermione was off helping the teachers put up defenses or some such, then he couldn't go after her for help right now. In which case, it was possible that if Voldemort had left a horcrux here in Hogwarts, he had told Snape where, so that Snape could keep it safe, even if Snape did not know what it was—just as he had done with Lucius Malfoy…
And if Snape knew, it was possible his kid did, too. Or that the kid had seen something that resembled the object he was looking for—the Diary had been in plain sight all along…

He rounded the corner, and skidded to a halt upon almost running straight into his targets. Malfoy let out a yelp of surprise, but had his wand out in a flash. The other kid pulled out his wand, too, but he lingered behind Malfoy, not ready to throw himself into the front—in fact, it looked as though Malfoy would not let him. He had his wand pointed at Harry, and the other hand spread protectively outward, putting himself directly and deliberately between the two of them.

"What do you want?" Malfoy snarled.

"Where are you going?" Harry shot back, pointing his wand at Malfoy, having no intention of being hexed off-guard.

"We're getting out of here," Malfoy said, his pointy face furrowed with determination.

Harry narrowed his eyes at this, sensing a lie. Selenius was looking slightly unsure of this statement, and Harry rather doubted Malfoy was finding another way out of the school; Fred and George had them covered, and the Room of Requirement was open for everyone to get through…

"I don't believe you."

"Don't you have something else to do, Potter?" Malfoy brandished his wand, and Harry tensed, ready to retaliate. "I hate to do this, for once, I really do, but—"

"Wait!"

Both of their heads snapped around to look at Selenius, who was slowly lowering his wand.

"What are you here for?" he asked. "None of us are looking for a fight, but you—you were looking for us, weren't you? What do you want?"

Harry did not lower his wand as he replied, "I'm looking for Ravenclaw's diadem."

There was a moment of silence, and then Malfoy let out a howl of laughter.

"You're mad, Potter! I always knew, but this just proves it! That magic tiara of Ravenclaw's has been missing for centuries, you idiot! No one knows where it is! Most people have never even heard of it!"

"That's not true!" Harry said, anger rising. "The Ravenclaw house ghost does, but I can't ask her if I don't know where to find her!"

"Then go look for her, Potter," Malfoy said, turning to leave. "I don't know where—"

"Do you know what it looks like?" Selenius interjected.

"I saw a replica of it, up in Ravenclaw Tower," Harry said quickly, grasping at the hook the younger boy gave him. "Luna showed me."

"Luna showed you?" Selenius said, looking rather impressed. "I'm surprised. She must really like you, to take you up there."

"You know Luna?" Harry asked in astonishment, momentarily taken off guard.

"She's in the D.A, with Neville and Ginny," Selenius said, offering Harry an olive branch of a smile.
"They're my friends. They've been following you on Potterwatch all year, you know—I've heard a lot about you from them." Almost eagerly, he asked, "Did you really kill a Basilisk in your second year?"

Harry glanced at Malfoy, who was looking increasingly sour at this, and at once, he thought he was starting to have an inkling of understanding. Selenius Snape was Malfoy's protégé, perhaps because of the favors Snape had done for him, or the fact that he was a family friend. But Selenius clearly knew Luna, as well as the rest of the D.A, which meant that he hung out in their circle regularly. It was a bizarre turn of events, and despite his new understanding, Harry was more baffled than ever.

"I—yeah. I did." In a tone of increasing bewilderment, he asked, "You—you're a member of the D.A?"

"Against better judgment," Malfoy snapped. "His mother's Gryffindorkness must have rubbed off on him."

Selenius elbowed Malfoy in the side, hard. "Don't insult my mother, Draco—after what happened at Malfoy Manor, I could point out a few things about your own that leave something to be desired—"

Harry held up his hands. His head was spinning; this was becoming too much to try and keep track of. "Wait. You know who his mum is? My godmother?"

Malfoy and Selenius both stared at him, as though struck. For a moment, all three of them looked at each other like owls caught in very bright wandlight. Harry's scar began to prickle warningly again, and then Malfoy spoke.

Quietly, he said, "You don't know?"

"Know what?" Harry asked roughly.

"You don't know?" Malfoy repeated, now looking gleeful. "You don't know who she is?"

"Tell me, Malfoy!"

"Draco, don't!" Selenius pleaded. "She doesn't want anyone to know—you weren't supposed to know, either—"

"Tell me!" Harry repeated, advancing on them.

"Not if you want help finding that diadem!" Selenius said waringly, raising his wand.

"And you know where it is?" Harry said, torn between interest and derision.

Selenius's eyes glittered, in a way that reminded him disturbingly of Snape; but when he smiled, it was oddly friendly. For just a moment, Harry was taken completely off-guard: when he had first seen Selenius, it was impossible not to see Snape in him—either in the photos he had seen, or in the short in-person meeting they had thus far. It was like looking at a younger version of his most hated professor, younger even than the one he had glimpsed at in the pensieve in his fifth year, and it still brought forward feelings of anger, hate, and betrayal to the fore.

And yet, there was something else there, too. Selenius Snape had a familiar smile, the slight twist of the lips that was both wry and warm—not the cold snarl of Harry's enemy, which he had come to know after nearly six years of magical education under his tyrannical thumb. For a moment, just a moment, Harry thought he had an inkling of what it was like for Snape, to see him so many years after his parents had been buried: he was his father all over again, even if he had been
complimentarily told that he was like his mother in personality.

That had never stopped Snape from singling him out for his particular brand of torture. Harry had learned early on that in Snape's opinion, the crimes of the father were also apparently the burden of the son. He felt his fists clench at his side at this, as the old fury rose up in him; but then almost immediately, though by no means quickly, it began to subside, like something tarred, sludgy and dark slowly draining away. Selenius looked just like Snape, but it was obvious from the first moment they had spoken together that he was nothing like his cold, murderous father.

He wasn't going to make the same mistake that Snape had made about him.

And given everything he had heard about his godmother, a tiny inkling inside him told him that cruelty toward her son would be poor repayment for the care and concern she reportedly had for him. It would be poor repayment of the fact that Sirius had spoken very highly of his godmother, and had clearly loved Selenius if the photographs were anything to go by—poor repayment to the people who loved and had looked out for him. It was difficult for him to stare into Selenius's eyes and see the man who had murdered Professor Dumbledore gazing back at him, but right now, he needed all the allies he could get—he needed to be the one who could make the right decision to treat someone on their own merits, and not because their father had made his life a living hell. He wasn't going to be like Snape. He wasn't going to lower himself to being like the Death Eaters in how he fought, and he wasn't going to lower himself to petty revenge.

He gave Selenius a searching look, and finally nodded in response.

Selenius smiled broadly now. Malfoy's eyes narrowed calculatingly.

"I think I know what you're looking for."

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The Great Hall suddenly grew silent when Neville ran back into the room, out of breath, with Professor Sprout at his side. He pointed at the door, panting hard, but he managed to get out a single comprehensible word:

"Goblins."

Then the room fell into an uproar. Everyone was yelling, afraid; it was well-known that the goblins had been doing their utmost to remain neutral, but as Neville regained his voice, he was able to explain shortly about the approaching, armor-clad army he had just seen, which was most certainly not neutral. It was Hermione, however, who regained order by raising her wand and letting off an enormous BANG! That threatened to shake the very walls.

"That's enough!" she snapped, fully back in her element of control, and striding toward the doors. Everyone—except for Kingsley and the other teachers, perhaps—stared at her in a mixture of astonishment and amazement. "All of you, get back to your posts! We've still got less than ten minutes before midnight, and we're still not moving fast enough! Kingsley, I'll handle this…"

And she disappeared before anyone could raise a word of protest. Trotting down the steps, wand out, eyes darting warily for any signs of approaching enemies, she quickly made her way toward Hagrid's, where the goblins had first been sighted. Sure enough, they were all standing just beyond the covered bridge, and as she approached, she saw them shift uneasily, though they made no move to attack.

They were bearing several flags, each with the Gringotts emblem firmly stamped on it. This was not
the Dark Lord's mark, or the show of his supporters, but the clear stance of the goblins. Hermione found herself in for a bit of a shock, however, when the shortest of the lot darted forward merrily—and, she realized a bit belatedly, was wearing a tea cozy over his helmet.

"Miss Hermione!" Dobby said, coming to a halt in front of her and beaming. "Dobby has brought the goblins—the goblins does wish to help, and so Dobby has brought them to help!"

Despite herself, Hermione's jaw dropped at this. A moment later, a familiar face appeared under one of the visors of the nearest row, and Hermione recognized Griphook. He was wearing an expression of smug satisfaction, showing his pointy teeth in a bared grin.

"When the house elf came to inform us that Hogwarts was soon to be under siege, we all agreed that we were at last ready to align ourselves with wand-carriers," he said, looking up at her. He was bearing a heavy, glinting battle axe, no doubt goblin-made just like his armor. "We are willing to help bring down the Dark Lord, if it means getting the recognition… that we deserve."

There was a murmur of hoarse, ragged assent in a strange language that Hermione knew not, but had reasonable suspicion of it being Gobbledegook.

She could hardly breathe. She had hoped, she had prayed… but never in her wildest dreams would she have believed that they would show up, that they would all agree to make a stand with them. Right here. Right now.

They were waiting for a response, she realized belatedly. Yet, she did not quite know how to respond, although the shock on her face was probably explanation enough for the goblins. Finally, however, she gave them all a low bow.

"Thank you," she said sincerely, before straightening up. There was a small flash of surprise behind some of the visors and iron masks she could see, at this concession of pride by a witch, but she gave them all a genuine smile of delight and appreciation before pulling out her wand and tapping the invisible barrier that blocked entry across the bridge. Protections that had been put up just a few minutes before.

"You may pass," she intoned, stepping aside to let them through. As one, in organized rows of three, the goblins began marching for Hogwarts, with Dobby in the lead. Some of the goblins walked by her without giving her a second glance; others did not bother to hide their astonishment and curiosity at what a strange wand-carrier she was. Once they had all gotten through, she tapped the barrier once more, resealing it.

And then she followed them back to the castle, feeling a bubble of hope begin to rise in her chest.

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"It's here," Selenius said, as they slowly pushed open the door to the Room of Requirement. "Of course, it usually looks different—Neville always keep it in the form of a bunker for the students who had to disappear for a bit, he's gotten really good at being very specific with the room about what he wants…"

"So I've heard," Harry panted. "You saw it in here?"

"In the place where practically everything is hidden," Selenius said. "I think I even found a quintuped someone tried to keep as a pet—don't think it turned out very well."

"I spent all my spare time in here last year," Malfoy finally spoke up. He had been sullen and silent for the most part as Selenius led Harry up to the room, giving Harry all the details about the D.A’s
activities over the past year as they ran, but now there was finally a glimmer of interest in his eyes at what they were about to do. "The place is mostly stuffed with junk—useless junk, but there's more than enough interesting things in here..."

"I saw it here last year, when you showed me the room," Selenius said. "I never told Mum or Dad that you'd shown me, but when you wanted that book, you let me take a look so I could see what you were talking about..."

This drew Harry to a halt. "You helped Malfoy repair that Vanishing Cabinet?"

"I just lent him a book," Selenius said defensively. "I didn't know why he needed it."

"Where would you find a book on repairing Vanishing Cabinets? I can't imagine it being in 101 Random Household Repair Tips and Tricks—"

"I borrowed it from my dad," Selenius said, just a bit tightly, as he led them over to a cupboard that was lying haphazardly on a pile of old furniture, rooted in a mound of books that had been carelessly tossed on it, as though for good measure. Upon it, tucked nearly out of view, was an ugly bust of an old warlock—and upon it, a glittering silvery crown.

"Well, it doesn't matter now," Harry said, just a bit harshly. "Malfoy's not the one who killed him, in the end."

"Look," Selenius snapped, rounding on him, "you're not the only one who knew Professor Dumbledore, alright? I don't know why my dad did what he did, but he had his reasons—"

Harry couldn't help himself. "What reasons were those?" he demanded. "He didn't have to kill him!"

Selenius pointed a finger at Malfoy. "If my dad hadn't done it, Draco would have had to do it, or You-Know-Who would've killed him and his entire family! Dumbledore—I don't know why, but when I talked to his portrait, he wasn't even angry! I dunno, maybe he was just old, he was already nearing the end of his life, maybe he didn't think it was a poor trade to give up his life to save another's—"

While they were arguing, Malfoy had silently given himself a leg-up on a nearby chair, and tentatively reached out for the bust, careful not to touch the diadem. His expression as he listened to the conversation of his companions was bitter, but marred with determination as he maneuvered to reach the object they had been seeking. He was more than ready to retort, but bit his tongue; the lives of his parents were still on the line, and that meant allying himself with Potter might be necessary.

Best not to burn that bridge just yet.

"That doesn't change the fact that Snape murdered him!"

"It wasn't murder! It—" Selenius suddenly clamped a hand over his mouth.

"Of course it was!" Harry said hotly. "I was there! I saw Dumbledore begging for his life—"

Quietly, as he carefully lifted the crowned bust down, Malfoy said, "He wasn't."

Harry rounded on him. "How do you know?" he said angrily.

"Draco—"

"Selenius, enough. I don't think now's the time to keep everything held so close to the vest anymore"
—we need allies, and Potter is the best we can find right now," Malfoy snapped, as he stepped down and gently set his burden down on the ground. The diadem gleamed in the dim light. "You haven't been in Slytherin house long enough to know that there are times when you give up your secrets."

"But it's not our secret to give!"

"It is now," Malfoy said, gazing at Selenius steadily. The two locked eyes, each burning with their own determination and conviction, and then to Harry's surprise, Selenius relented. He seemed to withdraw slightly, to become brooding and silent; and with evident self-control, Malfoy slowly turned to look at Harry. Whatever else he felt about the Boy Who Lived, he was apparently willing to push it aside for now.

"I recently got a chance to speak to Dumbledore's portrait," he said, rising to his feet. "He told me so himself. He was already dying—something about some poison he drank before returning to Hogwarts." Harry's eyes widened at this. "And he…" Draco paused, as though he himself were uncertain about revealing something so personal, before he plowed on: "He said he was glad that Snape had gone through with the plan. He was glad that my parents and I had been spared."

"He said that, did he?" Harry said roughly.

"Yes."

Harry gave him a sharp look. There was something about the simplicity of Malfoy's tone and words that finally began to worm its way through his gut, planting the seeds of doubt in his certainty. Malfoy, he did not trust on his own; nor did he have much reason to trust Selenius, except for the fact that Selenius was a member of the D.A and his godmother's son—and that he had been surprisingly considerate to him so far. Shockingly honest. And for a moment, he had looked just like Dobby or Hagrid when they were about to give something away…

"Snape—I saw him, I saw him kill Dumbledore with the Killing Curse…"

Malfoy seemed to deliberate for a moment, as though trying to decide how much to tell him. This irritated Harry, even as he came to kneel on the ground to examine the diadem carefully.

Wit beyond measure is a man's greatest treasure.

His eyes widened with something akin to disbelief and calamitous joy; they had found it. After all the trouble they had gone through, this was it, this was really it…

Malfoy's next words interrupted his thoughts. "Dumbledore always trusted Snape, Potter. And his portrait still does, even knowing who killed him. Don't be such a Gryffindor about it—at least recognize the obvious, which is that there's clearly more to what happened than what we saw."

Harry glared at him. "I know what I saw!"

"And given that Dumbledore's portrait trusts him—and that I trust him—"

"Why does it matter if you trust him?" Harry retorted.

Malfoy inhaled sharply for a moment, and turned away. "Because he knows—he know that I've defected from—from You-Know-Who's side."

"You what?" Harry asked, rising to his feet.

"Why else would I help you?" Malfoy demanded.
"I dunno, maybe you were just tagging along to make sure your little Slytherin protégé didn't get in trouble—"

"As if I've been doing a good job of that, look at the company he keeps!"

"Is that a statement about yourself?" Harry asked sarcastically. "Look, I don't know what, but I didn't realize that you—that you were actually on my side—"

"I'm not on anyone's side, Potter!" Malfoy sneered. "I just want to get myself and my parents out of this alive. That's the reason I defected—they tortured them, you know, after you left Malfoy Manor."

"And you?"

Draco's right temple twitched at this. "Mother…" For a moment, he seemed to choke on his own words, but then he said harshly, "Mother sent me away before the Dark Lord arrived."

For the longest moment, Harry stared into Malfoy's face, as though he had suddenly been struck. And then, with patience that he did not know he possessed, he carefully picked up the diadem with just the tips of his fingers, and looked Malfoy squarely in the eye.

"If you want to get out of this alive, you're going to need help," he said quietly. "The only way you're going to get that help in this castle right now is if you help us, too."

Malfoy hesitated. "As soon as I find my parents, Potter, we're out of here. I won't stop you from… doing what needs to be done, but I'm not hanging around to be the hero."

"That's fine," Harry said shortly. He awkwardly rearranged the diadem in one hand, and stuck out the other to him. Malfoy gave him a distrustful look. "As long as we understand that you're not going to get in my way, I won't stop you from trying to save your family."

Malfoy paused for a long moment, and then stiffly grasped Harry's hand. They barely shook, and let go extremely quickly.

Selenius folded his arms across his chest, eyes glittering with snarky, exasperated amusement.

"Now that you're done doing a miserable job of coming to some kind of international treaty, can we go?"

"Yeah," Harry said, stepping away from Malfoy. "Let's go. Hermione's got what we need to take care of the diadem." He fumbled for the Marauders map in his pocket, unfolding it with one hand, and let out an exclamation when the blond snatched it up from him, unfolding it.

"Give it back!"

"Shut up for a minute," Malfoy snapped, turning the map over. He was staring at it with something very much like greed and curiosity as he flipped it in his hands, and after divining its purpose in just a few moments, quickly scanned through it. "I'm trying to find Granger. And my parents, if they're on the grounds…"

"I haven't been able to find Hermione on it," Harry said, still trying to hold the diadem with the smallest amount of contact possible. He looked very badly like he wanted to hex Malfoy for touching the map, but was refraining with admirable self-restraint. "Last I looked, anyway. Too many people running around all at once."

"How do you search through this thing?" There was no disguising the awe in his voice as he
scanned the map.

"I just look for last names, usually where I expect to find them," Harry said, scowling. He did not expect Malfoy to run off with it—not right now, at least—but he did not like the Slytherin handling his precious map.

Selenius was peering over Draco's arm, trying to get a good look at it. "Does it have my name on it?"

"It has the names of anyone currently in Hogwarts," Harry said, adjusting the diadem in his arms so that he was now only touching it with the sleeve of his robes. Given his prior experience with horcruxes, he wanted to make his contact with it as minimal as possible. His scar was prickling again, and it was distracting him now. "Students, staff—it's even got Mrs. Norris on it, and she's a cat."

Malfoy calmly scanned the map, one eyebrow raised, before he handed it back to Harry, who stuffed it back in his pocket with a sour expression.

"She's heading up toward the fourth floor," Malfoy said. "Let's intercept her, shall we?"

~o~O~o~

Hermione ran down the corridor, legs pounding as the sound of battle exploded around her. Midnight had struck, and as promised, Voldemort's forces had begun their assault. Minerva had sent the knights that had previously stood guard over the halls to now employ their considerable numbers to fighting off the numerous monsters the Dark Lord had sent, and the goblins had begun stationing themselves at strategic points around the castle to help fend off attackers that did not come directly through the doors.

A nearby window suddenly shattered, a long hairy leg poking through, and Hermione let out a startled scream of surprise as an acromantula began forcing its way through. Rock and stone crumbled around the window as it tore it apart, and Hermione did not hesitate as she aimed her wand. She was not in sixth-year Defense Against the Dark Arts; Unforgivables were not barred for this battle. Right now, they were fighting for their lives.

"Imperio!"

At once, the enormous spider halted its attempts to get through, and instead turned around. It did not have the mental capacity needed to fight off her spell, and it instead turned its efforts on attacking its fellows. There was a series of loud rumblings as spider after spider was kicked off the outer wall. Hermione did not have what it took to feel any sort of satisfaction at this bit of cleverness; she merely gathered her wits again, now on high-strung alert as she tore along the corridor, searching for Harry. She had the Sword of Gryffindor out, hefting it awkwardly in her left hand while she brandished her wand in her right.

She was relieved when her friend came into view, tearing straight towards her—a felt a frisson of fear and palpable relief run through her when she realized Selenius was with him, flanked closely by Draco Malfoy. There was a loud thump from nearby as another spider fell to its death, and all four of them flinched as they skidded to a halt on the side of the wall as far away from the windows as possible.

"What is he still doing here?" Hermione demanded, grabbing Selenius by the shoulder. "First years were supposed to leave through the Room of Requirement!"

"It's a good thing he didn't!" Harry shot back, unfurling his arms to reveal the diadem nestled
securely in the sleeve of his robes. "He knew exactly where to find it! Here—give me the sword—"

"How—"

"I don't have time to explain! We need to get this over with—everyone's still fighting downstairs, aren't they? And where's Ron?"

"Ron's still in the Great Hall," Hermione said, as she passed the sword to Harry. "Harry—no, Harry, don't do it here, it's too exposed—"

"...I'll be in Myrtle's bathroom."

And then he was sprinting down the corridor, sword in one hand, diadem in the other, robes flapping behind him as he ducked and dodged through the rubble Hermione had narrowly avoided being hit with on her way through. She stared after his back, gaping in disbelief for a moment, and then she wheeled around to the two Slytherins beside her.

"What are you still doing here?" she shrieked. "You were supposed to leave with the others!"

"I'm not running away!" Selenius said loudly, his words almost drowned out by a loud inhuman scream, followed by the violent shaking of the corridor they were in. A piece of stone fell from the ceiling, narrowly missing them, and Hermione grabbed both him and Draco by the shoulders, and began dragging them back the way they had come, out of the immediate vicinity of battle. "You and dad are still here—you're still fighting—and I can't go with the others, they know who I am now, you know what they'd do—"

"You're not staying here!" Hermione said.

"I'm not running away!" Selenius repeated hotly.

"You listen to me—"

"I've spent my whole life hiding and running away!" Selenius howled. "I'm not doing it again—not now—"

"I said you listen to me!" Hermione grabbed him by the shoulder of his robes, pulling him closer to her so that he could see her face clearly. See the fact that she was not joking. That she was not relenting. That she was not accepting an argument from him. "No one underage is being allowed to stay here, and that includes you!"

"I can fight!"

"No, you cannot!"

"Harry Potter was twelve when he—"

"I'm still your mother, Selenius!" Hermione bit out angrily. There were tears threatening at the corner of her eyes, but she ignored them. "I don't care what Harry Potter did when he was twelve! I may not have been around as much as I should have, and I might not have seen you for so many months this year, but you are still going to listen to me when I tell you that you are not staying here—"

"I'm not stupid!" Selenius shouted. "I know what you were doing—running off with Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, fighting You-Know-Who! It's what you've always been doing, hasn't it?" He suddenly turned bitter, yanking free from her. "That's all you've ever been concerned about—that's why you left me with my aunt and uncle, so that you could do that! I've spend my whole life being
hidden away, like I can't take care of myself, or like I can't be seen because merlin forbid someone even get a glimpse of me— I'm sick of it! This is the first time I've been allowed to do anything, and the minute you get back—"

Hermione lost it. "This isn't about that right now!" She was screaming, partly because of the noise around them, mostly because she had finally lost it. "Right now, this is about the fact that it's not just you—it's everyone—and as your mother, I have every right to tell you that you're not staying here!"

"I'm not leaving if dad's still here!"

Hermione yanked her wand upward, pointing it at her son's temple. He looked at it cross-eyed, backing away a pace. Tears were streaming freely down her face now, but her words came out anguished and clear:

"I don't care if I have to Imperio you to get you out of here and safe," she said, with as much warning and menace in her tone as she could muster. "I don't care if you hate or resent me for it. You are my son; I am your mother. And you will listen to me, when I'm telling you that right now, you are to get your butt out of here and stay out of the way."

Draco, who had been standing silent throughout this argument, was wearing an expression of utter disbelief on his face as he took her words in. Selenius, for the first time, looked scared.

"I have given up far too much for this damn war, Selenius." Her face grew softer now, vulnerable with pain and bone-deep weariness. For the first time since her de-aging, she finally looked her years. "I'm not about to lose you, too. Whatever my reasons were for leaving you with your aunt and uncle for the time that I did… whatever my reasons for not being here this year… you're far too precious to me to throw you in the Dark Lord's path."

Selenius swallowed; tears were beading down his cheek now, unnoticed by any of them, except for the tiny sniffle he made. Hermione lowered her wand, and then wrapped her arms around him, pulling him against her tightly.

"And if for whatever reason I don't come back from this… I'll at least be glad I sent you away, because it is a mother's duty to protect her children." She raised her eyes slightly, to meet Malfoy's. "Any mother. Every mother. We do this not because we believe our children to be incapable, but because we love you too much to let you die pointlessly. Children are not… and should not… be tools of war."

Malfoy looked away.

She felt Selenius nod his head against her; she continued. "I have never hidden you all these years because I am ashamed of you, Selenius. I have never hidden you because I believed you were not able to handle living a normal life. I never hid you because there was something wrong with you, in any way, shape, or form. I did it because it was the consequence… of one of many other consequences that happened as a result of a mistake I made when I was fifteen and tripped down a flight of stairs with a Time-Turner—and because not hiding you would result in consequences that might…" she hesitated, glancing back up at Malfoy. "Because it might result in consequences… that would not turn out as fortuitous as Draco here, when the Dark Lord decided to use him to hurt his parents."

Something seemed to flicker in the blond boy's eyes—understanding perhaps, or pain, before his expression became shuttered. Hermione released Selenius, and watched him straighten up, rubbing at his eyes.
"Now please… I want the both of you to get out of here. I want you—I want you to go to Tine Cottage," she said, revealing the Secret to Malfoy. "I want you to stay there, until this is over. Am I understood?"

Selenius nodded, but Draco shook his head.

"I'm not leaving without my parents, Granger."

Hermione straightened up, and looked him squarely in the eyes.

"Draco, as a mother, I know that right now, Narcissa must be worried sick for you," she said. "If you try to cross enemy lines to find them, I have little doubt you will be killed. If you stay here to find them, you are more likely to get killed in the chaos."

A sudden crash as part of the ceiling several meters down the nearest corridor suddenly caved in drove her point home quite nicely.

"Leave now," she said, softening her tone. "When I see your parents, I will let them know that you are safe, and that you have left. I will tell them that you have defected, and that you are waiting for them. I can do no more for you than that, but it is enough that I can spare them the pain of paying the price of their son for this war. Alright?"

Draco placed a hand on Selenius's shoulder, though his expression was openly suspicious. "You'll tell them?"

"You have my word."

Draco nodded, and then tugged on Selenius's shoulder. "Let's go. The Vanishing Cabinet in the Room of Requirement is still functional—we'll get out through Borgin and Burkes."

Hermione nodded, swooping down to place a last kiss on her son's head, before turning to leave.

"I love you," she said.

And then, like Harry only minutes ago, she hurried down the corridor to return to the fray.

"I love you, mum," Selenius whispered.

They watched her disappear from view, and then turned to retrace their steps back up to the Seventh Floor.

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Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione surveyed the wreckage around them, through the dust and blood that streaked across her vision. The goblins were doing excellent work, operating in vicious hordes that took down a good deal of the enemies who came through, and Hermione had to admit that if it were not for them, they would have lost horrible number of people. And yet, they were such well-organized tacticians that their strategy of bludgeon and retreat meant that they hardly suffered any casualties at all.

Harry had joined them in the fighting happening in the Entrance Hall, the smoking diadem in one hand, and the triumphant sword in the other. He immediately handed it off to Ron, who was having an easier time using it on close-range opponents than his wand, although he kept the latter out. He was by no means trained in the use of the sword, but his height and long arms gave him a good amount of range in which to swing.

Yet, the body of a Ravenclaw seventh-year lay strewn on the ground, in the awkward prone position she had been left in after having her neck snapped by a giant. Another student Hermione did not know lay feet away from her, having been caught off-guard by an enormous take-out of the wall that had very nearly killed Fred. It was all pure luck, for those who were still standing: no one was in control of this battle. It was pure chaos, with blood and debris and death and pain and agony and the breaking of innocence roaring through at every turn. The night was already far gone from a nightmare and had now dipped into some kind of horror that one could not awaken from in their most desperate dreams.

"Harry, the snake, we need the snake!" Ron shouted, as he jabbed his wand in the direction of an oncoming giant, causing it to let out a scream of pain as he struck it square in the eyes. "We need to find You-Know-Who's snake—staying here isn't doing anything!"

"I don't know where he is—"

And almost like a dream, and interval in the fighting graced them, and it seemed they were stuck in the eye of the storm. Fighting was happening around them, but for the moment, there were no more oncoming targets. Percy, who had redeemed himself most admirably only moments ago, was helping Fred half-drag half-walk George back into the Great Hall with a broken leg, leaving the three of them alone, save for their goblin compatriots.

"Harry, you have to look inside his mind!" Hermione said, half-staggering her way through the debris to get to him. "Ron's right—where the Dark Lord is, his snake will be too, and only you can find him—"

Harry closed his eyes, and Hermione and Ron quickly surrounded him, wands out and ready to protect him while he searched within himself for his connection to Voldemort. Chaos raged around them, but nothing struck at them. After about a minute, his eyes flew open again.

"He's in the boathouse."
"The boathouse?" Ron repeated, disbelievingly.

"The snake's with him, but it's got some sort of magical protection around it." Harry rubbed at his scar. "He's just sent Lucius Malfoy to find Snape."

"He's not even fighting?" Hermione shrieked, outraged. "And—and what does he want with—Snape?"

"He just said that he requires a service from him... something about it being the only way... I don't know!" Harry turned to look at her. "Malfoy's worried about what happened to his son, but You-Know-Who seems to think I'll be the one to come to him at the end of the night, so he's not worried..."

"Why would he be in the boathouse?" Ron said, still stunned by the answer. "I mean... I get that he's a narcissistic git who lets others do the fighting for him, but if he were going to stay out of the way, wouldn't he find somewhere more secluded?"

"I think he wants to be close by," Harry said grimly. "He's trying to make it easy for me to come to him, and he probably wants to keep a close eye on the battle... and there's really nowhere else he could do that, the rest of the castle's under siege, and the Shrieking Shack would be too far away..."

"We need to get to that snake," Ron said grimly. "Here, give me the cloak—I've got the sword, I'll be able to get in a surprise strike—"

"No, I'll go," Harry said decisively.

"We'll all go," Hermione said, yanking Harry and Ron close to her, and helping Harry pull the cloak over himself and Ron, before turning her wand and Disillusioning herself. "There's no point separating the three of us. If we get lost, we'll be distracted worrying about what's happened. You sneak by with the cloak—I'll guard your back."

Without further argument, they wove their way through the dust and debris, ducking and dodging spells thrown by the students and dueling Death Eaters. Hermione did not hesitate in ambushing many an unaware enemy from behind, hitting them with her favored Choking Spell so that their opponents could decide what to do with them. She was not up to using the Killing Curse willy-nilly; she did not have it in her to do so, nor was she foolish enough to try: if she missed, there was no undoing it.

The Unforgivables were each a double-edged sword.

They eventually made it through the courtyard, but as soon as they stepped foot on the grounds, they stopped in their tracks, terrified by the sight before them.

Hundreds of dementers swirling into view out of the pitiless darkness, their decayed hands reaching for them, their cloak-like appearances like a twisted black omen of their coming. They glided toward them, the horrible rattling of their breaths sucking away any hope Hermione might have had of getting through...

She raised her wand.

"E—Expecto Patronum!"

Like Harry's stag, the spell withered and died almost immediately. Footsteps approached behind them, signaling the arrival of Luna, Ernie, and Seamus from the D.A, followed almost immediately by the grateful appearance of a silvery hare leaping through the dementors' midst, driving them back,
followed closely by a sprinting fox and a charging boar. Hermione tried again, but while Harry's spell seemed to revive, hers did not.

"Come on," Harry panted, as a silvery stag burst forth. "Come on…"

*Think of something happy… something happy…*

But it was still hard to do so, right now, everything seemed hopeless… doomed to eventually crumple to the ground, everything she had ever known and held dear…

*Held dear…*

*My locket!*

Hermione pointed her wand once more. With great effort, as she forcefully pulled up the thought of the locket hanging around her neck, like a potent good-luck charm. The locket, which held so many of their hopes and dreams for the future, a reminder of what she had, a reminder of what she was here for. What she was protecting. What she held precious, because it gave her great joy. "*Expecto Patronum!*"

With shocking clarity, her Patronus burst forth from her wand in a powerful leap, causing the dementors still drifting just short of the reach of her companions' silvery forms to dart back as the large cat lunged for them with all the fierceness of a mother lion protecting her cubs. And yet, it was not a lion; the shape was wrong. As the dementors fled the force of the strong form, Hermione was able to finally see very clearly what it was.

The panther raced after the dementors who were slow in retreating, aggressively pursuing its prey; it wove through the air with lithe, sleek grace and sure movements. It joined Harry's stag, and now the dementors finally scattered in haste, quickly returning from whence they had come. The Patronuses vanished one by one, including Hermione's, leaving the night clear once more, though the sounds of battle still raged around them.

The next minute, they were dodging the advance of a giant intent on squishing them, and they tore off into the night. They dashed out of the ruined courtyard, hiking over rubble and the fallen before reaching the stairs that trailed down the hillside and led to their destination. It was a long path, and they sprinted down it, trying not to trip over their uneven footing in the darkness; their wands stayed out and lit, and Harry once again reignited his stag Patronus to protect and guide them as they made their way.

It was ironic, Hermione thought, that the boathouses had been their destination in their first year, and it was their destination now in what was meant to bring an end to it all. It was also where the Seventh Years had always left from on their final journey on the boats, though she herself had never gotten to experience it. And in a way, she almost would now.

They slowed down just a bit as the muffled sounds of battle began to fade, and the presence of dementors vanished as they sought other, easier targets closer to where the majority of the people were still clashing. Three lone figures with a Patronus did not motivate them to pursue. Satisfied, Harry released his Patronus, and it vanished in a wisp of silvery smoke. With only their poor night vision to guide them now, they carefully picked their way through the darkness, pressing against the wall for support as they cautiously made their way down the last few yards leading to the boathouse.

There was a glow emanating from behind the ornate glass, and the three of them carefully circled around, not wanting their shadows to be seen; Harry gestured for them to follow, pointing silently to a window that had been left open a crack—just enough for a very large snake to slither through,
Hermione thought—and they peered through it.

The waterway was filled with tethered boats, coming to a dead end at the far side of the wall. On one side—and this made Hermione’s skin jump slightly—she saw the grey, scaly skin of their foe as he stood, slowly caressing the stolen wand in his long, thin fingers.

Hermione’s arm suddenly twitched as she glimpsed her husband, his back turned them; he was standing stiffly, with his arms by his side. Fear had been all Hermione had been able to feel as of late, but it suddenly seemed to rise to an ominous crescendo as he stood there, facing the Dark Lord and his Elder Wand.

She felt Harry grab her arm, his grip tightening painfully as he looked down at the two of them—one a man, one a monster—which he hated more than anyone else. It was as though he were counting on her to stop him from rushing in, wand raised, to try and kill them both in a foolhardy headlong rush through the window. Because Severus was standing just feet away from them, and she fancied that she could see the sweat beading down the back of his neck.

"My lord?"

Nagini floated in a magical cage behind Voldemort, twisting and writhing within the confines of her protection. She was their target, yet she was the furthest from the window, and Hermione did not know what sort of spell would penetrate such a defense…

"Give me news, Severus," the Dark Lord rasped, now slowly twirling his ill-gotten wand between his fingers. "How goes the battle?"

"My lord, their resistance is crumbling… Potter and the others have disappeared from view, but I ordered our forces to keep their focus on taking the castle…"

"Very good, Severus, very good…"

For a moment, Voldemort disappeared from view, but then she saw him slowly circling Severus, blocking their view of him for a moment before disappearing once more past the window.

"My lord," she heard Severus murmur deferentially, "please, let me return to the battle. Let me find Potter—"

"I have told you no, Severus, just as I have said to Lucius." Voldemort stopped moving, his red, serpentine eyes narrowing at Severus. "I know you wish to find out what has become of your wife, as surely as Lucius wished to seek out his son’s fate."

"No, my lord, never—"

"I have no need to seek out Potter, for by the end of the night, Potter will come to me."

Hermione could hear Harry's heart beating against hers, a frantic lub-dub of rising fear. On her other side, Ron's face had drained of all color, and he glanced over at Harry as though for confirmation that Voldemort’s prediction was true.

"I have a problem," Voldemort continued softly, seeing the blank confusion on her husband's face as he turned to look at him. "One that only you can help with."

"My lord?" How Severus could keep his voice so calm, so controlled, in the face of this monster, Hermione did not know. Perhaps it was because it was the only thing keeping him alive; to give way
to the rising panic he surely felt would mean his death.

In response, the Dark Lord raised the wand in his hand, holding it as gently aloft. Hermione was certain that if she attempted a Summoning Charm now, she would surely get it—

"Why doesn't it work for me, Severus?"

Hermione, whose wand had slowly been raised in preparation to cast, paused.

"My—my lord?" There was no denying the confusion in Severus's tone, voicing the same bewilderment felt by the three of them hidden behind the glass. "I do not understand…"

"What is he talking about?" Harry hissed under his breath, his question barely audible. "He's got the wand, hasn't he? He's been using it…"

"That must be the reason he's been staying behind," Ron whispered quietly. "If it's not working for him properly, he wouldn't want to go out and expose himself in battle…"

"But why…?"

"Because he never won that wand," Hermione said softly. "He took it from Dumbledore's grave, but it was Draco…" realization suddenly struck, and she tore her eyes away from Severus to look at Harry. "Draco was the one who disarmed him… even though Se—Sn-Snape was the one to kill him…"

"So, You-Know-Who never gained ownership of the wand?" Ron clarified in an excited, barely-audible exhalation.

Hermione and Harry both nodded.

"I feel no difference between this wand and the one I procured from Ollivander all those years ago," Voldemort continued, interrupting their conversation, and their heads swiveled back around to look at him. A delicate pause, and as though he thought Severus had perhaps not understood him, he repeated: "No difference."

Severus did not speak.

"I have thought long and hard, Severus… do you know why I have called you back from battle?"

She saw Harry squeeze his eyes shut and twitch a hand up to his forehead, clutching his scar. He slowly slid to the ground, pressing his face against the stone beneath them, and Hermione pulled away from the window to grasp his shoulder and force him to look up at her. She searched his eyes, trying to find out what was wrong—was his scar hurting this much, that it could cause him to slump to the ground—?

"Hermione," Ron whispered frantically, and Hermione's head snapped back up to look.

"You have been faithful to me, Severus… or so I thought." Voldemort's next words came out as a sibilant hiss. "Imagine my surprise tonight when I discovered that you had been keeping a secret from me… a secret for twelve long years."

"My lord—"

"A son, Severus." Voldemort's tone was light, but judging by the expression on Harry's face, there was no doubt that his rage was starting to boil over. He was just containing it very, very tightly.
"Why did you never tell me that you had a son?"

Severus seemed unable to speak; Hermione seemed unable to breathe. There was no talking his way out of this. He had lied and kept Selenius's existence so carefully under the radar that now that the Dark Lord had finally caught wind of it, he was going to be uncontrolably angry at this deception. Harry and Ron were staring at each other with eyes widened in disbelief.

Severus finally seemed to find the words he needed. "I… my lord, my wife wished to keep his existence a secret from the world… I—I obliged her, because it was a means of keeping her under my authority…"

"Even from me, Severus?"

"My wife—she feared you above all others, my lord… to tell you was the greatest threat I could ever make to her…" Severus seemed to be struggling to find the right way to appease him. "Your orders were to maintain control of her at any cost…"

"And did you?"

"I went to great lengths to coerce her, to manipulate her, and even on occasion—Imperius her, if I had to." Severus's face, if at all possible, seemed to grow paler as he continued, "My son is young, my lord—he is only a child, I did not think he would be of any concern to you, yet."

"Do not presume to know what does and does not concern me," Voldemort said quietly, but Hermione sensed the seething rage beneath his words. "And yet, were this my only problem with you, I could let you go… I could let you return…"

Hermione saw Severus's face clearly now, as he turned to face Voldemort more fully. "My lord?"

"Despite your purported control over her, your wife has been a great obstacle to my capturing Harry Potter long before it ever came to this battle," the Dark Lord hissed, now suddenly, visibly enraged, like a cobra showing its hood in preparation to strike. "You have been too gentle with her, Severus. Despite my orders to get her out of the way, you have delayed and made excuses as to why you could not. But even beyond that, Severus, you have been my greatest obstacle all along!"

"My lord, I never—My lord knows I only seek to serve—"

"The Elder Wand cannot work for me, Severus, because I was not the one to kill Albus Dumbledore."

Hermione let out a tiny, barely audible whimper at this. Oh no—no… it can't be…

"Twice, my wand of yew failed to kill Potter. Ollivander told me to use another's wand—and so I did. But Lucius's wand shattered, upon meeting Potter's…"

No—no—no…

"The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner, Severus." Voldemort raised his wand, and Hermione jerked forward. "Master the wand, and I master Potter at last!"

He swiped the wand forward, but for a moment, nothing seemed to happen; both Hermione and Severus thought perhaps he had been given a reprieve—perhaps this had merely been a test, for the Dark Lord to see if Severus would try to kill him first rather than be killed—a test of loyalty, that was all—
But then Hermione saw the floating sphere in which Nagini resided glide forward, and before the snake's target could do more than let out a yell, it sphere had encased him, head and shoulders—

Voldemort let out a kind of garbled, strangled, raspy sort of hiss, and before Hermione could lift herself up to stop the snake, Nagini struck. Hermione opened her mouth, but all that came out was a choked, whimpering sound that was lost in the wake of her husband's terrible scream, as the snake's fangs tore into his neck.

He sank to his knees, unable to stand, though he struggled to push the magical sphere off of him; Nagini drew back, and with a flick of his wand, Voldemort lifted the cage up, where it rolled back, its occupant hissing and coiling and flickering her tongue at her fatally wounded prey. Support gone, Hermione watched with numb, gaping horror as Severus slumped sideways to the ground. Blood gushed from his neck—there was so much blood…

"I regret it," Voldemort said coldly. "Fear not, my faithful servant; your wife and son will join you soon enough."

A gesture at the cage, and it floated away from her husband's body as Voldemort gathered himself up and left through the canal archway. Harry grabbed Hermione and yanked her down to the ground as low as possible, Ron following suit, as Voldemort passed just mere feet away from them in the darkness.

"Come, Nagini…"

And then he disappeared up the very steps that Hermione, Harry, and Ron had come down from. Hermione lay there, unmoving, unable to breathe or think as they waited for Voldemort's footsteps to fade; and then with a loud cry, she forced herself to her knees, yanking herself from Harry's grip, and threw herself at the window. Her shoulder connected, and it swung inward with a loud, squealing creak of protest as she half-tumbled half-crawled inside.

She staggered over to where Severus lay and with shaking hands, pressed her fingers against the wounds, trying to staunch the flow of blood. He was gasping for breath, his breathing ragged, and his eyes still open. They flickered to her, and then widened as Harry and Ron came into view, quickly kneeling beside their friend.

Something silvery and blue was leaking out of his eyes and ears, mixing with the blood that pooled on the floor. He struggled to speak, but nothing came out but a horrible, rasping gargle; he lifted one hand up and grasped the front of Harry's robes.

"What are you waiting for?" Hermione cried, turning to look at the boys. Harry was gazing down at Severus in horror. "Get something! A phial—anything—"

In the next moment, Harry had summoned a small phial in his hand and was bending down to collect the silvery blue substance that were memories. With a cry of frustration as blood continued to gush past her fingers, Hermione pulled them away and picked up her wand with her sticky fingers.

"Harry, take that up to the castle. Ron—Ron, go with him—"

"What?" Harry said. "We're not leaving you here—you're the one who said we shouldn't split up—"

"You can't stay here, but I have to! Harry, go!"

"I'll stay," Ron said, looking ill as he stared down at Severus's face; he was deathly pale now, and his gaze had grown unfocused. "Harry, go—take a look at those memories, I'll stay here with Hermione… here," Ron added, fumbling with his belt. "Take the sword with you—"
Hermione did not know if Harry had left or not, when she heard footsteps fading into the distance, and Severus's hand slumped back to the ground. Without bothering to roll up her sleeves, she pointed her wand at Severus's neck, frantically trying to remember the healing spell he had taught her. The same one he had used on Malfoy last year, when Harry had nearly killed him with Sectumsempra. The one that was like song.

At once, the blood on the floor of the shack stopped pooling out, halting; and then slowly, it began to flow in reverse, like the bird in the bell jar at the Department of Mysteries that had returned to the egg. It slowly poured back into his body, washing clean off the floor as though it had never stained it in the first place, and slowly returned to its circulation.

Without a word, without breaking her incantation, she pulled her beaded bag out of her robes and tossed it to Ron, praying that he would know what to do. She heard him rummage around, and a moment later, he set down several potion-filled phials on the ground. She watched as Severus struggled to remain awake, his eyes flickering hazily from her to Ron, and then locking back onto her.

And then he whispered, in a terrible, hoarse rasp, "Hermione… look… at… me…"

"Don't," she pleaded, as she ended the spell and hurried to uncork the essence of dittany. The spell should have healed the wound, but Nagini's venom was preventing it. The most she was able to do was restore the blood to his system, and now that she was no longer keeping it there, it was once again starting to gush anew. She managed to free the cap with fumbling fingers, set the phial down, and began unbuttoning the front of his robes with trembling hands, freeing his neck. "Don't speak yet."

"Hermione," Ron began. His eyes were wide, and he was staring first at Severus, then at her, with unmasked confusion and disbelief. "What—"

"Ron—don't—not right now—" she pulled the last button free, tugging the front of his robes aside, and then yanking the frock coat free, and tore off the buttons on the white shirt underneath, exposing his neck and chest fully to her. She picked up the dittany, and hastily began to apply it.

"But I—I don't understand…" he watched as the wound began to close, slowly, and comprehension suddenly dawned. "No—that's not possible—"

"Ron—"

"I mean, I thought it might be possible, but I didn't believe—"

"Ron—"

"How long, Hermione?" Ron did not sound angry. He sounded too stunned to be angry. "I don't understand how, but—"

"Weasley…" Severus groaned, closing his eyes. "Shut… up."

"You can't take points off of me anymore, Snape." Ron began sifting through the bottles he had laid out. "And right now, I'm not particularly afraid of being hexed." He gave a nervous laugh, which seemed to be laced with a bit of hysteria, the kind that happened when you were trying to remain calm, and the only other alternative was to completely lose it. Severus looked too weak to glare at him. "Which ones do you need, Hermione?"

"A bezoar—there should be a box of bezoars in there—and the red potion is the anti-venom… the same kind we used for your dad…"
Ron passed her the tiny crystal phial of bright, blood-red potion, and then began rummaging through the beaded bag again. "Start talking, Hermione. Explain this to me."

"Not now, Ron—"

"He’s not getting up any time soon, and if you're staying here to make sure he lives, we've got all the time in the world." He pulled out a grubby-looking box, and set it down. Weakly, he added, "It… it should have been obvious, shouldn’t it? All those clues… the similarities… you're Harry's godmother, aren’t you?"

"I—I—" Hermione looked down at Severus helplessly as she uncorked the anti-venom, and tipped it to his lips. He choked on it a bit as the liquid slid inside, and she tilted the phial up until every drop had been dribbled out, and then she set it aside to return her attention to the wound at his neck. It was starting to close faster now, and with more surety, as the anti-venom went to work. Relief flowed into her, and she swooped down to press a kiss his forehead, hope rising to the fore.

And then she looked back up at Ron. "Yes."

Severus's eyes fluttered open again, and his hand rose to weakly cup her face. She grasped it, holding it in place as she watched his life slowly restore itself. Ron passed a shriveled-looking stone to her, looking apprehensive and visibly disturbed by the sight before him, but he made no comment; she took it, pressing it to his mouth. She raised his head, stroking the underside of his throat to help him swallow it, and then laid his head on her lap. He was healing. She had done all she could—and thank the gods, it had worked—and now all that was left was for him to rest.

His breathing was still shallow, but the wound had closed, though it was still red and raw, and a few dribbles of blood were still working their way down the side of his neck as the dittany waited for the anti-venom to finish its work. She wiped it clean with the sleeve of her robe, and then gently lowered her husband's hand to his side, stroking the hair out of his face before finally looking up at Ron.

She opened her mouth to speak, but instead quite nearly jumped to her feet when a high, cold voice spoke into her ear, as though it were from someone standing right next to her:

"You have fought valiantly," Voldemort began, his voice reverberating through the stone walls. "Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained heavy losses. If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste. Lord Voldemort is merciful," the voice continued. "I command my forces to retreat immediately. You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured."

Ron and Hermione looked at each other.

"I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you. You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences. This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me."

Hermione saw the horror on her face reflected clearly on Ron’s. Harry. Dear gods. She prayed he wouldn't believe a word of it; everyone who was fighting was doing it because they had faith in him, and Harry couldn't afford to be distracted from his goal—kill Nagini, then kill Voldemort—

"One hour."
Silence fell, and then almost pleadingly, knowing she couldn't deal with this threat and her friend's abject disapproval right now. This wasn't a time for Ron to blow his stack, and she couldn't resort to her usual tactic of turning cold and unresponsive when she needed her friends at her aid and Harry's more than ever.

"Please don't be angry…"

"I'm not angry," Ron said honestly, shifting to his knees to stare down at Severus with a slightly ill expression. "I'm just—I don't know what I am. Disbelieving, maybe. Disgusted too, probably, although I'm really trying not to pay attention to that…" he struggled for a moment. "But I mean, we've been friends since first year, and this…it doesn't make sense. I mean—he killed Professor Dumbledore…"

His eyes suddenly flickered from Severus to her. "And—Hermione, he was our professor!"

"Not in my time, he wasn't," Hermione countered. "He was my classmate back then, not my professor."

"What do you mean 'back then'?" Ron demanded.

Severus closed his eyes. His face was still a deathly pallor, drained of blood. "Tell him," he said hoarsely.

Hermione swallowed, and gathered up her courage. "Ron, do you remember the time-turner I used in my third year?"

"Of course. Not that I found out until the end of the year…"

"After I turned it in, I turned right around and asked for it back," Hermione said quietly. "I kept it with me until fifth year."

"Why didn't you use it to stop You-Know-Who from coming back in fourth—?"

"I couldn't, Ron. Professor Dumbledore stopped me—he said that I couldn't use time to erase all evil, and he was right, because if I'd done that, I would have just delayed his coming further. At the very least, Harry was still alive…"

"Right, right," Ron said, holding his hands up. "Okay. So you kept the time-turner behind our backs, and then what?"

Hermione looked him squarely in the eyes. "When Umbridge caught the D.A, I tried to use the time-turner to go back and find out who had betrayed us, and stop it from happening again. But I was running through the halls while trying to change the dials, and while running down a flight of stairs, I… tripped."

"Tripped," Ron repeated dubiously.

"I got thrown about twenty years back in time," Hermione said. "I went from 1996 to 1977. That's where I met Dumbledore again, and he told me that there wasn't a way to send me back to my original time." She laughed, although there was a slight edge of weak hysteria to it. "Imagine my horror. I mean, I was so naïve at that time… I thought Dumbledore could fix anything. But he couldn't, and he told me that I would just have to make myself a part of the time that I'd ended up in."

Ron goggled at her. She continued, "I grew up with the Marauders—James, Sirius, and Remus were my best friends." She looked down at Severus. "And he… well, at first we didn't get along, but we
eventually came to a bit of an understanding…”

Severus let out a weak, barely audible mutter at this. His silky smooth timbre was gone; the damage done to his voice had not yet been repaired, and so it came out as a hoarse rasp: "Insufferable… know-it-all."

Ron gave her a deeply disturbed look as though to say, *Did you really marry this git?*

Hermione merely grinned sheepishly, as she gently pulled a lock of hair out of Severus's face. "Obstinate arse."

Ron's eyes widened as Severus merely let out a weak huff of annoyance. Hermione chuckled, feeling something like giddy relief now, and continued her tale. "Like I said, we came to a bit of an understanding. We… when we were both graduated from Hogwarts, we were both already working for the Order." The smile slid off her face now, and she gazed at Ron with a defensive, wary look. "Severus has always been a double-agent for the Order, Ron… but I…” she struggled to put it in terms that Ron would understand. "A little under eighteen years ago, I became Severus's handler. I was the one he reported to, the go-between for him and Dumbledore."

He stared at her.

"Essentially, I've been working for the Order before you were born… or before I was born, for that matter. It's enough to make anybody's head spin, to be honest," Hermione explained, "but that's how it was."

"So that's why Dumbledore trusted Snape all these years," Ron said, with something akin to awe. "Because of…you."

"Partly, I suppose," Hermione admitted, and then added pointedly, "but Severus has proven his loyalty to the Order many times over."

"Dumbledore—"

"Albus was already dying," Hermione said quietly. "You saw what happened to his hand over the summer. Severus and I were the first to see it—Severus was the one who stopped the curse from spreading further. He gave him more time."

Ron gaped at her.

"He didn't have long to live, Ron. As soon as he knew he had less than a year left, he made Severus promise to kill him in Malfoy's place." Hermione stroked her husband's hair soothingly, as she added, "Severus didn't murder the Headmaster. He killed him on his orders—it was assisted suicide. And,” she added, seeing the look on Ron's face, "he made me promise that if Severus should fail, I was to do it in his stead. Fortunately, it did not come to that."

Ron sat there for a moment, fingering one of the phials. He looked as though he had been struck dumb. At last, he slowly shook his head.

"Unbelievable," he said weakly.

"You're… taking this rather well," Hermione tried cautiously.

"It's not—it's not like I haven't had time to get used to the idea," Ron said shortly, now packing the phials back into the bag. "I mean, I thought it was ridiculous—long shot, you know—but I mused on it a few times, when I saw the pictures back in Grimmauld Place, so the idea… I mean, the larger
shock is knowing that I was right, and not… you know." He shook his head again. "Harry's godmother. Merlin's beard. And all this time he was looking, you were there right in front of him."

He paused to let this sink in, and then said suddenly, "Well, there goes that theory out the window."

"Which theory?" Hermione asked dryly.

"Harry and I thought that maybe you—you know, his godmother—was the one who gave us the sword," Ron said. "Of course, now we're still left wondering… wait," he said, as Hermione started grinning. "What—do you know who—why are you laughing?"

Hermione snorted with suppressed amusement into her hand for a moment, and then said, "Tell me, what was the Patronus again?"

"A lioness," Ron deadpanned. "But you were in Godric's Hollow, you said so yourself…"

"Describe it," Hermione said, interested. "I never got more about it from the two of you."

"Well," Ron said, scratching the back of his head self-consciously, "I—er—well, at first, Harry and I were afraid of it, but even though it looked dangerous, it was… it felt gentle. Like it wanted to help us. It actually made us feel like we were a bunch of cubs being led back home, so we sort of decided to follow it, after that." A thought struck him. "You're a lion Animagus, but that's not your Patronus."

"No, it isn't. But I suppose, in a way, I did help you get the sword."

She waited for it to sink in; when it did, he reared up at once. "No—please tell me you're joking!"

Hermione shook her head, shifting her seat slightly and pulling Severus up further onto her lap, so that his head was resting more comfortably. "It was Severus's job to give Harry the sword. He stuck around to make sure you got it, and then left."

Ron moaned openly at this, and buried his face in his hands. "Fantastic. I'm dead."

"What? Why?" Hermione asked, bewildered.

"Because—because— when Harry opened the locket, it tried to fight back—"

"Enough, Weasley," Severus rasped, interrupting him. He struggled to move, but Hermione held him down. "It doesn't… matter."

Ron glanced down distrustfully at him. "You're not going to hex me for what I saw…sir?" he added as an afterthought, as though he figured that now he knew his hated ex-Professor was no longer his enemy, he ought to be a bit more respectful.

Severus closed his eyes for a moment, and then with great effort, opened them to look at Ron. He seemed to have no energy left in him to sneer or snarl; Hermione was amazed that he even had what it took to speak at this point.

"I… know what it's like… to want someone you can't have," he said, his voice so quiet it was barely audible. "Or to… pay a price for it… it's not worth it."

Ron stared at him as though he had never seen Severus quite right before, and then looked up at Hermione in amazement.

"Did he just turn a new leaf, or has he always been like this after a near-death experience?"
Hermione opened her mouth, prepared to make a snarky retort, but Severus got there first. His concern, however, was not with Ron's comment.

"Hermione…" He grimaced, turning his head to the side. "The Dark Lord knows… about Selenius. Where…?"

"I sent him away with Draco," Hermione said. "They've gone to Tine Cottage. They're both out of the way."

Severus looked at her with ill-focused relief. "Good," he whispered. And then closed his eyes.

~o~O~o~

Selenius and Draco carefully pushed open the door to the Vanishing Cabinet, stepping out into the gloomy shop of Borgin and Burkes. It was thankfully empty, and as they clambered out, Draco pressed himself carefully against the door, peering out into the street, before pushing to open it. He let out an exclamation of frustration as it refused to budge; it was locked.

"How do we get out of here?" Selenius whispered.

"We'll find a way," Draco flicked his wand at the door. "Alohamora!"

He pressed his weight against it, and then frowned. "I should have known it wouldn't work. The security in here is too strong for that—was worth a try, though…"

"Maybe we could get through a window…"

"They're charmed too, no doubt. Borgin keeps this place watertight." Draco banged his fist against the door in frustration. "Bollocks." He turned around to look at Selenius. "Don't touch anything in the room. I'm going to check the back and the counter; Borgin might have left some spare keys around."

With that, he disappeared. Selenius, who had been about to pick up a dusty-looking book, quickly pulled his hand back. Hoping to find a way out, he carefully picked his way through the cluttered room. He found nothing, and was about to suggest to Draco that they go back through the Vanishing Cabinet and try to get the Room of Requirement to give them a passage to someplace else when sudden footsteps caught his attention. He peered out through one of the windows.

Four cloaked and masked figures were approaching the shop, surrounding a weary and frightened looking man. Selenius quickly pulled back as the man pulled a set of keys from his pocket and began unlocking the door, and scrabbled away to find a hiding place. The door opened, and Selenius ducked behind a dusty table, praying they didn't see him.

"…the cabinet's still there, sir," the man said warily, stepping back to allow the four to enter. "It'll still lead to Hogwarts, if its pair is there."

"Good, good," said a deep, raspy voice. "We're a bit late to the party, but it don't matter none—we'll find ourselves right in the middle of it, just like last time."

One of the other cloaked figures let out a chuckle.

Selenius saw Draco reappear, and freeze at the window. He made to draw back, but it was too late; he had been spotted. But he spoke first.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.
"What are you doing here in my shop?" the man demanded.

"On the Dark Lord's orders, of course," Draco said superciliously. "But I'm not talking to you. What are you lot doing here?"

There was a rustling sound as hoods were removed, and Selenius, though he could not see them, saw Draco's face suddenly turn pale.

"So what's the Dark Lord orderin' you to do, if ye don't mind me askin'?" one of them said with a laugh. "We're all suppose t'be at Hogwarts, Malfoy."

"The Dark Lord asked me to fetch him something," Draco cobbled together. "I had to leave and come through here. It's fortunate that you came," he added, "because this place is too well warded. I couldn't get out."

One of them grunted. "Be on yer way then, Malfoy. Borgin, leave the store unlocked fer tonight; we might have more comin' soon."

"I—yes, Mr. Greyback, sir." Borgin bowed low, just in the corner of Selenius's view, and then backed away. "I'll—I'll just be on my way, then—"

There was the sound of boots against the floor, and with horror, Selenius looked up in time to see one of the masked figures coming around the other side of the table. He was trapped. Without a moment to spare, he pulled out his wand, pointing it at the approaching man. It was now or never.

"Incendio!" he whispered.

There was a sudden shout as the man's robes caught fire; Selenius scrambled out from under the table, and made a dash for the open door. Jets of green light shot past him, and he threw himself to the side, narrowly avoiding another flash. Draco was out seconds later, firing a spell behind his shoulder, as he slammed the door shut.

"Move, you fool!"

There was no hesitation as both boys made a run for it, feet pounding as they sprinted down the street. The door to the shop was blasted open a moment later, and the two of them ducked down the nearest alley as the four Death Eaters followed their trail, howling in hot pursuit.

"That was a god-damned idiotic thing to do!" Draco panted, as he grabbed Selenius and yanked him down another, smaller alleyway. They scrambled up a trashcan, and hoisted themselves on a nearby house whose sloped roof was just a few feet above the ground; with barely a moment to spare to catch their balance, they ran, crossing over the other shops and houses below. A spell blasted the part of the roof behind them away, causing Selenius to lose his balance. He staggered for a moment, waving his arms frantically to grab hold of something, and then found himself falling backwards.

"Selenius!"

He hit the balcony of one of the shops with a hard thump, and let out a whimper of pain, quickly rising to his feet in time to see Draco wheel around, brandishing his wand at their four pursuers. Jets of light streamed by overhead, and Selenius crawled out of view, under the awning, desperately trying to think of a plan. Draco was the only one who knew how to Apparate…

But he had a Portkey! He glanced down at his wrist. He still had the Portkey—why he hadn't thought to use it before, he didn't know, but he had it—
…and the vial of Felix Felicis.

Without another moment's hesitation, Selenius thrust his hand in his pockets, and pulled out the tiny phial. He was alarmed to see that it had cracked down the middle from his fall, but had not yet leaked. He tore the top off, and for a split moment, hesitated; and then he took a tiny sip, before recorking the bottle.

For a moment, nothing seemed to happen. Then an idea formed, a solid plan; none of the Death Eaters were paying attention to him. They were all focused on Draco. He knew that if he was quiet in climbing back up on the roof—and this he began to do, carefully stepping on the balcony rail and swinging himself back up—he could distract the Death Eaters and Portkey both himself and Draco out of there…

He pocketed the phial, reaching down for a roof single that he fallen onto the balcony with him, and pulled his arm back—and then threw it.

It cartwheeled through the air and violently smacked into the head of the dirty, ragged-looking man in the middle, causing him to totter off-balance for a moment; the man turned around with a snarl, and Selenius pointed his wand at him.

But before he could strike, the man toppled over as Draco's spell struck him; jets of light flew in his direction now, and Selenius ducked behind a slanted chimney, the spells missing him by a hair; but the distraction had cost the remaining three, for with their backs to Draco, to older boy now had a clear and unimpeded shot at them all.

"Diffindo!"

The portion of roof that the three Death Eaters were standing on cracked; they slipped and let out yells of surprise as they lost their footing, tumbling down toward the street, as the hunk of roof came loose and plummeted away. Selenius flinched as they hit the ground, and grimaced when the section of roof fell on top of one of them, crushing the man. But Felix would not let him linger for long, as the surviving two staggered back to their feet. It urged him to be quick and to hurry, and he did so, sprinting over to Draco and throwing his arms around his friend's midsection.

"—Padfoot!"

A yank behind his navel, and the world spun away.

Seconds later, a jet of green light flew through the very spot the two of them had been standing in, hit a higher wall, and promptly set the building aflame.

~o~O~o~

"We should get back up to the castle," Hermione said, checking her watch. "The hour's almost up. We need to find Harry."

Severus was sitting up now, leaning against the wall; he looked in no condition to walk. In fact, he barely appeared to be conscious, flickering in and out of awareness. Hermione was adamant that they not leave him there. But neither could they drag or carry him back up to the castle in this climate; he would be attacked before an explanation could be made.

That was when Hermione finally revealed the better use of her watch.

"Kingsley gave me this for my seventeenth birthday," she explained to Ron, as he hooked an arm underneath Severus's shoulder, while she took the other, extending her free hand out for him to grab.
"I spent an entire summer training under him and Moody, back when he was an Auror. It's keyed to port us to the Headmaster's office no matter how many times I do it—here—"

She gestured for Ron to pull the dial out, and he twisted it once. He glanced at her as though to check that he had done it right, and at her approving nod, he pushed it back in. Hermione jerked as a force seemed to yank her forward from somewhere behind her naval. The world spun dizzily around them, and then a few seconds later, it was thankfully over, as they landed on the firm ground of the Headmaster's Office.

It had not been penetrated by the rage of battle yet, though as they landed on their feet with an audible thump, Hermione looked up in time to see that Harry had long since gone; Dumbledore's pensieve sat on the desk, filled with fresh memories, but no Harry. She gestured for Ron to help her haul Severus into one of the chairs, where he fell back into it, his head lolling to the side. He had finally lost the battle of wills to remain conscious.

She bit her lower lip, and then looked pleadingly at Ron.

"I can't leave him…"

"I'll go find Harry," Ron said bracingly. "Stay here with him—we'll figure out what to do next. We've still got the snake to take care of, and then You-Know-Who…"

Hermione nodded, looking worried.

"We're almost there, Hermione," Ron said, placing a hand on her shoulder, before pulling her into a one-armed hug. "This stupid battle's almost over. We'll beat him yet."

Hermione threw her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "Be safe," she said, with as much conviction as she could muster. "I'll join you as soon as I can—I'm going to try and get him up to the Room of Requirement and out of here, someplace safe. I'll be back by your side before you know it."

"Just don't be late," Ron joked.

Hermione looked at him for a moment, prepared to speak, when a sudden clink caught her attention.

The two of them stared blankly at each other, uncertain as to where the sound had come from, and then Hermione suddenly let out a squeal, hopping on one foot in a hurried effort to tear her shoe off.

"—hot hot hot—ow!"

"You know," said the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, his tone perfectly conversational as Hermione yanked off her shoe, setting her foot down on the ground with some measure of relief before shaking it, "I was rather expecting you to find it sooner."

Something gold fell out of the shoe and hit the ground.

"After all, I did not think it was so far-fetched a phrase, to use the words 'don't be late'— although I'm quite pleased that I banked right, on giving you those socks… although better late than never, I suppose…"

Hermione and Ron both stared down at the tiny hourglass on a chain that was lying innocently on the floor, save for its faint emanating glow. It was slowly burning through in the elaborate carpet of the Headmaster's office. And then Hermione peered down at her shoe. A hole had been burned clear through it.

"It was quite a challenge to repair it, and it is still rather hot, but I did a rather fine job if I do say so
myself," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "Wouldn't you agree, Mrs. Snape?"

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Hermione and Ron spun into the middle of the kitchen of Tine Cottage through the assistance of an illegal Portkey, Severus held up between the both of them, unconscious, as they came through. Hermione had made the choice to reveal the Secret of her home to Ron, but she had not been counting on the reaction of its occupants; immediately, Selenius leapt out of his seat and Malfoy, who had been pacing, had brandished his wand in surprise at their sudden arrival.

Selenius's face drained of color as he took in his father's bloodied clothes, half torn open at the neck, and in disturbing disarray.

"Is it over?" Malfoy demanded, looking wary at them both; he seemed torn between hanging back and coming forward to help them. "Where are my parents? What happened?"

"It's not over," Hermione said quickly, as Ron let out a grunt of effort before hefting Severus half-onto the kitchen table, "but he's been hurt, and we couldn't leave him with the other injured."

"What is he doing here?" Ron demanded, jerking his head in Malfoy's direction.

"He's here with Selenius," Hermione said, panting slightly as she relieved herself of her husband's dead weight. "I invited him in—this place is Secret-Kept. He wouldn't be here if I didn't want him to be."

"And—him?" Malfoy said, with a disbelieving sneer at Ron.

Ron glared at him. "Unlike you, Malfoy, I happen to be her friend."

Selenius tugged on Hermione's sleeve; she had very nearly forgotten he was there, so wrapped up as she was in Severus's survival and the brewing conflict between Malfoy and Ron. She looked down.

"Is—is he going to be all right?" Selenius looked scared. "What happened to him?"

Hermione forced her own fears back down as she fought to give her son a reassurance, squeezing his arm comfortingly. "He'll be fine. If you want to make yourself useful, go upstairs and grab a pillow and some towels from the hall closet." She turned her attention back to the two older boys, the enmity radiating between them like unchecked electricity, and added pointedly, "We can only stay here an hour before we have to go back, so we need to move—quickly."

Selenius took off, his feet pounding up the stairs as he left. Ron looked at Malfoy with an expression of intense dislike, which was only matched by the blond boy's glare, but reluctantly backed off. Malfoy did not. Hermione pursed her lips into a thin line, and then addressed them both.

"Draco, right now, I don't have the time to contend with house rivalry," she said, as she turned away to rummage through the cupboard for some pots. Finding one she liked, she set it under the tap and
began filling it with water. "Either make yourself useful, or stay out of the way. There's already enough fighting going on at Hogwarts, and I won't have any of it in my house."

Malfoy narrowed his eyes at her, threw one last sneer at Ron, and then left the room. He had to quickly pull to the side to avoid being barreled over by Selenius as the younger boy came back, and Hermione brought the water to the table, setting it down on one of the chairs.

"Actually, it's probably best if you both go," she said, nodding at the stairs in other room. "You too, Ron. I'll call you down when I'm done."

"I want to stay," Selenius said, face set.

"Selenius, as soon as I'm gone, you can stay here all you like," Hermione said wearily, "but right now, please just go."

Selenius rather looked as though he would like to argue, but Malfoy graciously took her words to heart and made himself useful, grasping Selenius by the back of his robes and subtly yanking him back. The younger boy left, looking both sullen and worried, but without further protest. Ron made to follow, stopping at the doorway. He cast a wary, nervous look at Severus, and then turned to her.

"Call me if you need anything."

Hermione gave him a look that was completely depleted of energy, but managed to give him a faint smile. "Thank you, Ron."

He gave an awkward nod, and then left, closing the door behind him. Privacy at last, and with fifty minutes left, Hermione began stripping her husband down. She was all business, trying to get this done as quickly and efficiently as possible. His trousers were fine, so she left them on, but everything else above that had to go. Ribs stuck out in a way Hermione had never seen before, and tiny scars crisscrossed his body in places she had never recalled. New ones, fresh ones. She grabbed a washcloth, dipped it into the pot of warm water, and began wiping away the blood.

She could have magicked it away, to be sure, but she wanted to do it by hand. There was something about being gentle where a spell was harsh and indiscriminate, and it would take her mind off of the war, if only for a little while. She had taken him away from Hogwarts so that she could bring him to a safe place and get him properly tended to, as he would have been if she had been able to take him to the Great Hall with the other wounded.

Once she and Ron returned to Hogwarts, they would use the Time-Turner to regain the hour they had lost in bringing her husband here. Certainly, she was not looking forward to using it again; once had been enough. But she weighed Severus's welfare over her wariness of the object, and it was settled. The tiny hourglass necklace was still hot, hotter than could be borne to touch, but the chain was merely lukewarm to the touch, which meant that Hermione was able to dangle the pendant at length while it was in use. The dials, too, had cooled sufficiently to be fiddled with if she was careful. It was merely the hourglass itself that still burned as though it had been left in a blazing fire for too long.

Twenty years. Over twenty years, and it had not yet finished cooling. Hermione was amazed.

What Hermione found even more shocking, and this she mulled over as she scrubbed the caked blood from her husband's neck, was that the headmaster had been able to repair it.

And he hadn't even told her. Hermione felt a stirring of discontent at this notion. All year, she, Harry, and Ron had been stumbling about half-blind in their quest for Horcruxes, with only vague clues and
a fairy-tale riddle to guide them. They had been operating on so little information, which Dumbledore had withheld, and Hermione was confused and angry as to why. What could possibly be gained from not giving them everything they needed? Why force them to follow the winding path of the Peverell brothers instead of giving them a solid foundation for guidance?

And why give her the Time-Turner now, after he was dead? Had she been meant to use it earlier, shortly after she first received the socks? She doubted he had bequeathed her the object, hidden as nothing more than the knitting pattern on a pair of socks, as a means of saving Severus. He could have not known something would happen to Severus—

*The Elder Wand belongs to the wizard who killed its last owner...*

But that was not true. Wands switched from hand to hand by virtue of having been won. The fact that Draco’s wand worked for Harry proved that, as well as Ollivander’s testimony. Merely defeating the wielder and taking the wand against their will would prove sufficient to switch its allegiance.

Draco had been the one to disarm Dumbledore. He had defeated him, removed his wand.

But Dumbledore had been counting on Severus—

Hermione jerked to a halt suddenly, staring down at the blood-stained cloth in her hands. Dumbledore was no fool. Surely he knew that by killing him, in the course of things as he had planned, Severus would become the new master of the wand—and that Tom Riddle would surely seek out such a wand, knowing his own was useless against Harry— He would not care about winning a wand when merely killing its owner would do—

She clenched her fingers around the cloth, squeezing pinkish water from it.

She had been a fool. Severus had been a fool. They had all been played for ignorant fools. Of course Dumbledore alone would have known—and certainly, he would not have said a word about it to either of them. Or to Harry; to tell Harry he had to defeat Severus would have diverted him from his real goal of Horcrux-hunting. Now that it was all said and done, the pieces were starting to fall into place, and Hermione was not liking the picture one bit.

Dumbledore knew that one way or another—that was, if things had gone as he schemed— Severus would have to be defeated by the next person who intended to wield the Elder Wand. Whether it was at Harry’s hands or Voldemort’s, he would have faced off and then been at the mercy of someone who either hated him or considered him expendable. But Voldemort had gotten there first, and Harry—by pure luck, Harry had gained an opportunity, however unwittingly, to win the wand’s allegiance from Draco…

Which meant several things. Firstly, Dumbledore had set her husband up to die. Secondly, he had given her the Time-Turner, though whether it was to mitigate the first item or for another purpose, she was not entirely certain. Thirdly, Harry was now the master of the Elder Wand, which he did not have, and which Voldemort currently possessed, but did not have the allegiance of. These three things whirled furiously through her mind, and it was all Hermione could do to force her hands—trembling now with fury—to set the stained cloth down and pick up her want to spell bandages around Severus’s neck.

But what was the *point* of all of this? Why had Dumbledore set things up so that, ideally, Harry would have the wand? Power was not the answer—of all things Harry needed, spell strength was not one of them. Sheer firepower would not defeat Voldemort. What was so special about the wand, that Dumbledore had gone through great lengths to ensure that Harry would…
Hermione paused this train of thought for a moment, switching track as she recalled that the wand was one of three powerful magical objects. Of which they were positive Harry owned at least one of, if not two. But why would Dumbledore insist they gather those three? The three Hallows would supposedly make one the master of Death—Voldemort refused to die, had gone to great lengths to circumvent it—was this Dumbledore's answer to laying the monster to rest once and for all? Especially, perhaps, if Harry was unable to destroy all of Voldemort's Horcruxes?

Which meant… that they were still short a Hallow, and still short a Horcrux. It was like a card game, where they had two sets of cards that, if either was played, would be a winning hand—but both sets were short a final item. Two ways to win, which Dumbledore had provided them with, and which they were unable to fulfill.

Hermione slammed her hand down on the table with an audible cry of frustration. They were so close—so close—they had been given so many clues, Dumbledore had given her the book that led to the Hallows, and had mentored Harry in understanding the Horcruxes—

Hermione's eyes widened. He had given her the book… had given Ron the Deluminator… they had figured out the purpose of both. But he had bequeathed Harry the Snitch, which they had yet to figure out, and which had read I open at the close.

I open at the close.

"The close..." Hermione muttered, bracing herself against the table and bowing her head, deep in thought. "I open at the close... the close... but surely not..."

Surely it did not refer to death?

Hermione recalled the ugly, cracked stone set in the old ring that Dumbledore had worn the night he had come back delirious and with his hand blackened. Harry had recalled the scratch marks on it—the Peverell crest, which Voldemort had likely turned into a horcrux because of its significance to his heritage, ignorant of its true power. Harry had already voiced suspicions that Dumbledore had put the stone in the snitch. All that was left to clear the way was to figure out how to get it to open.

I open at the close.

The third Hallow. The third part of the Deathly Hallows. Objects that, as legend had it, had been made by Death himself.

Hermione's blood ran cold.

At this moment, the close was now interchangeable with death. The Snitch surely opened when Harry was close to dying—but why?

I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me...

Dumbledore would surely have foreseen this moment. Harry had the Cloak. Whether or not he had the wand in his hand, it owed its allegiance to him as surely as if he were carrying it. And concealed in that tiny, fluttering golden ball… undoubtedly… was the Stone.

But why? Hermione let out a strangled sound of rage and frustration, turning around to chuck the washcloth at the window, where it splattered against the pane and then sank slowly onto the counter. Why would Dumbledore set Harry up to die? He had loved that boy, she knew; however manipulative Dumbledore was, he had been extremely fond of Harry, and unconventional and occasionally, waywardly wrong though he was, had always kept Harry's best interests at heart. Why,
then, would he send him to slaughter? Why?

She paused, forcing herself to breathe in deeply, to calm herself and think rationally. What if, when Harry had all three Hallows, he really was the so-called master of death? However one interpreted the term, that either meant he could control someone else's death… or his own. But how? The logistics did not make sense to her. What was the point of giving Harry the tools he needed to avert death, and then expect him to walk into it willingly into its embrace? What was to be gained?

There was something here she was missing, but she could feel she was getting closer to it. She was circling the answer now, like a lioness assessing its prey, trying to identify just what it was, despite knowing it was there. There was something there.

Harry had a unique link to Voldemort. Perhaps his temporary death would result in Voldemort's? It had to have something to do with the link between the two that Dumbledore had remarked upon so often—the scar on Harry's head that acted as a veritable alarm bell and scrying tool into Tom Riddle's conscious. Killing Harry would not kill Voldemort—however connected they were, despite the Prophecy's words, the death of one would not result in the other's simultaneously. But the Hallows would prevent Harry from dying. So what was it that Dumbledore was seeking to have killed with Harry in the process, without Harry actually dying…?

The link… his scar… the fact that Harry had spent most of fifth year complaining that it prickled, having funny dreams that fed off of Voldemort's obsession, even going along for the ride as he witnessed Voldemort possess Nagini—

Nagini! Hermione shot up straight. Nagini was a horcrux, and the only being Voldemort was known to have possessed after returning to his body—other than Harry—was his snake. And according to Dumbledore he had tried to possess Harry, back in the Department of Mysteries—the snake was a Horcrux, and though Dumbledore had never said it outright, Harry was inexplicably linked to Voldemort—

Harry was able to read Voldemort's moods. His thoughts.

He had a piece of Voldemort inside him.

She gasped, as the final piece fell into place. How she had gone so long without realizing it, she did not know; perhaps she had realized it all along and had merely been in denial, did not want to believe it, had willfully ignored it because the alternative was too horrible to contemplate—but now she had finally gone hunting for these answers, and they had smacked her in the face without mercy. Because as horrible as it was, the truth would still stand when she sought it.

Harry was a horcrux.

~o~O~o~

Ron sat on the floor, absently thumbing his deluminator, watching the orbs of light fly to and fro as he played with it. Selenius lay back on the bed and staring at the ceiling as though it held the answers to the universe. Malfoy was sitting against the opposite wall, looking increasingly irate, until he finally lost his temper.

"Weasley, will you stop it?" he snapped.

Ron clicked the deluminator once more, plunging them into darkness again. "Sorry," he said, not sounding at all apologetic.

"Oh for the love of—turn the lights back on, you idiot!"
Click. The orbs of light returned to the lamp on the bedside table and brought life back to the candles on the desk near the window, bathing the room in gentle orange light.

"…better." Malfoy was curled up now, hugging his arms around his knees, and glaring out into the room. Gone was the confident, aristocratic snob; in his place was a boy thrust into manhood far too early, and had found himself in over his head, and now cared for nothing more than the fate of his family. He was under the hospitality of a Muggle-born he had despised all his life, and who held his fate in her hands in more way than one. Suffice to say, he was not in any mood to be pleasant.

Ron angled his head to look over at Selenius, and cleared his throat. The boy turned his head to look at him, raising an eyebrow in inquiry; Ron looked at him awkwardly for a moment.

"So… er," he said uncertainly. "We've never properly met each other, have we?"

There was a moment of silence, and then the sound of sardonic clapping from the blond in the corner.

"Very good, Weasley. We've been sitting in here for twenty minutes while you play with that lighter, and you finally get around to the introductions," Malfoy drawled. "Your social skills are as impeccable as ever."

Ron flushed, but resisted the urge to retort, instead very deliberately turning away from Malfoy so that all the Slytherin saw of him was his profile; he wasn't about to turn his back on Malfoy, but he was giving him the cold shoulder. "Well, I mean, I've seen pictures of you at Grimmauld Place… we saw your room." Almost off-handedly, he asked, "Where'd you get that autographed poster of Krum?"

Selenius slowly sat up. "Mum took me to the Quidditch World Cup for my birthday a few years back," he said. His head swiveled in the direction of the door, as though hoping his mother would come in at any moment to tell him how his father was. "You saw my room?"

"Stumbled upon it by accident, really," Ron admitted, scratching the back of his head. "We saw all those pictures of you and… some other members of the Order. Sirius, mostly."

"Yeah," Selenius said quietly. "We were close."

"So Sirius knew about you?" Ron asked curiously.

Selenius shrugged half-heartedly. The subject seemed to depress him, somewhat. "He knew me since I was a baby. He was like an uncle to me. He'd look after me, sometimes, when Mum and Dad couldn't."

Ron winced in sympathy. "Harry was really torn up when Sirius died, too. He was…" Ron cast about for the right word for a moment. "He was a good bloke."

"I know."

"Who took care of you after… you know…"

Selenius looked away again, this time to gaze out the window; it was so dark now, however, that all he could see was his starry reflection in the glass. "I stayed at the Burrow with Mr. and Mrs. Weasley."

Ron, whose fingers had been fiddling precariously on the deluminator, froze. There was a click, and the lights in the room went out. He hastily clicked them back on, looking at Selenius with his jaw
dropped in open astonishment.

"Wait—*my* parents—?"

"Mum was pretending to be a student, wasn't she?" Selenius snapped, almost irritably. "Dad was teaching full-time, Remus is busy, and Sirius... Sirius wasn't there." This last part was said bitterly. "So Mum had Mrs. Weasley homeschool me."

"My mum knew? About all of this?" Ron gaped at him. "About you?"

"Clearly, Weasley—"

"Malfoy, shut up. Selenius—"

"Yes, she knew!" Selenius snarled, sitting up straighter and turning to give Ron a dirty look. "Yes, everyone in the Order knew about Mum! A few of them knew about me. Now can you *please* leave me alone?"

"Look—" Ron began.

Without another word, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and got to his feet. The next moment, he had slammed the door shut behind him, and the sounds of footsteps could be heard stomping down the stairs. Malfoy waited until they grew silent, before he finally spoke.

"That was predictably tactless of you." Surprisingly, his tone carried only traces of icy venom, rather than the usual level of carefully crafted vitriol and snobbery.

Ron groaned in frustration, and buried his face in his hands. "I'm still trying to take this all in, Malfoy! Forgive me if I'm a little annoyed at being kept out of the loop!"

"You're not the only one," Malfoy snapped, leaning forward. "Selenius has lied and evaded me since the day I met him, but you don't see me harassing him for answers while his father looks two sparks away from death!"

"You should have seen what he *really* looked like when we first saw him," Ron sniped back. "Compared to that, he looks healthy as a hippogriff!"

Malfoy's pale face tightened for a moment and creases appeared under his eyes, making him look uncharacteristically old for his eighteen years. "How did you find him, anyway?"

"We just happened to be there when You-Know-Who decided to off him with that great bloody snake of his," Ron said bad-temperedly. "Trust me, after tonight, I'm adding snakes to my list of things I never want to keep for a pet, right underneath spiders and rats and blast-ended skrewts."

"At the rate you're going, perhaps you ought to settle for a pet rock, Weasley," Malfoy sneered. "Something nice and easy that won't ruffle your delicate Gryffindor sensibilities."

"So what are *you* doing here?" Ron challenged. "What happened, Malfoy? Slithering out of having to fight like the rest of us?"

Malfoy's eyes flashed. "I *wanted* to stay, Weasley. Unfortunately for that plan, Granger's mothering instinct kicked in."

Ron sat back, looking sullen. "I don't even get why you're helping us," he said angrily, clicking his deluminator. The lights in the room went out. "I mean, it doesn't make sense. You were in a right
"hurry to join up with You-Know-Who back in school—"

"I'm not helping you," Malfoy sneered, as the lights were summarily clicked back on again. "I wanted to stay to find my parents, Weasley. After this mess, they're all I've got."

This gave Ron pause; he looked down at his hands for a moment, and then gazed up at his schoolboy enemy seriously. "The price of not making friends who will stand with you, I suppose?"

Malfoy pursed his lips together, as though to retort, but then thought better of it. "Tell me about it," he said coldly, though his eyes glinted with something Ron couldn't quite interpret. "Selenius is the first real friend I've ever had."

~o~O~o~

Hermione had finished cleaning up the kitchen, and was leaning against the table, mentally bracing herself for what was to come once she and Ron left, when the door handle turned and Selenius quietly peered inside.

"Come in," Hermione said tiredly, bending down to press a last kiss to her husband's forehead, and then straightened, ready to make preparations to leave. Selenius slipped in, and shut the door behind him. "I'm almost done here. I'm about to bring your father upstairs, and then we'll leave."

"You're going back to Hogwarts?" Selenius asked quietly.

Hermione nodded, running her fingers through Severus's lanky hair, more for her comfort than his. Selenius swallowed. "Dad—Dad was almost killed, wasn't he?"

"He's fine now," Hermione said, dodging the question entirely.

"But if you go back to Hogwarts, who will look after you?" Selenius asked, just a bit desperately.

"I can take care of myself," she responded evasively, straightening.

"So could Dad," Selenius said quietly.

Hermione's face set stonily as she looked down at her son. "He had a job to do, and he's fine," she reiterated. "I have a job to do, and it still needs to be done. If I get hurt, I have people who will help me, too."

"But—"

"Selenius, if we were all so afraid of sacrificing that we could not bring ourselves to lay our lives on the line, this war would never end," Hermione said with forced calm. She grasped his shoulders, and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Evenly, she added, "I'll be fine. Look after your father, and don't leave Tine Cottage until I tell you the coast is clear—all right?"

Selenius gazed at her for a long moment, and then muttered, "Fine." He paused, and then as though he were being prodded into doing so by an invisible force, reached into his pocket. He drew out the cracked phial of Felix Felicis, and pressed it into her palm.

Hermione realized in alarm that some of it was missing, even as she tapped it with her wand to repair the line running down the middle.

"Selenius, what—"
"We ran into a little trouble on the way home, but it was nothing," Selenius said reassuringly. "I took a little bit of that, and got us out of there. But if I'm going to be stuck here for the rest of the night..." he paused, taking in a deep breath, glancing over at his father's unconscious form, and then muttered, "Just take it, mum."

~o~O~o~

Hermione and Ron spun back into the Headmaster's Office, the latter letting go of her watch and looking slightly ill at the Portkey's dizzying manner of travel, before righting himself at once. Hermione cautiously picked up the chain of the hourglass, putting it around Ron's neck as well as hers, while holding the timepiece as far away from her as possible as she carefully set the dial using just the tips of her fingers.

"You're sure this is going to work?" Ron asked, eyeing her warily. "I mean, you did get send back in time twenty years the last time you did this—"

"Don't remind me," Hermione said. "I'm half-tempted not to even try it. But we have to."

"So how far back are we going?" Ron asked bracingly.

"Well," Hermione said, chancing a look at her watch, "we used up an hour, which means that if we go back an hour, we'll return where we left off—with twenty minutes before our grace period is over."

"So where do you think Harry is?"

"I don't know," Hermione lied. "Now hold on—"

"Wait," Ron said, holding up a hand to stop her. "What if you took us back an hour and ten minutes? That'd give us more time to find him and get together to figure out what to do next."

Hermione hesitated, and then shook her head. "I don't want to mess with time more than we already have tonight. We're just returning to where we were the moment we left this office an hour ago to bring Severus to Tine Cottage."

"Alright."

"Right—hold on—"

There was an audible click, and then the world spun around them like a kaleidoscope; they stood there, motionlessly in place, as time rewound itself—and then came to a sudden, breathless halt. Ron blinked for a moment, as though unsure it had actually worked, as Hermione pulled the chain off from around their necks and quickly placed it in a small empty phial with an Imperturbable Charm on it; the Time-Turner glowed warmly as it rested within the confines of the magicked bottle. She quickly stashed it back in her beaded bag, and then looked up at Ron.

"So..." Ron said slowly, now circling around the room, as though trying to find something—anything—that would prove to him that they had really gone back sixty minutes. "Harry. Where d'you reckon...?"

He stopped in front of the Pensieve on the desk. "We know he took a look at these, 'cause he poured them out," Ron said, wheeling around to look at her. "What do you think Snape gave him?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, to tell Ron that she had no idea and that it wasn't any of their business, but found herself pausing for a moment. Harry had gone from the boathouse to the
memories, and then somewhere else—the Forbidden Forest, most likely. But what had been so important that her husband had willingly given them up to him? In a way, what she was about to do almost felt like an invasion of his privacy, except for the fact that he had willingly given them up—under duress, yes, but offered nonetheless…

She slowly stepped forward until she could see her reflection gazing out at her from the rune-marked bowl. Ron hovered next to her, curious, and she finally spoke.

"I don't know for sure," she said, honest for the first time, "but this will probably tell us."

And she placed her finger in the pensieve.

The memories swirled around her brightly, as though she had dived into a sunlit lake. It cleared almost instantly, as Hermione registered the warmly-shining afternoon, and the vivacious colors of the world around her. Hermione blinked for a moment as she found herself in a nearly-deserted playground that she neither recognized nor understood the significance of. A moment later, though, the laughter of one of the girls on the swing-set drew her attention to the scene before her—and the stringy-haired boy hiding behind a clump of bushes.

Hermione stared for a moment as she recognized her husband's unmistakable younger self. His clothes, however, were a far cry from the tidy and reserved ones he preferred present-day; his were so mismatched that it almost seemed deliberate. His hair was longer, too; greasier than she had ever seen it and uncut. He couldn't be more than nine or ten. He was watching the two girls on the swing-set with undisguised interest.

"Lily, don't do it!"

Hermione's head snapped up at this, and at once, she recognized the younger of the two girls playing on the swing set. The fine red hair, the lovely face, and as the girl ignored her sister and launched herself out of the swing—the familiar laughter. Hermione watched in astonishment as she seemed to float gracefully out of the swing, lowering gently to the ground, landing with as much softness and gracefulness as a butterfly.

"Mummy told you not to!" Hermione watched as Petunia—good gods, had the horrible woman ever been so young?—came to a screeching halt on her swing, scraping her feet against the sand to drag herself to a stop, before jumping off. She placed her hands on her hip in a very bossy way, looking down at her younger sister. "Mummy said you weren't allowed, Lily!"

Why had Severus given Harry this memory? Hermione watched as Lily picked a flower off the ground, just beyond the bush Severus was hiding behind, and held it out of the swing—the familiar laughter. Hermione watched in astonishment as she seemed to float gracefully out of the swing, lowering gently to the ground, landing with as much softness and gracefulness as a butterfly.

Lily. This was Severus's memory, and in it was—Lily. She blinked again, rather thrown off a bit by this.

"Mummy told you not to!" Hermione watched as Petunia—good gods, had the horrible woman ever been so young?—came to a screeching halt on her swing, scraping her feet against the sand to drag herself to a stop, before jumping off. She placed her hands on her hip in a very bossy way, looking down at her younger sister. "Mummy said you weren't allowed, Lily!"

Why had Severus given Harry this memory? Hermione watched as Lily picked a flower off the ground, just beyond the bush Severus was hiding behind, and held it out to her sister. It's petals began to unfurl and then fold themselves again, opening and closing in a way that was so very obviously not natural, yet all the more magical for the perfectly smooth, innocent way in which it was done. What was significant about this? What had he wanted Harry to see?

Petunia protested this display with an outraged, perhaps even frightened shriek of, "Stop it!"

"It's not hurting you," Lily said, but she closed the blossom once more and then let it drop to the ground.

"It's not right," Petunia said, but Hermione could tell she was eyeing the fallen flower with a look of disguised wanting. Jealousy. "How do you do it?"
Severus seemed to no longer be able to contain himself and stood up, revealing his presence as he did so, and evidently shocking the two girls.

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

Petunia let out a shriek and ran back to the swings, as though they would somehow afford her protection, but Lily stood her ground, looking at him calmly. Yet, when Hermione gazed at Severus's face, it seemed to her that he very much regretted his appearance, for a dull flush had filled his sallow cheeks.

Yet, somehow, Lily seemed to either not notice or not care. "What's obvious?"

Severus fidgeted for a moment, with an air of nervous excitement; he glanced at Petunia, who was grabbing onto one of the swings as though for dear life, and then lowered his voice so that only Lily could hear.

"I know what you are."

This must be it. It was as plain as the nose on her husband's face—this was the memory of the first time he had ever met Lily.

"What do you mean?"

"You're… you're a witch," Severus whispered. It was as though the word were a taboo for him, yet he pressed forward and dared to say it, in the hopes of making a connection with this other girl whom he knew shared his talent.

Lily, on the other hand, looked clearly offended. "That's not a very nice thing to say to somebody!"

She turned to march back to her sister, nose in the air, and Hermione saw alarm cross Severus's sallow face. He looked ridiculous in his overlarge coat as he came out from around the bush, looking more bat-like than she had ever seen him before as it flapped after him.

"No!" Ignoring Lily's look of affronted disapproval, and the deep red suffusing his face in embarrassment, he insisted, "You are. You are a witch. I've been watching you for a while. But there's nothing wrong with that. My mum's one, and I'm a wizard."

Hermione saw Lily's eyes widen in consideration at this—it was a spark of hope, as though part of her wanted to believe the explanation of this sallow, stringy-haired boy was the key to her insecurities about her talent. But Petunia's laugh cut across them both like a dash of cold water.

"Wizard!" she shrieked, in a manner rather reminiscent of Pansy Parkinson. "I know who you are. You're that Snape boy! They live down Spinner's End by the river," she added, turning to her younger sister. It was clear from her tone that she considered the address to be a rather undesirable one. Turning back to Severus, disdain providing her with courage, she demanded, "Why have you been spying on us?"

"I haven't been spying," Severus said, looking rather hot and uncomfortable in the bright sunlight. His coat had to be too warm, yet Hermione suspected he perhaps did not want to reveal the smock-like shirt underneath. "Wouldn't spy on you anyway," he added spitefully to Petunia. "You're a Muggle."

Hermione closed her eyes as the insult got the desired reaction, though as the two girls left, leaving Severus alone in the playground, it was clear from the expression of bitter disappointment on his face that this had not gone as planned…
The scene dissolved once more, and this time, Hermione found herself standing in a small thicket of trees bordering the bank of a glittering river. Severus and Lily were sitting cross-legged from each other; they had obviously come to some kind of understanding, and perhaps had even become friends at this point, because Severus seemed to have become comfortable enough to take off the unbearably hot coat.

Hermione found herself listening to their conversation, feeling an odd sort of turmoil as she finally saw what Lily and Severus had had as children—before she had come along—and registering an odd sense of loss and longing as she found herself wishing that she had been in Lily's place. Had been there to appreciate seeing this boy so open, so confident despite the fact that he was painfully shy—wished that she had been able to have more of these sort of moments with him, where the future seemed open and bright, and not so clouded by the weighty worries of the world.

"Does it make a difference, being Muggle-born?"

Severus hesitated. He gazed at her, his black eyes filled with the same kind of greedy, undisguised interest that Hermione had seen in the first memory, when he had watched Lily on the swing.

"No," he said. "It doesn't make any difference."

"Good," Lily said, relaxing. She had been tense a moment ago, fearful for his answer, but now she lay sprawled out on the ground, gazing through the greenish gloom at the faint sunlight that peeked through the leaves overhead.

"You've got loads of magic," Severus said eagerly. "I saw that. All the time I was watching you…"

He trailed off when it became clear that Lily was not listening; her mind was elsewhere. Almost immediately, though, it came back and she looked up at him with curiosity in those green eyes. And —concern.

"How are things at your house?"

Severus's face seemed to tighten at this. Hermione had always known it was a sensitive topic, but even here, bringing it up seemed to make him withdraw.

"Fine," he said shortly.

"They're not arguing anymore?"

"Oh yes, they're arguing," Severus said bitterly, reaching over to pick up a fistful of leaves. He began tearing them apart, watching their destruction as though he would rather look at them than answer her. But answer he did. "But it won't be that long and I'll be gone."

"Doesn't your dad like magic?"

"He doesn't like anything, much," Severus said.

"Severus?" His head snapped up to look at her, a slight smile crossing his face when she said his name. "Tell me about the dementors again."

Hermione slowly sat down in the grass, sensing that this might be a long story.

"What d'you want to know about them for?" Severus asked, looking mystified.

"If I use magic outside school—"
Hermione very nearly buried her face in her hands. Good grief.

"They wouldn't give you to the dementors for that!" he said at once. "Dementors are for people who do really bad stuff. They guard the wizard prison, Azkaban. You're not going to end up in Azkaban, you're too—"

He broke off, his face turning a most damning shade of red again. He refocused his attention back on the leaves, shredding them. A sudden rustling noise caught their attention, however, and Hermione turned around in time to see Petunia scramble to regain her footing on the roots of the tree she had been hiding behind. It instantly became clear to Hermione that Petunia had been just as nosy as an adult as she had been as a child.

"Who's spying now?" Severus demanded, getting to his feet. He looked angry at having been interrupted; even more so at the realization that Petunia had heard every word they said. "What d'you want?"

Petunia seemed rather alarmed at being caught, and seemed to struggle for a moment to find something to say, and then her eyes narrowed as they fell upon the boy's shirt.

"What is that you're wearing anyway?" she asked spitefully, pointing at the misfitting shirt. "Your mum's blouse?"

Hermione saw a tic appear on Severus's temple, a slight twitch, just before there was a warning crack above them; and then a large branch suddenly fell when it should not, snagging Petunia on the shoulder, causing her to stagger back in pain and surprise—and then she burst into tears and turned to run.

"Tuney!"

But Petunia was gone; Lily rounded on Severus.

"Did you make that happen?"

"No." He looked both defiant and scared, more regretful of the fact that Lily was angry with him, rather than Petunia's obvious distress.

"You did!" Lily was backing away from him, growing angrier by the minute. "You did! You hurt her!"

"No—no, I didn't!"

But Lily was unconvinced; she threw him a last glare over her shoulder, and then ran off to find her sister, leaving Severus alone, looking both miserable and confused.

The scene changed again. Hermione was unprepared for the crowdedness of Platform 9 ¾, and she almost pulled out of the way to avoid being run over when she realized that the people around her seemed to pass through her as though she were no more than a ghost. Disconcerted, Hermione turned around in time to see Severus pull away from a thin, sallow-faced woman who greatly resembled him, and whose expression seemed contorted in deep-seated bitterness—only to have the scene dissolve around her again, before she could fully glimpse the end of Lily and Petunia arguing several feet away, and to reform once more into the corridor of the Hogwarts Express.

Severus was hurrying down the aisle, already wearing his school robes—Hermione did not doubt that he had taken off his awful Muggle clothes at the earliest opportunity—and quickly slid into one of the compartments, where the sound of rowdy boys could be heard as they laughed and chortled
with each other over something they no doubt found particularly amusing. Lily had distanced herself from them, hunched over her seat with her cheek pressed against the windowpane. As Hermione darted through in time to avoid having the door shut in her face, she saw that Lily had been crying.

She glanced around the compartment even as Severus took his seat, and was startled again as several familiar faces popped out at her. James and Sirius were sitting on the other side of the compartment, paying the other two no mind, until a single word caught James's attention, causing him to look up.

"—Slytherin?"

Hermione stared at this younger version of James, who seemed almost identical to her memory of Harry, the first time she had boarded the Hogwarts Express at the tender age of eleven. He was slight, with black hair like Severus just as she remembered, yet there was something about him that seemed to set him distinctly apart from the other boy—perhaps it was the unmistakable air of a child who had been well-cared for and well-loved, perhaps even adored. In fact, if anything, more than anyone else in the room, James seemed to resemble Selenius the most—until his next words threw her off.

"Who wants to be in Slytherin? I think I'd leave, wouldn't you?"

Hermione watched the scene unfold with something akin to numbness and forced passivity, her eyes lingering longingly on Sirius for a moment, before she took a moment to gaze down at Lily. This was all very interesting, but this was what Harry had seen, and it was because Severus had thought it was vital that he do so. But why? Surely she wasn't here just to see how Severus's and the Marauders' rivalry had gotten started. But why? Surely she wasn't here just to see how Severus's and the Marauders' rivalry had gotten started. There had to be more to this.

But no, Lily had stood up, and she and Severus left—James attempting to trip the latter as he did so—and the scene dissolved once more, swirling into existence again as the candle-lit Great Hall on the night of the Welcoming Feast. As Hermione watched first Lily, then Severus be sorted—Gryffindor and Slytherin respectively—she began to wonder if she was perhaps wasting her time. This was all very interesting, but none of it possibly told her where Harry had gone after this—except, perhaps, he might venture back down to the boathouse to find them before going to the Forbidden Forest, if that was where he was indeed planning to go—

When the next scene came, Hermione found herself resolving that if nothing fruitful came up after this, she would leave to go find Harry on foot—

And found herself promptly rescinding that vow. For in this scene, she was following Severus out of the Great Hall, he having just finished his OWLs—and with the Marauders nearby, her instincts told her there would be trouble. He was beginning to look very much as Hermione had remembered him, tall and dark, with a bitter and lone-wolf air about him as he stalked toward the lake, his movements somewhat jumpy and skittish.

She was shocked, five minutes later, when she realized only a little too late just precisely what she was witnessing.

How many times had she heard this tale? How many times had she wondered?

"Alright, Snivellus?" James called loudly.

Severus's reaction was as though he had been expecting an attack; his bag dropped and he had his wand out in a flash, but James had the drop on him.

"Expelliarmus!"
Severus's wand flew out of his hands, cartwheeled several times through the air, and then landed in the grass twelve feet away. He made to dive for it, panic written openly on his pale face—panic and anger. But Sirius let out a bark of laughter, and then shouted, "Impedimenta!"

Severus was knocked half-way to the ground in his desperate bid to retrieve his wand. All around them, students were starting to appear, milling around as the commotion caught their attention. Some looked apprehensive; others entertained. Severus lay panting on the ground, arms pinned to his sides, as James and Sirius advanced on him, wands raised.

That was when James glanced over his shoulder at one of the girls at the other side of the water's edge, and with a jolt, Hermione recognized Lily. But her head snapped back around to James when he said, "How'd the exam go, Snivelly?"

"I was watching him, his nose was touching the parchment," Sirius said, and there was an edge of vicious glee to his words. "There'll be great grease marks all over it, they won't be able to read a word."

The laughter of the audience around them rang through Hermione's ears, and she squeezed her eyes shut; a moment later, something wet trailed down her cheek. So these were her friends. These were the people she had constantly defended to Severus—and defended Severus from. In all her years of knowing them, they had never done anything quite at this level, although Sirius had surpassed it that one time in the end of her fifth year. At times, she had thought he had perhaps exaggerated his tale, but now her illusions had been clearly broken away: he had not.

"You—wait," Severus panted, struggling to get to his feet. He looked as though he had been bound by invisible ropes, and was staring up at James with a look of purest loathing. "You—wait!"

"Wait for what?" Sirius asked coolly. "What're you going to do, Snivelly, wipe your nose on us?"

In the midst of Severus's stream of swearwords mixed with impotent curses, Hermione felt herself turning numb, despite the tears trickling down her cheek. If she had gone back in time further, if she had arrived before this had happened, what would she have done if she was not only witnessing this scene, but being a part of it? She surely would not have become James and Sirius's friend—and perhaps not even Remus's, by extension, for though the other boy was watching with a look of concern creasing his eyes, his body hiding the eager face of Pettigrew as he watched Severus's humiliating from a safe vantage point, he was standing there and doing nothing.

But would she have come to Severus's defense?

"Wash your mouth," James said coldly, interrupting her thoughts. "Scourgify!"

Severus suddenly began to choke as pink soap bubbles appeared, causing him to gag as it frothed at his mouth. He struggled all the more uselessly at this, trying to cough out the soap streaming from his mouth—

"Leave him alone!"

Hermione's eyes snapped to the side, locking onto the familiar red-haired girl she had grown up with. Lily! She had come to his defense—but—

James jumped at her sudden appearance, and his hand immediately flew to his hair, ruffling it almost casually as he took on a lighter, more pleasant tone. "All right, Evans?" he called.

"Leave him alone," Lily repeated furiously. "What's he done to you?"
James seemed to take a moment to think, deliberating on it as though it were some great question. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "it's more the fact that he exists, if you know what I mean."

Hermione felt as though someone had just gutted her. She stood there, thunderstruck, watching as the other students around them began to laugh in wholehearted agreement.

"You think you're funny," Lily said coldly, "but you're just an arrogant, bullying toerag, Potter. Leave him alone."

"I will if you go out with me, Evans," James said quickly. It was as though he had been waiting for this opportunity. "Go on—go out with me and I'll never lay a wand on old Snivelly again."

Behind him, Hermione could see Severus inching toward his fallen wand as the Impediment Jinx began to wear off, spitting out soapsuds as he wriggled his way forward.

"I wouldn't go out with you if it were a choice between you and the giant squid!"

"Bad luck, Prongs," Sirius said briskly, seeing the disappointed look on James's face before turning back to his victim—only to realize that he had been remiss in keeping track of the spell's longevity, for Severus made a final lunge for his wand. "Oi!"

But it was too late. A slash of his wand at James, a flash of light, and a gash appeared on James's face. James whirled around, enraged, and there was another flash followed by a loud bang—and moments later, Severus was being dangled upside down by his ankle. His robes had fallen over his head, revealing skinny, pale legs and a pair of greying underpants. The crowd around them cheered yet again, greatly entertained by this.

Hermione was disgusted.

Lily's face twitched for a moment, as though she were about to smile, but her resolve held firm. "Let him down!"

"Certainly," James said, almost cordially, as he wiped the blood off the side of his face with one sleeve. A flick of his wand, and Severus fell to the ground in a crumpled heap; he was on his feet almost immediately, wand raised, but almost before he had even gained his footing, Sirius had his wand pointed at him.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

They were playing with him, like a pair of cats torturing a mouse. No that Severus was like a mouse, by any means, but the game they played was just as cruel. They were letting him up long enough to knock him down again, and Hermione felt her cheeks start to burn heatedly as she began to wish that this scene was real, if only so that she could step in.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!" Lily shouted. She had pulled out her wand, finally, and had it pointed threateningly at James. She was done with warnings.

"Ah, Evans, don't make me hex you," James said earnestly.

"Take the curse off him, then!"

James sighed exaggeratedly at this, but turned to face Severus nonetheless. He was frozen on the ground, rigid as a board, though his eyes burned with unrestrained, seething hate. The kind that had always been reserved for the Marauders, which Hermione was all too familiar with. The kind that Hermione had worked so hard to convince him to let go of. James muttered the counter-curse, and at
once, Severus struggled to get to his feet again quickly.

"There you go," James said, glancing down at Severus with great dislike. "You're lucky Evans was here, Snivellus—"

Severus's normally pale, sallow face was flushed several shades of red, in a mixture of pain, humiliation, and emasculated shame. Hermione knew what he was about to say before he even opened his mouth.

"I don't need help from filthy little mudbloods like her!"

To Lily's credit, she merely blinked at him, as though in surprise. Yet it was impossible to not see that she was hurt and humiliated by his words, and Hermione saw her face harden. And still, Hermione watched dumbly as the scene unfolded—as the moment that forever shaped her husband's life literally came to life right before her eyes. A mystery that he had never revealed fully to her, but here… she finally saw and understood it.

"Fine," Lily said coolly. "I won't bother in the future." She turned, as though to leave. "And I'd wash my pants if I were you, Snivellus."

"Apologize to Evans!" James roared, jerking his arm toward Severus, wand pointed at his throat.

"I don't want you to make him apologize!" Lily shouted, rounding on James, temper finally lost. "You're as bad as he is!"

"What?" James yelped. "I'd never call you a—a you-know-what!"

"Messing up your hair because you think it looks cool to look like you've just got off your broomstick, showing off with that stupid Snitch, walking down corridors and hexing anyone who annoys you just because you can—I'm surprised that broomstick got off the ground with your fat head on it." She turned on her heel. "You make me sick."

"Evans!" James called, but Lily stalked off as though she hadn't heard him. "Hey, Evans!"

He watched her leave, and then turned away, looking disgusted. Severus watched Lily leave, still wearing the same look of horror and regret on his face that he had worn the moment he had let the words slip out.

"What is it with her?" James asked, turning to Sirius, trying and failing to ask the question as though it were casual and of no importance to him.

"Reading between the lines, I'd say she thinks you're a bit conceited, mate."

"Right," James said, looking furious with himself. "Right—"

There was another flash of light, and Severus was once again hoisted into the air. He had dropped his wand, and it lay three feet away from him, firmly on the ground while he himself was hung up by his ankle.

"Who wants to see me take off Snivelly's pants?"

But whether James really did take off Severus's pants, Hermione did not know, for the scene dissolved once more. Hermione stood there disbelievingly for a moment, and then quickly rubbed at her eyes, forcefully reminding herself where she was and what she was here for, as the next scene—Severus's attempted apology—began to unfold.
"I only came out because Mary told me you were threatening to sleep here."

"I was. I would have done. I never meant to call you a Mudblood, it just—"

"Slipped out?" Lily suggested coldly.

Hermione was starting to understand. Everything before now had been an introduction leading up to the last scene and now, context for Harry so that he would at last understand why Severus had said what he said—

And why, years later, he had done what he had done.

The scene dissolved very quickly, and this time, Hermione found herself once again in the tunnel of the shrieking shack. She knelt down, peering through the gloom, as she watched the memory unfold. This time, however, unlike the memory that Harry had seen in his fifth year, the memory continued until they crawled out of the tunnel. In the moonlight, they both looked suitably shell-shocked.

"Come on," she heard herself say weakly, getting to her feet and helping Severus do the same. "We need to get out of here."

As they stood, staggering out of reach of the Whomping Willow, the light hit Hermione's face enough that Harry would undoubtedly recognize her. It was dark, but her features were unmistakable. And Hermione realized with a jolt that Severus had finally revealed who she was, just as the scene swirled away once more.

Hermione now found herself standing in the middle of the Gryffindor Common Room. She blinked as she watched Severus hoisting himself over the railing, and followed by taking the stairs, skidding to a halt in front of the doorway in time to see him trying to shake her awake.

"...Hermione, please, wake up—don't make me... Hermione!"

This was how it all began. Hermione's eyes widened. Harry now knew that it was she who had gone back in time—now undoubtedly knew that she was his godmother... and now Severus was showing him how everything else had unfolded. How much he had shown, Hermione did not yet know. But she was about to find out, as her younger self sat up and began interrogating him—and with almost depressing predictability, the scene dissipated again...

This time, however, the scene took longer to appear. Hermione frowned, as she found herself in an unfamiliar place. A deserted moor, with Severus standing there, looking scared; his hair flipped wildly about his face as the wind blew through the dark and stormy night. He looked forlorn and cold, yet on high alert, wildly turning on the spot, his eyes searching for something in the darkness—

A flash of white light zig-zagged across Hermione's vision, and for a moment, she thought it had been lightning— until she saw a familiar ebony wand skitter to the ground several feet away, and she heard Severus cry, "Don't kill me!"

"That was not my intention."

And there stood Albus Dumbledore. The wind whipped and tore at his robes, and his face was illuminated rather hauntingly by the light of his own lit wand.

"Well, Severus? What message does Lord Voldemort have for me?"

Hermione quickly came to the realization that this was the meeting she had missed. The one she had arranged, and spent nearly a full day locked in the Headmaster's Office to await the details of
outcome from.

"No—no message! I'm here on my own account!"

Hermione watched the negotiations between them with rapt attention. Severus was completely at the Headmaster's mercy in every sense of the word, and he almost seemed broken toward the end.

"And what will you give me in return, Severus?"

Hermione stared at the headmaster, uncomprehending.

"In—in return?" Severus gaped at him, and then choked on his answer: "Anything."

Dumbledore gazed down at him for a long moment, and then reached to pull Severus to his feet.

"Let us return to Hogwarts," he said, "where Miss Granger is waiting for us."

Hermione hugged her arms around her middle, wondering how much longer she would have to watch this. Was there a way to speed up memories? For as riveting as these revelations were, she could not help but get the sense that she was fast running out of time, and she had the idea that the most important things were near the end, after everything that had been shown was finally allowed to be made sense of—

A sudden sound like a wounded animal caught her attention, and she whirled around in time to see Severus slumped forward in a chair. Dumbledore was standing over him, looking grim. Severus finally lifted his head, and Hermione was struck by the misery she saw in them; it was different from the man whom she recalled had returned to their quarters and slumped down with her to grieve. This was a man who did not even have the heart left in him do to anything but grieve.

Hermione already felt wretched and wrenched after the last few memories she had seen, but this sight made her want to sink to the floor and curl up. She had not forgotten the devastation that had followed James and Lily's deaths—though she was now angry at James and Sirius for the memory she had seen down by the lake, not even that could erase her memories of them as her friends, by which time they had matured a great deal, and the few years they had together since their graduation. It could not change her recollection of James, as the upstanding young man he had been before he died—and it could not erase twenty years of faithful friendship with Sirius. And it could certainly not ease her guilt over their deaths.

"I thought… you were going… to keep her… safe…"

"She and James put their faith in the wrong person," Dumbledore said. "Rather like you, Severus. Weren't you hoping that Lord Voldemort would spare her?"

Severus said nothing.

"Her boy survives," Dumbledore said gently.

Severus's head jerked slightly at this, and his breathing grew shallower, but he still remained seemingly incapable of speaking.

"Her son lives," Dumbledore repeated. "He has her eyes, precisely her eyes, if you'll recall." He paused, as though for maximum impact, and then said, "You remember the shape and color of Lily's eyes, I am sure?"

"DON'T!" Severus bellowed, with such suddenness that Hermione jumped back. He sank back in
his chair, defeated. "Gone… dead…"

"Is this remorse, Severus?"

"I wish… I wish I were dead…"

For the third time that night, Hermione felt as though someone had struck her across the face with something very heavy.

There was a pause, and then Dumbledore said, "Surely you do not mean that."

Severus seemed to force himself to look through a haze of pain as he gaze senselessly up at the Headmaster. "Hermione," he croaked. "She knows—all my fault—once the shock's worn off, she'll—she'll never forgive me…"

"How would you know?" Dumbledore asked him coldly. "Have you asked her?" Severus did not respond. "Have you spoken to her?"

"No," Severus said raggedly. "I—I haven't spoken to her since—since—" he broke off, unable to finish. He struggled for a moment, and then with great effort, "Hermione is—is my life…but even she could not—could not be so forgiving…when it is my fault that they were targeted in the first place."

"You do Hermione a disservice to make up her mind for her," Dumbledore said, his tone without compassion. "Certainly, she has lost just as much as you have this night—but do you truly believe that she holds you responsible for it?"

"She must… surely…"

"Blaming yourself does little good, Severus," Dumbledore said. "What would you do, to make things right again?"

"A-anything… I already promised you anything…"

"Would you give Hermione up?"

Severus's entire body suddenly gave violent twitch at this and he jerked his head up. "No!"

Dumbledore seemed satisfied with this answer. "Then let us settle this matter to rest. Your way forward, Severus, is clear." Severus gazed at him uncomprehendingly, and Dumbledore said, "Do you not see it?"

"What… what do you mean…?"

"You know how and why Lily died," Dumbledore said. "Make sure her death was not in vain."

Severus looked at him, not quite understanding.

"Help me protect Lily's son."

Hermione closed her eyes, as though doing so would protect her from the anguish roiling through her body as the cumulative memories bore down on her, coalescing powerfully into this one moment where she finally understood the conversation she herself had with Severus upon his return. After Lily's death. After paying the Headmaster a visit.

And why he had forgiven her for her foreknowledge of their deaths.
"...very well. Very well. But never tell, Dumbledore! This must be between us! Swear it! I cannot bear… especially Potter's son… I want your word!"

"My word, Severus, that I shall never reveal the best of you?" Dumbledore sighed, looking down at Severus's ferocious, pained face. "If you insist..."

At once, the memories seemed to come faster now, as though more was trying to be crammed in all at once, just the pertinent bits. The first day of Harry's arrival and Severus's assessment of him... the end of the Yule Ball, where Hermione once again saw the events playing out...

"...Karkaroff intends to flee if the Mark burns."

"Does he?" Dumbledore's words sounded soft, musing. "And do you intend to join him?"

"No," she heard Severus say, as the memory once more began to dissolve, slowly this time. "I am not such a coward..."

"No," Dumbledore agreed, his voice fading. "You are a braver man by far than Igor Karkaroff. You know, sometimes I think we sort too soon..."

Severus's stricken face, Hermione's discolored appearance at his side laughing as she pulled the butterbeer from his hands, was the last of that memory before it swirled away...

And then at last, they were once again in the Headmaster's Office. A familiar time. A familiar place. A familiar figure slumped over a chair, his hand blackened, and Hermione and Severus both attending to him, trying to make sense of the curse... where she and Severus both swore they would carry on with Dumbledore's plan for his death...

And then a conversation between Severus and Dumbledore that she herself had not been present for, but recognized at once as one that Hagrid had let slip to Harry—and that she had spoken to Severus about. The conversation was fairly mundane in comparison to the last few she had seen, yet Hermione had the sensation that this was leading up to something extremely important...

"Come to my office tonight, Severus, at eleven, and you shall not complain that I have no confidence in you..."

And quite suddenly, they were back in the Headmaser's office yet again. Severus was sitting in one of the armchairs, holding himself so still, he might very well have been petrified in place; Dumbledore was pacing around him as he talked.

"Harry must not know, not until the last moment, not until it is necessary, otherwise how could he have the strength to do what must be done?"

"But what must he do?"

"That is between Harry and me. Now listen closely, Severus. There will come a time after my death—do not argue, do not interrupt!" Dumbledore said, as Severus opened his mouth to speak. "There will come a time when Lord Voldemort will seem to fear for the life of his snake. At that time, you must brew the anti-venom and give it to Hermione, though you must not tell her whom it is for."

Hermione gazed at the headmaster, dumbstruck. The anti-venom she had used on Severus—it had been in her bag, it had been a part of her stash of potions...

But Severus had never given it to her.
And she had not put it there. At least, she had no recollection of doing so. It had simply appeared there one day, labeled, and she had merely assumed…

When had he snuck it in?

"He will fear for Nagini’s life?” Severus asked blankly.

"Precisely. If there comes a time when Lord Voldemort stops sending that snake forth to do his bidding, but keeps it safe beside him under magical protection, then, I think, it will be safe to tell Harry."

"Tell him what?"

Dumbledore took a deep breath, and closed his eyes.

"Tell him that on the night Lord Voldemort tried to kill him, when Lily cast her own life between them as a shield, the killing curse rebounded upon Lord Voldemort, and a fragment of Lord Voldemort's soul was blasted apart from the whole, and latched itself onto the only living soul left in that collapsed building."

Severus stared at Dumbledore in astonishment, and the Headmaster continued: "Part of Lord Voldemort lives inside Harry, and it is that which gives him the power of speech with snakes, and a connection with Lord Voldemort's mind that he has never understood."

Hermione inhaled sharply. This was it. Everything that Severus had given Harry before now… led up to this moment. This revelation.

"And while that fragment of soul, unmissed by Voldemort, remains attached to and protected by Harry, Lord Voldemort cannot die."

There was a long moment of silence. Hermione stared down at her hands, as another conversation replayed itself in her head. A conversation following the one just before this scene, where she had finally found a private word with her husband while undercover as a student.

"We were discussing Potter. I asked him what he was doing, those evenings they spend closeted in his office. The headmaster was aggravatingly vague, and then could not have put it any more plainly that he does not trust me."

"Dumbledore trusts you!"

"It's not an issue of trust in regards to loyalty, Hermione. It's an issue of trust regarding my capabilities as a spy—most particularly, in keeping certain things from the Dark Lord."

"Rubbish! He tells Harry far more important things, and they have a direct connection!"

"The difference, however, is that Dumbledore does not fear the Dark Lord trying to invade Potter's mind again. He seems to think that the Dark Lord did not enjoy the experience enough to try it again in the near future."

"That's not all that's bothering you."

"That's all I can tell you."

Hermione had seen something her husband's eyes that night, had merely thought him weary and stressed, but now she knew it was something more. He had known. Just as she had known before he
did that James and Lily had been slated to die, he had found out before her that Harry was to be the proverbial sacrifice.

He had known.

And not said a word to her.

The Severus in the memory spoke, interrupting Hermione's thoughts. With a strange sort of calm, he said, "So the boy… the boy must die?"

"And Voldemort himself must do it, Severus. That is essential."

Another long silence followed this, and then Severus said, "I thought… all those years… that we were protecting him for her. For Lily. Because of a grave mistake I made that ended the life of a friend."

"We have protected him because it has been essential to teach him, to raise him, to let him try his strength," said Dumbledore, his eyes still tightly shut. "Meanwhile, the connection between them grows ever stronger, a parasitic growth. Sometimes I have thought he suspects it himself. If I know him, he will have arranged matters so that when he does set out to meet his death, it will truly mean the end of Voldemort."

Dumbledore opened his eyes. Severus looked as horrified as Hermione felt.

"You have kept him alive so that he can die at the right moment?"

"Don't be shocked, Severus. How many men and women have you watched die?"

"Lately, only those whom I could not save," Severus said, getting to his feet. "You have used me."

"Meaning?"

"I have spied for you and lied for you, put myself in mortal danger for you, and put my family on hold for you. Everything was supposed to be to keep Lily Potter's son safe," Severus bit out. "Now you tell me you have been raising him like a pig for slaughter!"

"But this is touching, Severus," Dumbledore said seriously, moving to stand behind his desk, peering down at Severus through his half-moon spectacles. "Have you grown to care for the boy after all?"

Something flickered across Severus's face as he pulled out his wand, but he merely uttered, "*Expecto Patronum!*

At once, a large, silvery lion burst forth from the tip of his wand, landing gracefully upon the floor of the office. Hermione watched in astonishment as the lioness padded forward a few steps toward Severus, rubbing her head affectionately against his leg, and then leapt away. It slipped off, disappearing into the wall and vanishing without a trace. Dumbledore stood there for a moment, watching the patronus vanish, and then turned to look at Severus again.

To Hermione's shock, there were tears in his eyes.

"I see," Dumbledore said quietly. "She really has changed you, after all…"

"My wife, the lioness," Severus said, and there was an edge of bitter reflection to his voice. "She
loves him like a son. How could I not feel something, when she loved James Potter like a brother, and all I can see are Lily's eyes staring back at me?"

Hermione gazed into her husband's face, astonished beyond comprehension, beyond words—but before she could fully register it all, take everything in, the scene changed again, and she realized that he was not done. But as she watched Severus Confund Mundungus Fletcher, planting the idea of seven Potters, it finally clicked in her mind, the last piece of the puzzle.

She had been right.

Harry was undoubtedly on his way to the Forbidden Forest now.

Yet, something else seemed to finally make sense. Dumbledore cared deeply for Harry. So deeply that it was not an issue of him giving Harry two different tools with which to defeat the Dark Lord…

It was giving him the answer he needed to do it. Horcruxes.

And giving him the tools he needed to survive. Hallows.

The scene continued to change—the battle over Surrey, where George had lost his ear… Severus in Grimmauld Place, taking Lily's letter to Sirius, and then descending the stairs to where she herself was waiting for him…

"Even after all these years, I still can't believe they're gone," she heard herself say. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, unchecked. "Here one day, gone the next… with nothing but an imprint of them behind, in all they've said and done…"

And at last, they returned to the Headmaster's office seemingly for the last time—for Hermione could not think of anything more that Severus could possibly show. At last, every secret had been laid bare.

"Headmaster! They are camping in the Forest of Dean! Your wife—"

"Hermione?" Severus stood up abruptly, almost knocking over his chair. "What about her?"

"—mentioned the place while the Weasley boy was unpacking their things, and I heard her!"

"Good. Very good!" Dumbledore's portrait cried, standing up at once. "Now, Severus, the sword! Do not forget that it must be taken under the conditions of need and valor, and he must not know that you give it! If Voldemort should read Harry's mind and see you acting for him—"

"I know," Severus said curtly, reaching for the portrait of Dumbledore and pulling at its side, whereupon it swung outward, revealing a hidden cavity behind it. He pulled the Sword of Gryffindor out from it, and shut the portrait closed. "And you still aren't going to tell me why it's so important to give Potter the sword?"

"No, I don't think so," Dumbledore said. "And I'd rather you didn't ask your wife about it, either. Harry will know what to do with it. And Severus, be very careful, they might not take kindly to your appearance after George Weasley's mishap—though Hermione did a splendid job of healing him… but as they say, it is the thought that counts."

Severus turned away. There was a slight smirk on his face, which he quickly schooled away.

"Don't worry, Dumbledore," he said coolly. "I have a plan…"

Hermione watched her husband leave the room. She seemed to rise up out of the pensieve as the
door clicked shut behind him, finding herself in the Headmaster's office once again—this time, in reality. She let out a gasp, as though for air, as she backed away from the pensieve, rubbing her face as though to wash the shock away.

"Hermione?" Ron's voice penetrated her ears as though from the end of a long tunnel, very distantly. "Are you alright? What did you see…?"

Hermione opened her eyes. The office looked the same as ever, though the portraits were now empty again, no doubt running through the castle to see what was happening. She looked down at her watch.

It was three minutes until their hour was up.

She did not realize tears were trickling down her cheeks until a drop landed on the crystal face of her timepiece.

"I have to go!" she gasped. Without another word, she pushed past a startled Ron and tore out the door, past the stone gargoyle lying on its side at the foot of the stairs, sprinting down the corridor.

She had to find Harry.

~o~O~o~

Ron stood there for a moment, feeling rather dumb. It was not a new feeling; oftentimes, he felt as though Hermione left him out of the loop of her thinking, regardless of whether she explained or not. She had spent nearly twenty minutes with her face in the bowl, and despite the fact that Ron was deathly curious to know what Harry had seen—and now Hermione—he had refrained from joining her. It was odd, to think of taking a look at Snape's memories, and he was sorely tempted. Instead, he chose to stand guard so that if anyone came in the room, he would be there to defend them both—with his wand, if necessary.

And now that Hermione had run out of the room as though Fluffy himself were on her heels, he was not quite sure what to do. With each revelation, he was starting to understand more and more about why Hermione made him feel like she was his mother rather than his childhood friend—and this time, she was chasing after Harry the same was his own mother had always chased after any number of his other siblings or himself. He was feeling slightly disconcerted by this—it was odd, seeing someone whom he had once held romantic attraction to in that kind of light. The light that he still held all older adults in, despite the fact that he was now of age. Nevertheless, he collected himself a moment later, and flew down the stairs. He was just descending the marble steps to the Great Hall when he came to a screeching halt to avoid knocking into one of the goblins—who he recognized a moment later as Griphook.

He was covered in blood, though it did not appear to be his own, which only soaked through what his armor did not protect. He still wielded his battle axe, and when he saw who had nearly run into him, he looked up at Ron.

"Ah, Weasley," he said, drawing out the name. "Waiting for the fighting to start, are you?"

Ron hesitated, something seeming to click in his mind. "The fighting… it hasn't started yet?"

Griphook slowly shook his head.

"The Dark Lord gave us one hour," he said. "One hour has gone. His army has not returned."

"Look," Ron said, panting and out of breath. He leaned over, bracing his hands on his knees. "I
dunno why he hasn't attacked yet, but Hermione's gone haring off after Harry, so…"

"Mr. Potter left the Great Hall ten minutes ago," Griphook said evenly. "Miss Granger disappeared through those doors just now."

Ron stared out the door in the wreckage-strewn courtyard. His first instinct was to chase after Hermione, but he had no idea where she had gone. And a part of his brain reminded him that she had not asked him to come along. He was not sure what he should do, but he figured that perhaps he should wait there for the two of them to come back—there was no sense in going blindly through the night and further split the three of them up to try and find them again.

He heard footsteps approach behind them, crunching loudly against the debris on the ground, and he turned around in time to see Neville approaching. He had a cut above his brow, and a torn lip, and had not escaped without more than a few scratches—but he appeared to be fine.

"You alright, mate?" he asked, coming to stop beside him. "You look a mess."

"So do you," Ron said, cracking a smile. He jerked his head toward the door. "Did you see Harry come through here, Neville?"

"He said he had something to do," Neville said, scratching at some of the blood caking on his temple. He paused. "He hasn't come back yet, has he?"

Ron shook his head.

"You don't… you don't think he's gone off to find You-Know-Who, do you?"

~o~O~o~

Hermione tore across the grounds, which were eerily silent save for the groans of the fallen and the squelch of wet grass, mud, and blood between her paws. She did not want to be seen running across the lawn, and even if someone failed to recognize her, her tangle of bushy hair flying behind her would be an immediate giveaway that there was something human crossing the lawn. Thus, she had taken the risk and bowed to the wellspring of deep-seated instincts she had uncovered, allowing her to transition into her newly-discovered Animagus form with something like a jolt followed by a smooth change.

She slowed as she neared the woods, ears pricked for signs of life on the other side of the gloom, and then she leapt into the clustered trees. Her golden eyes could see in the darkness, and she leapt over every fallen log and the tree roots that rose from the ground. She did not have to stop and think about what direction to go, for she knew exactly where Harry was headed: straight in to the depths. He would do it no other way.

The woods were eerily silent, save for the cracking of twigs beneath her paws, the unaccustomed way leaves crunched under her. And then she came to a halt, crouching low to the ground and peering into the darkness as an odd sort of shimmer flickered before her, not several feet away. And then a hand appeared, attached to an invisible body, and holding a glittering, gold ball whose wings fluttered faintly—

The Snitch was pulled back underneath Harry's invisibility cloak, and then a sound like metal sliding against metal could be heard; Hermione padded forward, climbing over a large, knotted tree root in time to see a faint glow emanating from the shimmer—and then the Cloak was ripped off, and Harry whirled around to face her, his wand lit, face washed out from the bright light.

Hermione blinked against the wandlight for a moment, and then in a smooth movement, was upright
again, on two feet instead of four. Harry's wand quickly lowered as he recognized who it was, and
his mouth gaped half-open for a moment, as though there were something he was dying to say.

"Harry?" Hermione said softly, stepping forward and wrapping her arms around his neck. "I'm afraid
to ask what you're doing out here."

Harry wrapped his arms around her and squeezed tightly for a moment, as though to convince
himself that she was truly there—solid, real—and then turned away. In answer, he held out his
sweaty palm, in which a familiar black stone with a jagged crack rested.

Hermione's breath caught. "The stone that was in Marvolo Gaunt's ring?"

"The Resurrection Stone," Harry responded quietly. His eyes flickered over her for a moment, and
then he asked quietly, "Those memories Snape gave me... are you really..."

Hermione nodded. She bit her lower lip, trying to suppress the tears that continue to prickle
threateningly—and then something snapped inside her, and she broke again, the tears winning the
battle. They rolled down her cheeks, and soaked into Harry's neck as she threw her arms around him
again.

"I'm so sorry," she choked. "I'm sorry I had to keep it such a secret all these years. I really wanted to
tell you—to let you know that there was someone else out there who cared for you, that you didn't—
that you weren't alone..."

"How—" Harry's voice didn't seem to be working properly for him. "How did you know I'd—that
I'd be here?"

Hermione inhaled deeply. "I—I knew you too well, Harry. I knew you wouldn't ignore the Dark
Lord's words—and then when I saw the memories for myself..."

"You—you saw the memories?"

"Yes, Harry, I looked, because I wasn't sure where you were... I knew that wherever you went, you
would have gone tearing off based on whatever memories Severus had given you..." Hermione tried
to compose herself, pulling on all of her considerable self-discipline that had been acquired over the
last twenty years, but it didn't stop her next words from coming out choked. "I—after I realized not
only where you had to be, but what Severus had shown you, I... I had to follow."

Harry swallowed. "You... I didn't realize it for the longest time, but just like now—you call—you
always called Vol... you always called You-Know-Who the same thing all his Death Eaters called
him."

Hermione startled at this, but she did not look away. "I suppose... well, you know everything now,
don't you?" She gave him a faint smile. "I guess I picked that habit up from my husband, after so
many years."

"Yeah..." Harry looked faintly ill at this. He swallowed again, harder this time. "I... you... Snape... all
this time..."

Hermione placed her hand over his upturned palm, the tiny black stone poking into her. "Nothing's
changed, Harry," she whispered. A pause, and then she grasped the underside of his hand in her free
on, and turned it over once. Twice. And then a third time. "I may be Hermione Snape, but I'm not
just your godmother—I'm still your best friend from since we were silly first-years taking down a
mountain troll, and you're still like a brother and a son to me all at once..."
And then with a whisper, she said, "Close your eyes, Harry."

She watched those green eyes disappear behind his glasses, and then shut her own. The world stayed dark for them both, until the sound of shuffling made their ears prick, like frail bodies finding their footing on the leafy, debris-strewn earth. Her eyes open—and so had Harry's—and they both turned to look.

At once, Hermione could see that they were neither quite living nor dead—they looked rather exactly as Hermione would have imagined the boundary between the living and the dead, that narrow strip of existence where they were more than ghosts and less than flesh. As they approached, Hermione realized that they were all exactly as she had remembered them—and as they came a halt, each wearing a comfortingly familiar and warm smile, an inkling began to grow within her that suggested that this was perhaps all they were with the Stone's help—memories given life.

Sirius no longer wore that haggard, haunted look that had followed him in his years since Azkaban. There was James, who looked almost exactly like Harry—at the same height they shared, they could have been brothers rather than father and son. Lily still had that envious mane of silky red hair, like burnished flame, and that motherly look about her face that Hermione had come to admire in the year they had grown closer before her untimely death. She felt a small measure of relief that there was no judgment in their expressions, no indication upon their faces that they bore grudges against her.

It was just the three of them. For a moment, Hermione wondered why there were not more—and then a final figure stumped out of nowhere on nothing but a peg-leg, though he was no longer missing an eye or a chunk out of his nose. Mad-Eye Moody appeared, wearing that familiar, wry smile—though he no longer had the gash on his mouth that made it twisted. She opened her mouth in astonishment, about to say something, anything—but then Sirius raised a hand to cup her face, and she turned her gaze on him. His fingers went through her, and though she felt something against her skin where his hand should have been, it was not solid, and it was not flesh. It had no temperature of its own.

"Nicely does it, Potter," Mad-Eye said, tilting his head at Harry—and then her. "Always good work, Snape."

Harry looked at him with almost startled bewilderment. Moody merely laughed.

"I never got to finish my last chess game with Selenius," Sirius said, snapping her attention back to him. He was smiling, but there was an edge of sadness to his words, a trace of recovered human emotion that the truly departed did not have. That the Stone reforged for him. "I'm sorry for that."

Hermione rubbed at her eyes, unable to stop the tears from flowing freely. "Do you—do you want me to give him a message?" she choked.

Sirius shook his head. "It's a heady thing, sending messages between the living and the dead," he said. "It makes people hang onto them, hoping that there might be a way to cross the gap… Selenius has his whole life ahead of him, Hermione," he said, pulling his hand away. "I'm glad I got to know him, got to be there with him to watch him grow…"

And now he turned to Harry, who was looking at him as though he too were trying to assess exactly what Sirius had become. "…The way I never got to see Harry. I'm sorry I wasn't able to be there, that I only got to see a fraction of the man you've become—but I'm proud to call you my godson," he said, grinning at Harry. His eyes were full something, which if it was not life, Hermione thought must be laughter. "We're all proud of you."

"You've been so brave," Lily said, coming to stand beside Sirius. James followed, placing a hand on
her shoulder, looking at his son with fatherly pride. Harry looked at her, as though he would very much like to try, to believe he might be able to reach out and finally touch his mother's face.

Moody interjected with a chuckle. "You've gotten this far, too. There was never any turning back with you."

"I…" Harry's voice caught in his throat. "I never wanted any of you to die…"

"I'm sorry," Hermione whispered. She gazed into the face of two people who had been her best friends in another time—two men who had been like brothers. And then she forced herself to look at Lily, half-afraid that she would see resentment in the other woman's eyes. And lastly, a man who had been her mentor and a respected friend for as long as she could remember. They all turned to look at her, and she confessed softly, "I'm sorry I didn't stop you from being killed even though I knew… even though I knew it would happen…"

To her surprise, James merely smiled at her. "We're not mad," he said, placing his arm around Lily. "We forgave you a long time ago, Hermione."

"We haven't once regretted asking you to be Harry's godmother," Lily added gently.

"Never once regretted having you in the Order, either," Moody added gruffly. "Always did your homework for the rest of us, eh?"

"It's not your fault, what had to happen," James said breezily. "Dying wasn't as bad as we thought it'd be."

Harry swallowed. "Does it—does it hurt?"

"Dying?" Sirius said, with surprising brevity. "Not at all. Quicker and easier than falling asleep."

Hermione sniffled and looked at Harry, who seemed to be taking a moment to absorb this. A chilly breeze blew through the clearing, lifting his bangs up just enough that in the wandlight, she could see his lightning-bolt scar, as fresh as the day it had been made. And then quietly, he asked, "Will you stay with me?"

"Harry…" Hermione began.

"No," Harry said. "I've got to do this, Hermione. Don't you see?" he asked, turning to face her, expression dead-set. "Part of You-Know-Who lives on in me—until I die, he can't either." He took a deep breath. "I already put the Sword of Gryffindor back in the Sorting Hat—I figure that if there's anyone else who can kill the snake, it'll be whoever pulls it out."

Hermione opened her mouth, and then shut it. She stood there considering him for a moment, and then said, very quietly, "Do you want me to wait here for you?"

"I won't be coming back," Harry said.

"You've got all three Deathly Hallows, haven't you?" Hermione pressed. "Even if you don't possess the wand, you're still the master of it—just in case," she continued, "I'll wait here."

Harry peered at her through his glasses. "You'll wait here for me?" he repeated, as though making sure he had heard right.

Hermione nodded, blinking away the wetness in her eyes.
Harry turned to look at his parents and godfather, who all stood there, waiting—and then he turned back to her.

"Yeah," he said. His voice cracked. "I'd like that. I'll... I'll try to come back."

Hermione placed one hand around his back, and one behind his head, holding him tightly to her. Praying this would not be the last time she saw her scar-headed friend. And then, with great reluctance, she released him.

"Come back," she begged. "Please."

Harry nodded, and with a final look at her, he turned to go. She watched James, Lily, and Sirius follow him deeper into the woods, until the faint, unearthly glow that outlined them faded away. Moody stumped beside them, though he paused just at the edge of her vision to look back. He gave her a final salute, and then disappeared with the rest of them. She watched her best friend leave, wondering if she would ever see him again—wondering if Dumbledore's plan would work—wondering if she had been right.

Or terribly, terribly wrong all along.

She wondered if she would ever be normal after all of this. Even now, she could not cry properly, felt she could not fully express the depth of her emotions. They had been locked away for so long, restrained and beaten down and suppressed and forced to be ignored and pushed aside... all so that she could keep a cool head, so that she could do her job, so that she could continue to do her part unfalteringly in bringing down the Dark Lord.

What kind of godmother struggled to find emotion to fully express to her godson how she felt about him calmly walking to his death? What kind of woman met the sight of her dying husband with minimal hysteria, and coolly managed to arrange a little fiddling with time so that she could fix him up good and proper?

What kind of friend looked into the eyes of people whose deaths she had been responsible for—

What kind of friend accepted their forgiveness, knowing that they were the recreations of wistful hopes and distant memories?

What kind of mother barely expressed anything of depth to her son after she brought his father home unconscious and covered in his own blood—

At this, Hermione forced herself to mentally shut down on this question, pushing it away. She had a job to do. Once it was over—once it was all over—she could release the coiled spring that was her life, let the pent-up years go, release the dam in the same way she had done before when she was younger, less controlled, less able to handle the burden of her job and war—

She might finally be able to begin healing again.

She might be able... to have the life that she had dreamed of with Severus.

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
A sudden disturbance in the air, a prickle of magical force that rippled out from the depths of the forest, blew past her and made Hermione suddenly jerk up, alert. It faded quickly, and she could not discern what it was—but her suspicions began to run high as the sounds of vague yells brushing through the trees told her that very far up ahead, something had happened to cause a commotion. A magical disturbance. But what was going on there? What had Harry done?

But almost as quickly as it had appeared, it was gone, scattered to the wind, leaving Hermione with nothing but a sense of growing unease. And then the ground shook with audible footsteps, and Hermione stumbled back, almost falling off the tree roots as it began advancing toward her. It was certainly not Harry—could not be—and it was marching toward her in a steady thrum of heavy footfalls. She quickly scrambled for cover, at once wanting to stay, yet unsure if she shouldn't run. Her self-preservation kicked in a moment later, and she quickly made use of her new Animagus form to scamper up the nearest tree.

Birds shrieked and flew from their night roosts as the noise grew louder, more raucous, and Hermione stayed tightly where she was, not daring to move a muscle.

She perched on the branches, hiding amongst the thickness of the leaves and the darkness, and settled into a crouch just in time for her golden eyes to locate the source of the sound as it passed below her. A great, shaggy head passed just inches underneath her, whom she recognized instantly as being Hagrid's—manacled and forced to walk. Around him were the cloaked, masked figures of the Death Eaters—all of whom were jeering and crowing in triumph, though their voices were intermingled with the heavy, shuddering sobs of the half-giant as…

As he carried Harry in his arms.

Hermione did not wait. She lifted to her feet and slinked along the branch onto the next tree, following the victorious procession silently, trying to look, trying to see, to make sense of it all.
Harry's glasses hung askew on his face, as though someone had shoved them on without care; his eyes were shut, and his mouth was open and lolling, a tiny bit of drool dripping down the side of his chin. This made Hermione pause. She had seen too many dead bodies in her lifetime to know that a person did not look like this in death—this was comical, almost too comical, and for a moment, her heart jumped in hope that perhaps Harry was faking. Harry was trying too hard to look dead—and Voldemort, whose scaly figure led the march, appeared too triumphant to notice.

She continued to slink among the tree branches, which were so thick and intertwined from years of untouched and undomesticated existence that it was little effort for Hermione to pad across them as she followed the procession. Movement from the forest floor around them made her look, and she saw hoofed legs and unclothed human torsos appear, bearing bows and swishing their tails, though they watched silently and noncommittally. The centaurs observed, like sprites of the forest, as Harry was borne away.

One centaur came prominently into view, but it was Hagrid who first named him.

"Bane!" he suddenly bellowed, in anger and anguish. The centaurs all silently turned their heads toward him. Heavily, but with rage still strong beneath his words, "Happy now, are yeh, that you didn’ fight, yeh cowardly bunch o’ nags?" Hermione waited for one of the centaurs to react to this, to knock an arrow, but none of them moved a muscle. "Are yeh happy Harry Potter's—d-dead…?"

He broke down in fresh tears at this, and could not continue.

Some of the Death Eaters, emboldened by Hagrid's insults, jeered at them as they left them behind. And then her ears picked up the sound of hoofbeats galloping away in unison, and they were gone. The branches began to thin out now, as they reached the outskirts of the forest, and Hermione was forced to stop and allow herself to fall behind. As soon as they were out of her line of sight, she bolted down the tree, and without bothering to resume her human form, began a kind of half-gallop in the direction of Hogwarts, circling around the Death Eaters as she went.

Hagrid had Harry. She was not certain if Harry was alive and faking death, or if he was well and truly gone. But she knew Voldemort would want to show off his prize. Leaping and sprinting across the uneven earth, Hermione reached the edge and then leapt out, landing on soft, muddy grass before tearing off in the direction of the school. And if she got there quickly enough, which was likely because Voldemort appeared to be in no rush, they could perhaps mount a rescue attempt to get Hagrid and Harry out of there.

As soon as she was within sight of the double doors, she smoothly resumed her human form and slipped inside. She skidded across the entrance hall, dipping and stepping over the wreckage strewn across it, and then threw open the doors to the Great Hall.

She must have looked a fright. She was panting hard, clearly out of breath; her hair was probably wild beyond belief, and she was caked in mud and dirt. Perhaps, even, she had shed her illusion of being nothing more than a school girl caught up in the midst of a war; her demeanor certainly did not lend itself to that impression. Whatever it was, everyone very quickly stopped what they were doing to look at her.

Before she could open her mouth to speak, the magnified voice of Voldemort broke through the startled silence.

"Harry Potter is dead."

The entire room let out a sharp inhale of breath, a gasp of shock, as this news washed over them, sucking the air from the room.
"He was killed as he ran away, trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him. We bring you his body as proof that you hero is gone."

"No!" Hermione saw Neville sway to his feet, from where he had been kneeling to help Madam Pomfrey patch someone up. Ron stood next to him, his blue eyes looking at her in a pale expression of fright and desperate need for her reassurance.

"The battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death eaters outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is finished. There must be no more war. Anyone who continues to resist, man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family..."

"He's lying," Ron suddenly shouted, momentarily capturing the attention of the people around him. "Harry would never run away, and he isn't dead! He can't be!"

"...kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents, children, your brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together."

Eerie, terrified quiet fell upon them; everyone waited, as though not daring to breathe in case Voldemort was not finished—but it appeared that he was, and Hermione immediately stepped forward.

"I'm not sure whether Harry is dead or not," she said coolly, her calm composure somehow keeping the room from falling into complete chaos at the news, "but he was not trying to run away. He went to do something important, something that he'd been trying to do since the start of the battle that's absolutely necessary to defeat the Dark Lord, and he did it now because he didn't want to wait for more people to die first."

She looked around, at the wide, watchful eyes locked on her, desperate for the information she had for them.

"He was trying to protect you," she said quietly.

For a moment, no one spoke; and then Neville nodded.

"I knew that," he said, his face set with determination. "We all knew Harry, didn't we?" he asked, addressing the people around him. "I mean, not all of us knew him personally, but we do know who he is, as a person—he was brave enough to fight You-Know-Who over the Philosopher's Stone in his first year, he was brave enough to battle a Basilisk in second, and he went through the Tri-Wizard Tournament in fourth... he stood up for what he knew was right in fifth, and fought in the Department of Mysteries... and he was there, helping us fight, the night Dumbledore died," he finished, glancing around at them. "To top it off, didn't he just escape on a dragon to come here, to Hogwarts—to help us? To fight? If that doesn't tell you what kind of man he is, I don't know what does. But that's not the type of person who would just run off and abandon his friends."

All around him, people were slowly nodding; those who had known Harry had been nodding and agreeing vigorously throughout Neville's speech, but now those who had not were slowly coming to agreement. None of them believed Voldemort's assertion that Harry had been trying to sneak away to save his own skin. They were united in their faith and belief of Harry once more.

Ron was looking enormously relieved.

"Now," Hermione said, taking charge, "the Dark Lord will be knocking on our door soon—he's got Harry with him, and if Harry's still alive, we'll need to help him get away—if he is alive," she stressed, "he's pretending to be dead, so I'll need some volunteers to help me create a diversion."
At once, a hall full of hands rose up. But a tingling sensation of warning snaked up her spine, and a cold and lifeless hand coming to rest on her shoulder, made Hermione look up.

Violet eyes smiled down at her, two rows of perfectly white and sharpened teeth in full view for her to see. There were several startled cries and gasps from the crowd as they realized who—what—he was.

"How may I help you?"

Hermione looked up at the vampire's fanged visage, unafraid, and returned his gesture with a wry quirk of her own lips.

"Long time no see, Sanguini."

~o~O~o~

Hermione had not cared where the vampire had come from, nor why. All she was concerned about was the fact that he was here, that he was her ally, and most importantly, that he was already very dead.

She needed a diversion.

And Voldemort would most certainly attempt to exterminate it.

Fortunately in this case, while one could certainly imprison and torture a vampire, it took a great deal more effort to kill one than a carelessly thrown Avada Kedavra. Thus, the both of them left the Great Hall shortly and moved out into the courtyard where Voldemort was sure to arrive with his procession.

"You know," Hermione said, as they surveyed the wreckage around them, "I was expecting there to be more vampires on his side—but we haven't encountered any, yet."

Sanguini slowly shook his head, the pale and sickly skin stretching out over his bones as he did so, like it was more of a detached wrap than actual skin. "I managed to dissuade them."

"You?" Hermione's eyes widened in wonder at this. "How?"

Sanguini remained silent for a moment, and then he said, "Vampires have long been persecuted by the living. Wizards in particular fear the dead, hence their ingrained reaction to sightings of zombies or inferi. But we are neither mindless nor the tools of a dark wizard… and I reminded our coven leaders of this one pride we still retain."

Hermione nodded. "Pride is all we have left at this point," she murmured. "And hope."

"I also relayed the tale of how you helped me," Sanguini said, his tone almost bored. "I told them how your unexpected kindness allowed me to evade capture. Some of them even remembered you coming in while they were asleep, and they were duly impressed that you did not leave them in a smoking ruin."

"So the vampires are on our side?" Hermione asked, hope rising.

Sanguini shook his head. "No."

Hermione's expression fell sharply at this, but then she saw his lips quirk up in an approximation of a tooth-lipped smiled.
"But given that your assistance allowed the community to remain neutral in the last war, they granted me a favor," he rasped. "They rejected the Dark Lord's advances. And so I am here of my own accord."

Hermione felt her heart skip a beat. Dumbledore had been worried that the Vampire community would accept—and yet—and yet—

How had one tiny act so many years ago changed this crucial moment?

Sanguini's violet eyes flickered, and Hermione had the impression that he was laughing inwardly. "The undead prefer to lie in the luxury of a lazy eternity. It was not a difficult decision for them to make."

Hermione smiled at him. "For someone who's supposed to be dead, you're a lot more lively than expected."

Sanguini bared his teeth at her in a fanged smile, and then slowly pointed a finger at the entrance to the courtyard.

"They will enter here," he said hoarsely, suddenly very business-like. "They will put your half-giant friend in the front, bearing Harry Potter for all to see. I will distract them from behind the pillars of one of the surviving awnings—you will use that opportunity to set your friends free."

Hermione nodded. Carefully, she reached into her pocket, withdrawing the remains of the Felix Felicis. She saw Sanguini's eyes pass over it with interest, and then held it up to her lips, draining a little more than half of it before handing it out to him.

"It's liquid luck," she said. "We'll both need all the luck we can get."

She saw Sanguni's eyes widen, making him look even more tired and emaciated than before. "No," he said. "You would not—you should not give up something so valuable…"

Hermione pressed it into his hand, and his cold fingers wrapped around it, almost of their own accord. "We're in this together. Right now, this isn't you helping me because of some debt you owe—it's us working together as friends, if not allies. Please, take it."

Cautiously, Sanguini held it up to his nose, and inhaled deeply. His eyes closed slowly for a moment, and then snapped back open. "It smells of you…and of someone who smells like you, yet is not you."

Hermione blinked, but before she could formulate an answer, the vampire had lifted the phial to his mouth and tilted the remainder of the golden potion past his lips. A blue-tinged tongue flickered past his teeth to trace his lips, as though savoring the taste, and then he handed the phial to Hermione. His pupils were dilating rapidly, and an odd, dangerous light seemed to have enveloped his eyes.

"Such brilliance… the amazing things that wizards come up with…"

He gazed down at Hermione who, feeling the effects of her own liquid luck, offered him a smile.

Which Sanguini returned.

"Thank you," he said hoarsely.

~o~O~o~
Voldemort's forces assembled in the courtyard less than fifteen minutes later. As predicted, and to Hermione's relief, Hagrid was indeed staged upfront, holding Harry in his arms in compliance with Voldemort's wishes that all of Hogwarts should see his dead body. Hagrid was still sobbing quietly, though his sniffles were still loud enough to be heard by all.

Everyone else was assembled at the foot of the stairs leading to the Entrance Hall, their expressions stony, faces set. They were an exhausted, tear-stricken lot, but they were prepared for what they knew would come, and their hearts were still lit with hope that Harry was alive. Hermione stood among them, with Ron at her left and Neville at her right, all three of them prepared to rush in to save Harry and Hagrid.

But still, when they saw Harry's still form cradled in Hagrid's arms, a cry rose among them.

"No," she heard Ginny whimper, and Hermione's neck twitched as she stopped herself from turning around to look at the girl. "No—Harry! Harry…"

"No, Potter," she heard Minerva say softly, from behind her. Hermione knew it was taking all of the woman's self-control not to break out in shock at the sight before them. But she had been warned, and Hermione had said that they all needed to keep a level head. With Albus gone, and Moody gone, even Kingsley obeyed her. "No…"

She saw Ron gulp audibly, his face pale; she saw Neville trembling beside her, though she suspected it was more with rage than fear—and then quite suddenly, he shouted, "No!"

He took a step forward.

"Harry!"

Voldemort raised his wand, and there was a loud bang as a chunk of debris exploded in front of them, causing them all to cringe. "Silence!"

There was a sudden scream from behind, and all of the Death Eaters—Voldemort included—whipped around in time to see Dolohov sink to the ground, gushing blood from his neck. They barely had time to register the bloodied lips of the vampire as he moved with unexpected swiftness, his body creaking audibly as he grabbed another masked Death Eater by the face, yellowed fingernails digging in his victim's skull, and yanked him toward his mouth. There was another terrible scream that was broken only by the sound of all hell breaking loose, as the Death Eaters rushed to subdue their attacker.

Hermione did not give a command. She gave no warning, no alert, that this was a set-up as she sprinted forward, wand raised. Neville and Ron charged after her, and she slashed her wand at Hagrid's bindings. The chains and ropes fell away with an audible clink, littering in pieces around his feet, and Hagrid did not waste a moment in pounding forward, his enormous feet making the ground quake slightly as he ran.

"No—forget the vampire, I say! Forget him—stop that oaf!"

The jets of light flying did not stop, however, and with Hagrid safely on their side, no one else was inclined to hold back. And enormous cheer broke free as they saw Harry leap out of Hagrid's arms and land on the ground on his feet, quite alive, and looking rather shocked by his reception. He was immediately pulled out of Hermione's and the Death Eaters' line of sight as Ginny pulled him into a hug, and several other people let out exclamations and declarations of relief that he was alive. Hexes and curses flew out from their side, striking the Death Eaters who had their backs turned as they tried to drive away the vampire feasting on them.
But Sanguini was already leaving. He ducked and dodged every spell that flew his way, wearing a bloody grin as he sprinted toward her, his corpse-like expression victorious. Her vision of him blurred for a moment, and then he was beside her, one hand on her shoulder in acknowledgement of their success.

There was sudden scream, another loud bang, and this time, before Hermione could get any words out, she realized that she had been silenced. They all whipped around to look. Those who had their wands out were looking dumbstruck that their incantations had been halted, and then quickly scrambled back as the giants accompanying Voldemort lumbered forward, clubs raised threateningly. There were chunked remains of fresh bodies smeared on them, and Hermione realized that they had tried to smash Sanguini, and missed spectacularly.

"So this is what I get, after the generous offers I made to the nosferatu of Britain…” Voldemort said, his words accompanied by a low, angry hiss. His wand was pointed at someone lying directly at his feet, although their form was partially obscured by dust. Hermione couldn't identify who it was. "And as for Harry Potter… I don't know how you survived, but I ensure you that after tonight, you will still be most thoroughly dead."

In response, Sanguini stuck out his bluish tongue at the despot. Hermione saw Voldemort's red eyes widen in rage, a vein throbbing visibly in his temple, and fought to absurd urge to laugh.

"No he won't!"

Hermione realized in horror that the person on the ground was Neville—and he was slowly sitting up.

"The only one here who's going to lose tonight is you!"

"And who is this?” Voldemort asked, his tone suddenly controlled, perhaps even conversational. It was clear to Hermione that he was trying to regain his façade of perfect calm and manipulation over the events of tonight, both to his Death Eaters and to the side he intended to crush. "Who has volunteered tonight to demonstrate what happens to those who continue to fight when the battle is already lost?"

Bellatrix let out a cackle.

"Neville Longbottom, my lord! The son of the Aurors—the one who has been giving the Carrows so much trouble!"

Hermione clenched her fist, and struggled against the Silencing Spell holding her. "Let him go!” she bit out.

At once, shouting rose around her, as others broke past their enchantment—but another loud bang from Voldemort's wand lay a blanket of silence over them, though Hermione flicked her wand in the air to halt it from wrapping around her.

"Ah, Mrs. Snape," Voldemort said, his tone almost cordial. "It's such a pleasant surprise to see you again, still running after the brats of your Order friends—as always. Now Neville," he said, turning his attention back to the prisoner lying at his feet, "won't you join me? You show spirit and bravery, and are as pureblooded as they come. You will be a valuable Death Eater."

Hermione saw Neville's fists clench. "I'll join you when hell freezes over!" he declared.

Hermione pointed her wand at the Dark Lord, even as she felt Harry bump his way through to stand beside her.
"Neville here is going to show you what happens when you throw away your noble stock and good qualities for a foolish cause," Voldemort said, his voice a sibilant hiss.

At once, Neville grew rigid at his feet, as though struck by a spell, and the Dark Lord reached down and yanked him up. The Dark Lord waved his wand, and there was a shattering sound as a misshapen, bird-like shape flew through the air toward him. As it zoomed closer, Hermione realized at once what it was, her eyes widening in recognition. The Dark Lord snatched it out of the air, shaking the ragged old Sorting Hat in his hand, and then held it over Neville's unprotected head.

"There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts!" Voldemort declared. "The noble House of Slytherin should suffice for everyone—don't you think so, Neville?"

Neville's face contorted, and for a moment, he looked as though he were about to be sick—and then he spat at Voldemort's feet. "Go to hell!"

Voldemort's enraged expression was the last thing Hermione saw before he yanked the hat down on Neville's head.

"On your own head be it!"

The Death Eaters' wands were holding everyone at bay, but guided by the golden potion running through her veins, Hermione broke ranks. Jets of light flew at her, but she ducked, twisted, and dodged, slashing her wand in their direction. Bolstered by her sudden spurt of bravery, the crowd broke loose, and the hexes and curses aimed for her were now being matched by those determined to stop them.

Harry appeared at her side a moment later, panting, but wearing the most determined expression Hermione had ever seen. There was a pounding of hoofbeats, and the sound of Grawp as he made his appearance from the darkness with a cry of "HAGGER!", and arrows flew out of nowhere, arcing over the walls and raining like a downpour upon the Death Eaters. Harry reached Neville first, but as he yanked the hat off of his friend's head, something glittery and red slid out from the brim, thumping to the ground. Freed from Voldemort's spell, Neville reached down and swiped it from the ground.

"Glad you're alright!" Neville said, beaming at Harry as he hefting the Sword of Gryffindor in his hands. "Hermione was right—look out!"

They both ducked as a giant club swung low over their heads, and then they were fighting their way through, wands and sword blazing. It was chaos again, where no one knew if the person at their back was foe or friend. Neville disappeared among the crowd, and Harry pulled Hermione behind one of the surviving pillars.

"The snake—we've still got to get the snake—"

There was a sudden, unanimous cry from all sides, and they both snapped their head around to look. A snowy white owl had appeared out of nowhere, gliding toward Nagini. The snake was reared up, ready to strike Neville, when Hedwig raked her talons along the snake's back, causing it to whip around to retaliate, jaws snapping impotently as the owl veered away. Whatever happened next was over so fast that they did not have the time to see it, but a moment and a sword swing later, the sight of Nagini's head arcing through the air was unmistakable as it tumbled back to the ground. Harry opened his mouth for a moment, in an exclamation of 'oh', and then shut it. He looked back at Hermione.

"This is it, then," he said grimly.
Hermione saw the snowy owl swoop upward and away, disappearing around a castle turret, victorious and unharmed. She smiled at this, and then nodded. "Go do what you have to do," she said. "Leave everything else to the rest of us—we're all here with you!"

Harry nodded, and with a salute in her direction, turned and ran back into the fray. Hermione followed, and a moment later, the man she had been about to duel was thrown to the ground by what appeared to be a bloodied corpse—and then her vision cleared as she recognized her vampire friend. Then she and Sanguini were fighting side by side, pushing past the Death Eaters to get to the double doors, where the battle was slowly surging inward. They were nearly knocked over as Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy burst past them, but Hermione reached out at the last minute and yanked on the back of Narcissa's robe.

"Narcissa—wait—"

"My son—my son—Draco!" Narcissa yanked away from her, but Hermione held on.

"Draco isn't here!"

Narcissa whipped around to look at her. "What? Where—"

A sudden scream as Sanguini took down the Death Eater who had noticed Hermione's distraction and been about to hex her tore through the air, but both women ignored it. "Draco is with my son. He's safe. If you want to stay and fight, do so. But if you're not willing to, then you should leave—he's safe."

Narcissa gaped at her for a moment, and then wheeled around to face her husband. Lucius's pale, bruised face was a pitiful sight to see, but so was the look of dejection on his face as his wife turned toward him, as he clearly expected to be told bad news.

"Come—Lucius, Lucius, we're leaving."

"Draco—"

"Severus's—if Hermione is to be believed, Draco is safe. We're going!"

Lucius's pale grey eyes flickered between the both of them, and then grasping the situation, he started towards his wife. Without a second glance in her direction, both Malfoys left the direction they had come, tearing off toward the school gates, where they would Apparate away. Hermione saw a wisp of something misty and white burst forth from Narcissa's wand and then slip off into the darkness like a glowing lantern, and then turned to face the throng.

Everywhere, it was chaos. Tonks and Remus were fighting side-by-side on one end in a duel against three. Ginny and Aberforth Dumbledore were teaming up, Ron was with Dean and Seamus as they interjected themselves into other peoples' duels and came crashing down on their opponents in support, ending them all that much quicker. Hermione found herself standing with Sanguini, both of them working seamlessly together with Felix Felicis running through their veins to guide their teamwork.

Centaurs were bursting in through the Entrance Hall, charging with bows and arrows raised. Goblins hacked at the enemy, hexes and curses flew every which way, and in the midst of all of it, the door to the kitchens burst open within the bowels of the castle, and a great swarm of house-elves exited like an angry anthill disturbed, with two very prominent figures in the lead. Kreacher and Dobby, for all they had never gotten along, were each wearing a pot on their head and carrying a kitchen knife in both hands, and were screaming an odd sort of war cry.
The Death Eaters were outnumbered, almost ludicrously so; the horde that surrounded them was such an amazing mix of humans, elves, centaurs, goblins, and other unexpected allies alike—all composed of those whom they had alienated and attempted to suppress with their despotic regime. For all that every race represented here had been oppressed at some point, there was no debate about who was superior to who as they all fought alongside each other.

Hermione saw Bellatrix suddenly turn her wand on Ginny, who was frantically trying to keep on the defensive, and rushed to assist her—though not before Molly got there.

"Not my daughter, you bitch!"

Hermione grabbed Ginny's arm, yanking her out of the way just in time as a jet of green light soared over them both. They stumbled away from the fight between Molly and Bellatrix, and rejoined Sanguini as he ducked and twisted and side-stepped, waiting for the opening he needed to finish off the two death eaters holding him at bay. All around them, it was a clash of several different battles all at once, and it was difficult to make out anything at all with the confusion of lights and dust clouding the air.

Hermione broke away from Sanguini and Ginny, who were now teaming up to throw their opponents off-balance long enough for Sanguini to reach them. She ran to join Minerva and Kingsley's fight as they put their dueling skills to the test with the despot himself. All three of them twisted, dodged, ducked, slashed, blocked, defended, and gave everything they had, working seamlessly as a team, though they couldn't quite seem to finish him.

Voldemort's eyes bugged when Hermione threw herself into their battle.

"It's useless!" he screamed, as Hermione's Stunner crashed against his Shielding Charm. In such close quarters, she could still not afford to use lethal spells. "All you have fought for is for naught!"

"Give it up!" Hermione called, ducking his jet of green light. "You're going to lose!"

Kingsley's shower of sharp obsidian arrowheads and Minerva's knife-shaped birds smacked into the Shield Charm around the Dark Lord, as he continued, "I have seen into your heart, Mrs. Snape! I know the only reason you have ever involved yourself in this war was to protect your husband and child—neither of which you have left!"

Their spells clashed again, three on one, as the Dark Lord added, as though he thought Hermione had not quite comprehended his words, "Your husband is dead, mudblood! And your son will soon be, as well!"

"Fool you!" Hermione shouted, neatly ducking his next spell, and returning with another simple Stunner. "If you wanted to kill my husband, you should have checked before you left—" she dodged again "—should have waited—" Another duck and dodge "—should have pressed your own cold fingers to his neck and checked for a pulse—" another twist and side-step, followed by retaliation "—because he's alive!"

"Liar!"

"This is what happens, Voldiedork," Hermione said, with uncharacteristic gleefulness. The situation she was in was dire and serious, but she still had some of the golden potion in her, sustaining her luck—at least, she hoped there had been enough to hold out for this long—and now was her opportunity to give the Dark Lord the very same sort of cheek she had once shown Lucius Malfoy. "You've gotten sloppy in your dotage! You used to be so thorough, too—but first Severus survived because you didn't make sure he was dead before you left, and then Harry got away too! Things
don't seem to be working out for you, do they?"

There was a sudden, enormous explosion behind her, and Hermione whipped around in time to dodge the enormous club of the giant who had just taken out part of the wall near them. Minerva and Kingsley were both pressing forward against Voldemort, holding his spells at bay while she was distracted, and Hermione turned her wand on the giant behind her. She felled him with a swarm of human-sized knives transfigured out of the rubble around them, but before she could turn around, something heavy and hard knocked into her from behind. The blow threw her forward, and she skidded on the ground, twisting around to look up in time to see Rowle standing above her.

His wand was gone, his face bloodied, but his hands were clenched into fists. Hermione scrambled for her wand, only to realize she had dropped it from the force of his hit—and she surged up, pointing her fingers at him.

"Incendio!"

Fire burst to life around her hand, engulfing it without burning her, and she swung toward him. Her first connected, and the death eater let out a shout of surprise, something that fell between a grunt of pain and a scream of shock at the burn. But the fire sputtered out a moment later as his big, meaty hands came to wrap around her neck, cutting off her air. Hermione struggled, kicking hard, as Rowle's grip slowly increased, crushing her windpipe and strangling her.

Her vision blurred with suffocating pain and dizziness, and the last thing she saw was Sanguini coming up from behind the enormous Death Eater, one hand raised like a talon to strike, blood-filled jaws opened wide. Coming to her rescue. And then her world shook, and she felt herself falling. Her head hit the ground with a hard thud, and the screams from the man above her was all she could register. She heard Harry and Ron's voices as they neared, heard Harry's cry of alarm as he knelt over her, his warm fingers closing around her wrist as he checked to see if she was still alive. Cold ones lifted up her head, pulling one unresponsive eyelid back to peer down at her, and Hermione vaguely made out Sanguini's swaying face before he released her, allowing her eye to join the other in darkness.

And then nothingness took over, and the sounds of battle faded away.

The last thing Hermione remembered thinking was I think my luck ran out.

~o~O~o~

Hermione found herself sitting down by the lake. It was a beautiful day in autumn, and the lake sparkled like a mixture of green and blue jewels. The castle lay off in the distance, standing proud and tall, and Hermione found herself idly wondering why she hadn't thought to bring her books with her.

"I thought you'd be here," Sirius suddenly said, coming from behind her and slumping down to the ground next to her. His hair was long and wild as Hermione remembered, but it had been neatly parted. He was fresher than Hermione recalled, too—his face had lost that haunted look of Azkaban, and he appeared carefree and young. This image was perhaps helped by the fact that he was wearing school robes, and he was fiddling with the tie, wincing at the fact that it was too tight before flashing her a grin. "What are you doing?"

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, and then shut it. She merely shrugged. "I don't know."

"I suppose that's as good an answer as any," Sirius said, folding his arms behind his head and leaning against a tree. "Sometimes, it's nice to just sit back and do nothing."
"I didn't say I was doing nothing," Hermione said, smiling. "I just said I didn't know what I was doing."

"Same difference," Sirius said, reaching into his pocket to unwrap a chocolate frog.

At that moment, there was the sound of footsteps, of wet leaves crunching beneath a pair of feet, and Hermione looked around in time to see James striding forward. For a moment, Hermione thought it was Harry—but then the hazel eyes and lack of a scar made her see otherwise. He sat on the ground next to her, sitting cross-legged and leaning back before pulling a little golden ball with delicate-looking wings out of his pocket.

"Sorry I'm late," he said cheerfully, holding it up for Hermione to see. "Nicked this first."

He released the snitch, and it at once fluttered out of his hand, darting up and out. Hermione waited for James to make a grab for it, but he instead just sat back to watch it flitting about their heads. The sound of a wrapper being pocketed allowed Hermione to turn around in time for Sirius to bite into the head of his chocolate frog.

"Where's Remus?" Hermione asked.

James shrugged. "He's busy. Said he still had stuff to do."

"Anyway," Sirius said, "we thought we'd just drop by, since you've got too much time on your hands."

"I do not," Hermione protested.

"You haven't got a book," Sirius pointed out. "Hands are empty, and it's not like you're sitting here trying to telepathically summon the Giant Squid. Hence, too much time on your hands."

"It's not meant to be a literal expression, Sirius," Hermione said, suppressing a giggle.

"But he's still right," James pointed out. "Now that it's all over, you can relax. So we thought we'd join you."

"I… over?" Hermione blinked, not quite understanding, yet feeling that there was something she was supposed to get here. "What's over?"

"Well," Sirius said, turning his chocolate frog card over in his hands. "We figure that now that Voliedork—can I call him that? It's very fitting, I think—is dead, and you're sitting back and recuperating… you can relax. I mean, you've pretty much been working nonstop for years, haven't you? I'm surprised you haven't driven yourself nuts, or driven yourself into the ground—or done both and sprouted a tree."

Hermione suddenly remembered. "I suppose," she echoed. "I mean, I have been… working…"

There was a sudden hum, and they both looked up for the source of it. James spotted it first, pointing at the hornet nest nestled on one of the upper branches of the tree they were resting under. They gazed at it for a moment, and then Hermione turned to look back at Sirius.

"So what are you going to do now?" she asked. "That it's all over, I mean."

"Well," Sirius said, scratching his chin thoughtfully. "I thought I might just sit back and relax, too. I mean, there's nothing left for us to do, so we can just enjoy whatever happens to us now."
Hermione turned to look at James, who nodded emphatically at this.

"We'll be leaving Hogwarts in the boats like the other seventh years, won't we? Lily said she'll share mine."

Hermione smiled. "I've never gotten to leave Hogwarts by boat. I didn't get to take part in that tradition when I graduated."

The hum of the hornet's nest was growing steadily louder, like a white noise of many voices clamoring to be heard, and their importance merely reduced to a buzz. Sirius clapped a hand over her shoulder.

"You haven't graduated from life just yet," he said with a playful grin. "Come to think of it, Snape hasn't, either. You'll end up having to share a boat with him!"

"Like she would mind," James chuckled. The golden snitch fluttered near his ear, and then darted over to her before flittering up again. "Count yourself lucky—you got held back! You'll have more time to try and read every book in the library!"

Hermione elbowed him. "My life doesn't revolve around books, you know!"

The hornet's nest was getting annoying loud now, like a chainsaw that someone had forgotten to turn off. Sirius grasped her hand and pressed the chocolate frog card into it, closing her fingers around it.

"We'll see," he said. "Anyway, we've got to go. The boats are leaving soon, and we've put them off for too long."

As one, he and James stood up, stretching. Without bothering to retrieve the snitch still fluttering steadily higher toward the sunlight, hovering closer and closer to the hornets buzzing above them, they strode off in the direction of the castle.

Hermione peered down at the chocolate frog card in her hand, and turned it over. Dumbledore's wizened old smile looked up at her from its window, and to her surprise, he waved.

A voice suddenly broke through the loud hum of the hornets, although it seemed to come from the nest, and with a jolt, Hermione woke in time to adjust to the fact that she was not at the lake or Hogwarts, but instead in a soft, warm bed—and make out what those around her were saying, their words coming out from the darkness.

"—evidence? Evidence? There is no evidence, Williamson!" It sounded like Arthur Weasley. "This summons is absurd—"

"She's married to a wanted man, Arthur, and she's been an active participant in the war!"

"Yes, but that's not evidence—a trial is—"

"It's not a trial, Arthur!" the man called Williamson said. "But her husband is a Death Eater—or at the very least, his status as one remains to be clarified. There's going to be a hearing—an investigation—to determine whether charges will be pressed or not."

"It's still absurd! Severus Snape was on our side—Harry himself—"

"We can't allow justice to be determined by letting everyone who has a good word put out for them slide by, Arthur. You know this—"
Another voice suddenly broke through as a door was forced open, and several footsteps pounded inside.

"She's our friend, you moron!" Ron's voice shouted.

"And anything that she did, she was doing it under orders!" Harry sounded angry. "Dumbledore—"

"Dumbledore is dead," the Auror said, as though any of them needed reminding. There was the sound of paper rustling. "Please inform Hermione Snape that as soon as she is awake, a date and time for her hearing will be scheduled. The Ministry is willing to take pains to schedule with convenience to her health. Please remember that this is not an arrest or a trial, but an inquiry—we are merely asking her to go on record explaining herself."

"Hermione was her husband's handler," Arthur said quietly. "Severus and Hermione only ever did anything on Albus Dumbledore's orders. I don't doubt that's the only explanation you're going to get."

There was a tense silence, and then Hermione heard Williamson's footsteps face away.

"If you have any complaints, Arthur, talk to Kingsley."

"Kingsley isn't king, Williamson. He can't arbitrarily declare people innocent or guilty—he's bound by the law just as much as anyone else, and if you haven't noticed, he's attempting to fight corruption, not perpetuate it. He's negotiating on a plan of action with the Wizengamot…"

"And in order for the Wizengamot to make an informed decision, they need to understand everything that has happened regarding You-Know-Who. By all accounts, Madam Snape was the Order's right-hand. Good day, Arthur."

Silence followed, and then Hermione heard Harry utter, "Git. After everything's Hermione's done…"

"I'll go tell Snape," Ron muttered. "Selenius wants to see his mum, though—should we bring him?"

"I don't know if that's a good idea," Arthur said, sounding weary. "Selenius doesn't need to see Hermione like this—she needs quiet and rest. In any case, I doubt Severus wants Selenius to leave his sight."

"Right."

Ron's footsteps faded away as he left, and then Hermione heard Arthur heave a sigh. "I'll go downstairs to help Molly before heading to the Ministry to help the Goblins' appeal—they're going through with their decision to renegotiate Wizard-Goblin relations, and they need all the support they can get. It's bad timing for us, with so much else to do, but it needs to be done… they'll be helping us with restoration, after all…"

"Hermione's amazing," Harry said softly. "I know Ron and I never fell in line with her when she was going on about elf-rights and how wizards treat non-wizards, but she was able to connect with the goblins and get them to help us—and that vampire who agreed to be a diversion so that Hagrid and I could get away… and the centaurs…"

He trailed off.

"I firmly believe that Hermione has always seen something in others who are often overlooked," Arthur said. "Even if some of the things she does seem a bit unorthodox or naïve to us."
There was a long pause, and then Harry said in an odd sort of tone, "Maybe that's why she married Snape."

"I have no doubt that Hermione married Severus because she loves him, Harry—"

"I wasn't saying—I wasn't implying otherwise," Harry said quickly. "It's just that she's probably the only one who would have ever seen anything in him in the first—you know, that none of us ever saw, not until he gave me those memories. He hid that part of himself so well."

Hermione slowly forced her eyes open, adjusting them to the dim light of the room in time to see Arthur smile at Harry before turning to leave. Harry stood there for a moment, and then turned to look at her. It took him another moment longer, after he sat down at the foot of her bed, for him to realize she was awake.

"Hey," Hermione said hoarsely. She smiled weakly at him.

Harry stared at her for a moment, stuttering, and then pulled himself together. "You're awake! Were you—did you—"

"I think I heard most of what you were saying," Hermione said quietly, slowly sitting up. To her relief, she appeared to be suffering nothing more than soreness, which was a step-up from the number of times she had awoken barely able to walk. She fumbled at her neck for a moment, and felt relief when she realized that her locket was still there. "How long have I been asleep?"

"A little over a day," Harry said, removing his glasses to rub at his eyes. "As soon as I defeated Voldemort, everything started happening so fast… but we brought you back to the Burrow as soon as we were able to leave. There was so much going on, and the Aurors started coming in to help us clean up—mostly 'cause they weren't under the Imperius anymore, or were able to act without being arrested, or because Kingsley sent them a message telling them that if they didn't get moving he was going to fire them all…"

"Sounds like he'll make a great Minister of Magic," Hermione said dryly.

"It's only temporary, though," Harry said, putting his glasses back on and giving her a wry smile. "I'm surprised you haven't already asked, but don't you want to know how it all went down?"

"That can wait for later," Hermione said, shaking her head. "Right now… for the first time in years, I don't have to—I can just sit back and relax without worrying about Vol… about Voldemort."

Harry nodded. "Get some sleep," he advised. "I'll bring up some food in a little while, if you like."

"Get about—about what happened in the Forbidden Forest…"

"I waited for you," Hermione said, without preamble.

"I know," Harry said. He hesitated, and then said, "There's something else I've been wanting to tell you. For the longest time, I didn't know who you were—which you obviously know, but it's just that ever since I found out you existed, I've always wondered who you were. I sometimes imagined the circumstances under which you were hidden from me, or pestered Sirius for information he couldn't give. Sometimes," he admitted, "I resented you for not being there. Especially after Sirius died. And now, I realize all along that you were right in front of me."

He gazed steadily at her.

"And now I know that no matter what, you were always there for me," he said. "Thank you."
Hermione smiled, and held out a hand to him. He took it, and she pulled him close to her, before wrapping her arms around him.

"I'm so glad," she whispered. Tears pricked at the corner of her eyes, unbidden, but for the first time in years, she did not bother trying to hold them back. "And Harry… I'm so proud of you."

~o~O~o~

As soon as she located her wand—which had been helpfully placed on the nightstand—and was able to walk, she was downstairs with everyone else. Everyone was there, and yet, they were not—people kept dropping by every few minutes, only to leave again because they had something urgent to attend to. As before, there were celebrations going on around the country, and everyone was spreading whatever news they had. The story of how Harry had defeated Voldemort was the most oft-repeated tale, but it was not what Hermione was most interested in hearing first.

As soon as Molly had served her a bowl of tantalizingly warm soup, Hermione asked about Severus and Selenius, only to hear from Ron that they were both still at Tine Cottage. She was still tired and weary, and the burden of nearly twenty years still weighed heavily on her, but as soon as she had filled her belly, she insisted on being allowed to leave.

Ron and Harry were mystified by this behavior, and Hermione took a moment to explain it to them as she hunted around for a traveling cloak.

"Everything else can wait," she said. "I've spent the past several years separated from my family on and off—don't you think they're the first people I want to see?"

"Why don't you bring them here?" Harry suggested. "That way, we can all be together."

"I appreciate the offer, and maybe later, I will," Hermione agreed. "But right now, I don't think any of us are ready for that. It's just—" she took a moment to search for the right words. "It's just been too long, Harry. So much has happened to us, and there's so much else we need to do before we can live our lives again. And I think—Harry, I know you think you know Severus, after what you saw in those memories, but he's still a more complex man than what you saw in the Pensieve. And…" she paused. "Harry, even after all we've been through together, after so many years of having to hide who I really am, I don't think we know each other as well as we'd like to think, either… and I think that's going to take time to repair."

To her surprise, Harry only took a minute to absorb this before he nodded. "Right. Just… just know that when you're ready, we'll still be here."

Grateful for Harry's understanding, Hermione prepared to leave. She knew that part of Harry's acceptance of her feelings was the fact that he was probably experiencing the same thing on a larger scale. She was very aware that out there, there were hundreds, probably thousands, of people who wanted him to step forward and talk. Talk about how he had done it, acknowledge the lives lost and sacrifices made, suggest plans for the future. Talk about hope. This was most likely the reason he was staying at the Burrow right now—there were only a few people he wanted the company of while he recuperated from what has surely been as much of an ordeal for him as it had for anyone else, and Hermione had no doubt that he understood the feeling of not wanting to deal with the masses right now.

People wanted him to step forward and put a close to this long night, this terrifying chapter of their lives. To share their grief and celebration, to be their leader and savior all in one, and to direct them in the restoration of their lives. Yet, how could they expect him to be ready to do that when he himself was still recovering from it all?
She Apparated to Tine Cottage from the Burrow, and landed beside the mailbox that had once been Sirius's boundary marker. The beach was still visible, off in the distance, and the waves rolled along the shore as they always did. On the ramp of land leading down to the beach, a collection of wildflowers had begun to bloom, dotting the hills in brilliant, gentle shades of blue and violet. The sky was a bit overcast with the promise of rain, and yet, Hermione thought that Tine Cottage had never looked more beautiful.

She slowly knelt down on the ground, and dug her fingers into the soft and dewy earth. It was then that she realized she was still in the clothes that she had fought in two days ago, though they had been Scourgified of blood and dirt, their tears and scrapes magically mended. Yet, she did not care, as she leaned forward to breathe in the scent of one of the wild roses growing up along the mailbox.

The door opened, while she knelt on the ground immersing herself the beauty and peacefulness of their sanctuary. There was a sudden cry of "Mum!" and Hermione looked up in time to see Selenius running toward her, arms outstretched. She stood up, brushing off her hands in time for him to throw his arms around her. She hugged him tightly, and then they pulled away to look at each other, as though to check that they were both really, truly there.

"You're alive!"

"Of course I am," Hermione said, kissing his forehead. "Why would you think I wasn't?"

"No one would let me see you," Selenius said. "They said you'd been hurt, but wouldn't tell me how badly."

"I'm fine," Hermione assured him warmly. "Just a little tired and sore, but I'll be right as rain soon."

Selenius hugged her again, gently this time, and then turned to look at the doorway. Hermione followed his gaze, and then a brilliant smile slowly lit across her face as she saw who was there. He looked about as tired as she felt, and without his voluminous robes, the bandage around his neck was clearly visible over the top of his white button-up shirt, leaving him looking more vulnerable, more open somehow—but there was no doubt that not only was it him, but he was alive and as healthy-looking as anyone could be after having their throat mauled by a giant snake.

Hermione slowly walked toward him, almost-dreamlike, with Selenius's hand grasped in one of hers, as though he thought that doing so would keep her upright. Perhaps it would. But as soon as she reached him, her free hand came out to grasp his shoulder, and she felt immense relief as both of his arms came out to wrap around her, pulling her firmly against his side. It had been so long since all three of them were together like this, without the weight of the world bearing down on them, and for the first time, Hermione felt an inkling sense that perhaps finally—it was all over.

Severus's hand moved from her waist to her cheek, brushing it gently with the pads of his fingers, before leaning in to kiss her. Selenius released her hand, and Hermione cupped Severus's cheek as she closed her eyes, leaning into him. A moment later, she pressed her head against his chest, and let out a long, heavy sigh.

"I can't believe it's finally over," she whispered. She opened her eyes, and reached one hand for her locket, pulling it out for the both of them to see, stroking the soft sheepskin backing. "We can finally... we can finally put this back."

They stayed there for a long moment, the three of them.

And at last, they went inside.
The sheepskin rug was placed neatly in front of the mantle in the living room, though it was such a small and cozy living room that the couch and armchairs had been pushed back to make room for it. Hermione did not know when Severus had cleared out their quarters at Hogwarts and brought their possessions here, but she was pleased that it had all been taken care of already. It was one less thing for her to arrange, one less reason for her to return to Hogwarts and see the wreckage of what had been her home for quite a number of years.

They did not talk about Spinner's End, as Hermione sat on the floor with the corner of the rug in one hand, the scrap of worn sheepskin in the other, and a spool of white thread and a needle at her feet. They did not discuss Hogwarts, as she leaned back in her husband's arms and shifted into a more comfortable position on his lap, and took her time in hand-stitching the piece back in place. Her years of knitting hats for house-elves had paid off somewhat, although the skin was thicker than expected, and it took some fumbling for her to get the thread through. But she worked in steady, comfortable, peaceful silence.

Selenius sat at the other corner of the rug, his back to the mantel, and immersed in a book. There were three cups of tea on the arm of one of the armchairs, perched precariously, and which none of them were particularly concerned about. The fireplace crackled merrily as she sewed, and as the rug came closer and closer to repair, a sense of inner peace stole across Hermione. The piece of sheepskin she was sewing back into place looked different from the rest, a bit more worn in a different sort of way, and it would never look quite the same as the rest—particularly since, if you pulled the wool to the side, or brushed your fingers along the skin, you would detect the cluster of stitches holding it together.

Hermione felt this was all very well. They would never be the same again. No matter what they had to look forward to, their lives would be forever changed, forever set in stone by what had happened and what they had done. At last, she finished, and set aside her needle and thread to examine her work, before turning to look at Severus.

A faint quirk of his lips told her that he approved greatly of her handiwork and the symbolism it represented. And at last, breaking their silence, Hermione extricated herself from his arms and stood. She offered him her hand, and he grasped it and got to his feet.

"Let's go for a walk," she said.

The beach was beautiful in the afternoon, when the sun broke through the clouds to warm the chilly sand beneath their feet. None of them wore shoes, and Selenius hurried along the shore ahead of them, his trousers hiked up to his knees yet still wet with ocean spray as he stopped every few yards to check the sand, as though expecting to find treasure. Occasionally, he picked up an odd-looking shell, only to drop it back and continue his search.

Hermione half-expected to see a shaggy black dog racing after him, barking happily and sending sand flying beneath his feet. This was the sort of thing Sirius would have been at Selenius's side for—instead, Crookshanks was padding along steadily after Selenius, bottlebrush tail held high, not slowing or increasing his pace as he trotted after the boy, leaving little pawprints in the sand.

Hermione and Severus walked slowly along the shoreline, hands joined tightly as they savored this moment—the first opportunity that they had to simply be together again, without the knowledge that they would be parted again soon after. But they knew that they could not put off discussion of the world forever, and at last, they cracked open the topic with the reluctance of someone peeling back a
Neither of them had much energy to speak of; Nagini's venom had not been completely mitigated by Hermione's quick medical attention, and it would take a few days for the damage it had caused to be reversed. Hermione was still exhausted from the battle itself, as well as the fiasco of escaping from Gringotts that had preceded it shortly. But still, they approached the topic that they knew would have to be broached eventually.

"There will be trials," Hermione said slowly, as they watched Selenius pick up a flat stone and chuck it off into the waves, to see if it would skip. "For both of us, probably. The good thing is that Harry and the rest of the Order are all on our side—the Ministry can't ignore that kind of support, especially since Kingsley's been temporarily voted Minister of Magic."

"But there is still the possibility that the law will not work out in our favor," Severus said, his voice quiet. He had hardly spoken a word, and his deep, silky voice was still raspy and hoarse. Scratchy. Not quite the familiar smooth baritone Hermione knew.

A look of determination flashed across Hermione's face, deepening the shadows under her eyes. "If the worst comes to worst, we'll leave Britain," she said without a moment's hesitation. "If all we have left is persecution and stigma, we'll take everything we have and go. But I'm not expecting that scenario."

His hand tightened around hers, his thumb gently caressing her fingers. "As long as we both understand and agree upon our plan of action if things go badly for us."

Hermione lifted their joined hands up to her lips, pressing a gentle kiss to his. "We do. But I have a feeling that there will be a lot of angry people if the Ministry doesn't see things our way, and we both know how politics can sway a trial in one direction or the other. Right now, Harry's the one everyone's going to listen to, and Harry's on our side."

"Ever the optimist," Severus murmured. "You were always so sure we would both survive, while I could hardly contemplate the idea... and yet, you managed to make it happen—almost by sheer determination, it seems."

"And planning," Hermione said with a faint smile. "With lots of luck and hope thrown into the handbasket to hell."

Severus's voice cracked as he coupled together his response. "And now—you're staying here? You're not—going back to the Burrow?"

Hermione shook her head. "I don't think we're going back to Spinner's End, either, unless it's to retrieve our things."

"I agree," Severus said quietly, kissing her cheek lightly. "It has its own share of good memories with you and Selenius there, but..." he trailed off, unable to finish.

But Hermione understood. He had grown up there with his parents, which was not a nice collection of memories, and Wormtail had spent several months living with him there as well. The neighborhood was not a pleasant one. There were too many reasons why they wanted to stay at Tine Cottage. Why it was now practically their home in all but full, verbal acknowledgement.

"How's Draco doing?" Hermione asked suddenly.

"He's returned to Malfoy Manor," Severus said quietly. "His parents are currently making negotiations with the Ministry."
Hermione tasted something bitter in the back of her throat. "Lucius will just buy their way out again, I suppose?"

"No, I don't suppose so," Severus said indifferently. "Shacklebolt would never allow it. But they're negotiating upon what charges are being pressed against them and the evidence behind each one, trying to use the fact that Narcissa helped Potter in the Forbidden Forest as proof that they were serving against their will. Which was true near the end, I suppose…"

"But they're trying to use that one act to mitigate everything else they've done."

"I honestly wouldn't have expected anything less from Lucius."

Hermione nodded, and then paused before plowing on. "But you still haven't said how Draco is doing."

Severus sighed and looked away, gazing off in the direction Selenius had gone. "He's about as fine as you can expect. His parents have survived, he has his own trial to contend with, and his future is uncertain." He hesitated, and then with an air of near-reluctance, admitted, "He has asked to see Selenius again. However, he is not allowed to leave Malfoy Manor—Shacklebolt has had too much experience with Malfoys to let him do that—and I am not about to let Lucius near Selenius. Not right now."

"Good," Hermione said, her voice tight. "Selenius with Draco is one thing—but if you even thought I would entertain the idea of letting Lucius Malfoy near my son…"

"I hadn't." Severus gave her a dour look. "Do you think he's the sort of man I'd want my son to be around?"

"No," Hermione whispered. "I don't."

Severus nodded curtly at this, and then placed a hand over his bandaged neck with a grimace. Hermione glanced at the white cloth, and then at his face.

"Does it still hurt terribly?"

"No," he admitted. "Itches like mad."

They both looked down at the sand as Crookshanks padded up to them and rubbed against their ankles, his entire body vibrating with a loud, rumbling purr; and then they looked to see Selenius jogging after them. They waited until their son had caught up, sand spraying everywhere as he skidded to a halt, and then the four of them began making their way back.

Later, after the first family dinner that Hermione could remember having for the longest time, they sent Selenius up to bed and followed shortly after. For a moment, as they began undressing, they began to feel that things were finally normal again—until Hermione slowed as she pulled off her shirt. She walked to stand in front of the mirror, and it was the first time in nearly a year that she finally got a good look at herself.

A year on the run had not been kind to her. Her ribs were visible, and she crossed her arms across her chest to run her fingers down her sides, feeling every one of the dips and bumps. There were a few tiny scars here and there, mostly from trivial things, such as being scraped by brambles and branches while out camping. But there were still more visible marks, too—Bellatrix's handiwork was spelled out incomprehensibly in reverse on the reflected surface, and the place that she had been stabbed in her side was still ridged and ropey pink. The scar on her leg was of a different kind, flat and discolored.
But what frightened her most of all was that she could barely recognize herself. Her face was sharper, not in the manner of those who had suffered Azkaban, but tired and worn. She looked like someone Molly Weasley would not have allowed to leave her house without being fattened up with good food first. And her hair was a mess, dirty and wild, and only temporarily held back by being bound in a messily-tied braid.

She found herself contemplating what to do about it when her husband came up from behind and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her against him and resting his chin on her shoulder.

"Are you coming to bed?" His voice was hoarse, but his words surprisingly soft.

Hermione closed her eyes, breathing in deeply before opening them to gaze into the mirror again. And then she tore her eyes away to look at him directly, giving him a warm smile before taking his hands in hers, and following him to the bed. They got in under the covers, and it took several tries for them to find something comfortable for them both—they no longer precisely remembered how they had so easily done this before—until Hermione rested her head on his shoulder and buried her face in his chest, and he was able to rest his head on the pillow without her tangle of hair tickling him awake.

They had been apart for so long that Hermione felt something within her despair at the fact that it now felt so strange, even if there was still a familiar element of comfort and security to it, to share her bed. To have a warm body against hers that belonged to someone she trusted implicitly, to have someone touching her at all; to be in such an intimate situation that had once been almost ingrained to the level of instinct, and was now so alien and uncertain.

After all this time, to know her husband in person was somewhat comparable to meeting an old acquaintance that she had once known very well, but was now only a vague resemblance of the person they had been before. They had both changed so much, and been apart for so long, that Hermione found herself agonizing over the smallest things. What if she turned over on her other side? Where before, she would have done it without a second thought, what would happen if she did it now? Would Severus think she was turning her back to him? Would he misinterpret it as rejection, as a subtle cold shoulder to try and distance herself from him, when it was really just because it was more comfortable for her to be spooned against him?

His eyes were closed, but she knew he was not asleep—his breathing had not quite evened out. Cautiously, she brought a hand up to stroke his chest, brushing it with her knuckles, and causing him to let out an approximation of a sigh of contentment. Higher up, the bandages had been removed from his neck for the night, and the skin there was visibly reddened and sore, radiating outward from two visible puncture marks that had scabbed over. She carefully avoided touching it as she brought her hand up higher to stroke his cheek, and assured that she now had his attention, she shifted onto her other side. She felt him stiffen at this, but then relax when she took hold of his other arm, the one that was not underneath her, and pulled it closer to her body so that he was effectively holding her. She felt him shift at this, wrapping his arms around her, and let out a sound of agreement when he placed her more securely against him.

Satisfied, Hermione closed her eyes, ready to sleep, when Severus spoke.

"I've been meaning to ask," he whispered into her ear, "but how did you know to be there when the Dark Lord tried to kill me—and how did you have the time to bring me to Tine Cottage?"

Hermione swallowed. "Luck," she choked. "It was all luck—Ron and I insisted on accompanying Harry to find the Dark Lo—Vol—Voldemort—" she felt him twitch at this, but he did not protest her use of the name "because that was where Nagini was, and we still had to kill her. Harry knew where he was because of their connection, and so we went to find a way to kill Nagini… only to
She heard Severus inhale sharply. "So if Potter had not seen into the Dark Lord's mind… if he had continued with his Occlumency…"

Hermione let out a weak laugh. "It's the final piece of irony, isn't it? You tried so hard to teach him Occlumency, yet his incompetency in the subject is what saved your life."

Severus ran a hand along her arm, his fingers brushing against the scars that formed the hated word on it left behind by Bellatrix Lestrange. "And Tine Cottage?"

"Earlier this year, Albus bequeathed Harry, Ron, and I several things of value," Hermione said slowly. "I got Tine Cottage and Selenius's copy of *The Tales of Beadle the Bard*… which is a long story in of itself, but he also gave me a pair of socks."

"Socks," Severus repeated flatly.

"Yes," Hermione agreed. "And it turned out what when a certain phrase was spoken within hearing distance of them, they… erm… well, the knit-pattern of a Time-Turner woven into them became real. Sort of like how Harry looking into the Mirror of Erised in his first year saw himself holding the Philosopher's Stone, which caused the stone to appear in his pocket. That's how I heard it, anyway."

This caused Severus's hand to still. "He gave you a Time-Turner?" He said sharply. "Again?"

"He apparently found a way to repair the one that sent me back twenty years in the first place, and enchanted it in the hopes that I would find it eventually," Hermione said tiredly. "In short, yes."

"That—that doddering old *fool*—I can't believe—no," he corrected, sounding disgusted, "I can believe he would give it to you. But you—you used it?"

"Trust me, you're not too far off from how I felt," Hermione said quietly, "but we couldn't leave you alone in that office, and we couldn't leave you in the care of the ones looking after the injured in the Great Hall. So I brought you back to Tine Cottage with Ron—which is why he has access here," she reminded him, "and then we returned to Hogwarts and went back in time by exactly one hour, perhaps not even a few seconds after we had left for Tine Cottage to begin with. I wasn't looking forward to using it again—and after what happened, I don't think I'll ever want to touch another Time-Turner ever again—"

She suddenly broke off.

"What?" Severus demanded. "What is it?"

"The Time-Turner…" Hermione said slowly. "It was in my bag… my pocket… along with my Notebook…"

If she had been facing him, she was sure that all the color would have drained from her husband's face as well as hers. "The Ministry took it?"

"No, I don't think so," Hermione said slowly. "I don't—I don't remember what happened to it. Harry or Ron probably has it."

"Your notebook," Severus said quietly. "It's a meticulous, chronological record of our actions since the first-war." Hermione twisted her head up to look at him. "Are you planning to submit it at your inquiry?"
Hermione bit her lower lip. "Yes."

"I see."

"If I had it my way, I would burn it," Hermione whispered, laying her cheek back down on the pillow. "But doing that changes nothing. It doesn't erase what's happened, and only means that another reminder of how horrible this war was is destroyed. Makes it easier for people to forget, once the sharpness and clarity fades away. And then all you have left to tell the tale ends up being compressed into a single chapter of *Hogwarts, A History.*"

She heaved a sigh, and then closed her eyes. "I can't destroy it. No matter how much I'd like to not have to hold our actions up to the light to be scrutinized, this is probably the only comprehensive compendium of what happened. I want—I want people to read it and know. I don't ever want this war to be forgotten or—or diluted and distorted into something simple and petty because there wasn't a source around to give people the raw details of reality."

"In that case, we'll probably end up moving as far away from Britain as possible," Severus muttered.

"Good. You can meet my parents in Australia, once I've restored their memories. That's a visit long over-due." Hermione grasped his hand in hers, and caressed his knuckles with her thumb. "But humor aside… I can't destroy it. And I won't hide it."

She paused for a moment, and then for the first time in what felt like forever, she smiled at him. It was a genuine one, with a slight quirk of mischief to it.

"I won't hide it," she repeated, with a glint in her tired, war-weary eyes that was rather reminiscent of Albus Dumbledore when he had a sudden spark of inspiration. "But I don't think we'll be playing by the Ministry's rules."

Please review!

~Anubis Ankh
Epilogue: The End

A/N: This is it! The final chapter.

This has been a long and amazing journey, and I'm half-sad and half-ecstatic that it's complete. In this ending, we wonder what became of everyone, yet I think we can be satisfied that this tale ends where their brighter future begins.

Enormous thanks to my amazing beta, who has been a brilliant and valuable contributor to making this story the polished piece that it is. Without her, it wouldn't be half as good as it is now. Everyone, please take a moment to acknowledge the hard work she's put in, because I don't know what I would have done without her.

My eternal gratitude also goes to my readers, who have enjoyed, reviewed, encouraged, constructively critiqued, cheered, and paid me for my work of written love with their words, too. And, also, for the amazing patience you have displayed when chapters have been slow in coming out, or my slightly neurotic tendencies caused me to scramble to rewrite or tweak a chapter just before it's supposed to be posted.

As always, I do not own. But sometimes, there is a certain relief to not owning, because it leaves you free to explore a world of possibilities many, many times.

Thank you, all!

The day had dawned sunny and bright. Where there were fields, flowers bloomed with wild, breathtaking scents that carried in the breeze and made the world sweet while simultaneously causing people to sneeze and eyes to water, and not because of the breathtaking beauty. It was neither hot nor humid, but a pleasant day, the kind that drew even the most closeted people from their homes to enjoy it. It was one of those days that gave off the sensation that the world had been reborn overnight and begun anew—which was rather something of a let-down, because as with any other day, people had things to attend to.

Kingsley was in his office, reviewing several forms and reform propositions that needed his input—and, their progenitors would hope, his signature—when the door opened, and he looked up in time to see Harry peer inside, Selenius's face popping in just a foot or so below his from behind the doorframe.

"Er," Harry said, glancing down at Selenius rather awkwardly, who was looking up at him with a very sour look. "I'm about to head down to the courtroom—I'm dropping Selenius off here."

"You still could have snuck me in," Kingsley heard Selenius mutter to him, as Harry backed away, opening the door further to let him in.

"I'm not interested in a detention before school's even started," Harry deadpanned, and Kingsley suspected he was actually quite serious. He would be retaking his seventh year starting on September 1st, like everyone else—last year had officially been scratched. "That's a record that not even I'm willing to make. Well," he said, giving Kingsley a bit of a nod, "Have fun, I guess. I'll come back when it's over."

The door shut behind him with a click, and Selenius stood there, hands stuck in his pockets, and
glaring at the floor with a sullen look. Kingsley gave the boy a moment to wallow in his thoughts, and then sat up and leaned back in his chair.

"Have a seat," he offered, gesturing at the comfy chair opposite him. "I brought some stuff for you, just in case you forgot to bring anything—getting out of the house on time with something like this looming over can be a challenge, I know."

"I hate getting up early," Selenius grumbled, but his shoulders relaxed as he climbed into the proffered chair. He let out a muffled sound of surprise as he very nearly sank into it.

Kingsley gave him an easy smile that belied his laughter as Selenius struggled to sit up straight. It was very difficult for uptight ministry officials to try to argue their points when they were practically slumping in their seats, hence the reason Kingsley had chosen such a ridiculously plush chair. Selenius, however, kicked off his shoes and pulled up his feet so that he was now sitting cross-legged and upright, and then reached over for one of the chocolate frog cards that had been stacked to the side of the desk.

Kingsley reached over and tossed a Muggle Sudoku book onto the desk, along with the most recent editions of *The Quibbler* and the *Daily Prophet*. A bowl of sweets sat near the edge of the desk with the chocolate frog cards, and Selenius hesitated before reaching over and plucking out a sugar quill and sucking on it as he began to unwrap his chocolate frog.

"I don't get why I have to be here anyway," Selenius said, working around the quill. He glanced around the room, which was surprisingly well-organized, though every inch was covered with newspaper clippings and tacked notes. Almost reluctantly, he reached over for the Sudoku puzzle and nicked a quill from the desk, unable to resist the lure of the challenge. "I was there for Draco's trial."

"I'm sure your parents have their reasons," Kingsley said soothingly. Coming from anyone else, it would have sounded condescending, but from Kingsley, it had the desired effect of setting someone at ease. His eyes crinkled with concern, however, as he took in Selenius's defensive posture. "How is Mr. Malfoy, anyway?"

Selenius shrugged, removing the sugar quill from his mouth long enough to take a bite out of his chocolate frog. "He's going back to Hogwarts next year, I guess. Like everyone else."

"Are you looking forward to it?"

Selenius made a face. "If I wasn't repeating first year, sure. But after everything that happened last year… I guess I just really wish I could go off, you know? Have time to myself, try to get a grip on things." He suddenly looked uncomfortable. "But everyone just expects everything to fall in place afterwards—the war's over, so it feels like no one's allowed to dwell on it now. It's like you're not really supposed to talk about it, because no one wants to hear how bad it was for you, because they're convinced they had it worse, or that just because you didn't have it as bad as some means you shouldn't talk about it at all."

"Have you told your parents how you feel?" Kingsley didn't want to imagine the kid carrying all of this in his head alone. Surely Hermione, at least, was aware of what was going on with her son? Or Severus, perhaps—the man was frighteningly perceptive.

"They've got their own stuff going on," Selenius muttered, and his voice was getting softer with every word, so that Kingsley had to strain to hear him. "I mean, last year, I had to deal with everything by myself… I guess I'm used to that, now. Dad was… you know."
Kingsley made a noise that sounded like "Mhm," but he didn't press the issue. He was fairly well aware of what had gone on at Hogwarts during Severus Snape's reign as Headmaster. He had shown his son no favoritism, rarely acknowledged his very existence, and the entire experience had been a miserable one all around. But Selenius looked two words away from clamming up completely, so instead, he suggested:

"Maybe a repeat of your first year isn't such a bad idea," he offered. "Your teachers already know how smart you are—you can either breeze through classes and use the free time to do other things, or ask them to assign you extra material. I'm sure they'd be happy to oblige."

"You think?" Selenius looked almost hopeful.

"No one's saying you can't," Kingsley said with a gentle smile.

"I'll ask," Selenius said, but he sounded rather doubtful, as though he didn't dare expect more. Glancing at the newspapers on the desk, he added, "I've been keeping up with the *Prophet*, too. Draco doesn't talk about it, much, but his dad's not the only one in jail."

"Like who?" Kingsley prodded.

Selenius shrugged. "Crabbe and Goyle, I guess—they were in Draco's year. A lot of the families of some of the Slytherins—I don't think I'm going to be very popular, next year, since anyone who's not in jail is probably going to be very unhappy with me." He swallowed the remains of his chocolate frog, and then glanced down at the card that came with it. He gazed at it for a moment, and then looked up at Kingsley. "Do you collect chocolate frog cards?"

"I used to," Kingsley said, still absorbing the rest of what Selenius had told him. "When I was about your age. They were just about as popular then as they are now." He winked at Selenius. "My favorite used to be Agrippa, but in more recent years, I think it's become Albus Dumbledore."

At this, Selenius grinned, and help up the card almost sheepishly. Albus Dumbledore's visage peered out calmly from the frame, and then tipped off its hat in greeting before swaying out of view. "Yeah. He never hangs around for long, either."

"It's almost as though he still has plenty to do," Kingsley agreed.

Selenius's interest seemed to pick up at this. "Exactly. And I want to continue it, too."

Kingsley gave him a curious look. "What do you mean?"

"Well, he discovered the twelve uses of dragon's blood, right?" Selenius stated. "I want to be the one to find the thirteenth. Or—I dunno—maybe I'll figure something out that he never got, right? Stuff that no one ever really imagined possible."

Kingsley glanced down at the half-completed set of Sudoku puzzles, the empty chocolate frog wrapper lying on his desk, and finally the chocolate frog card of the brilliant old man with the famously sweet tooth, and smiled.

"Do you ever think things will get better?" Selenius suddenly blurted. He sat up a bit straighter. "That things will go back to being—normal?"

There was a sudden commotion outside, and they both turned to look around as the door was suddenly thrown open and a harried-looking ministry official burst in, quite out of breath, and with an air of unmistakable panic. He didn't even see Selenius as he strode in, glasses knocked askew as he vied unnecessarily for Kingsley's attention.
"Minister! …Minister, they've gone," he gasped.

"Of course they have," Kingsley said, looking rather unconcerned. "You couldn't expect them to stay all day, could you?"

"No! No—I mean, they left right in the middle of the trial—"

"Trial? I thought it was merely an inquiry."

"It is! It is—it's just—they left with no warning—"

"That must have been quite a feat, since you can't Apparate in or out of the courtrooms," Kingsley observed.

"They snuck their wands in with them through security somehow," the man said, still panting. "And—and a portkey. They stayed for all of half an hour to tell us the bare bones of their story, and before we could start questioning them, they asked to give a demonstration, and—and—"

He paused to gasp for breath, and then said, "He—Professor Snape de-aged himself right before our eyes—we couldn't believe it when Mrs. Snape told us that she'd done it herself, but he just proved it right there for all of us, and—and then she left a dusty old notebook and a chocolate frog card on her chair, and they just—Portkeyed away. Gone!"

"He de-aged?" Kingsley asked curiously.

"We didn't believe—Mrs. Snape, when she explained that she herself had de-aged, that's how she slotted herself back in her timeline, she said—it was the basis for half her tale, we thought she was mad until they demonstrated how—de-aging! He de-aged himself!" the man exclaimed, spluttering, not quite sure how to express himself. "It is possible! And they—"

"That's all very interesting, but I'd be much more interested in seeing this notebook," Kingsley said with an air of accepting calm. "And the chocolate frog card. Where are they now?"

"The Aurors…"

"Tell them to deliver the notebook and its contents to my office before lunch," Kingsley said, smiling. "In the condition they found it in, of course. Anything else?"

The man gazed at him dumbstruck, and then stuttered, "You're not—you're not going to go after them?"

"Why would I?" Kingsley said. "It's an inquiry, isn't it? That's what I've been told all along, anyway."

"Yes, yes, but—but…" the man broke off suddenly, seeing that Kingsley's unconcerned expression hadn't changed, and suddenly looked defeated. "I… I suppose that's all, sir. I just…"

"If you want to make yourself productive for the rest of the day, I'd start by calling up the Prophet and giving them the full story before they start nosing about," Kingsley said, opening up the morning edition and flipping it back closed for a moment to read the headline, before passing it across his desk. The man jumped when Selenius reached over to take it, finally noticing the boy's presence, and then looked back at the Minister.

"I—yes, I'll do that—right away—"
"And tell the Head of the Department of International Cooperation that I won't be able to make the meeting this evening, won't you?" Kingsley said, rising to his feet. Selenius set the paper aside and leapt off the chair, bending down to shove his shoes back on. "There's a dinner planned at the Burrow, and you know I'm never one to miss an opportunity for good cooking."

The ministry official stuttered for a moment, and then turned around, tripping over his robes as he left. The door didn't shut properly as he left, and the sounds of muffled, flurried noise could be heard coming from the hallway. Selenius grinned.

"Mrs. Weasley will be happy to hear that," he said, plucking another sugar quill from the desk and placing it on his tongue. "That's probably where mum and dad are, too. I think they already had plans to celebrate tonight. And Remus has been hinting at something for days."

At that moment, the door opened again, and Harry stuck his head back in. He was grinning, and it was in such a way that it seemed he wasn't able to help himself. In fact, he looked rather exhilarated as he took in the room and its occupants.

"Ready to go?" he said. "I've already lost Gryffindor ten points for cheek, and another ten for laughing. I've got nothing to lose by bringing you back before they've finished putting up party decorations—whoops," he said, looking at Kingsley. "Was that supposed to be a surprise?"

"I knew it!" Selenius crowed, leaping to his feet. "My birthday isn't for another month, but I knew they were coming up with something!"

"It's for the both of us," Harry said, smiling broadly. "We'll surprise them, shall we?"

Kingsley chuckled. "Tell Molly I'll be there as promised. And Selenius," he added gently, "at the very least, I'd talk to your mother if I were you. You too, Harry," he added, seeing the look on the older boy's face. "Don't keep things bottled up inside forever, and Hermione is a good person to talk to. Alright?"

"Right," Harry said bracingly.

Selenius fiddled with the chocolate frog card in his hand for a moment, and then pocketed it before glancing up at Harry. "Fine. I can always use you as a shield, anyway."

"Sorry to inform you, but I don't think that'll work with Hermione," Harry countered

"We'll see about that," Selenius said, grabbing hold of Harry's arm and half-dragging him from the office. "Let's go. I want to get there before they do!"

Kingsley watched the two of them disappear from the doorway, and heard Selenius's muffled exclamation of, "I want to see the looks on their faces!" fade away as they left. Kingsley let out a sigh that fell somewhere between amusement and something else, and then he got up to close the door. Before he could, however, it was pushed open once more, and the Auror who entered almost knocked him over.

"Oh—I'm sorry, sir—"

"My doorway the new thoroughfare, is that it?" Kingsley asked with good humor.

"I don't know about that, but I was told to give you this," the Auror said, thrusting a brown, leather-bound book into his hands. There was a chocolate frog card poking out between the middle. "I figured I'd get it to you now."
"Much appreciated, Williamson," Kingsley said, accepting the delivery.

The Auror let out a noncommittal sound at this, and then turned to leave. The door was properly shut behind him, and Kingsley walked around his desk and sat down in the chair, reclining in it as he opened the book and pulled out the chocolate frog card.

Albus Dumbledore's wizened old face smiled up at him from this card, his hand gesturing at the notebook. Without another word, Kingsley set it aside and opened the book to the first page, and at long last, let history meet the light of day.

*Finite Incantatem*
Chapter Forty

Please be warned that part-way through this chapter, the POV changes.

Wrackspurts and chocolate frogs for the win. :)

Edit: I cannot believe how scatterbrained I am. While re-reading this chapter, I realized that part of it had been cut-off. I do not know why. I do not know how. All I know is that I am rushing to paste the missing part in before too many people see it. What is wrong with me?

Anti-Litigation Charm: I do not own.

Please review!

Four o'clock the following afternoon found the wedding well underway. Almost all of the guests had arrived, although the appearance of the infamous Muriel Weasley Hermione had heard so much about was a bit of a nightmare, to be honest. The woman had an opinion to broadcast about everyone and everything, and no filter or tact to speak of.

"You look great!" Ron said, looking rather startled when Hermione reappeared in the marquee. "I wasn't expecting—wow."

"Always the tone of surprise," Hermione said dryly, though she was smiling. "Your Great-Aunt Muriel doesn't agree, I just met her upstairs while she was giving Fleur the tiara. She said, 'Oh dear, is this the Muggle-born?' followed closely by a comment on my skinny ankles and bad posture."

"Don't take it personally, she's rude to everyone," Ron said with a shake of his head. "You should hear her go on about my freckles."

"Talking about Muriel?" George inquired, emerging from the marquee with Fred at his side. "She just commented that my nose seemed to be off-center—or maybe my ears. She didn't really seem to be able to tell the difference."

"Bad eyesight," Fred said, nodding sagely. "I wish old Uncle Bilius was still with us; he was a right laugh at weddings."

"Wasn't he the one who saw a Grim and died twenty-four hours later?" Hermione asked, frowning slightly.

"Well, yeah, he went a bit odd toward the end," George conceded.

"But before he went loopy he was the life and soul of the party," Fred said, grinning. "He used to down an entire bottle of firewhisky, then run onto the dance floor, hoist up his robes, and start pulling bunches of flowers out of his—"

"Yes, he sounds like a real charmer," Hermione said, not wanting to contemplate this disturbing anecdote any further. Harry, on the other hand, was roaring with laughter.

"Never married for some reason," Ron said off-handedly.

"You amaze me," Hermione said with an apostrophic roll of her eyes toward the tent ceiling, but she was giggling despite herself.
And then they all burst into laughter. Hermione was still snickering when a lone latecomer arrived, and she turned around in time to see a dark-haired young man who was oddly familiar, and who Hermione only had three or four seconds to recognize—

"Viktor!" she exclaimed, dropping the beaded bag she was carrying with her and hugging the Bulgarian Quidditch Player. Ron picked it up, hefting it with a look of disbelief on his face at how heavy it was, and then shrugged and shoved it toward Harry, who took it while throwing his best friend a look that said very clearly *what do you expect me to do with it?* Hermione backed away quickly after a moment, blushing. "I didn't know you were—goodness—it's lovely to see—how are you?"

"Fine," Viktor said, smiling down at her as he handed Ron his invitation. "You look vunderful."

"How come you're here?" Ron asked, checking the invitation over and looking rather suspiciously at their guest.

"Fleur invited me," Viktor said, eyebrows raised. Hermione simply could not help herself, as she mentally sized him up and compared him to Severus. The two were so alike that sometimes, it was not difficult for her to wonder if she had been attracted to Viktor purely because he shared so many of the same characteristics that she would later find attractive in the man she married. But she was still very glad to see him; they wrote to each other on occasion, and remained good friends. He was the only person outside the Order who was aware that Hermione had a son, and he occasionally asked after him.

"I'll show you your seat," Harry said quickly. He was disguised as a Weasley cousin, which meant Krum would not recognize him, but he seemed to think it prudent to get the Bulgarian Quidditch Player out of Ron's vicinity. The two of them disappeared, leaving Hermione alone with Ron.

"Come on, we'd better get to our seats…"

The wedding went off without a hitch, and after Hermione congratulated the happy couple, she managed to find a moment to talk with Viktor semi-privately, joining him at a table that had not yet been filled up with curious people and Quidditch fans, all of whom seemed eager to meet the famous Seeker.

"You change every time I see you," Viktor commented, stirring his glass. "First, at the Quidditch World Cup, to sign your poster. Then at Hogwarts, where there were two of you—one not yet grown, and one already there. And here…"

Hermione laughed. "Now I'm rather stuck in-between, aren't I?"

Viktor shook his head. "You are a mystery." He paused, and then lowered his voice. "Your husband… did he really…"

Hermione shook her head. "I can't talk about it."

"I hardly believe it," Viktor said quietly. "When I first met him, he did not seem…" he trailed off.

"You don't think he did it, I suppose?" Hermione asked dully. "Suppose he's been framed?"

Viktor shook his head. "There were too many witnesses," he said. "But there is something strange about the way it was done. Too… flawless, yes? Too smooth."

Hermione stared at him. "What's that supposed to mean?"
Viktor shrugged. "In Quidditch, I would be thinking that someone had just Confunded the reff-ree, because he called the wrong play. This does not seem much different. Whether your husband did it or not, I am thinking there is more to it than what meets the eye." He looked at Hermione. "Dumbledore was a brilliant man. A great man. I liked him very much. It is difficult to believe he died as easily as they say he did."

They brooded in silence for a moment, each unsure of what to say, when Viktor finally said, "I haff also had the… displeasure of meeting that man over there," he said, gesturing at a tall man in yellow. "Veasley and one of his cousins explained that he does not know what the symbol he is vearing around his neck is. I am wondering if you do."

Hermione squinted at Xenophilius Lovegood's neck, and shook her head. "I don't…" she said slowly.

"You do not know what that is?"

Hermione wracked her head for some clue, and shook it in negation. "I don't think I've ever even seen it before," she said honestly.

Viktor stared at the blond man with intense, pugnacious dislike as he answered, "He is vearing Grindelwald's sign upon his chest. It is carved into a vall at Durmstrang, he put it there when he was a student. I would recognize it anywhere."

"Grindelwald…" Hermione said slowly. "He's the Dark Wizard Dumbledore defeated years ago, didn't he?"

"Exactly."

Hermione shook her head. "I've never heard of it before in my life, and I'm pretty sure Mr. Lovegood hasn't either. That sign probably isn't all that well known in Wizarding Britain." She sat staring at Xenophilius Lovegood's neck for a moment, vaguely thinking somewhere that the symbol should be familiar to her, but she could not quite place it.

"Do you know where the sign originated from?" she asked, hoping it would jog her memory.

Viktor shook his head.

"Grindelwald may have lifted it off somewhere else," Viktor said. "It vhas probably a symbol of pover that he came across and decided he vhanted to use. But vhat symbol or from vhere, I do not know."

He looked at the symbol once more.

"All I know is that man over there vears the symbol of Grindelvald, and were he not a guest, I vould challenge him to a duel," he said, scowling.

~o~O~o~

"I simply can't dance anymore," Hermione said later, pulling up a chair beside Harry and fanning herself. She had the time of her life back there, but now she was dead on her feet. "Ron's gone looking to find more butterbeers. I managed to convince Viktor not to confront Luna's father, he looked rather like he wanted to… thankfully, he—" she broke off, looking at Harry, whose face seemed both strained and depleted of energy. "Harry? Are you all right?"

Harry shook his head. He opened his mouth to speak, but quickly shut it as something large and silver suddenly fell through the canopy above, gliding gracefully down to the floor. The lynx
gleamed brightly as it landed in the middle of the astonished dancers, some of whom seemed for a moment to think that this was part of the entertainment, until it opened its mouth wide and spoke in the deep, slow voice of Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"The Ministry has fallen. Scrimgeour is dead. They are coming."

Hermione immediately jumped to her feet, wand at the ready, as the rest of the crowd took a moment to register this. Heads were still turning, people were slowly either stopping their conversations or dances, and the murmur of interested voices quickly gave way to rising panic as the message began to sink in. And then all hell broke loose, guests were running every which way, and Harry was jumping to his feet.

"I'll find Ron!" he shouted, disappearing into the terrified, near-stampeding crowd as they poured out from the tent, trying to get away as quickly as possible. Hermione had no time to stop him, and frantically scrambled around for her purse. But at that moment, she could not remember when she last had it. It had dropped when Viktor arrived, but Ron or Harry had picked it up, she could not remember which—

Buffeted by the crowd, Hermione was pushed outside the tent. She forced herself to remain calm, scanning the crowd as people rushed out, trying to catch sight of Harry or Ron. Cloaked and masked figures had appeared, and everyone who was in the Order had their wands out and on the defensive—

"Stupefy!" Hermione screamed, aiming at the first Death Eater in her line of view. He slid to the ground, and was immediately lost beneath the pounding feet. A moment later, she caught sight of Remus and Tonks, and sprinted over to join them.

"Remus!" she gasped, catching up with them. "Where's Harry and Ron?"

"Weren't they with you?" Tonks answered, looking frightened. "I thought they were with you!"

"No, I was with Harry, and then he went to find Ron—" Hermione broke off and aimed her wand at another masked figure that had Apparated less than twenty feet away from them, hitting him with another Stunner. "I don't know where they are!"

"We'll find them," Remus assured her, but his expression was grim. "Hermione, get inside and hide—"

"What? No, I have to find—"

"They're looking for Harry, and if they can't find him, they'll go after you and Ron!" Remus said angrily. "You can't be here!"

He was right. With a final duck and dodge, Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and Disapparated away.

~o~O~o~

Hermione remained pacing in the kitchen of Tine Cottage for several hours, desperately awaiting some form of news to reassure her that Harry and Ron had been found, and that everyone else was all right. Selenius had taken one look at his mother's pale, frantic face, and demanded to know what had happened.

And so Hermione told him. There was no point in keeping it from him. The Ministry had fallen—nowhere was safe if you were relying on the Ministry’s laws for protection. She did not dare send a
Patronus, not until she heard from them first. Three sleepless nights passed with three unread Daily Prophet papers neatly stacked on the table, until Hermione could handle it no more, and finally opened them.

What she saw sickened her.

Muggle-Born Register… Harry Potter wanted for questioning… Attendance at Hogwarts now compulsory…

School started in three weeks. As Hermione read further, she felt an odd pit of relief in her stomach as she realized that a student would only need to prove that they had at least one magical descendent. With Selenius's disguise, he would be safe—perfectly safe—

Her musings were interrupted by a wisp of silver bursting through the kitchen window, and Hermione jumped back in surprise as it solidified into the same, gleaming form as the lynx that had warned them all four days ago.

"Harry and Ron safe, Burrow being watched, do not come out of hiding."

It melted away a moment later, and Hermione stood there, feeling an immense sense of relief. And then there was a knock on the door, which startled her out of her reverie so badly that she screamed.

"Hermione, it's me!" Remus's voice floated through. "Open up!"

Hermione quickly pressed a hand against the door, wand at the ready. "Prove it!"

"I am Remus John Lupin, werewolf, sometimes known as Moony, one of the four creators of the Marauder's Map," Remus said firmly, "and when you first came to Hogwarts in my sixth year, I comforted you on the floor of the Gryffindor Common Room while you cried."

"Oh, all right," Hermione said shakily, opening the door with relief as she let her friend in. "I'm sorry, but it's just—you gave me quite a fright…"

"Perfectly understandable," Remus said, closing the door behind him. "I just thought I would stop by and let you know that Harry and Ron are at Grimmauld Place. They were frantic with worry about you, so you might want to send them a Patronus to let them know you're fine."

Hermione breathed in deeply, letting the tension flow from her body as immense relief seeped in. "Thank merlin."

"They also told me to tell you that they found the real locket," Remus said, frowning as he took a seat at the kitchen table. "And that they've got your beaded bag. Ron said to thank you specifically for packing his toothbrush, by the way."

Hermione pressed a hand to her mouth to suppress a smile. Crookshanks, who had been sleeping in front of the window on top of the counter, yawned and stretched, blinking sleepily at them. "Right."

"Also…" Remus hesitated. "Arthur said he won't be able to take Selenius to the train. It took me three days to shake off the Death Eater that was trailing me, and the Burrow is being watched."

"Shite," Hermione breathed.

"I don't think Selenius could go anyway," Remus said, looking uncertain. "You've read the paper, haven't you? They require proof of at least one magical relative—"
"We've already taken care of that," Hermione said. "But I can't be seen taking him, and now…"

Remus stroked his chin thoughtfully. "I thought it might be possible to ask Fred and George," he suggested quietly.

"What?" Hermione exclaimed. "No! They don't know about him—or about my situation, even—besides," she added, "why them?"

"Because they've done a splendid job of knocking out the Death Eater that was trailing them," Remus said. "It was actually how I managed to eventually do it. They're smart and sneaky, they'd have no trouble getting Selenius in there and then getting themselves out."

"But…" Hermione protested.

"I can speak to them if you want," Remus said quickly. "I'll explain everything—"

"No," Hermione said.

"Hermione—"

"I said no, Remus!" Hermione snapped. "The more people we let in on this secret, the more likely it'll be given up! And then—and then—" She couldn't bring herself to say it, because even at this level, Remus wasn't supposed to know. But if Voldemort found out, then Severus's life would be forfeit.

"Hermione," Remus said firmly, "Fred and George are as trustworthy as any of us. If we explain to them, I'm sure they'll be willing to keep it secret, and help—"

"And what if they're not?" Hermione said coldly.

Remus stared levelly at her.

"Then we'll Obliviate them."

Hermione wavered for a moment, and then slumped down into a chair.

"Wouldn't it be possible to just… tell them enough to get them to help, but not everything?" she asked. "They don't have to know its Severus…"

"I can do that," Remus promised.

He left shortly after, and Hermione found herself putting Dobby out of work by making dinner herself, working at the counter as the last rays of sunlight filtered through the window. The fire-lit lamp that hung by it glowed, adding warm light to the room, and Hermione found herself gazing off into the distance as she mulled over Remus's words. Remus had not said it, but it was clear that he thought she was treating everyone with an undeserved amount of suspicion.

Her shoulders slumped. Had she been keeping secrets for so long that when it was time to let them unravel just a bit, she couldn't bring herself to do it? True, Fred and George were pranksters, and had acted irresponsibly in the past, but when it came down to it, they were on the ball and held fast just like everyone else.

She peered at her reflection in the window.

_And when you first came to Hogwarts in my sixth year, I comforted you on the floor of the Gryffindor Common Room while you cried._
Gods, how long ago that seemed! She had been a different person then, yet that was where the pile of secrets had started to grow with alarming speed.

Her ring suddenly burned, and she yanked her hand up to her eyes so she could see it.

*Where are you?*

Hermione hesitated for a moment, and then wrote, *Safe*. He could be writing this under duress, with Voldemort commanding him to contact her.

There was a pause, and then the words melted away and were erased with, *and Selenius?*

Hermione felt relief. He would not have written this if the Dark Lord had been watching.

*With me*, she wrote.

*Good*, came the reply. *Potter and Weasley?*

*We got separated. I need to contact them.*

Her words hung there for a full minute, and then sank away with no response. Deciding that he must have gotten what he had contacted her for, Hermione lifted her wand, and tried to think of a happy memory. Despite the situation at hand, it was not too difficult. She drew out a long-buried memory of Gryffindor Tower raucously celebrating a Quidditch victory, with the marauders making themselves the life of the party, their laughter and cheer outrageously infectious—

"*Expecto Patronum!*"

A large, furry form burst forth from her wand, laid itself out supinely, and then got to its feet and lunged forward, disappearing into the door. Hermione stared at it for a moment, utterly dumbfounded; she had not cast a Patronus in years, as there had been no reason to, but it had obviously changed. It had gone before she had time to get a good look at it, though.

Either way, she hoped Harry and Ron would realize that it was her. She would wait for a response from them, some kind of affirmation, and then try to find them. So far, it seemed they had found a safe haven at Grimmauld Place and located the Locket, which was an enormous achievement in less than a week's worth of work, in Hermione's estimation. They were already off to a good start.

~o~O~o~

It was a full week before Hermione received any form of reply. A large, silver stag burst through her kitchen window, as seemed to be the local fashion for Patroni, and came to a stop in the middle of the kitchen, pawing at the stone floor with a proud look about it, shaking its magnificently-antlered head as it spoke.

"*Sorry it took so long to respond!*" Harry's voice said apologetically, and a little louder than necessary. It was like the time Ron had tried calling Harry's house using a Muggle phone. "*It took us a few tries to figure out how to send messenger Patroni—that's what Ron says they're called, anyway. Also, your Patronus has changed, did you know that?*" Hermione shook her head in exasperation, and Harry continued, "*That aside, we're at Grimmauld Place right now, and we've figured out where the Locket is. Getting it is going to be a real problem, though. There are Death Eaters watching the house, so I don't know whether you can get in or not, but if you think you can, please come. We're glad you're safe—we were really worried. And there's loads more to tell you.*"

At long last, the stag closed its mouth, gave Hermione a final, piercing look, and melted away.
Hermione stood there, snorting with laughter. She had never heard anyone make such a wordy message for a Patronus in her life. Nevertheless, with every word, her sense of relief had mounted, and now she once again felt ready, free to take action with a direction. She knew where they were, and they were expecting her.

When she Apparated on the doorstep of Grimmauld Place, she quickly slipped inside, and had shut the door behind her with such speed that she had only had just a moment to glimpse the cloaked figures hanging about in front of the house. Selenius had been left at home alone with Dobby to look after him and strict orders not to leave the house. She had not taken more than a few steps inside when she heard Moody's voice whisper hoarsely out of the darkness.

"Severus Snape?"

Hermione jumped back in alarm, wand out and at the ready, when something whooshed over her like cold draft. For a moment, she felt the sickening sensation of her tongue rolling itself up, and then it vanished, leaving her with a slight sense of nausea. She did not have much time to recover; a dusty figure raised itself from the carpet, and Hermione stared in horror as the wasted figure raised a hand at her. She recognized the curse immediately, backpedalling as it advanced on her.

"I—I didn't kill you—" she stammered.

On the word kill, the dust-composed corpse-like figure exploded. Hermione hesitated for a moment, and raised her wand, expecting more, when she heard a voice calling from upstairs—

"Blimey—Hermione, is that you?"

"Down here, Ron!" Hermione said, relieved, as Ron appeared on the landing above, squinting down at her through the dust. Hermione quickly ascended the stairs, following Ron into the Drawing Room, where she saw Harry sitting in one of the chairs. He looked up when he saw her, and his expression immediately brightened.

"Hermione!" he said, standing up immediately and pulling her into a hug. "Thank goodness—I wasn't sure if our Patronus actually worked!"

"Trust me, it worked," Hermione said dryly, setting down the bag she had brought with her. "How have you been?"

"Going stir-crazy," Ron admitted, coming up behind her and pulling her into a hug. "Come check out what we found—come on—"

"Wait, aren't you going to tell me about the Locket—"

"That can come later," Harry said, directing her to the next floor. "We found something else."

Hermione had no choice but to follow them, as the boys led her up the stairs, and stopped her in front of one of the bedrooms. Ron tapped the fancy-looking sign on one of the door in front of them, looking excited. Hermione had seen it before, and merely pressed her lips.

"Regulus Arcturus Black," she repeated. "Yes, Ron, I know. He was Sirius's younger brother."

"Not just his brother," Harry said excited. "R. A. B. The locket, remember?"

Hermione startled for a moment as she realized Harry was right. The fake locket had been signed by someone named R.A.B—but—
"Harry, how can you be sure—" she began.

"We asked Kreacher," Harry replied. "He confirmed it."

Hermione gave him a skeptical, concerned look. "You'd trust Kreacher's word on this?"

"Well, normally, no," Ron admitted, glancing at Harry, "but over the last four days, there's been a bit of a… a reconciliation."

Hermione's eyebrows rose to her hairline.

"Do tell," she said.

They did. It was a lot to absorb, admittedly, but the earnest, excited expressions on the boys' faces could only convince Hermione that they were telling the truth. It shocked her how with just a single act—that was to say, presenting Regulus's locket to Kreacher—he had managed to repair several years' worth of bad blood between himself and the house elf. Yet, when Harry called Kreacher to him, the house elf was positively cordial, bowing as low to the ground as his snout-like nose would let him, and eagerly asking Harry if there was anything he needed done.

It was Harry's response, however, that highlighted it for her. Kreacher had finally responded to the olive branch offered to him, but the way Harry framed his requests was just as polite, friendly even, as he had ever done with Dobby. Kreacher disappeared with a loud crack as soon as Harry had asked if he would be willing to make tea for the three of them, and then Harry rapped on the door of Regulus's room, drawing her attention back to it.

"Like we said, we found R.A.B," Harry said, as Ron wandered down the hall, over to the next door, which was no doubt labeled with Sirius's name. "And we know where the locket is."

"You've told me that several times," Hermione said slowly, "but you haven't actually said where it is."

Harry hesitated, and then spilled it out.

"Umbridge," he said.

Hermione's jaw set at this, and she was about to respond when Ron interrupted from the other end of the corridor.

"Hey, guys… look at this."

Harry immediately went to join Ron's side, but Hermione stopped short the moment she realized what Ron was looking at. They were parked in front of the door at the end of the hallway, a door which was normally rendered invisible and unimportant to observers, but which was now plainly, clearly, visible. It only took Hermione a moment to realize why; the door registered the presence of those who knew it was there, and then made itself plain to observers. It had mistakenly materialized itself due to Hermione's presence.

"It looks like a closet," Harry said, unconcerned.

"Yeah, but I haven't seen it here before, and trust me, I've spent more time wandering through this house in the past few days than I care to remember," Ron said, with the merest trace of a grumble. He tried the handle. "And it's locked."

Hermione wrung her hands, and then regained control over herself, and stiffened. "If we don't know
"What's in there, maybe we shouldn't—" she began.

"We cleaned this house inside-out back in fifth year," Harry said, pulling out his wand. "I'm not expecting a doxy attack." He tapped the knob. "Alohamora!"

There was an audible click, and Ron tried the knob again. Hermione trailed behind, helplessly, as they pushed open the door to Selenius's old room.

The first thing Ron said was, " Bloody hell."

Hermione could see why he would say that. From Harry and Ron's perspectives, they had just walked into something completely and utterly unexpected.

The room had not changed at all since Hermione had last seen it. She lingered in the doorway for a moment, and then slipped inside after the boys, hoping to salvage the situation. But really, there was nothing she could do. And, from first glance, there was also nothing immediately incriminating. There was the four-poster bed with its plain and simple coverlet, unmade as Selenius had left it. The handkerchief blanket Hagrid had given him, however, was still there. The pictures still lined up on the wall, moving and smiling, and Hermione saw Harry lean in closer for a better look as Ron poked around the room.

"Hey, check this out!" Ron said, picking up the miniature figure of Viktor Krum, and then pulling a pair of Omnioculars off the shelves. "We got this stuff from the Quidditch World Cup, too—" he turned around to look at Hermione. "Blimey, you don't think…"

"Hey," Harry said quietly.

"I don't know," Hermione said, uncertainly.

"I mean, whoever was here obviously was at the World Cup, I haven't seen this stuff sold anywhere else—and whoa," Ron said, tugging a notebook off the shelf and opening it. "This guy was nuts—you'd like him, Hermione, he's about as crazy for Arithmancy as you are…"

"Guys," Harry said louder.

"What?" Ron and Hermione asked in unison.

"Look at this."

Hermione went to join Harry, her eyes landing upon the photos on the wall with growing dread. Harry had placed his finger on the picture of Hermione and Severus in the staff room, with Selenius in Hermione's arms.

"That's him," Harry said. "It looks exactly like him. That's the toddler I saw in my first year."

"You're worried about the toddler?" Ron asked, looking distinctly ill. "Look at Snape."

"And the woman," Harry said eagerly, trailing his fingers along the wall. "That's my godmother. I recognize her."

Ron peered closer. "Hey, Hermione—"

"Yes, I know," Hermione snapped, pretending to be more interested in the photos than she actually was. "She looks just like me."

"Well…" Ron grinned. "Actually, I was going to say you're prettier, but okay. Her hair's neater,
though." He cocked his head to the side. "Although you have to admit that the resemblance is uncanny… you wouldn't happen to have an evil sister that we don't know about?"

Hermione elbowed him, smiling with something akin to relief. "Very funny."

Harry, on the other hand, was not laughing. His fingers trailed first from one photo, then the other, and then back and forth between them. His lips were moving, as though he were talking something over with himself, and Ron goggled at the picture of Severus smiling once more before turning around for another go at the shelves.

Finally, he turned around to look at Hermione.

"I was right," he said. "I knew it. My godmother's married to Snape, and that," he added, tapping the only motionless picture of the lot, pointing to Selenius, "is their son. But…" he trailed off.

"But what?" Hermione asked.

Harry chewed on the inside of his cheek for a moment, and then said, "I didn't know they were so close." Seeing the look of confusion on her face, he amended, "Sirius and my godmother—and look at their kid, Sirius and Remus… this had to have been taken in our fifth year… and here he is, with Fang, in Hagrid's hut…"

"Is he riding Sirius?" Ron asked, nodding toward the picture of Selenius hanging onto a big, black dog. The Remus in the photo was quickly ducking out of the way as he barreled past. "I thought first-years were small, but that kid's tiny."

"Ron!" Hermione chided.

"Well, he is!"

"You don't seem that bothered," Harry said. His voice sounded strange, like he was having a hard time breathing.

"Look," Ron said, setting the Omnioculars down and turning to look at Harry, "we've known about this for years, haven't we? We've suspected it, anyway. I admit that picture of Snape over there is kind of creepy—I always thought that if he ever really smiled, his face would crack in two—but we've found a link to your godmother, haven't we? Isn't that what you wanted?"

Harry did not seem convinced. "Yeah, but…" he struggled to express himself. "I mean, what was she doing here? In this house? This whole time?"

"Hiding, would be my guess," Ron said, now going through Selenius's carefully-organized bookcase. "Snape probably kept him here. Or your godmother. Maybe she lived here with Sirius while he was in hiding, she would have brought the kid along— ah-hah!" he said triumphantly. "Found it!"

"What?" Harry demanded.

"His name's Selenius Tacitus Snape," Ron said, holding up the notebook he had been looking through. "Kid signs his name in all his books."

"Selenius," Harry repeated, as though trying the word out. Ron's words seemed to have finally gotten through to him, and he had calmed down, and was now looking around the room with more curiosity than horror. In truth, Hermione had expected Ron to be the one to lose his head, and she had even half-expected to be recognized. But Ron had prevailed this round, and was bringing Harry
with him. "That's a bit of an odd name, don't you think?"

"The Selenius star system," Hermione could not help remind them, as she looked up once more at the picture of Selenius racing alongside Sirius on the beach near Tine Cottage before pulling the covers of the bed back and straightening them out. "We learned that in Astronomy. And the root of the name refers to a lunar deity in Greek mythology."

"His mum must've really liked star-gazing," Ron guessed.

Hermione resisted the urge to roll her eyes at him. "It's a common name in old wizarding families, Ron."

Harry did not reply. He stood beside the bed, staring silently up at the photos, still taking them in. Hermione had gone to Selenius's desk, and almost out of habit, began straightening it up. Ron was still looking through the books, passing over the equations and reading whatever had been legibly written in them. Hermione sat there, chewing on her lower lip, looking thoughtful and worried as Harry and Ron went through the relics of what had been her son's life. She could see the gears practically whirring in Harry's head, trying to piece some parts of the puzzle together, while Ron seemed to enjoy fiddling with Selenius's things. He immediately recognized Hagrid's work in the thestral carving, and spent several minutes tracing his fingers along one of the wings before picking up the small hat covered in pink feathers that hung on the thestral's head.

"Hey," he said, lifting it off the carving, "these are one of Fred and George's Headless Hats." Three bars of chocolate suddenly fell out of it, thunking to the floor, and Ron picked them up. "And Honeydukes. This kid is lucky—completely loaded with goods." He looked around the room with something akin to admiration and jealousy, and with a stab, Hermione remembered that Ron had rarely gotten anything more than hand-me-downs, with five older brothers before him.

"Wonder when he's coming back," Harry mused aloud.

Ron shook his head, waving the chocolate. "Doubtful. This stuff's old. Anyway, if Snape's kid was living here before Dumbledore died, it's pretty obvious that he's not here now. Snape probably took him away."

"Or my godmother," Harry said quietly.

Hermione finally spoke up.

"Harry," she said quietly, "I know you want to find out more about your godmother, but... we have something else to deal with first." Harry gave her a blank look. "Horcruxes, remember?"

Ron let out a sigh. "She's right, mate. We can always look through this stuff later. Anyway," he said, getting to his feet and unpeeling the chocolate and tasting it to see if it was still good, "we haven't told Hermione how we're planning on getting that locket from Umbridge."

"Oh," Harry said, finally pulling himself away from the photos on the wall. "Right."

There was a sudden crack in the doorway, and they all looked.

"Kreacher has the master's tea ready in the Drawing Room, with biscuits," Kreacher said, bowing, "when master and his friends is ready."

"Thanks, Kreacher," Harry said.

~o~O~o~
They were all finally caught up to speed. Hermione left shortly after, promising to bring back food to stock the house with, and Disapparated back to Tine Cottage. She made it a habit to sleep over once or twice a week at Grimmauld Place as August wore on and they spent more time actively planning and discussing not just how to infiltrate the Ministry, but also what the other Horcruxes might be and where to find them. Harry and Ron were under the impression that she was staying with the Order, which they thought was a good idea.

It was in the second week that Hermione received a Patronus message from Remus, telling her where to meet them. Hermione Apparated to the indicated location, which was a rather nondescript stretch of woods. What she found there, however, was rather shocking; there was a small tent with a kind of antenna poking out from the top, and when Remus invited her inside, what she saw made her jaw drop. Aside from the camp beds strewn around the tent, there was a strange set-up of wires and odd pieces of flesh-colored string criss-crossed around the room, all hooked up to what looked like a microphone. It was so messy that Hermione had to step over and under each string very carefully in order to get inside without knocking anything over.

From the ceiling, hung an owl cage. Hedwig was perched on top of one of the luggage racks stacked in the corner, and when she saw Hermione, let out a low hoot of greeting and glided down onto her arm. Hermione stroked her neck, smiling, before looking up at the twins.

"Hey," Fred said, looking up from where he was kneeling beside one of the pieces of flesh-colored string. "Welcome to the headquarters of Potterwatch. I see you've met our mascot, by the way."

"Potterwatch?" Hermione asked blankly.

"It's an underground Wizarding News Network that Lee Jordan designed," Remus explained, as he took a seat on one of the mattresses. "Fred and George are working with him." He reached out with two fingers to stroke Hedwig's beak. "Hedwig's staying with them for now, since it's not safe at the Burrow. We can't have any sign that Harry's left anything behind that he might come back for, so we brought her here for a bit."

Hedwig ruffled her feathers at this and closed her eyes, looking surprisingly content on Hermione's arm.

"We have to hijack the news station to make it let us in, and put in a password so that the enemy can't listen to our broadcasts easily, but it's bloody brilliant," George said, appearing behind Hermione. "Next password's 'Mad-Eye'. Don't forget to tell Harry and Ron."

"Anyway," Fred said, his expression suddenly serious, "Remus told us that you're in a bit of a bind."

"A rather bizarre one, too."

Hermione looked at Remus, who was shaking his head.

"I told them," he said. "They still can't believe you didn't tell anyone else about the time-turner accident."

Fred waved a hand. "It's not just the time-turner, Moony, my friend. It's the fact that she went back in time twenty years, and returned to this time with a kid and a husband. If that's not shock-worthy, I don't know what is."

"You'll forgive us for our heart attacks," George said, smiling. "I mean, it is hard to match up Miss Goody Two-Shoes with the Order's Right-Hand, isn't it?"

Hermione rounded on Remus. "What did you tell them?" she demanded.
"I explained a bit about what you did in the first war," Remus said calmly. "They needed a bit of context."

"But—" Hermione began.

"Look," Fred interrupted. "Whatever you did, we know a good bit of it now, at least enough to give us an idea."

"But no worries, because we're still going to help you," George said with wink. "Besides, I owe you for my ear. If it hadn't been for you, when they finally make a statue in my honor, they'd have to name me something like George the Holey."

"And we couldn't have that, could we, Gred?" Fred said, looping an arm over his twin's shoulder.

"Not at all, Forge."

Hermione stared at the two of them.

"You'll do it?" she said at last. "You'll help Selenius?"

"Yes, they will," Remus said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "And more importantly, they've promised to keep it secret."

Hermione bowed her head.

"Alright," she said softly. "Thank you."

She was surprised, yet gratified, when Remus pulled her into an embrace. Hermione returned it, giving him a friendly squeeze.

"I always told you everyone in Gryffindor would be your friend if you let them," Remus said gently.

Hermione squeezed him even tighter, and then let go. "Yes," she whispered, emotion filling her voice. "You were right."

~o~O~o~

The morning of September first, Hermione took Selenius and his trunk to Fred and George's camp. He had just turned twelve the day before, and Molly had sent him a birthday cake and some presents collected from the Order members who knew him, but the celebration as a whole had been an understandably small affair. Introductions were properly made now, and while George shrank down his stuff, Fred looked down at Selenius, stroking his chin contemplatively for a moment, before his expression suddenly brightened.

"Ah-hah!" he exclaimed, sounding very much like Ron. "Now I remember where I knew you from — you were at Weasleys Wizard Wheezes. And," he said, looking up at Hermione, his face lighting up in realization, "you were with him—disguised, of course..."

"How do you remember me?" Selenius asked in disbelief.

"You're the only one whose mother would buy them ten galleons' worth of stuff at once," Fred said, grinning at Hermione. He placed a hand on Selenius's head, ruffling his hair. "Anyway, did you put them to good use? Please tell me you put them to good use."

"He's the reason your stuff was banned before term even started," Hermione said dryly. "I also have reason to believe your Reusable Hangman was making death threats to Mrs. Norris."
"Good," George said with an approving nod. He held out a hand to Selenius, as though to shake it. "Ready to go?"

Selenius nodded, and looked at his mother. Hermione looked as though she were fighting very hard not to cry, and it was Remus who seemed to be keeping her from doing so, by keeping a comforting hand on her shoulder. With another hand, George reached up for the owl cage hanging from the ceiling, unhooking it and lowering it to his side. The snowy owl inside ruffled her feathers and hooted softly, but made no protest.

"I'll see you for Christmas?" Selenius asked hopefully.

Hermione nodded, knowing she lying to herself just as much.

Satisfied, he took George's hand. They stood there for a moment, and then there were two simultaneous, loud cracks of Apparition, and they had gone.

~o~O~o~

Selenius pushed his cart through the wall and onto Platform 9 ¾, with Fred and George flanking him on either side. A snowy owl hooted quietly from her cage, which rested atop her trunk. George had brought the owl—named Hedwig—with them, and said that he would be taking her with him. The owl was friendly enough, if a little stiff on reception, and Selenius had the vague sense that he had seen it before. George had not been quite straight with him on why he was taking this particular owl with him, but Selenius wasn't about to complain. The moment they were through, George immediately directed the cart over to the train, not giving Selenius a single moment to stop and take in the crowd around them. He hefted the luggage off the cart, and began loading it in while Fred grasped Selenius's shoulder and led him in the opposite direction.

"Right-o," he said, leading the way. "This is it."

"I was expecting more trouble," Selenius mumbled. It was not that he was disappointed, but rather that the whole operation was going smoothly had him feeling uneasy.

"So was I," Fred conceded, "but it looks like there aren't any of Voldy's henchmen hanging around here. Ready?" he asked, stopping at the door.

Selenius nodded.

"Remember what your mother said," Fred told him seriously. "Be good, stay out of trouble, remember your family tree…"

Selenius nodded again.

"And make sure to cause mischief every once in a while." Fred winked at him. "A little chaos every now and then is a good thing."

Selenius grinned at him. He liked the Weasley twins already. "Thanks."

"And please, do take good care of that owl."

He clambered on board, and found himself in the carriage corridor. It was crowded, with everyone trying to find an available compartment, or an empty one to reserve for their friends. He pushed his way through, poking his head into compartments here and there, trying to find a place to sit.

"Move—"
"Over here, this one's empty, let's go—"

"How was your summer?"

Now panicking slightly, wondering if there was even someplace left for him to sit, Selenius ducked forward hurriedly toward the back of the train, and promptly collided with one of the older students. He stumbled backward and looked up, and opened his mouth to apologize when he froze.

"Get out of my way," Draco Malfoy snapped, brushing past him. Selenius quickly righted himself, about to keep searching, when the older boy suddenly did a double-take and turned around.

"Wait, don't I know you—"

Selenius did not hesitate a moment longer. He dashed forward, bumping into several people, knocking things out of their hands as he pushed and shoved through, trying to lose himself in the crowd. Behind him, he heard some grunts and complaints as people tried to pick their things up, only to have them knocked out of their hands again as the older boy shoved them aside to go after him.

Not caring whether the compartment was already filled or not, but seeing that it was already part-way open, Selenius quickly ducked inside and slid it shut. The students he had just walked in on looked at him with bewildered expressions as he quickly looked around the compartment, looking for someplace to hide, and then dove underneath the seat. He saw the tall, round-faced boy look as though he were about to get up from his seat, but then the compartment door slid open again.

Selenius saw part of the blond's head poking in, but he did not seem to think to look down. A quick look, and he withdrew, though not before sneering at its other occupants. The compartment door slammed shut again. He stayed there for a moment, not daring to move a muscle, and then one of the other students got out of her seat. A pair of sneakered feet walked over toward him, and then a girl with blond hair knelt down next to him.

"You can come out, you know," she said. "There aren't any wrackspurts left, but you might attract them if you stay down there for too long."

~o~O~o~

The train had begun to move steadily now, leaving Kings Cross behind. Selenius made himself comfortable on one of the seats near the window, staring out as the countryside blurred past them, and then turned to the three older students he was sharing the compartment with, sizing them up.

There was the round-faced seventh-year who had introduced himself as Neville Longbottom. The blond-haired girl from earlier was Luna Lovegood, and it had only taken Selenius roughly thirty seconds to assess that she was barking mad, if not outright loony. The red-haired girl, however, he recognized after a moment's pause; he had seen her before, and when he got her name, he immediately remembered where. He had seen pictures of Ginevra Weasley before, and of course Molly and Arthur had occasionally talked about their other kids within his earshot. The red hair and hazel eyes were unmistakable.

When Selenius had introduced himself, he had no inclination to tell them who his parents were; and when he merely identified himself as Selenius Black, and as a first-year, all three of them had shut up immediately. Except for Luna, but Ginny had shushed the girl when she opened her mouth to speak. Now they all sat in awkward silence, Selenius's legs dangling a few inches off the floor and swinging as the train moved, and all he could think of right now was how much he wished his mother had simply had him Floo to Hogwarts instead. This was destined to be a long trip, and from the looks of it, and unpleasant one.
He could have gotten up to find another compartment, but he felt he was better off in here than wandering the rest of the train. Draco might see him again. It was not that Selenius did not want to see him, because in truth, he had very much been looking forward to seeing him again—but the boy had met him before, and questions would be asked.

Selenius had not even been sorted yet. He did not know what house he would be in. He would need to find a way to salvage the situation before he saw Draco again. Perhaps he might even find a way to speak to his father for help—or, since he now had an owl, perhaps he would send a letter to his mother for advice.

He leaned forward on his knees, lost in thought. Suddenly, the dreamy-eyed blond waved her hand in front of his face, startling him.

"What?" he snapped.

"Wrackspurts," the older girl said simply. "They were starting to get a bit aggressive."

"Thanks," Selenius said insincerely.

"You're welcome."

The train rocked steadily beneath them, the only sound in the compartment other than the white noise filtering in from the corridors and other compartments. Selenius hesitated for a moment, and then looked up at the seventh-year Gryffindor sitting across him.

"How do we get Sorted?"

It had never occurred to him to ask his parents, which he now felt to be a bit of an oversight on his part, especially since they had both taught there. Surely they would know. But now he was riding off into the unknown, and already had a problem that needed planning to get around—Draco Malfoy—and if he at least had some idea of where he was going to go, he could get onto that as soon as possible.

"Oh," Neville said, sitting up quickly. "There's a Sorting Hat."

Selenius stared at him blankly.

"You put it on your head, and it kind of pokes around for a bit, to decide where to put you," the boy said. Judging by the unimpressed look on Selenius's face, it seemed he was doing a poor job of explaining it properly, because he hastily added, "It's a talking hat—sings a song when you guys get lined up in the Great Hall, and then you each try it on. It calls out the name of the house it chooses for you."

"How does it choose?" Selenius asked.

"W-well," Neville said, blustering a bit. "It—er, it sort of... I mean, each of the four houses value certain qualities over others, so the hat sort of puts you in the house you best fit in."

Selenius raised an eyebrow at him.

"And you're a Gryffindor?" he asked skeptically.

"Where dwell the brave at heart," Neville said, with an almost resigned sigh.

~o~O~o~
The food trolley had come and gone, when the Hogwarts Express came to an abrupt, screeching halt. The chocolate frog Selenius had been unwrapping hopped out of his hand and thunked against the window in a rather disturbing fashion from the force of the train's stop, and slid down a few inches, leaving a chocolate smear on the window. Ginny and Neville both looked alarmed, and as Selenius got up to scrape his would-be snack off the glass, he suddenly wondered if this was not part of the plan.

"Is this normal?" he asked, as the chocolate frog let out a faint croak. "For the train to stop?"

"No," Ginny said, getting to her feet and pulling out her wand. "We're not there yet—I don't know why we've stopped…"

"So this is—bad, right?" Selenius confirmed, a sinking feeling in his gut.

"I think so," Neville said, as he pulled out his wand as well.

Luna looked unconcerned. She set down her copy of the Quibbler, and looked out the window.

"Oh," she said, pointing. "They're here."

"What?" Selenius asked, peering through the pane. Dark figures had appeared outside the train and were approaching, all cloaked and wearing masks, and he could not make them out very well. It was too dark. Still, they were getting closer. Panic rose in his chest. "What—are they?"

Ginny leaned over toward the window, and then reeled back.

"Death Eaters," she exclaimed. "But how? I thought—"

She broke off as the sound of the train doors opening echoed through the corridor. And then without warning, the door to their compartment was quickly pulled wide. Selenius scrabbled backwards in surprise, and then fear, as he recognized the cowl of the Death Eaters. There were two of them, one leaning into their compartment, another at its back and looking at the compartment across the aisle. From the sounds of it, other compartments were being searched, too.

The grotesquely-masked head swiveled slowly, as though looking for something, and then withdrew. In a flash, Neville was after him, blocking the doorway with his body as he leaned his head out into the corridor.

"Hey, losers!"

At once, it seemed, the train went silent. Selenius could imagine every Death Eater in the coach had their attention on Neville, and if anything, he shrank back further against the window. The chocolate frog in his hands croaked pathetically.

"He isn't here."

The Death Eater who had disappeared a moment ago to search another compartment suddenly reappeared, wand pointed at Neville's temple. Selenius could see fury and disdain radiating from the eyes behind the holes in the mask.

"What did you say?" the Death Eater demanded roughly, dangerously.

Neville opened his mouth to speak.

The chocolate frog in Selenius's hands decided at that moment to make another bid for freedom; it
leapt away, soared past Neville's head, and landed with another sickening thunk on the Death Eater's face. The man let out an undignified half-scream, stumbling backward as the semi-sentient sweet frantically tried to get away. Alarm erupted in the corridors, and there were several jets of light as the other Death Eaters, not understanding what was happening, immediately started hexing the source of the commotion. The man slumped to the ground with a whimper.

The chocolate frog landed on the floor, and began to half-drag, half-hop away. Selenius sat there, not daring to breathe as it trailed away…

And a moment later, was crushed under the heel of another Death Eater's boot.

~o~O~o~

"Well," Selenius said finally, half an hour later, "I guess… that was probably the most exciting thing any chocolate frog's done in its life."

"I used to have a toad," Neville said miserably. "Trust me, he wasn't much better off."

The Death Eaters had finally left, taking their unconscious companion with them, and thoroughly assured that Harry Potter was indeed not on the train. They had been enraged to discover that the source of their troubles was nothing more than an over-excited snack from the food trolley, and combined with their disappointment that their target was not present, they seemed ready to start hexing the lot of them to teach them a lesson.

It was a tall Death Eater who stopped them.

"Snape said he wanted the students to reach Hogwarts in one piece," he told them, when they had their wands raised and ready to start with Neville. "Our orders were to leave them unharmed. We didn't find what we came for. Let's go."

They had been extremely lucky, in Selenius's estimation.

Ginny crossed her arms and let out a huff of exasperation.

"I can't believe they were hoping to find Harry here," she said. "Honestly, what did they expect—that he'd be all packed up and riding the train back to school?"

"Well, why wouldn't he?" Selenius asked.

"Because he's on the run from You-Know-Who," Ginny said, "and Dumbledore's dead. Hogwarts isn't safe."

"Then why are we going?" Selenius wondered out loud. "I mean, if it's not safe…"

"Well, the Death Eaters aren't really interested in us," Ginny said. "To them, we're just students. They only want Harry. Or Ron. Or Hermione."

"Who?" Selenius asked blankly, feeling very out of the loop.

"You haven't been reading the news, haven't you?" Luna asked, looking up from her copy of the Quibbler, which she was reading sideways, for some odd reason. "Ronald Weasley and Hermione Granger. They're Harry Potter's best friends, so they're wanted by the Ministry, of course."

"But there are still some students who aren't coming back," Neville cut in. "Dean's not on the train. He couldn't prove his heritage to the Muggle-Born Registration Committee, so he's in hiding."
"Anyone who's a Muggle-born is in hiding," Ginny said. "They'd be arrested, otherwise."

Selenius remained silent. Ginny peered at him for a moment, and then said rather worriedly, "You aren't a Muggle-born, are you? Because if you are, the minute you set foot in Hogwarts…"

"I'm a half-blood," Selenius replied, a bit too defensively.

"They're going to want to know who, though," Neville muttered, turning his head to try and read the front cover of Luna's magazine sideways. "You have to be able to give names, or they're going to go after you anyway, like Dean."

"Si… Sirius Black," Selenius mumbled, turning away.

Ginny's jaw dropped. Neville looked surprised. Luna looked up from her magazine.

"You mean Stubby Boardman?" she asked brightly.

"That's not possible," Ginny said, looking dumbstruck. "You're lying. I mean, I get it if you're hiding your parentage, but there's no way that's going to fly, because Sirius didn't have any kids, and—"

"He wasn't married," Selenius replied defensively. "Anyway, I can prove it."

"Yeah?" Ginny demanded. "How?"

In response, Selenius dug into the pocket of his jeans, and pulled out a folded-up photo. He carefully flattened it out and held it up for Ginny to see. It was a picture of Selenius as a toddler, sitting at the table of Grimmauld Place with Sirius. Ginny stared at him in disbelief as Selenius quickly folded the photo up and put it away.

"But… but…" she said.

"I was there when your dad got attacked by a giant snake, and you lot wanted to go running off to St. Mungo's," Selenius replied sullenly. "I lived at Grimmauld Place. It's just that none of you ever saw me."

"I believe you," Ginny said, still looking as though someone had just poured cold water over her.

Luna looked at him curiously, tilting her head to the side as though trying to ascertain whether he was telling the truth, and then settled back down to her magazine.

Selenius had the disquieting notion that she did not really believe him.

~o~O~o~

"All righ'," Hagrid called, waving as they gingerly picked themselves off the little rowboats. "Firs' years over here… firs' years this way…"

Selenius immediately came to stand on the stone steps, where Hagrid was waiting for them. Other first years were slowly clustering around him, shivering slightly in the cold, but otherwise staring uneasily either up at the castle or the grey, gloomy, overcast sky. The other students were heading up to the castle in horseless carriages. Ginny, who had warmed up considerably toward him now, wished him luck for the Sorting, and then had disappeared in a carriage with Neville, Luna, and another seventh-year.

Hagrid had not recognized him immediately, and right now, Selenius had no intention of drawing attention to himself. He was hopeful that there might be an opportunity to visit Hagrid later, but he
was unsure if the half-giant was aware that he was staying under a fake identity, and didn't want to test that right now. Not in this company.

They had rowed across the lake. The water was a smooth mirror of black, like glass, only broken in ripples by the wind. The depths below were impenetrable from above, but more than once Selenius could have sworn he saw something with tentacles moving just underneath the surface. He tried to breathe easy, telling himself it was just the giant squid.

"Everyone make it all right?" Hagrid asked, surveying the cluster of students. "Got yer things? You, there—got yer hat?" A small girl was wringing water out of her black pointy hat, which had clearly taken a dip in the lake. "Let's go!"

And they marched their way up the steps, to the doors of the Great Hall. The other students had never seen Hogwarts before, and were all clearly amazed by what they saw—tall pillars that greeted them by towering intimidatingly, with gargoyles peering out at them from the approaching darkness. The fountain in the courtyard they trudged through, lights that shone from every window, making the castle look like a giant stone jack-o-lantern...

Yet, Selenius had been here before, and it was not new to him. He was too preoccupied to be fascinated. When they stopped at the doors, it was to find Professor McGonagall waiting for them.

"The firs' years, Professor," Hagrid said.

"Thank you, Hagrid." She looked as strict and stern as ever, but there was an edge of weariness to her that Selenius had not seen before. Perhaps it was just his imagination. Maybe she was just getting old. "I'll take them from here."

Hagrid nodded, and then gave the first years a friendly salute before pulling the massive doors open and heading inside. They shut behind him, and McGonagall took in a very deep breath, before she began to speak.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," she said tightly. "The start-of-term banquet will begin shortly, but before you take your seats in the Great Hall, you will be sorted into your houses. The Sorting is a very important ceremony because, while you are here, your house will be something like your family within Hogwarts. You will have classes with the rest of your house, sleep in your house dormitory and spend free time in your house common room."

She looked them all over sternly.

"The four houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw and Slytherin," she continued briskly. "Each house has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your house points, while any rule-breaking will lose house points. At the end of the year, the house with the most points is awarded the House Cup, a great honour." She inhaled sharply, and when she spoke again, it sounded a bit as though she had a bit of a head cold. "I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever house becomes yours.

"This year, there has been a change in staffing, which you may not be aware of," she said. "We have a new Headmaster, whom you will all meet in the Great Hall shortly." Her eyes landed on Selenius, and for some reason, they did not seem at all friendly. They lingered for a moment, and then she turned away. "I will collect you for the Sorting ceremony in a few moments' time. Please wait here quietly."

She left, ascending the stairs just as Hagrid had done, and closing the door behind her. The other
students all began to whisper nervously among themselves, but Selenius was hardly listening. He was too uneasy. Something was not right. He knew Professor Dumbledore was dead; his father had admitted to doing the deed himself. Selenius had spent two weeks with enormous difficulty in reconciling those two things, until he finally concluded that there must have been some reason, some very good reason, for his father to kill the previous Headmaster. What reason this was, he did not know.

But it seemed Hogwarts had changed. A fog of depression seemed to have settled over it, and he couldn’t quite make sense of it.

And then there was the Sorting Ceremony. His father had been the Head of Slytherin; his mother was a Gryffindor. Which house would he be sent to?

All too soon, McGonagall returned, ordering them all to line up before leading them inside. They filed through the Entrance Hall, and a moment later, through the open doors of the Great Hall. Selenius blinked owlishly as the light of a thousand candles, all floating above the tables, lit up the otherwise dark and dreary ceiling, which was just as dark grey as the sky outside. All around them, hundreds of students were sitting at their house tables, some leaning in their seats and straining to get a look at the new arrivals. Selenius nearly jumped back a foot as a silent, silver-stained specter floated right in front of him, brushing his sleeve and making it feel as though his shoulder had been dipped in a bucket of ice. He recognized the Bloody Baron as he glided over to the table of black and green-clad students, turning his ghastly face upon the other tables with a look of pure disinterest.

The hall seemed deathly silent, for some reason. It was only now that Selenius realized this. None of the students sitting at the tables were talking. The only sound was a sudden clap of unexpected thunder lighting up the sky, and the first-years’ footsteps echoing in the hall. Even the ghosts were silent, the Fat Friar most surprisingly, whom Selenius had always had the impression of being an amicable chatterbox.

And then they all halted abruptly. The girl trailing behind him very nearly collided with him, and despite being near the front of the line, she had to peer around him in order to see why they had stopped. Selenius had no trouble seeing, however; he was indisputably the tallest of the lot, and could see a good three or four inches over his fellow first-years’ heads. Most of them were standing on their toes to see over him.

What he saw was McGonagall striding up toward the dais where—and Selenius’s heart leapt at this, glad for a familiar face that at least knew his situation—he saw his father standing. The teachers were all seated at the staff table, their faces set and stony, perhaps even a shade mutinous, but Headmaster Snape radiated aloof disinterest in the face of their disapproval. She placed a ragged, torn and patched hat that was so filthy that Selenius wondered if someone had buried it in Hagrid’s garden for a year before unearthing it, on top of a wooden stool; and without another word, or even a direct glance at the raven-haired man standing beside it, she strode toward the table and stiffly took her seat.

His father stood there, as though waiting for something to happen; and then quite suddenly, the Sorting Hat shifted slightly, the ragged tear at the brim opening wide.

And then it burst into song:

I may be patched and frayed,

With a thousand years to go to pot;

But I am the Hogwarts Sorting Cap,
The smartest hat and all that rot!

Set yourself upon this stool,

Pull me down around your head;

I will see that of which you are made,

Clever, kind, cunning, or brave instead!

I will have a poke around your mind,

And send you to those whom you will be among;

So listen closely to the Sorting Hat,

This is my redundant song:

You may belong in Gryffindor,

Where dwell the brave at heart;

The House of Lions is full of daring nerve,

Courageousness sets them apart.

Perhaps you belong in Hufflepuff,

Where they are patient with toil;

The House of the Badger is hardworking and true,

And unalteringly loyal.

And you may be in Slytherin,

Where await the most cunning kind;

The House of Snakes are slippery friends,

These ambitious folks use any means they can find.

Or you may find yourself in Ravenclaw,

Among those of keen minds;

Those who nest in the House of the Raven,

Are of the keenest kind.

So put me on, and have no fear,

I will sort you to where you belong;

Tug me snug around your ears,

And I will pull you from the throng;
Though by talent you are divided,
These are dark times that we live in;
The bonds that come from within
Should not be thus quartered.
I have sung, I have warned,
Let the Sorting now commence.

The hat quickly fell silent. A few murmurs could be heard coming from the house tables, but they
died away as soon as they had begun. The new Headmaster seemed to have the ability to silence the
students with little effort. Selenius watched his father's hand dip into the pocket of his robes, and a
moment later, he carefully unrolled a long scroll of parchment. A moment's pause, and then he turned
his attention to the waiting students.

"When I call your name, you will come up here, and place the Sorting Hat upon your head," he said
smoothly. His gaze lingered on them, but it was not a friendly one. "Once you have been Sorted, you
will make your way to your house table. You will await your turn in perfect silence."

His eyes glittered dangerously at them, and Selenius saw more than one student quaking in their
shoes now. The hair on his back was standing on end of its own accord; he had been looking
forward to seeing his father again, even if they had not parted on the best of terms, but now he was
well and truly frightened. Yet, Headmaster Snape seemed entirely unconcerned with the terror he
had inspired, unless it was to look faintly satisfied with himself, and he began calling out names.

The first-years left the line one by one, walking up to try on the hat. Some stumbled in surprise when
called, others tried to look as dignified and centered as possible. They would sit on the stool, most of
them trying not to look intimidated by the fact that the Headmaster was towering over them less than
a foot away, and failing spectacularly. The first time the hat shouted out its decision
("GRYFFINDOR!") Selenius nearly jumped back in surprise, stepping on the foot of the girl behind
him, and the boy who had just been sorted nearly fell off the chair. Selenius did not have long to
wait; they had only been standing in line for five minutes when his name was called.

"Black, Selenius." There was no inflection in his father's voice to indicate that the name held any
particular meaning to him. It was said with cold, sneering indifference, and he glared down at
Selenius just as he had with every other student who had stepped up before him. Selenius walked up
to the steps, and wordlessly picked up the hat.

He wondered if the torn brim that opened cut into the inside, and instead of putting it on immediately,
he turned it over in his hands to look. The faint, repressed titters he heard coming from the tables
should have warned him, but he did not register their significance until the hat was forcefully ripped
out of his hands. He found himself being pushed onto his seat, and the hat was summarily yanked
down over his eyes.

"A bit curious now, are we?" said a voice in his ear.

That was all the warning Selenius got, before the word "SLYTERIN!" rang through the room.
Before he had time to register what had just happened, the hat was suddenly pulled off his head, and
he looked up in time to see his father's impassive face. Their eyes locked for a moment, and then
Selenius looked away, pushing himself off the stool and making his way toward Slytherin table.

He saw a pale blond head sitting taller above the rest, and it was impossible to miss the fact that
Draco was scooting down the bench to make room. Selenius hesitated, for one long moment, and then hastily capitulated, sliding into the seat next to the older boy. The next name was called, and in the midst of the hat shouting out "GRYFFINDOR!", Draco folded his arms on the table and leaned down until he was level with Selenius.

It was the first time Selenius had gotten a good look at the older boy. His face was paler than ever, drawn, and with dark circles under his eyes. Yet, there was no mistaking those grey eyes narrowed in calculation, or the intelligence that glinted behind them. However ill he looked, he was in no way any less sharp—or curious.

"Selenius Black," he said, keeping his voice low enough for only Selenius to hear. "I don't suppose you're about to tell me that Sirrah is just a nickname, is it?"

Selenius felt it safer not to respond. Draco moved so that his mouth was directly at Selenius's ear, so that only he could possibly hear what he had to say next:

"In Slytherin house, your survival depends on how well you make allies," the pale blond whispered. "After this, I think, we're going to talk."

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Draco leaned against the wall, arms folded, as he listened to Selenius's explanation. That he had lied about his parentage, not because of his blood purity, but because his father had been in the Order of the Phoenix—and since his death, Selenius had been shunted from house to house since then, and held a fake identity. Selenius had mixed in part-truths with blatant lies, and when he finally finished, he leaned back and waited for the other boy to take it all in.

Draco took several minutes to respond. But when he did, he looked thoughtful, staring into the fireplace of the empty Slytherin common room.

"So," he finally said, "who's your mother, then?"


"Name, Selenius. I'm looking for a name."

Selenius shrugged. Draco tapped his fingers on the arm of the couch for a moment, and then shrugged.

"Fine. I suppose it doesn't matter—you're the son of a pureblood, even if he is a blood-traitor, and that's what counts," he said coolly. "You'll do well in Slytherin house, Selenius, mark my words—but its people with the most obvious secrets who get struck down, first." He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at Selenius. "You need protection. Someone who has your back."

"I suppose that's you?" Selenius asked surreptitiously.

"Not without something in return, of course," Draco said off-handedly.

"I don't—"

"I'm not asking much," the blond interrupted, crossing his legs.

Selenius folded his arms across his chest. "I don't care what you're asking for. I'm not giving anything."
"Loyalty," Draco said, his voice almost coaxing now. "Companionship. Someone who can actually carry an intelligent conversation, and understands the concept of confidentiality. Surely that's not too much?"

Selenius hesitated. Draco had just listed exactly what he himself was looking for.

"In short," he clarified, "a friend?"

Draco smiled.

"A rose by any other name," he said.

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For the first week of school, Selenius saw little of his father, except at mealtimes. Headmaster Snape had expressed no more interest in him than any other student, except perhaps to show preferential treatment to the Slytherins, but he seemed to be making a concerted effort at not showing unnecessary concern over Selenius.

It became immediately apparent to the other Slytherins that Draco had taken Selenius under his wing as his protégé, and as a Death Eater, those two things went hand in hand with Selenius having little to no trouble within his own house. He got along with the other first-year Slytherins, and a few second-years deigned to notice him, but mostly, everyone else seemed so self-absorbed that they paid him almost no heed. He was just a tall, wavy-haired first-year. Nothing special.

He tried to make friends with the other first-years, particularly those he shared classes with, but it was difficult. If they were not in Slytherin, they were wary and suspicious of him, despite any apparent good intentions. Often even outright hostile. Furthermore, he found that talking to other kids his own age was shockingly and despairingly awkward. He had little frame of reference to relate to them, and when he spoke, he sometimes found himself stuttering or outright stumbling over his words. Talking to them was taxing, and he found that many of the younger students had a tendency to mumble. It was nothing like what Selenius had ever experienced for as long as he could remember, and he found that despite the now ample opportunity he had to make friends with kids his own age, the only thing in his way was himself. Or rather, his social incompetency when it came to dealing with his peers.

Selenius found immediately that he did not like either of Malfoy's other friends—if they could be called such. Gregory Goyle and Vincent Crabbe seemed to fulfill the role of bodyguard more than friend, and in a way, Selenius found himself able to understand and sympathize with Draco if he had been feeling lonely. He hadn't exactly been locked away from the world for the last twelve years, as Selenius had, but being in the constant company of two brainless gorgons had to fairly restricting.

Selenius was thrilled when classes began, but his enthusiasm was almost cruelly curbed the moment he saw the teachers. He had known them since he was a baby; he had grown up admiring them. But it seemed that Professor McGonagall had turned cold to him, barely paying attention to him in class. Sprout seemed a bit distant. Only Flitwick seemed to not hold his father's hand in Dumbledore's death against him, and Slughorn was absolutely oblivious, which made Potions and Charms the only two classes Selenius was truly able to enjoy.

Defense Against the Dark Arts was a nightmare. Muggle Studies, which had previously been optional, had been made compulsory. Selenius's first class with the Carrows was spent being told that rule-breakers would be subject to the Crucius Curse, and that Muggles were barbaric animals that needed to be put down. At the start of the second Muggle-studies class, Alecto Carrow asked students who had Muggle parentage to stand up.
Selenius had the good sense to remain in his seat.

As did every other student.

Alecto Carrow had looked at them all approvingly.

"Good," she said nastily. "No filthy blood in here."

She had then proceeded to explain to them that Muggles were like cattle, and that they were responsible for driving witches and wizards into hiding by attempting to hunt them down, and that anyone with such muddied blood was automatically inferior. By the end of the week, Selenius, who had been so looking forward to going to school, now wanted nothing more than to leave. He excelled in all of his classes, although he was merely doing passably with the Carrows by going through the motions of their class without putting his heart into it, and he was utterly miserable.

In truth, his only consolation was the fact that he now had someone he could call a friend. Draco set aside evenings to play chess with him, out of the presence of his bodyguards, which Selenius found to be something of a relief. After so many years of not having a friend closer to his own age, this need, at least, was being met.

He had tried to seek out Ginny Weasley and Neville Longbottom, but they seemed to be studiously avoiding him now. Luna Lovegood was the only one he could seem to catch up to, and she said quite plainly what Selenius already knew.

"Oh, they're a bit wary, you see," she told him one evening, in the library. She added unnecessarily, "You're a Slytherin, after all."

"So?" Selenius snapped. "That shouldn't make a difference."

Luna cocked her head at him. "I know it shouldn't, but haven't you seen what other Slytherins have been doing to them?"

Selenius fell silent, recalling the older Slytherins who had returned from detention, not to serve it, but to give it to the unfortunate students who had caught the Carrows' ire. Luna smiled at him.

"It's okay, though," she said simply. "I'll be your friend."

Draco had snorted at this later, when they were playing chess.

"Loony Lovegood?" he sneered.

Selenius, who had fallen back into the habit of not dignifying questions he did not like with a verbal answer, merely sent his knight to cut down Draco's queen. Deciding to drop the issue of the slightly-batty Ravenclaw, they played in silence, until Selenius finally broke the ice.

"Where's the Headmaster's office?" He knew where it was, but it had been so long since he had been there that he was no longer certain.

"Snape?" Draco said. "Why?"

Selenius shrugged. "He was the former Slytherin Head of House, wasn't he?"

"There's Slughorn," the blond replied sulkily.

Selenius raised an eyebrow at him. "Would you really go to Slughorn?"
Draco examined his face for a moment, and then laughed. "You're right. Slughorn's a has-been. If I were you, I'd go to Snape too."

He directed Selenius on how to get to the Headmaster's Office, and then offered to accompany him. Selenius shrugged.

"It's not really necessary."

"Fine," Draco said, sounding bored. "I'll get my Transfiguration done." He yawned exaggeratedly, and then stretched. "I still don't get why they keep McGonagall around here. She's just another has-been, too."

Selenius stood up. "As you say," he responded diplomatically.

He left the common room, exited the dungeons, and made his way up the stairs leading to the Entrance Hall when he suddenly stopped.

In bright red and gold paint, in lettering so large that it would surely give Filch a heart attack when he discovered what new mess he would have to clean, were the words: *Dumbledore's Army, still recruiting!*

Selenius stood there, quite at a loss for words, when suddenly footsteps caught his attention, and he whipped around.

"You!" Amycus snapped, halting at the foot of the stairs. "So you're the one who's been behind this!"

"What?" Selenius asked blankly.

"Don't play games with me, you little bugger!" In three long strides, the Carrow had grabbed Selenius's arm, yanking him forward painfully. "All over the Charms corridor and the third floor—those messages you've been spray-painting on the wall!"

"I didn't do it!" Selenius said hotly, trying to pull away. "I was just coming upstairs and found it!"

A sudden blow to the head knocked him to the ground. Dazed, Selenius stared up at the ceiling, pain pulsing in the back of his head where he had landed, and on his cheek where Amycus had struck him. Torchlight from above flickered and spun dizzyingly for a moment, and then a strong hand was dragging him back to his feet by the wrist and up the stairs. Selenius stumbled in place behind him, not quite able to regain his footing.

"We'll see what the Headmaster has to say about this," Amycus snarled.

A voice suddenly rang across the room.

"What do you think you're doing?" McGonagall said, appearing two landings above them, and staring in horror at the bruise forming under Selenius's left cheek. "Professor Carrow—Professor Carrow, is that a student?"

"Right in one," Amycus responded nastily. Triumphant, he added, "Caught him at the scene of the crime!"

McGonagall was hurrying down the steps, wand raised, pale and tight-lipped as she approached. Selenius screwed his eyes shut in pain as the dull throbbing in his head refused to leave, but opened them again when the Transfiguration Professor grabbed the wrist that the Carrow was gripping.
"We do not manhandle our students!" she said, her voice filled with cold fury as she placed herself between Selenius and the outraged Carrow. "Just because he was found there does not mean he did it! There's no way he could have gotten through the castle that quickly."

Amycus scratched the back of his head. "His friends probably helped him," he said.

"Do you have any proof?" McGonagall demanded tightly.

"Well, he was there, wasn't he?" Carrow snapped. "I'm about to take him up to see Snape—he'll sort him out."

"I'll take him from here," McGonagall said sharply.

Selenius winced as Amycus's grip on his wrist tightened painfully—and then the man suddenly released him. Selenius watched him storm up the steps with unfocused eyes, and disappear off through the door leading to the Charms corridor, muttering furiously to himself. As soon as he had disappeared, McGonagall released his hand and tilted Selenius's chin up so that she could see him properly.

"Are you alright?"

Selenius tried to shake his head, but that only made the pounding worse, so he muttered, "No."

"Did Professor Carrow do this to you?"

"Yes."

Professor McGonagall straightened.

"We're going to take you to Poppy," she said decisively, "and then we'll take you to the Headmaster to sort you out."

Selenius was surprised by this radical change of attitude. The Transfiguration teacher had all but ignored him in her classes, and now she had intervened. Nevertheless, he was grateful, as she directed him toward the hospital wing.

"Did you spray paint those words on the wall?" she asked.

Selenius looked up at her. A nice, purple bruise had begun to form just underneath his eye, now forcing him to shut it.

"No," he said.

~o~O~o~

Poppy had him patched up in no time at all, and Selenius found himself no longer voluntarily walking up to the Headmaster's office, but now being marched there, as though he had committed some kind of crime. They approached the gargoyle, and for a moment, the Gryffindor Head of House hesitated, as though taking a moment to gather herself; and then she said, "Moonstone."

The gargoyle hopped aside, and the two of them made their way up the spiral staircase. A knock on the door, and then Selenius heard his father's silky voice command, "Enter."

They entered, and then stopped dead in their tracks. Amycus Carrow was already waiting for them there. His pig-like face turned to look at them, and at that moment, Selenius wanted nothing more than to turn and run back to Slytherin house. He suppressed the urge, and instead turned his gaze on
the Headmaster, who sat behind his desk, elbows resting on the surface, and fingers laced. He looked thoroughly unconcerned. If anything, his father's lack of reaction made Selenius even more frightened.

McGonagall spoke first. Lips twisting with distaste, she said, "Amycus claims he found Mr. Black in the Entrance Hall."

"The scene of the crime," Amycus repeated.

McGonagall's lips thinned. "Be as that may, there is no evidence of wrongdoing. Despite this, Amycus saw fit to subject him to corporal punishment before attempting to drag him up to see you."

The Headmaster's eyes glittered at this.

"Is this true, Professor Carrow?" he asked coolly.

"The little brat was trying to get away!" Amycus spat.

"Nevertheless, as Professor McGonagall has pointed out, just because he was present is no proof that he is the guilty one," Headmaster Snape said, leaning back in his chair. "I have told you I would allow the use of the Cruciatus as punishment for the most egregious rule-breakers, Amycus, but you are not to use corporal punishment indiscriminately. If you continue to do so," he added, his voice lowering dangerously, "I will be forced to revoke such permission."

"Ask him!" Amycus said, pointing a lumpy hand at Selenius. "Ask him if he did it!"

Selenius's father turned to look at him.

"Did you write those words on the wall?" he inquired.

"No," Selenius said vehemently.

"He's lying!"

"I doubt that, Amycus," the Headmaster said coolly. "There's no history with him. I suspect he was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Amycus looked furious. He kicked the foot of one of the armchairs as he turned to leave, and there was an almighty slam as the door shut behind him. Selenius flinched, and then looked back at his father.

He swallowed.

"Dad?" he whispered.

The Headmaster waved a hand dismissively at McGonagall. "You can leave."

The Transfiguration teacher's lips pressed into a thin line at this, but she merely turned on her heels and left. The door shut quietly behind her, leaving the office in relative silence. Not a word was spoken for a moment, before his father gestured at the armchair Amycus had kicked.

"Sit down," he said imperiously.

Selenius obeyed, and he was about to open his mouth to speak, when one of the portraits suddenly spoke.
"Alecto Carrow is dragging Ginny Weasley to see Argus Filch for interrogation," the portrait said. "Something about spray-painting something on the third-floor corridor—"

Headmaster Snape stood up so quickly that he almost knocked his chair over. He left without a word, the door shutting with a tell-tale click behind him that indicated there would be no one else coming in. Selenius sat there, in the Headmaster's office, quite alone save for the company of the portraits. None of them, however, seemed to have much to say, murmuring behind their hands to each other.

The portrait hanging behind the Headmaster's chair, however, suddenly stirred. Selenius stared at the oil daubs of Albus Dumbledore as they came to life, and looked up at him.

"Hello," he said pleasantly.

"Er..." Selenius responded, not at all sure what to say. He swallowed, and cleared his throat. "Uh, I never got the chance to thank you properly..." he trailed off.

"For the pair of thick, woolen socks I gave you for Christmas two years ago?"

Selenius looked away.

"I suspect, however, that is not what you are truly interested in discussing."

"Did my father really kill you?" he blurted out.

"Yes," Dumbledore said simply.

Selenius stood up. "How can you be so calm about that? I mean, he's sitting in your chair, he's letting the Carrows teach here—"

"It's quite easy to be calm about my death, I think, because I am already dead," Dumbledore said cheerfully. "As for the Carrows, I'm afraid your father didn't have much choice in allowing that to happen."

Selenius inhaled sharply. "I don't understand. He murdered you—"

"Ah," Dumbledore said. "He did kill me, but murder it was not."

Selenius stared at him.

"I can't tell the difference," he said.

Dumbledore folded his hands in his lap. "Your father was responsible for casting the Killing Curse on me, because I asked him to," he said. "By that time, I was already dying. I would say your father did me a great favor, in doing this."

"You asked him to?" Selenius said, in disbelief.

"Of course." Dumbledore peered down at him. "Not that the rest of the world is aware of this, naturally. I assume you understand that I do not expect you to relay that to anyone else?"

"Of course not—but—"

"Then that's all you need to know, I think."

Selenius pressed the portrait for more answers, but it was as though Dumbledore had suddenly
turned deaf. Frustrated, and with more questions than before, Selenius had no choice but to abandon the topic. He went to return to his chair, when something glittering caught his eye. He stepped forward, peering through the glass display case at the large sword that rested on it, the large rubies on the handle sparkling brightly.

The name Godric Gryffindor was etched along the blade.

"That," said the voice of one of the portraits, and Selenius looked up in time to see its occupant leaning down closer to him, "is the legendary sword of Godric Gryffindor."

Selenius looked at it with undisguised interest. The portrait chuckled.

"Don't worry. Slytherin house has its own heirlooms, I'm sure."

The door suddenly opened again, and Selenius looked up in time to see that his father had returned. He strode over to the glass case where the sword rested, robes billowing behind him, and placed a hand on Selenius's shoulder.

"Enjoying yourself, are you?"

Selenius shrugged, looking back down at the sword, and then up at the wall.

"The portraits aren't that talkative," he said, with a meaningful look at Dumbledore.

The hand on his shoulder tightened slightly, and then Selenius found himself being turned around. "That's not what I meant."

"Where's mum?" Selenius asked suddenly. "How is she?"

Selenius saw his father's jaw tighten at this. "As far as I know, she is perfectly safe. Where that is, I don't know." He shook his head. "That, however, is a topic for another time. We need to talk."

"I didn't do it," Selenius said at once.

"I know." His father seated himself in the Headmaster's chair, crossing his legs. "Have a seat. I'm interested in hearing about your first week of school."

Selenius found one word to sum it up, as he sat down in the chintz armchair. "Awful."

~o~O~o~

The next day, the Daily Prophet arrived at Slytherin table, and the news caused a bit of an uproar. It caused a bit of an uproar at every table, but Selenius tried to squeeze in to read the headlines over a fellow Slytherin's shoulder, which was a bit difficult, but he managed to catch a glimpse of the headlines: Undesirable Number One and Accomplices Spotted At the Ministry!

Selenius frowned, and peered closer, struggling to keep his spot as others crowded around for a look. The article was referring to events that had happened a little over a week ago, citing that three fugitives—including the one Selenius was most interested in hearing about, his mother—had been seen at the Ministry and escaped. There were rumors and speculation about what they had been there for, but satisfied that his mother was all right, Selenius finally retreated to allow someone else through.

He looked up at the high table, catching the dark eyes of the Headmaster for one long moment, before he returned to his seat.
Please review!

A/N: There was a tiny formatting problem with the Sorting Hat's song. My apologies.

~Anubis Ankh

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